



PLATO AND THE  
SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

THE PHILOSOPHICAL USE  
OF A LITERARY FORM

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CHARLES H. KAHN

## CHAPTER 2

### *The interpretation of Plato*

#### I. THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETING THE DIALOGUES

An anecdote reports that, when Plato was about to submit a set of tragedies for competition at the Dionysian festival, he encountered Socrates on his way to the theater. After this conversation with Socrates, so the story goes, Plato returned home and burnt all his poetic compositions.<sup>1</sup> If this story is not true, it is certainly *ben trovato*. Plato had the dramatic gifts of a Sophocles or Euripides, but he decided to exploit them in a different literary form. In the preceding chapter we surveyed the new genre that the development of Greek letters had provided for his use: the *logos Sōkratikos*, or "conversation with Socrates." Since it was Socrates who had made Plato a philosopher, it was by writing about Socrates – more exactly, by representing Socrates in his writing – that Plato could legitimately deploy his dramatic powers in the service of philosophy.

Plato's compositions in the dramatic dialogue form achieved an immense literary success. But Plato's use of this form, in which he himself never appears, creates formidable difficulties for the interpretation of his thought. The anonymity of the dialogue form presents the interpreter with a problem that is unparalleled for any other philosopher. According to a Platonic doctrine suggested in many places and crystallized in the *Republic*, the philosophical vision tends to see things together, to seek for unity in the midst of diversity and plurality.<sup>2</sup> But where is the unity to be found in Plato's own vision? Since we never hear Plato's own voice, how can we know where, and to what extent, what Socrates says represents what Plato thinks? The problem is made more acute both by the

1. D.L. III.5.

2. "One who sees things together (*ho sunoptikos*) is a dialectician, one who does not is none" (*Rep.* VII, 537c 7).

formal independence of the dialogues from one another, and by the discrepancy between the positions attributed to Socrates in different contexts.

We deal in this study with some eighteen dialogues,<sup>3</sup> from the *Apology* to the *Phaedrus*, covering almost two-thirds of Plato's entire corpus. Now it is a formal feature of these works that they make no explicit reference to one another: each dialogue presents itself as an autonomous unit, existing in its own literary space.<sup>4</sup> This situation changes with later dialogues. The *Sophist* and *Statesman* claim to continue a conversation begun in the *Theaetetus*; the *Critias* is a continuation of the *Timaeus*, and the *Timaeus* itself contains what appears to be an ambiguous reference back to the *Republic*. But the dialogues that we will discuss contain no such instance of overt cross-reference. In each case Socrates begins an entirely new conversation with new interlocutors. Although Socrates and his interlocutors will often refer to previous conversations, these conversations are not recorded in any of Plato's dialogues.

This formal autonomy makes it tempting, even desirable, to read each dialogue as if it were a complete literary unit and a thought-world of its own, like the individual plays of Shakespeare or Molière. At the same time, anyone who is interested in Plato's philosophy must find a way to relate the intellectual contents of these works to one another. We cannot ascribe to Plato eighteen different philosophies. In part, then, the problem of interpreting Plato's work can be seen as the problem of how the philosophical contents of the different dialogues are to be connected with one another.

At first sight the positions presented in separate works seem not only distinct but in some respects incompatible. To take an extreme example: Socrates in the *Gorgias* consistently denies an identity between pleasure and the good that Socrates in the *Protagoras* seems to affirm. Has Plato changed his mind? If not, how are we to explain the fact that in at least one of these two cases he makes Socrates expound a view that he, Plato, believes to be false? Is

3. The *Apology*, of course, is not a dialogue but a set of courtroom speeches. In the next chapter we take account of this difference. To avoid pedantry, in most contexts I simply count the *Apology* among the dialogues.

Among the dialogues proper I ignore the *Hippias Major*, which many scholars regard as Socratic or "transitional." I have given elsewhere my reasons for believing that this dialogue was not written by Plato. See Kahn (1985).

4. See Clay (1988). Clay is developing an observation of Tigerstedt (1977) 99.

Plato then not committed to Socrates' position in *either* work? And why do so many of the dialogues end in an *aporia* where no satisfying conclusion seems to be reached?

I maintain that the unifying links between dialogues, and the hints of conclusions not explicitly stated, are more deliberate, more subtle, and more ubiquitous than is generally recognized. Now the existence of thematic connections between dialogues is not itself a matter of dispute. Where interpreters differ is in the philosophical intention they attribute to these connections. Do different treatments of the same topic, such as the unity of virtue or the method of hypothesis, represent a change of views on Plato's part? Alternatively, is Plato simply exploring different possible positions, without a definite commitment to any one?<sup>5</sup> Or can these separate discussions ultimately be seen as different aspects of a single philosophical view? These are the central questions that any interpreter of the dialogues must confront.

## 2. TWO ALTERNATIVE READINGS OF THE DIALOGUES

Since the early nineteenth century the interpretation of Plato has been divided between two major tendencies: a unitarian view going back to Schleiermacher, and a developmental view introduced by Karl Friedrich Hermann. The unitarian tradition tends to assume that the various dialogues are composed from a single point of view, and that their diversity is to be explained on literary and pedagogical grounds, rather than as a change in the author's philosophy. Different dialogues are seen as exploring the same problem from different directions, or as leading the reader to deeper levels of reflection. According to Schleiermacher, the order of the dialogues is the order of a philosophical education. The unitarian tradition has been represented in this century (in different ways) by von Arnim, Shorey, Jaeger, Friedländer, and the Tübingen school.

The developmental tendency, on the other hand, assumes that Plato has changed his mind, and that the diversity of the dialogues reflects different stages in the evolution of Plato's thought. K. F.

5. The classical statement of this view is that of Grote (1875): "Plato is a searcher, and has not yet made up his mind" (I, 246). "Each of his dialogues has its own point of view, worked out on that particular occasion" (II, 278).

Hermann is credited with being the first to recognize a "Socratic" period in Plato's earlier work and to interpret the sequence of dialogues by reference to Plato's intellectual biography.<sup>6</sup> The developmental approach was reinforced at the end of the last century by the chronological study of Plato's style that began with Lewis Campbell's work in 1867 and which, by the end of the century, had successfully divided Plato's dialogues into three consecutive groups. Since all of the dialogues traditionally regarded as Socratic belong in the earliest of these groups, such stylistic studies seemed to confirm the developmental approach. After all, Plato began as a disciple of Socrates. Why should he not have established his own point of view by moving gradually away from, or beyond, the position of his master?

This approach presupposes that we can locate with some accuracy the philosophical position of Socrates within the dialogues, in order to trace Plato's movement from that point. Thus Guthrie recognized a group of dialogues in which Plato "is imaginatively recalling, in form and substance, the conversations of his master without as yet adding to them any distinctive doctrines of his own."<sup>7</sup> A more subtle and extreme formulation of this developmental view has been given by Gregory Vlastos, who finds an essentially Socratic philosophy in some ten or twelve Platonic dialogues. According to Vlastos, in these dialogues Plato is still under the spell of his master, whose philosophy is not only distinct from but antithetical to Plato's own mature thought. When Plato becomes an original philosopher, he departs from, and reacts against, his original Socratic position.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, my interpretation will stress the elements of continuity in Plato's thought, and reject the notion of any sharp break between the earlier dialogues and the metaphysical doctrine of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. But I should make clear that in denying the existence of a distinct Socratic period I do not mean to deny either the historical reality of Socrates or the importance of his influence on Plato. It is probably fair to say that no philosopher ever had a greater impact on his pupil or successor than Socrates had on Plato. It is the Socratic moral ideal, the total commitment to

6. Hermann (1839).

7. Guthrie (1975) 67.

8. Vlastos (1991). See ch. 2, "Socrates *contra* Socrates in Plato."

justice or righteousness (*dikaïosunē*) consecrated by Socrates' own martyrdom, that guides Plato throughout his life. The relationship between the two men will be more fully explored in the next chapter. What I deny is not the influence of Socrates but the usual biographical assumption that localizes this influence in Plato's earlier period.

It is also no part of my thesis to deny that we can plausibly recognize different stages in the formulation of Plato's thought. On the contrary, I will suggest that the traditional conception of a Socratic period confounds several distinct moments in Plato's development as a writer. But this traditional view also tends to conceal the fundamental continuity of thought between stages, and in particular between what I call the threshold dialogues and the next, more explicit statement of Plato's position in the great middle works: *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*.

It is on this point that my view is most resolutely unitarian. I want to deny any fundamental shift in philosophical position between such so-called Socratic dialogues as the *Laches*, *Charmides*, and *Protagoras*, on the one hand, and the *Phaedo* and *Republic* on the other hand. There is obviously a great deal of doctrine in the latter works that is absent from the former. But the argument from silence has no grip on an author as cunning as Plato. As Jaeger pointed out, the developmental interpretation often seems to assume that Plato must put into every dialogue everything that he knows or thinks at the time of writing.

