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Changing Course in Plato Studies*

GERALD A. PRESS

My first encounter with Plato was in my freshman year of college, in 'Introduction to Philosophy' reading the *Republic* back to back with Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*. I understood nothing; neither how my professor derived such simple, cold doctrines from the literary richness and complexity of the *Republic* nor what anything in Ayer's little book had to do with anything in Plato's very large one. Two years later I took the upper-level Plato course at Berkeley, taught at that time by Thomas Nagel, and unofficially attended a series of lectures in a house in Palo Alto given by Jonathan Ketchum, which began my discovery of a Plato alternative to the purely academic one I had been presented in college. Ketchum's Plato, which owed a good deal to the particular kind of 'continental philosophy' then being practiced by Konrad Gaiser in Tübingen (Ketchum 1981), introduced me to the idea that dialogues could have aims or functions different from the simple expository one presupposed by my academic Plato teachers and so obviously unlike the dialogues themselves. A few years later, in graduate school I discovered a slim monograph by Holger Thesleff (1967) and began what turned out to be lifetime of conversation, education, and collaboration about Plato. In that monograph, in *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Thesleff 1982) and *Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model* (Thesleff 1999), he argued for propositions that have been seminal influences determining the changing course of Plato studies in the last forty years:

1. besides passages of dialectical arguments, there are various other kinds of stylistic units to be found in the dialogues, so that they are much more complex and artfully composed than might have been thought;
2. the dialogues as we have them are products of editing, revision, and school-accumulation, so that assessing them as simply 'authentic' or 'in-authentic' is oversimplified; and
3. the compositional chronology of the Platonic dialogues which was the only objective basis of the developmental model of interpretation was grounded in largely unsupported assumptions.

The mainstream tradition in Plato interpretation in the mid-twentieth century was doctrinal and systematic, by which I mean that interpreters sought and as-

sumed that the dialogues contained Plato's philosophic doctrines or teachings on a variety of traditional topics and that these doctrines fit together into a more or less coherent philosophic system called Platonism. It was assumed that Plato wrote within the same distinct and well-defined intellectual practice called philosophy that we pursue today and that Socrates and other conversation leaders are mouthpieces for Plato's views and arguments. Their views can, therefore, reasonably be extracted from a dialogue compared with arguments and apparent doctrines in other dialogues and other philosophers, and examined for their truth, validity, consistency, and affiliations. Plato is thus understood, like Aristotle, to be and to present himself as an authority who writes in order to instruct readers in truths of which he is sure and the arguments that support them.

Apparent inconsistencies and contradictions between the doctrines seemingly taught in different dialogues (e.g., about the parts of the soul, the nature of Forms, the method for attaining knowledge, and the difference between apparently aporetic and apparently conclusive dialogues) were resolved by either by the 'unitarian' hypothesis that these are superficial and merely apparent differences beneath which is a bedrock of unchanging Platonic doctrine or by the developmental hypothesis that Plato's doctrines changed over time and that this change can be tracked by studying the dialogues in the order of their composition, Platonic chronology (Tigerstedt 1977).

At the same time, it was assumed that, for philosophic purposes, one could separate and exclude literary and dramatic elements as mere 'form' as opposed to the logical-dogmatic 'content' with which alone philosophy is taken to be concerned. One could ignore both the evident artistry of Plato's use of language, of drama, and the dialogism of the dialectical exchanges, their polyphony and intertextuality. In short, the dialogues were not taken to be literary or dramatic in any sense relevant to their philosophic interpretation.

This doctrinal view dates back to the first generation after Plato and can be found in Aristotle's comments as well as in the doxographical tradition. There was also, from antiquity on, a sporadic, alternative, skeptical version of Plato in the 'new Academy', perhaps supported by Cicero and opposed by Augustine.¹ But, since ancient skepticism operates through the opposition between dogmatism and skepticism, it is, in principle a crypto-dogmatic reading of Plato, the other pole of a dualism defined by dogma or doctrine.

¹ At *Acad.* 1.43-46, Cic. seems to present himself as an Academic skeptic epistemologically. I am grateful to Harold Tarrant for helping me avoid running aground on this point. Augustine's *Contra academicos* attacks skepticism as an obstacle to attaining eudaimonistic happiness rather than on epistemological grounds.