Of course there are also better arguments for the developmental view, arguments that rely not upon silence but upon the appearance of doctrinal incompatibility, for example between the immanent essences of the *Euthyphro* and *Meno* and the metaphysical Forms of the *Phaedo*, or between the treatment of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras* and the moral psychology of the *Republic*. These arguments will be considered at length in Chapters 6 and 8, respectively.

Before proceeding with the interpretation, let me make the main outlines of my position clear. Concerning the *Gorgias* and the three very short dialogues, *Crito*, *Ion*, and *Hippias Minor*, my interpretation does not deviate very far from the traditional view. However, I do argue for more doctrinal continuity between these four works, and more distance from Socrates' own position, than is generally recognized – specifically with regard to Plato's unSocratic conception of a moral *technē*. And I emphasize that, formally speak-

ing, the three shorter dialogues belong to the genre of "Socratic discourses" studied in Chapter 1. It is with the *Gorgias*, I suggest, that Plato first established himself as a major writer and transformed the *logos Sōkratikos* into an appropriate vehicle for constructive philosophy. But in its dogmatic tone the *Gorgias* is not typical. At the same time or, as I suppose, shortly thereafter, Plato created an essentially new form, the aporetic dialogue with a pseudo-historical setting. This form is exemplified in the seven works I call "pre-middle" or threshold dialogues to emphasize their proleptic relationship to the later group: *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Meno*, *Lysis*, and *Euthydemus*. Plato here embarks upon a sustained project of philosophic authorship that reaches its climax in the three great middle works: *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*. My view is that this group as a whole and each of its members are best understood from the perspective of the *Republic*. It is precisely for this threshold group that I would endorse Jaeger's somewhat extravagant claim:

For Plato the goal was fixed and the outlines of the whole scheme were already visible to him, when he took up pen to write the first of his "Socratic" dialogues. The entelechy of the *Republic* can be traced with full clarity in the early dialogues.<sup>9</sup>

I regard this, however, not as a strictly historical claim but as a hermeneutical hypothesis, a proposal for the most insightful reading of the dialogues. Except for what he tells us in the *Seventh Epistle*, we know nothing about Plato's intellectual biography.<sup>10</sup> And it is a mistake to think that we can make straightforward inferences from the dialogues concerning Plato's philosophical development. That would be impractical even if we knew the chronological sequence of the dialogues, which we do not. (The limits of our knowledge on this point will be traced in the next section.) The anonymity of the dialogue form, together with Plato's problematic irony in the presentation of Socrates, makes it impossible for us to see through these dramatic works in such a way as to read the mind of their author. To suppose that one can treat these dialogues as a direct statement of the author's opinion is what I call

9. Jaeger (1944) 152 = English tr. 96. I have modified the translation where necessary.

10. As I shall argue in Chapter 3, Aristotle's account of the origins of Plato's philosophy is not historically reliable.

the fallacy of transparency, the failure to take account of the doctrinal opacity of these literary texts. What we can and must attempt to discern, however, is the artistic intention with which they were composed. For in this sense the intention of the author is inscribed in the text. It is precisely this intention that my exegesis is designed to capture, by construing the seven threshold dialogues together with the *Symposium* and *Phaedo* as a single complex literary enterprise culminating in the *Republic*. And that means to see this whole group of dialogues as the multi-faceted expression of a single philosophical view.

Such, in outline, is the interpretation to be presented here. Since it involves a chronological component, I begin in the next section with a survey of our knowledge and ignorance concerning the chronology of the dialogues down to the time of the *Republic*. And since the prevailing view has a plausible biographical story to tell about Plato's philosophical development, tracing his progress from Socratic apprenticeship to mature Platonism by way of contact with mathematics and Pythagorean philosophy, to replace that story I shall sketch an alternative, equally speculative account of Plato's intellectual biography for the period of the early and threshold dialogues. In § 5 I give a preliminary review of the evidence in support of my central thesis, the reading of these seven dialogues as deliberate philosophical preparation for the views to be presented in the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. This thesis implies that Plato had reached these views long before he expounds them in the middle dialogues. Why then should he withhold such information from readers of the earlier works? That is the question I attempt to answer in § 6.

### 3. QUESTIONS OF CHRONOLOGY

The early nineteenth century had no reliable clues as to the order of the dialogues. The only fixed point was Aristotle's report in *Politics* II.6 that the *Laws* was written later than the *Republic*. F. A. Wolf had pointed out (in his edition of 1782) that the *Symposium* seemed to refer to events of 385 BC; and of course the *Apology* and other works referring to Socrates' trial and death had to be later than 399. But the rest was speculation. Schleiermacher put the *Phaedrus* first, because of its youthful spirit. Many dialogues were dated before the death of Socrates. The *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *States-*



man were thought to be relatively early, the *Republic* very late, along with the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*.

All this was changed in the last quarter of the century by the insights of two scholars of genius, Lewis Campbell and Friedrich Blass, and by the careful work of a succession of diligent word- and phrase-counters, of whom the most distinguished was Constantin Ritter. The story is a fascinating one, and it is told most dramatically by Lutoslawski for whom it was still fresh.<sup>11</sup>

In 1867 Campbell published an edition of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* in which he argued for the late date of these dialogues on the basis of an amazing number of observations, both literary and stylistic, of features common to them and to the *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and *Laws*. He thus identified what has come to be known as the late group or Group III. Campbell also noticed that the *Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic* have more traits of diction and sentence structure in common with this group than do the other dialogues. He thus implicitly recognized the existence of what has since been identified as the middle group or Group II.

Campbell's work was revolutionary, but it remained unnoticed for nearly thirty years, until Lutoslawski brought it to the attention of the German scholars who, beginning with Dittenberger in 1881, had independently undertaken to establish the chronology of the dialogues on linguistic grounds. In the meantime an epoch-making discovery was contributed by Blass in his history of Attic rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Blass observed that the avoidance of hiatus, systematically practiced by Isocrates, is adopted by Plato in only a few of his works, including the *Phaedrus*, but above all in the six dialogues independently identified by Campbell as the late group. Thus the identity of this group was clearly established by two independent investigators, using quite different observations, before the stylometricians began their work.

What Dittenberger (in 1881), Ritter (in 1888) and the others have done is above all to confirm the division of the dialogues into three groups. It was Campbell again in 1896 who definitively assigned the *Parmenides* to the middle group, together with the *Repub-*

11. Lutoslawski (1897). I am largely reporting information provided by Lutoslawski and Brandwood (1990). Brandwood gives a more reliable and up-to-date critical survey of work in the field, but Lutoslawski gives a fuller report of the early studies.

12. Blass (1874).

*lic*, *Theaetetus*, and *Phaedrus*<sup>13</sup>. (Ritter had found the style of the *Parmenides* so anomalous that he doubted its authenticity.) The same result concerning the three groups was reached independently by von Arnim, in a publication in the same year.<sup>14</sup>

In my opinion, this division of Plato's dialogues into three separate groups – early, middle, and late – can be regarded as a fixed point of departure in any speculation about the chronology of the dialogues. These groups were identified a century ago by three scholars working independently of one another, and their results in regard to the late group were confirmed by the hiatus observations of Blass and Janell.<sup>15</sup> The careful statistical studies begun by Dittenberger in 1881 and summarized by Brandwood more than a century later, have done nothing whatsoever to undermine this division into three groups.<sup>16</sup> This is the one solid achievement of stylistic studies.

Can stylometry do more? One may reasonably doubt it. What has occurred in the study of Platonic chronology since 1896 is (I am afraid) mostly confusion, not progress. There is first of all confusion about the term “middle dialogues,” which was originally a name for the stylistically intermediate group, but is now applied to the dialogues of Plato's so-called “middle period” defined in terms of content, with reference to the doctrine of transcendental Forms. The “middle” period so defined includes two or three stylistically early dialogues (*Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*); whereas the

13. Campbell (1896) 129–36.

14. See the account of von Arnim's 1896 publication in Brandwood (1990) 96–109; more briefly in Lutoslawski (1897) 136–8.

15. Lutoslawski emphasizes the extent to which the early investigators worked in ignorance of one another's results. The three pioneers – Campbell, Blass, and Dittenberger – were completely independent of one another, but all three identified the same group of six dialogues as late. Ritter (1888) knew Blass and Dittenberger but not Campbell. Von Arnim (1896) knew Dittenberger but apparently neither Campbell, Blass, nor Ritter. See Lutoslawski (1897) 101, 103, 121, and 136. It was Lutoslawski who first brought all of these studies together.

16. Brandwood (1990: 108), commenting on the work of Ritter and von Arnim, notes “their complete agreement on the division into three chronological groups, and at exactly the same points.” Elsewhere (p. 8) he recognizes that Campbell had already identified the same three groups. In another recent study, G. R. Ledger recognizes “the sharp difference between early and late works,” and implicitly confirms the division between Groups II and III. See Ledger (1989) 224f. But these fundamental results are obscured by Ledger's attempt to establish a sequence for all of the dialogues.

intermediate chronological group, defined stylistically, excludes these but includes *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus* which are often thought of as "late" dialogues. To avoid this confusion it would be better to speak simply of stylistic groups I, II, and III, recognizing that today the terms "middle dialogue" and "middle period" are regularly used with reference to content rather than style. I submit, however, that it is only the stylistic division into three groups that offers any basis for an intersubjective agreement on chronological order.

A second source of confusion is even more radical. This is the attempt to employ stylometry to establish a chronological order for dialogues *within* the three groups. In effect, what Campbell, Ritter and others discovered was that, in the course of his long career, Plato's style changed basically *twice*: once when he undertook to write the *Republic*, a composition on an entirely new scale; and once again when he began systematically to avoid hiatus and hence adopt more unnatural word order and sentence structure. (This change occurred between the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, marking the break between Groups II and III.) But there is really no reason to suppose that Plato's style changed significantly every time he wrote a new dialogue, and no reason to exclude the possibility that he was working on several dialogues at the same time.

The attempt to establish a complete linear ordering for the dialogues on stylometric grounds has produced no reliable results, no agreement after a century of work.<sup>17</sup> And this is what we might expect, since the attempt is based upon the fallacious assumption that chronological order will in every case be reflected in stylistic change. Although many if not all studies confirm the division into three groups, two different studies – even two studies by the same scholar<sup>18</sup> – rarely if ever produce the same ordering for dialogues *within* each group. In seeking to establish a linear ordering, stylometry in the last hundred years has attempted to do the undoable.

17. This lack of agreement is documented in the reviews of Brandwood's and Ledger's books. See, e.g. Schofield (1991) 108f.; Keyser (1991) and (1992); Young (1994).
18. The most striking case of this is von Arnim, who in his first (1896) study put the *Lysis* and the *Laches* at the very end of Group I, with the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*; but in his second (1912) study he placed both these dialogues near the beginning of this group, after the *Ion* and *Protagoras*. See the report in Brandwood (1990) 107 and 215.

This prolonged and continuing endeavor has served only to obscure, and hence undermine confidence in, the one solid, objective (or at least, reliably intersubjective) result of the chronological studies that began with Campbell. This is the modest but decisive achievement of dividing the dialogues into three groups.<sup>19</sup>

As far as stylistic evidence goes, then, the *Apology* and the *Crito* might have been written at the same time as the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*. All we really know is that these works are, as a group, earlier than the *Republic*. I think it is reasonable to believe that the *Apology* and *Crito* were written early, soon after Socrates' death, and that the three dialogues presenting the metaphysical conception of Forms (*Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Cratylus*) were written much later, shortly before the *Republic*. But there seems to be no sound philological basis for arguing this point against a doubter. There is no significant stylistic change. Thus, if we rely on Ritter's figures as reported by Brandwood, the *Symposium* has only three features of Plato's late style, the same number as the *Ion* and *Charmides*, and only one more than *Apology* and *Crito*.<sup>20</sup>

I have presented elsewhere the case for dating the *Gorgias* before the *Protagoras*, against the prevailing view.<sup>21</sup> Although I believe that the *Gorgias* was written first, I do not suppose that I have proved this. Conceivably, these dialogues were written at the same time. We really do not *know* the order of dialogues within Group I. Hence a responsible scholar has the right to arrange them in any

19. The only systematic study known to me that does not fully confirm the division into three groups is that of Thesleff (1982). Thesleff (p. 70) does recognize the identity of Group III as "valid beyond any reasonable doubt," but he does not accept the standard view of Group II as a chronological unit. Thesleff's method of dating combines stylistic criteria with considerations of philosophical content and he introduces hypothetical revisions by Plato and rewriting by a secretary. In my view, this means giving up any basis for intersubjective agreement.

20. Brandwood (1990) 66. Compare the situation for the *Euthydemus*, which some scholars have wanted to date after *Republic* VII, because the *Euthydemus* ranks dialectic above mathematics in a way that recalls the *Republic* text (*Euthyd.* 290c). The burden of proof is on a supporter of this view to explain why the *Euthydemus* has only four late features, the same number as the *Protagoras*, whereas *Republic* VII has sixteen – roughly the same number as the *Parmenides*, which has seventeen – despite the fact that the *Euthydemus* is one-third longer than *Republic* VII. (For these figures see Brandwood (1990) 66 and 72.)

21. Kahn (1988a).

sequence that he or she finds persuasive. There are very few exceptions, one of which I will mention in a moment. But in general the ordering must be decided by literary tact, historical imagination, or personal hunch. This hermeneutical choice is not to be confused with the kind of solid philological result, intersubjectively confirmable, that is represented by the division into three groups.

Perhaps the one clear exception in Group I is the chronological priority of the *Meno* to the *Phaedo*. This is guaranteed, not by the absence of the Forms from the former and their presence in the latter (for nothing justifies us in supposing that Plato must assert every one of his doctrines in every dialogue), but by definite textual indications that the author of the *Phaedo* intends the reader to recognize that the *Meno* is presupposed. Whereas the doctrine of recollection is introduced as a surprising novelty in the *Meno* (81A–E), in the *Phaedo* it is presented as a familiar view that Socrates “often used to assert” (72E). The whole context in the *Phaedo* (with the mention of leading questions and geometrical diagrams) comes close to being a direct reference to the *Meno*.

This is, I think, almost the only case in Group I where Plato himself has marked a sequence for the dialogues. (The closest parallel is provided by those passages in the *Crito* that refer to what Socrates said in court, and that in fact correspond to passages in the *Apology*.) Otherwise, the dialogues prior to the *Republic* are composed in such literary independence of one another that any sequential ordering is left up to us.

My own preference, then, is to arrange the dialogues of Group I in six successive stages, moving towards the position of the *Republic*. This is illustrated in the following list. The division into three groups represents a well-established consensus; the order of dialogues within each group is a matter of personal conjecture.

*The ordering of Plato's dialogues*

Group I

1. *Apology*, *Crito*
2. *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*
3. *Gorgias*, *Menexenus*
4. *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*
5. *Meno*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*
6. *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*

## Group II

Republic, Phaedrus, Parmenides, Theaetetus

## Group III

Sophist–Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus–Critias, Laws

I once believed that my arrangement of the dialogues in Group I was a chronological sequence, but I now think it is a mistake to make any claims about a matter on which we have so little evidence. Even if they are taken as chronological, however, my six stages do not pretend to represent the development of Plato's thought. They represent different moments in his literary presentation of Socrates and different approaches to the philosophical position of the *Republic*. In the last analysis, it is this systematic orientation towards the *Republic* that ties all or most of these dialogues together and offers the most enlightening perspective on their interrelationship. Such is my basic claim.

Since the dialogues of Group I are earlier, I have described their relation to the *Republic* as proleptic. But this term "proleptic" may seem too chronological. It does not greatly matter in what order these dialogues were actually composed or in what sequence they are in fact read. My six stages may be thought of as the proposal for an ideal reading order. Perhaps the better metaphor will be spatial rather than temporal: instead of before and after we can speak of exoteric and esoteric, of relative distance from the center as defined by the *Republic*. As a variant on the notion of prolepsis, this mode of interpretation might equally well be called *ingressive*. The different stages of Group I provide us with various points of entry, various degrees of ingress, into the Platonic thought-world that finds its fullest expression in the *Republic*.

## 4. A SPECULATIVE BIOGRAPHY

In the case of ancient authors we are generally without any serious documentation concerning the personal context of their literary work. For Plato, however, there is one exception. His *Seventh Epistle* offers a brief sketch of his early life, as seen from the vantage point of his old age.<sup>22</sup> As Dodds and others have recognized, this

22. Plato would have been about seventy-four at the time the letter was written. I have no doubt that the letter was written by Plato. Most twentieth-century Plato scholars have recognized the letter as authentic, but in the last gen-

account is most plausibly read as Plato's own self-portrayal of the events that led to the composition of the *Gorgias*. The letter gives us a picture of Plato's concerns in the 390s that seem quite different from the preoccupation with the theory and teaching of virtue that we find in the *Protagoras* and the dialogues of definition.

The narrative begins with the statement that "when I was young I had the same attitude as many others: I thought I would enter public life as soon as I came of age" (*Ep.* VII, 324B 8). Plato descended, in fact, from a great public family. He often mentions with pride his family connections with Solon; and his stepfather and great-uncle, Pyrilampes, was a close associate of Pericles.<sup>23</sup> It would have been natural for him to aspire to an eminent public role, like the ambitious young men he depicts in the dialogues, such as Hippocrates in the *Protagoras* (316B 8). But the letter recounts a series of events that prevented Plato from pursuing a normal political career. First there was the collapse of the extreme democracy after the defeat of Athens in 404 BC. In place of this constitution "which was reviled by many" came the oligarchic regime of the Thirty.