Research since the 1960s and '70s has so seriously undermined these traditional assumptions that the burden of proof has shifted to those who would claim that Plato is dogmatic, systematic, the creator of a philosophic system called Platonism (Press 1996). Work by Thesleff and others has done away with most of compositional chronology, hence with the developmental consensus of the period from 1875–1990 (Thesleff 1982; Nails 1995). Other arrangements of the Platonic corpus are now being investigated, and scholars are coming to recognize that the various arrangements that have been employed in the history of Platonic interpretation serve identifiable but different purposes; none of them is simply 'true' or 'false' (Poster 1998; Altman 2012). Research has also complicated the picture of the corpus with the categories of revision and semi-authenticity and has clarified that (and how) the dogmatic and systematic Platonism of the mainstream tradition is a post-Platonic production, beginning in the 'old Academy' after Plato's death and reinforced since the third century CE by the Neoplatonism that was identified as Platonism until the mid-eighteenth century.² It has also become clear that 'philosophy' was *not* a defined intellectual practice in which Plato participated along with predecessors but rather a term whose meaning was contested at the time and created in part through the later influence of the dialogues (Nightingale 1995).

Along with Platonic chronology and the developmental framework, the notion of 'Socratic' dialogues or philosophy, which was a version of dogmatic developmentalism particularly popular in Anglophone countries is in retreat. Instead of new books on 'Socratic philosophy', recent work has emphasized the continuity of Platonic philosophizing across dialogues previously considered early and Socratic as well as 'middle' and 'late' (Kahn 1996; Rowe 2007a; Peterson 2011; Zuckert 2009).

At the same time, increased attention to literary and dramatic features of the dialogues has undermined the assumption that the dialogues have the same single function or purpose as other philosophic texts, to tell readers what the right answer to a question is, the right way to understand a concept, or resolve a philosophic conundrum. Increasingly scholars are recognizing the literary and dramatic richness and complexity that the dialogues *in fact* exhibit and considering that richness and complexity as integral parts of what constitutes 'philosophy' in Plato's dialogues.³ Scholarship has also increasingly recognized that the dia-

² On the history and demise of the Neoplatonic interpretation, see Tigerstedt 1974. On post-Platonic developments, see Dillon 1977, 1990, 2003 and Tarrant 1985, 1993, 2000.

³ Pender 2000, 18–25; Petraki 2011; Destrée and Herrmann (eds.) 2011; Charalabopoulos

logues are organic wholes rather than assemblages of arguments from which it is legitimate to extract one for separate analysis. It has also done away with the old assumption that Socrates or another conversation leader is simply a mouthpiece for Plato's own doctrines and arguments (Clay 2000; Press 2004). Increasingly Plato scholarship has come to recognize the complexity, inadequacy and even fallaciousness of many of Socrates' refutations, thus illuminating a new problem in need of resolution (Sprague 1962; Beversluis 2000).

From all of this work, a more three-dimensional picture of has been developing of the historical Plato's dialogues and of his philosophy. The principles of this 'new Platonism' are to read the dialogues contextually and as organic wholes (Press 1993, 111–17), to see Plato's preferred role more as guide than preceptor (Scott 2000), and to see the philosophy they present as something more visionary, more a matter of principles than something dogmatic, and as transcending many of the dualisms that have affected the earlier history of Plato scholarship: philosophy *versus* literature, argument *versus* story, playful *versus* serious, dogmatic *versus* skeptical, true *versus* false, valid *versus* invalid.

The dialogues are both logical-argumentative and literary-dramatic. It is fundamental—and too easily overlooked—that they are all fiction (Murley 1955; Hunter 2006). When theories are presented and arguments made, they are all and always *within* the framework of a fiction, always made by characters rather than by the author. It follows from this that, to be true to the texts in their complete nature, interpreters should not simply take whatever Socrates (or another leading speaker) says as what Plato 'says' or 'thinks'. We should look at such statements in dialogical context. The first question should be, 'Why does Socrates say this to this interlocutor in precisely this dialogical situation?' in the dialogue. This question must be distinguished from the more important but very different external question, 'Why does Plato make Socrates say this to this interlocutor in this dialogical situation?' What does he want to accomplish by putting on this whole play for us? And one must not expect to find a single, univocal answer.

The fictions' primary components are language and drama. They are literarily rich both in language mechanics—vocabulary, grammar, style, and syntax—and in the frequency, diversity, and the extent of literary devices (Pender 2000; Scott ed. 2007) and tropes they deploy; e.g., allegory, allusion, diction, idiom, irony, juxtaposition, metaphor, paradox, personification, simile, tone, and understatement. These devices are not merely formal or ornamental, but in many cases constitutive of Platonic thought (Pender 2000, 18–25 on metaphor; Dix-

saut 2013 on digression). The most famous of the metaphors have taken on independent lives as foundations of the Western intellectual tradition—the ladder of intellectual ascent, the chariot of the soul, the gadfly, the figure itself and some few phrases of Plato's Socrates. Something similar has happened with the fictive 'ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy' (*Republic* 10,607b5–6) and the equally fictive and recurrent idea of a complete opposition between philosophy and 'rhetoric', which in both cases Plato, in effect, invented.⁴