Some of these leaders were relatives and acquaintances of mine,<sup>24</sup> and they invited me to join them as a natural associate. And my attitude was not surprising, in view of my youth. [Plato was twenty-three at the time.] I thought that they would lead the city from an unjust way of life to a just form of government. So I paid close attention to what they would do. And I saw that these men in a short time made the previous regime look like a golden age. (*Ep.* VII, 324D)

Plato particularly mentions their treatment of "my older friend Socrates, whom I would not hesitate to call the justest man of his time" (324E). The Thirty attempted to involve Socrates in their own crimes by ordering him to carry out a death-squad arrest of Leon of Salamis, which Socrates refused to do at the peril of his life.

When I observed these events and many others of the same kind, I was disgusted and I withdrew from the evils of that time. But shortly after-

eration the doubters were more conspicuous. The *communis opinio* seems now to be swinging back in favor of authenticity.

23. *Charmides* 154E-155A, 157E-158A; *Timaeus* 20E-21D. For Pyrilampes see Dodds (1959) 261. On Plato's family see also below, pp. 186f.

24. Critias, ringleader of the Thirty, was Plato's first cousin; Charmides, one of the Thirty, was his uncle.

wards the Thirty fell and their whole constitution collapsed. Once more I was drawn, more slowly this time but nevertheless, by the desire for a public role in politics.

On the whole the restored democracy was quite moderate and resisted the temptation to take revenge on their political opponents. But by some chance they accused and put to death "our same companion, Socrates."

As I considered these matters and the men engaged in politics, and our laws and customs, the more I observed and the more I advanced in years, the harder it seemed to me to direct political affairs in the right manner. (325B)

It was difficult to find trustworthy allies, while both the political mores and the letter of the law seemed progressively more corrupt.

So despite my initial enthusiasm for a public career, seeing this general disorder I ended by becoming dizzy. And I did not give up watching for things to improve . . . and waiting for an opportunity for action, but I finally understood that all the cities of today are badly governed. For the situation of their laws is practically incurable without an extraordinary stroke of good luck. And I was obliged to say, in praise of true philosophy, that it gives insight into what is just both for the city and for private individuals. So the races of mankind will not be released from evils until the class of true and genuine philosophers gain political power or until the rulers of the cities come by divine dispensation to practice true philosophy. It was in this frame of mind that I set out for my first trip to South Italy and Sicily. (*Ep.* VII, 325E–326B)

This is a document of extraordinary importance for anyone who assumes, as I do, that the letter was written by Plato. We could not have known of his youthful and persistent ambition for a political career, lasting until he was almost forty, if he had not told us himself. We might rather have imagined his early years preoccupied with philosophical inquiries, as in Socrates' description of his own youth in the *Phaedo*. But once we comprehend Plato's passionate concern for political action, many things fall into place. The deep yearning for political reconstruction explains why his three longest works, spanning his whole career, are devoted to the question of how to impose a moral order on the life of the city: *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Laws*. The same preoccupation helps us to understand his two fruitless voyages to the court of Dionysius II in Syracuse, when he thought he had some chance to influence the course of events in the most powerful city in the Greek world. From the re-



peated reference in this letter to the treatment of Socrates as a kind of measure of the health of a political regime, we can see the unique importance of Socrates in Plato's own life as a model for his moral and political thinking. And it is a model to which he still remains loyal in this letter, written almost half a century after Socrates' death. (The letter dates itself in 353 BC, just six years before Plato's own death.) By showing us how difficult it was for Plato to give up his political ambitions, the letter explains how important it was for him to conceive the life in philosophy as the continuation of politics by other means, so that his Socrates, at the end of the *Gorgias*, can paradoxically claim to be the only true politician in Athens (521D).

The letter tells us that Plato was about forty when he left Athens for Sicily and Magna Graecia. Looking back on this moment thirty-five years later, Plato reports that he had already reached the radical conclusion expressed in a famous passage of the *Republic*, that until political power and philosophic wisdom could be joined in the same hands, "there will be no cessation of evils for the cities, or even for the human race" (*Rep.* v, 473D). It seems entirely natural that in the letter Plato should quote this formula as the mature expression of his radically new view of politics. But this does not mean that the *Republic* was written when Plato was forty years old. Many scholars have recognized that the choice in the *Gorgias* between the Two Lives, the life in philosophy and the life in politics as usual, directly reflects Plato's own life decision as reported in the *Seventh Epistle*. A classic statement of the connection between the two documents is that of Dodds.

The secret of the peculiar emotional power of the *Gorgias* is, I think, that its author felt the issue as a deeply personal one, and has communicated the resulting tension to his readers . . . Here behind the figures of Socrates and Callicles, we can for once catch sight of Plato himself. For in the light of the *Seventh Letter* it is fairly clear that the *Gorgias* is more than an *apologia* for Socrates; it is at the same time Plato's *apologia pro vita sua*.<sup>25</sup> Behind it stands Plato's decision to forgo the political career towards which both family tradition and his own inclinations (*Ep.* vii, 325E 1) had urged him, and instead to open a school of philosophy. The decision was, as he tells us, the outcome of a long internal struggle, and that

25. "That the *Gorgias* is 'Plato's Apology' was first said by Schleiermacher in the introduction to his translation of the dialogue (pp. 15f. of the 3rd edition)." (Dodds' note in Dodds [1959].)

struggle seems to have left its mark on certain pages of the *Gorgias*: we shall hardly be wrong in hearing an echo of it in Socrates' bitter words about the cloud of false witnesses from the best Athenian families whom Polus can call to prove him mistaken (472A-C); or in the sneer of Callicles at people who turn their backs on public life "to spend the rest of their days whispering in a corner with three or four young lads" (485D); or in Socrates' final call to a new way of living, without which there can be no true statesmanship (527D-E). These personal tones give the *Gorgias* a unique place among the dialogues.<sup>26</sup>

In the *Gorgias* the figure of Socrates has become the emblem for Plato's own choice of the life in philosophy. The *Seventh Letter* tells us that this choice became definitive before Plato left for Italy around 388 BC. It is because we seem to find the direct reflection of this decision in the *Gorgias* that we can plausibly date the dialogue either just before or just after the voyage to the West.<sup>27</sup> In my judgment, the tone of bitterness and the relentless condemnation of Athenian politics and culture are more likely to mark the *Gorgias* as a farewell to Athens composed by the disappointed politician-philosopher leaving the city in disgust, rather than as a homecoming gift after his sojourn in other cities whose moral life he found even more depraved (*Ep.* VII, 326B-D). So I conjecture that the *Gorgias* was composed in 390-388 BC, before the trip to the West and only a few years after the *Ion* and the *Hippias Minor*.

The *Gorgias* says explicitly what the *Seventh Epistle* implies: that Socratic soul-tendence is both the prerequisite and the goal for political activity, so that philosophy pursued in the Socratic spirit is the only realistic way of working for political improvement. I suggest that with this new conception of politics came a new conception on Plato's part of his own role as writer and teacher. The project of teaching will be pursued in his activities in the Academy, following his return to Athens. The project of writing will take shape in a new series of dialogues that begins with the dialogues of definition and culminates in the *Republic*. The novelty of this project will appear more clearly if we situate it against the background of what I assume to be Plato's earlier work.

The *Apology* and the *Crito* are Socratic in an historical sense, in that they attempt to explain and justify Socrates' actions in court

26. Dodds (1959) 31. Dodds is here following the insight of Wilamowitz (1920) 1, 232-8.

27. So Dodds (1959) 26f.; Guthrie (1975) 284f.

and in prison, and thus to interpret the meaning of his life and death. The *Ion* and the *Hippias Minor* (which I take to be the only other dialogues composed in the 390s before the *Gorgias*) are Socratic in the literary sense: they represent imaginary conversations in which Socrates develops ideas (about poetry and about morality) that are somehow connected with the historical Socrates but freely developed in Plato's own way. Here Plato is amusing himself in the new literary genre of "conversations with Socrates," while at the same time developing certain themes and modes of argument that betray his involvement with philosophy in a more technical sense (as we shall see in Chapter 4). As I have suggested, it is in the *Gorgias* that Plato first sets out to formulate his own philosophical position and to compose a major literary work. Of course the *Apology* and *Crito* are small-scale masterpieces, revealing an exceptional literary talent; but the *Ion* and the *Hippias Minor* suggest that Plato was not ready to exploit that talent fully. It is, I assume, in the *Gorgias* that he does so for the first time. And the *Gorgias* will be followed or accompanied, after Plato's return to Athens, by an unceasing stream of dialogues, beginning perhaps with the *Laches*, and constituting the most extraordinary body of philosophical literature ever composed. Thus the man who, on my view, was only an occasional author before the composition of the *Gorgias* in his late thirties, became from then on something like a full-time writer, despite the fact that, as he tells us both in the *Seventh Letter* and in the *Phaedrus*, he never considered writing to be the most important part of his philosophical activity.

In the *Gorgias* we have, as Dodds recognized, "the first statement of Plato's personal views on ethics and politics, later to be developed in the *Republic*."<sup>28</sup> But the defense of Socratic ethics in the *Gorgias* is above all a negative achievement, in the brilliant refutation of Polus and Callicles. The positive argument for the life of Socratic virtue is much less satisfactory, as we shall see. And so Plato will be obliged to undertake once more the defense of justice and the moral life, as he will do in the *Republic*. But to do so with greater success he must first accomplish a major constructive work of philosophic thought and writing.

28. Dodds (1959) 16, n.1. For the central importance of political reconstruction in all of Plato's thought, see the remarks of Jaeger à propos of the *Seventh Letter*, (1944) 137 = English tr. 83f.

We can only guess how much philosophy Plato was discussing with his friends in those first ten years after Socrates' death, when his chief concern seems to have been the search for political allies and for an opportunity of political action. What we learn from the *Gorgias* about his early philosophical preoccupations, in addition to his moral-political program and his extraordinary skill in deploying arguments, is above all a keen interest in the mystical view of the soul that is usually described as Orphic or Pythagorean, and which in the dialogue is attributed to "someone from Sicily or South Italy" (493A 6). It was of course not necessary to travel to the West to encounter such ideas; they are introduced in the *Gorgias* by a quotation from Euripides (492E). But it may well be this interest in a view of the afterlife much cultivated in the West, as much as curiosity about Pythagorean science and mathematics, that decided Plato to undertake his voyage to the New World.<sup>29</sup> It may also be that he simply felt the need for a radical change of scene, for the opportunity to reflect upon life in Athens from a perspective both culturally and geographically remote.

Plato seems to have returned to Athens within a year or two, probably in 387 bc.<sup>30</sup> We have another very unusual document that reflects his passionate concern with Athenian politics shortly after his return. This is the funeral oration contained in the dialogue *Menexenus*. This is the only time we know of that Plato spoke out publicly on a matter of Athenian policy. And as usual he chose to speak anonymously and indirectly, in the guise of a dialogue where Socrates pretends to deliver a funeral oration composed by Aspasia "from the scraps left over from the funeral oration she composed for Pericles" (236B). The criticism of Athenian policy is itself indirect, conveyed by ironical praise of the Athenians for the courage and loyalty they no longer displayed in 386 bc. But the message must have been unmistakable for Plato's contemporaries. It constitutes an immediate application to the current political

29. The ancient tradition has it that Plato traveled to Italy to meet Archytas and the Pythagoreans. See the references to Cicero in Guthrie (1975) 17, n.3; cf. D.L. III.6.

I see no reason to believe in Plato's travels to Egypt and other lands, although the unreliability of the ancient sources who report such trips is not in itself proof that they did not take place.

30. So Guthrie (1975) 19, on slim evidence. But the *Menexenus* strongly suggests that he was back in Athens by 386.

crisis of the general critique of Athenian policy that Plato had formulated in the *Gorgias*.<sup>31</sup>

After this moment in 386 Plato's attitude towards Athenian politics seems to be summed up in his statement many years later in the *Seventh Epistle*:

[It is impious to use violence against one's parents.] If they are fixed in a way of life that pleases them, though it may not please me, I shall not antagonize them by useless scolding nor yet flatter them by contributing to the satisfaction of desires that I would myself rather die than approve. A reasonable man would live with the same attitude in regard to his city. He will speak out, if he thinks her politics are bad, and there is a prospect that he will be listened to and not put his life in danger by his speech . . . [But if his goals cannot be achieved without violence] he will keep his peace and pray for what is good both for himself and for his city. (331c-d)

Plato's conditions for speaking out in Athens were apparently satisfied at the time of the *Menexenus*, but never again. In the *Republic*, Plato compares the philosopher in an unjust city to the man caught in a dust-storm who takes refuge behind a wall and "who, when he sees the others filled with lawlessness, takes comfort if he is himself able to live his life here free from injustice and crime, and will cheerfully take his departure from this life with good hope for the future." This would be no small achievement, answers Adeimantus. "Nor the greatest either," says Socrates, "unless he meets with an appropriate commonwealth (*politeia*). For in a fitting constitution he will himself grow greater and together with his own welfare he will be a savior of the common good" (vi, 496d-497a). In this sense Plato never abandoned his political aspirations. Not only did he succumb twice to the temptation to try his hand in Sicilian politics. At the end of his life he was still preparing his last and longest work, the *Laws*, as his philosophical legacy to Athens and to the future of political thought.

In the years after 387 or 386, however, Plato was busy with other concerns. There was above all the organization of teaching and research that we have come to know as the foundation of the Acad-

31. For connections between the *Gorgias* and the *Menexenus* see Dodds (1959) 23f. followed by Guthrie (1975) 317. Dodds correctly saw that *Gorgias* and *Menexenus* "convey the same criticisms of Athenian democracy and Athenian foreign policy," but he underestimated the seriousness of Plato's protest against the humiliating terms of the King's Peace. See Kahn (1963) 220-34.

emy. Concerning the details of Plato's teaching activity and the conditions of study in the Academy we are not very well informed. What we do know is that he established the first permanent institution of higher education and scientific research, the paradigm for all academies, universities, and research centers down to our own time. Thus Plato's school not only served to train Aristotle and a host of other important thinkers and scientists; it also provided the model for Aristotle and later philosophers to form their own schools. And it seems that Plato's Academy never lost sight of its political mission, to serve as a "nursery of statesmen" by training men who would play an important role as political leaders or royal advisors.<sup>32</sup>

I suggest that at the same time when he was organizing this educational enterprise in the Academy, in the middle and late 380s, Plato began to write a new series of dialogues concerned with the theory of education and the unity and definition of virtue, and that these dialogues were planned as a natural complement to his activity as an educator. It is important to bear in mind that the publication of the *Gorgias* must have catapulted Plato from the ranks of the minor Socratics to his permanent position among the supreme masters of Greek letters. On the traditional assumption that Plato composed the *Protagoras* and several other dialogues before the *Gorgias*, his ascent will have been more gradual but still dramatic enough. Both the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras* must have been recognized as literary masterpieces as soon as they appeared.<sup>33</sup> Even their titles, referring to the major intellectual figures of the previous age, would have attracted considerable attention. The *Gorgias* alone will have established its author as the out-

32. The quotation is from Marrou (1950) 104. Marrou lists more than a dozen names of members of the Academy who played an important part in politics. (Most of the names are given by Plutarch *Adversus Colotem* 1126c-d.) For recent, more critical studies of the political mission of the Academy see Saunders (1986) 200-10, and a skeptical view argued at length in Brunt (1993) 282-342.

33. Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae* xi, 505d) tells of Gorgias himself reading Plato's dialogue named after him and remarking to his friends, "How well Plato knows how to make fun of people (*iambizein*)!" (DK 82A.15a). Aristode reports the story of a Corinthian farmer who, after encountering the *Gorgias*, abandoned his fields in order to study with Plato. (See below, Chapter 5, p. 141 with n.17.) Whether true or not, such stories reflect the reputation which the dialogue soon acquired.

standing Greek thinker and writer of his generation: not only the principal heir to Socrates as a philosopher but the successor to Euripides as an intellectual dramatist and the rival of Thucydides as a political thinker.

It was (I imagine) from this position of eminence that Plato embarked upon the creation of a new kind of Socratic dialogue, a set of rigorous discussions on virtue and education without any definite conclusions, designed to perplex and provoke his readers and thus to produce in them the kind of intellectual stimulation he had himself received from Socrates. We will discuss later Plato's interpretation of *aporia* as the first stage in philosophical enlightenment.<sup>34</sup> Here we are concerned with the literary innovations of this threshold group.

The aporetic dialogue makes its appearance in a new literary form, the "historical dialogue," anticipated only in the *Crito*. A careful proem sets the scene of the dialogue in a definite location with a fictive date.<sup>35</sup> In several cases a vivid description of the setting and the interlocutors is provided by a frame narrative, in which Socrates reports the conversation to a friend (*Charmides*, *Protagoras*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, as later in the *Republic*). The extraordinarily lifelike characterization of the participants gives the reader the illusion of overhearing an actual conversation. It is the same art that reaches its highest achievement in the *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, where, for a fuller representation of Socrates as the central figure, the role of narrator is assigned to someone else.

As an extension of Plato's own educational activities, this great series of dialogues must have been designed to serve many different functions. But one thing these dialogues do not attempt to do is to represent Plato's own train of thought. His own position at any moment tends to be hidden from view by the artfulness of the dialogue form. Thus the doctrine of recollection is presented in the *Meno* as the teaching of wise priests and priestesses, just as the transcendent Form of Beauty itself is revealed in the *Symposium* as the mystic teaching of Diotima. When these two doctrines come together in the systematic arguments of the *Phaedo*, it is reasonable to see Socrates as speaking finally for Plato himself. And in the

34. See below, Chapter 3 §6 and Chapter 6 §7.

35. Note the absence of any specific location and any definite fictive date in the *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, and *Gorgias*.

*Republic* Plato's personal signature is indirectly but unmistakably conveyed by the choice of Socrates' interlocutors, Plato's own brothers, the two "sons of Ariston": Glaucon and Adeimantus.<sup>36</sup>

In dialogues before the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, however, the rhetorical focus is on the reader, or rather on the various overlapping sets of readers. There is the loving portrait of Socrates for the general public, to honor his memory and propagate his moral ideal; there is the protreptic to philosophy for gifted young men (and perhaps a few women) who can be drawn into the educational enterprise; and there are the technical subtleties to be studied by those who are already ripe for training in philosophy. It is for all these audiences that the series of "popular" dialogues from the *Laches* to the *Symposium* is composed, in order to create the new audience that will be capable of entering the more unfamiliar philosophical world of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.

We do not know when this large literary project took shape, just as we do not know when Plato first formulated the doctrine of Forms for himself and for his friends. What we may reasonably believe is that when Plato begins to write the *Laches*, for example, he does so in the perspective of a much larger undertaking, one whose outlines may be dim but whose goal is clear: to lay the philosophical basis for a systematic defense of Socratic ethics and their application to the political domain. Thus to write the *Laches* is to prepare to write the *Euthyphro*, the *Charmides*, the *Protagoras*, the *Meno* . . . and ultimately the *Republic*.<sup>37</sup>

How old was Plato when this plan was formed, and when it was carried out? We cannot know, but we can at least make some plausible conjectures. The *Gorgias* is reasonably taken to mark the moment of Plato's commitment to the philosophic life, in his late thirties or early forties – the moment dated c. 388 BC by his own statement in the *Seventh Epistle*. The *Symposium*, on the other hand, provides the first explicit reference to his transcendental metaphysics, in the years after 385. (The dialogue is postdated by the anachronism at *Symposium* 193A.) Hence on my hypothesis the seven threshold dialogues, from the *Laches* to the *Meno* and *Euthy-*

36. See Sedley (1995: 4f.) for two strategic uses of the phrase "son of Ariston" as a subtle device by which Plato manages "to project his own authorial voice."

37. For my suggestion that the *Laches* was composed as the introduction to this new literary project, see Chapter 6 § 2.



*demus*, will fall in between, in the middle and late 380s. The *Republic* was composed after the *Symposium*, in the decade 380–370, when Plato was in his fifties. If these calculations are sound, the plan itself, and the composition of seven so-called early dialogues, will belong in the middle or late 380s, when Plato was about forty-five years old.

##### 5. A SKETCH OF THE INGRESSIVE INTERPRETATION

If by the meaning of a text we understand the message that the author intends to transmit to the reader, then the meaning of a Platonic text is accessible only at the cost of a considerable effort of interpretation. The reader must be as cunning in interpreting a dialogue as the author has been artful in composing it.<sup>38</sup>

This distance between text and message, or between what Plato writes and what he means to convey, is the first problem that any interpretation must confront. Behind it looms a larger problem: the distance between what Plato means to say in a specific passage and what he thinks in general, or, to put it differently, the place of a particular text within the larger world of Plato's philosophy. My notion of ingressive exposition is a proposal to deal with the first problem in the light of the second: to identify the meaning of a particular argument or an entire work by locating it within the larger thought-world articulated in the middle dialogues.

This proposal may be regarded as begging the question against the developmental reading: I assume that Plato did not change his mind in any fundamental way between the *Laches* and *Protagoras*, on the one hand, and the *Phaedo* and *Republic* on the other. But since in any case we do not have access to Plato's mind, the issue is: which assumptions provide us with the best interpretation of the texts? In this sense, the whole of Chapters 6 to 11 will constitute my argument against the developmental view and in favor of the hypothesis of ingressive exposition. By this hypothesis I mean the claim that the seven threshold dialogues are designed to prepare the reader for the views expounded in the *Symposium*,

38. Compare Tigerstedt's remarks (1977: 99) on "the reader's responsibility": "Nothing is a matter of course; everything can be called into question. To read Plato demands a far higher degree of vigilance and activity than any other philosopher asks for. Time after time, we are forced to make our choice, to decide how we should interpret what we are reading."

*Phaedo*, and *Republic*, and that they can be adequately understood only from the perspective of these middle works.<sup>39</sup>

Evidence in support of this claim will be of two kinds. On the one hand we find passages in the threshold dialogues that are enigmatic, puzzling, or somehow problematic, for which the solution or clarification will be provided by a text or a doctrine in the middle dialogues. And on the other hand, we find texts in the middle dialogues that deliberately emphasize their continuity with ideas and formulations familiar from the earlier works. An example of the first sort is the gradual emergence of the terminology for dialectic. An example of the second sort will be the formula for the Forms, presented in the *Phaedo* and repeated in the *Republic*, which unmistakably echoes the *what-is-X?* question of the dialogues of definition. I begin with the first example.

The terminology for dialectic provides what is perhaps the clearest case of progressive disclosure. In Plato as elsewhere in Greek, the verb *dialegesthai* means "carry on a conversation." In three dialogues of Group I – the *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, and *Protagoras* – this verb serves to describe the Socratic technique of discussing a topic by question and answer, in contrast to the rhetorical practice of making long speeches. (These three dialogues belong to what I count as stages 2–4 in Group I: see above, p. 47.) In three other dialogues of Group I we find forms derived from the corresponding nominal stem *dialekt-*. (These three dialogues belong to my stages 5–6.) Thus we have in the *Meno* 75c–d the adverbial form *dialektikōteron*, which characterizes a friendly method of inquiry as "answering questions more gently and *more conversationally*," in contrast to the hostile, competitive techniques of eristic disputation. If the distinction between dialectic and rhetoric is in some sense pre-Platonic, this contrast between dialectic and eristic, as drawn in the *Meno*, is presumably Plato's own. And the term *dialektikōteron* seems in fact to be his invention.

The next step in terminological elaboration is marked by the expression *dialektikos* for the dialectician, literally someone who is "skilled in the art of conversation." (This term also seems to be a Platonic creation. The feminine form for the art itself, *dialektikē*,

39. I am here assuming (what we cannot prove) that the *Symposium* and *Phaedo* are later than the other dialogues of Group I, with the exception of the *Cratylus*, which is also presumably one of the latest members of this group.

does not appear until *Republic* VII.) This word for dialectician turns up in only two passages in Group I: in the *Euthydemus* and in the *Cratylus*. In both contexts the *dialektikos* is unexpectedly introduced as someone in possession of a superior art, which enables him either to make use of the truths discovered by mathematicians (*Euthyd.* 290C), or to judge the correctness of the words which the namegiver has assigned to things (*Cratylus* 390C). These two passages are truly proleptic, in that they must strike the reader as enigmatic in their context.<sup>40</sup> They require an explanation that will be provided only in a later text. The *Euthydemus* passage is explicitly marked as mysterious, the utterance perhaps of some higher power (290E–291A). Neither the term *dialektikos* nor the corresponding conception of dialectic as the highest form of knowledge can really be understood without reference to the central books of the *Republic*. Only in the discussion of the Divided Line at the end of Book VI, and in the following references to dialectic as the sequel to mathematical studies in Book VII, does Plato explain why the *dialektikos* is in a position to judge the results of mathematical work and the correctness of names. (These passages are discussed in Chapter 10 §5.)

We can follow a similar pattern of progressive disclosure for the knowledge of good and bad. Introduced in the *Laches* as a covert answer to the question: “What is virtue?” (199E), the knowledge of good and bad reappears in the *Charmides* as the implied definition of *sōphrosunē* (174B–D). What is striking here is that in neither dialogue does either Socrates or his interlocutor recognize the implicit solution. Both *Laches* and *Charmides* end in overt *aporia*, and we the readers are left to puzzle out the answer on our own.

The *Euthydemus* treats a related theme as the topic for an infinite regress: Knowledge is the only good, but good for what? If it is beneficial, it must produce more knowledge. What will *this* knowledge make us good for? For making others good? But good for what? (*Euthyd.* 292E–293A). The regress is broken only in *Republic* VI, where the Form of the Good is introduced as the *megiston mathēma*, the highest object of knowledge.

Now when Socrates introduces the Form of the Good as ultimate object for knowledge, he repeatedly asserts that “you have

40. Compare the role of enigmatic utterance in the technical sense of prolepsis developed by Lebeck (1971) 1–2.

often heard this before" (VI, 504E 8, 505A 3); which is perhaps as close as Plato ever comes to commenting on his own use of proleptic composition. The whole context resonates with echoes of earlier dialogues.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, you know this too, that most people think the good is pleasure [as in the *Protagoras*], whereas the more refined sort think it is wisdom (*phronēsis*) [as in the *Euthydemus* and the *Meno*] . . . And those who hold the latter view are not able to indicate *what kind of wisdom*, but they end up being forced to say: knowledge of the good . . . [This is ridiculous] if those who complain that we do not know the good go on to speak to us as if we know it. For they say it is knowledge (*phronēsis*) of good, as if we understood what they say when they pronounce the word "good." [Compare the regress of *Euthydemus* 292B–E.] But what about those who define pleasure as good? . . . Are not they too forced to agree that some pleasures are bad? [So Callicles in the *Gorgias*, 499 Bff.] (*Rep.* VI, 505A–C)

Having reached the climatic moment of his exposition, Plato here looks back over the whole range of anticipatory discussions in earlier works. He thus makes clear that they are all to be understood in the light of this ultimate conception of the Good. (For more on the topic of knowledge as beneficial or good-directed, see Chapter 7 §8.)

Chapters 6–11 will deal with other themes for which an expository progression can be traced from threshold to middle dialogues. I conclude this preliminary sketch with the theme of the Forms themselves. It is well known that the *what-is-X?* question of the dialogues of definition serves as a direct antecedent for the theory of Forms. The most striking evidence of this is the fact already mentioned that, in the *Phaedo* and later dialogues, the technical designation for the Forms is the inverted form of the *what-is-X?* question, "the very what-X-is", *auto to ho esti* (*Phaedo* 75B 1, D 2, 78D 4, 92A 9; *Rep.* VI, 507B 7, and often). The essences of the *Euthyphro* and the *Meno* become the Forms of the middle dialogues. The continuity is explicitly marked by the fact that the three Forms

41. In this connection Adam (1902: II, 51) comments that the claim that, without knowledge of the good, nothing else is of any use, is "one of Plato's commonplaces," and he cites as parallels *Charmides* 173A ff., *Laches* 199c, *Euthyd.* 280e ff., 289A ff., 291, *Lysis* 219b ff. Adam adds: "The *Euthydemus* and *Charmides* already forecast the city of the Philosopher-king, in which Knowledge of Good shall 'sit alone in the helm of the state' (*Euthyd.* 291D)."

mentioned when the metaphysical doctrine is generalized at *Phaedo* 65D 12 (namely, Magnitude, Health, and Strength) are exactly the same as the three examples cited in the *Meno* for a uniform *eidōs* applying to different cases. (For more indications of continuity on this point see below, Chapter 11 §3.)

Such unmistakable signs of continuity are often interpreted as so many marks of development. The *what-is-X?* question of the *Laches* and *Euthyphro* is seen as the original, Socratic form of the search for definitions. It is only later, in mature Platonism, that this search is reinterpreted as the pursuit of metaphysical definienda, construed as items of eternal, intelligible Being. For this developmental view, the turning-point comes in the *Meno*, with the doctrine of recollection and the new importance of mathematics. But it is only in the *Symposium* and *Phaedo* that the new epistemology of the *Meno* is completed by the corresponding ontology, in the classic theory of unchanging Forms.

There is no disagreement, then, on the literary fact of continuity of content and gradual disclosure leading from the *Laches* and *Euthyphro* to the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. But are these lines of continuity to be read as stages in the development of Plato's thought? Or are they rather, as I am proposing, stages in the aporetic introduction and progressive exposition of elements in a unified view? I have shown elsewhere how the thematic structure of the *Republic* is characterized by techniques of proleptic composition that rise to a crescendo in Books vi–vii.<sup>42</sup> I suggest that an analogous plan of ingressive exposition, using similar techniques, leads from dialogue to dialogue to the very same climax in the central books of the *Republic*. At this point the developmental and the ingressive interpretations are strictly incompatible, since on my view there is no more reason to speak of Plato's intellectual development between the *Laches* and the *Republic* than there is to speak of his development between Book 1 and Book x of the *Republic*. Plato's thought processes in the course of composition are inaccessible to us. What we have is his authorial design, inscribed in the text of the dialogues. I suggest that the evidence for a comprehensive artistic plan should be seen as a reflection of the underlying unity of Plato's philosophical position. To put my view in its most drastic form: we may read some ten dialogues of Group I (from the *Laches* to the

42. See Kahn (1993a) 131–42.

*Phaedo* and the *Cratylus*) as if Plato had written them all at the same time, but offered them to the world in successive stages.

Some readers may balk at my suggestion that we can attribute to Plato an authorial design that is only conveyed indirectly. Appealing to rigorous principles of philological method, they may well ask: what right do we have to ascribe to Plato an intended meaning that is not explicitly spelled out in the text? For example, I shall argue in Chapter 6 that the conception of metaphysical Forms, though never mentioned in the *Meno*, is in fact entailed by the use made there of the doctrine of recollection as a response to Meno's paradox. For unless the prenatal cognitive experience of the disembodied psyche was radically different from learning in this life, the hypothesis of learning in a previous existence would simply produce a regress, in which the paradox would immediately recur. But what right do we have to assume that the author of the *Meno* was aware of this problem and left the solution for an insightful reader to discover?

Now it is easy to show that such indirect writing is a characteristic of Plato's art, and to show this from a closely related example in the *Meno* itself. The doctrine of recollection is illustrated there by a geometry lesson, in which an untutored slave learns (or "recollects") how to double the area of a given square. Socrates shows him that you can double the square by constructing a new square on the diagonal through the given square. Now this construction also illustrates two important mathematical results. First, the construction is an instance of the Pythagorean theorem, since the new square takes as its side the hypotenuse of the triangle formed in the original square by drawing the diagonal. And in the second place, this construction also illustrates the existence of incommensurable magnitudes or, as we say, irrational numbers, since the side of the new square stands to the side of the original square as  $\sqrt{2}$ , the most elementary case of an irrational number.

Why does the *Meno* make no mention of these important mathematical truths? Plato is clearly writing for a double audience. He expects his more intelligent and better informed readers to do some thinking on their own. The case is similar for the link between recollection and the Forms. Just as anyone trained in geometry will see what is involved in doubling the square, so anyone familiar with Plato's metaphysical thought will see what the objects of recollection must be.

In conclusion, I must admit that we cannot refute the developmental hypothesis, since we do not know Plato's intellectual biography. We can only challenge such a reading by pointing out how many unsupported assumptions it must make, and how many problems it leaves unsolved, by asking (for example) why the early dialogues contain so many puzzles – not only aporetic conclusions but so many deliberately undeveloped hints (like the knowledge of good and bad in *Laches* and *Charmides*) and so many enigmatic challenges, such as the references to dialectic and knowledge of the good in the *Euthydemus*, and the mysterious allusions to a virtue based on knowledge in the arguments of the *Protagoras* and the conclusion to the *Meno*. What kind of knowledge are we to suppose Plato has in mind in these cryptic references in *Protagoras* and *Meno*? If he is not leading us here in the direction of *Republic* v–vii, why are there so many questions that must remain unanswered for the reader who has not reached these central books? Why are there so many different lines of thematic development converging on the same point?

The most plausible explanation for the abundant and diverse evidence of meaningful design leading from the earlier dialogues to the *Republic* is the hypothesis of authorial intent. It is, I suggest, because we all implicitly recognize such a design and such an intent that we know that it is Plato speaking, and not merely the dialogue *persona* of Socrates, in the central books of the *Republic*. Plato for us is the author of the dialogues. And it is the pattern of unity created by the network of thematic lines connecting the dialogues and meeting one another in the *Republic* that permits us to say: this is the author's intention. He has designed these dialogues in such a way that, despite the anonymity of the dialogue form, we can securely recognize here the point of what he has written, the philosophic message he means to convey.

#### 6. PLATO'S MOTIVE FOR HOLDING BACK

Why so much deviousness on Plato's part? Why do dialogues like the *Charmides*, *Meno*, and *Euthydemus* obscurely hint at doctrines or conceptions we cannot fully understand unless we have read the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*?

The motivation guiding the work of a great writer will be complex, and presumably not always transparent even to himself. In

the case of Plato his lifetime loyalty to the dialogue form suggests a temperamental aversion to direct statement, reinforced by much reflection on the obstacles to successful communication for philosophical insight. But there are two more specific considerations that can help explain his choice of the technique of gradual disclosure in the threshold dialogues.

The first consideration is the pedagogical advantages of *aporia*. As Aristotle put it, a problem must be well knotted before it can be resolved. As pupil of Socrates and author of Socratic conversations, Plato would be peculiarly attentive to the salutary shock of perplexity and the effectiveness of this as a stimulus on inquiring minds.

The second consideration that lies behind Plato's reluctance to disclose his philosophical position goes deeper and is more difficult to formulate. The ingressive mode of exposition has, I suggest, been chosen by Plato because of his acute sense of the psychological distance that separates his world view from that of his audience. The frame of mind implied by Diotima's final revelation in the *Symposium*, more fully expressed in the extra-celestial vision of the *Phaedrus*, taken for granted in the allegory of the Cave and the otherworldly longings of the *Phaedo*, is essentially the frame of mind of a metaphysical visionary. Such a person is convinced that the unseen, intangible world, accessible only to rational thought and intellectual understanding, is vastly more meaningful, more precious, and more real than anything we can encounter in the realm of ordinary experience.<sup>43</sup> For such a visionary, the domain of unseen reality is the place of origin from which the human spirit or the rational psyche has come, and to which it may under favorable circumstances return. Philosophy is essentially the practice of spiritual liberation by which the rational psyche prepares itself for a successful voyage back to its transcendental homeland.

The metaphysical vision just described is recognizably that of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, as it is also that of rational mystics in the philosophical tradition of India. This is the vision articulated by Plato in the pre-natal myth of the *Phaedrus* and in the opening apologia of the *Phaedo*, when Socrates explains why a philosopher should be ready to die, since only the disembodied soul

43. For the fundamental importance of this aspect of Plato's thought, see Vlastos' sensitive discussion in "A Metaphysical Paradox (1973: 50-6)."



can hope to achieve fully the knowledge that it seeks. This vision continues to dominate Plato's later work, as when the *Theaetetus* speaks of escaping from the evils of this world by assimilation to the divine (ὁμοίωσις θεῶν), or when the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* remarks that human life is of little account, a mere plaything of the gods (VII, 803C, 804B).

This otherworldly vision is entirely at home in the spiritual atmosphere of late antiquity, in the age of gnosticism and theurgy. But it would be difficult to overstate the discrepancy between this view of human destiny and the typical attitudes and values of Greek society in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. The world we know from Attic tragedy and comedy, from the history of Thucydides and the pleading of the orators, is a world of petty pride, heroic passion, ordinary lust and greed, unlimited ambition and utter ruthlessness. In such a world the metaphysical vision just described seems almost grotesquely out of place.

This radical discrepancy is, I suggest, a fundamental factor in the shaping of the Platonic dialogue. On the one hand Plato's dialogues are firmly planted in Athenian soil, in the social and political reality of the Socratic age. Thus we have Nicias and Laches, Critias, Charmides, and Alcibiades, the sons of Pericles, and the grandsons of Aristides and Thucydides as the typical actors and audience for these dramas. On the other hand, the dialogues are also destined to reflect the celestial, otherworldly vision. That is as true for certain passages in the *Gorgias* and *Meno* as it is for the *Phaedo* as a whole and the climax of Diotima's speech. This discrepancy is of course one explanation for Plato's use of myth: myth provides the necessary literary distancing that permits Plato to articulate his out-of-place vision of meaning and truth.

For Plato's new world view, his only ally would be the Orphic-Pythagorean doctrine of reincarnation, with its associated teaching that we are dead in this life, buried or imprisoned in the body, but destined for a more divine existence. Hence it is precisely the Orphic-Pythagorean conception of the soul that is invoked in the *Meno* as background for Plato's doctrine of recollection. This new notion of recollection, understood not as a Pythagorean recall of previous incarnations but as a mode of a priori knowledge, is the brilliant link by which Plato connects his own metaphysical vision – whose rationality is guaranteed by its grounding in mathematics – with the old, weird teaching about a transmigrating

soul. It is above all Plato's allegorical reinterpretation of Orphic-Pythagorean doctrine that made such views respectable in the West.<sup>44</sup>

In the *Gorgias* Plato hints at the otherworldly vision, when he quotes Euripides: "who knows if life be death, but death be really life?" (492E). But the judgment myth of the *Gorgias* is relatively conventional. Plato is here not ready openly to commit himself (or Socrates) to the Orphic-Pythagorean conception of rebirth, as he will do in the myths of the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*. The *Meno* contains the first unmistakable disclosure of this transcendental conception of the soul; but essential features of the larger view remain unstated. Before that, Plato has been deliberately holding back, as a strategy for dealing with an exoteric audience. The ordinary Greek reader or auditor, whom we may conjure up from the world of comedy and oratory, from the lectures of the sophists and the writings of Xenophon, is wholly unprepared to take seriously Plato's metaphysical vision. Plato must first write in such a way as to engage the attention of readers who can identify with a blunt soldier like Laches or an amateur intellectual like Nicias or Meno. His Socrates will stimulate and puzzle such readers with topics that concern them directly, like the nature of courage and piety or the teachability of virtue.

In discussing these topics of interest to every thinking Athenian, the Platonic Socrates is no doubt following in the footsteps of his historical namesake, who called upon his interlocutors to examine their lives and reflect upon their aspiration to *aretē*. But in turning the discussion of courage, piety and virtue into an unsuccessful search for essences that explain why things are as they are, the Platonic Socrates is dispensing a new kind of *aporia*, in order to prepare his audience for a new kind of knowledge and a new view of reality.

It is in the *Symposium* that the delicate literary junction between Plato's vision and his contemporary audience is effected, by the cunning artifice of Diotima. The figure of Diotima is clearly designed to remind us of those wise priests and priestesses who teach reincarnation in the *Meno*. But Diotima is careful never to mention

44. Plato was preceded in this by Pindar, whom he loves to quote in this connection (*Meno* 81B-C, *Rep.* 1, 331A). Empedocles' claim to divinity, by contrast, would have seemed wildly eccentric. Note the satirical tone of Xenophanes' reference to reincarnation (DK 21B.7) and the guarded way in which Herodotus mentions these doctrines (II.123).

either reincarnation or any conception of immortality that might be laughed to scorn by the urbane company at Agathon's dinner party.<sup>45</sup> She (or rather Plato's Socrates, by the use of her voice) inserts the otherworldly vision into a philosophical account of erotic passion, the conventional topic for the evening's entertainment. Instead of appealing to outlandish conceptions of the psyche, Diotima finds her vision on the strictly rational ground of Eleatic ontology. The doctrine of eternal, unchanging Being, originally formulated by Parmenides, appears here in Diotima's account of the one and (as far as the *Symposium* goes) only representative of the Forms, the Beautiful itself, the object of metaphysical *erōs*.<sup>46</sup>

The otherworldly atmosphere that thus intrudes into Agathon's victory celebration is subtly reinforced by the repeated description of Socrates' fits of abstraction. But the seismic gap between world views is most vividly dramatized in the frustrated passion of Alcibiades, who is unable to establish emotional contact with Socrates even in bed, because they inhabit different worlds. The ironical contrast between two kinds of beauty that Alcibiades would propose to exchange with Socrates, "like gold for brass" (219A 1), echoing the contrast between the two wisdoms that Agathon and Socrates might transfer to one another by sharing the same couch (175C-E), confirms the sense of two radically opposed conceptions of what is true and significant.

The *Symposium* thus provides a decisive but still only partial disclosure of the otherworldly view. In the *Symposium* as in the *Meno*, Plato as consummate artist is careful not to lose touch with his audience by levitating too long or too far from the Athenian earth. Just as in the *Meno*, where the doctrine of rebirth was presented as background for recollection, the discussion quickly turns aside to a more pedestrian exercise in the method of hypothesis, so in the *Symposium* we are acquainted with the doctrine of Forms only in a momentary glimpse of the one transcendent object of desire. The dialogue ends in riotous drinking, with Socrates' interlocutors falling asleep. It is only in the *Phaedo* that we get a full disclosure of the transcendental world view, systematically anchored in the

45. The Orphic-Pythagorean verses of Euripides, cited with respect by Socrates in the *Gorgias* (429E 10 = fr. 638 Nauck<sup>2</sup>), are repeatedly mocked by Aristophanes in the *Frogs* (1082, 1477f.)

46. See the passage from *Symposium* 210E ff. cited and discussed below, pp. 342ff.

doctrine of Forms, with Socrates sanctified by his approaching death. Here the strong doctrine of immortality (from the *Meno*) can finally be joined with the Parmenidean metaphysics (from the *Symposium*) to construct the distinctly Platonic atmosphere of rational spirituality that pervades the entire dialogue, and that takes poetic shape in the first overtly Pythagorean myth of judgment.

In later chapters we return to a discussion of the literary tact with which Plato gradually familiarizes his reading audience with the new world view. But first we must begin where Plato himself began, with Socrates.