More specifically, the dialogues—even those least developed dramatically—are dramatic both in the minimal sense that they are presented directly or indirectly as live verbal exchanges between or among distinct characters in a variety of times and places, often very specifically located, which are often exploited either for ironic⁵ or for thematic resonance.⁶ But many dialogues are much more dramatically developed. They utilize and transform stories, structures, and devices from Greek tragedy and comedy, and often constitute, like the tragedies, reworkings of older stories and heroes.⁷ Socrates is presented indirectly as the new cultural hero—the new Achilles, Odysseus, Heracles—the Philosopher. They include a small world of characters, virtually all derived from historical models (Nails 2002), whose dialogical roles (predilections, prejudices, views articulated, and even idiomatic differences) serve both to delineate and to enhance treatment of central ideas. As has often been noted, Socrates' refutations are more directly of his interlocutors than of disembodied theories; hence the occasional worry that his refutations are ultimately all *ad hominem*.

The set of literary devices Plato employs is both extensive and in ways so strangely familiar that we may think of him as the original post-modern writer, since the dialogues regularly deploy irony, playfulness, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction, temporal distortion, unreliable narrators, the author as fictional character, and avoidance of traditional thematic closure.

If nothing else, the sheer extent of the literary and dramatic elements just indicated and the amount of labor it evidently required on Plato's part should

⁴ On the invention of rhetoric, see Wardy 1996.

⁵ The *R.* is set at the home of someone who was killed, and whose possessions were appropriated by, the Thirty; the *Euthphr.* at the stoa of the King Archon where Socrates answered the indictment against him for impiety, leading to his condemnation and execution.

⁶ *Prt.* is set at the home of Callias who was notoriously attached to sophists, several of whom, eventually, prevail on Protagoras not to give up the discussion in which he's being refuted.

⁷ On Socrates as hero see Eisner 1982, Loraux 1985, Haden 1997. On dialogues as reworkings of older myths, see Dorter 1982, Burger 1984, Gilead 1994.

suggest to us that they are an integral part of his project, properly understood. First and foremost this suggests, as Kierkegaard understood, that, rather than being direct, Platonic philosophic communication is indirect in multiply interacting—mutually reinforcing, complicating—ways.⁸ It is always *through* the voices of fictive characters and through their polyphony (Ostenfeld 2000). Next, the dialogues taken holistically are not only serious, but also playful. There are weighty and serious passages along with a great deal of humor of various kinds including *double entendres* (*Phaedrus* 250a–252b), elaborate jokes,⁹ and slapstick (*Charmides* 155c), and more puns than one can count. The opposition between play and seriousness is itself a minor theme on several occasions (*Gorgias* 481b), and Plato sometimes indicates that what most people consider serious is actually ridiculous and that the apparently ridiculous pursuits and beliefs of Socrates are actually the most serious. Ultimately, the dialogues embody a conjunction (or transcendence) of the opposition between play and seriousness, as is communicated, indirectly, in the last scene of the *Symposium*.

The dialogues deploy irony, itself a literary trope, extensively and in several dimensions: Socrates' statements that are taken by interlocutors and modern interpreters as ironic statements as contrasted with the 'Platonic' ironies of setting and character.¹⁰ Irony complicates interpretation because ironic statements transcend the simple true/false dichotomy that underpins analytic, dogmatic, and systematic readings. It is both true and false that Socrates does not teach or know what virtue is, depending on the how the reader or hearer understands the key words 'teach' and 'know'. The exact meaning of such Socratic statements is, therefore, not simple or univocal; and this is true both *within* their dialogical setting and, for interpreters, as elements in the whole indirect communication that each dialogue constitutes (Renaud 2001). An especially consequential example is Plato's deliberate deployment of dual uses of terms in such a way as to appear to be saying different things to different readers or auditors, in particular the use of

⁸ As is well known, Kierkegaard studied Plato's Socrates carefully and theorized a distinction between direct and indirect communication, the exact meaning of which has been debated (Aumann 2008, 2–3). Generally, it is 'designed to sever the reliance of the reader on the authority of the author and on the received wisdom of the community. The reader was to be forced to take individual responsibility for knowing who s/he is and for knowing where s/he stands on the existential, ethical and religious issues raised in the texts' (McDonald 2012, §2).

⁹ Parmenides is turned into a pluralist in *Prm*. Socrates conducts a 'chorus' of sophists in *Prt*. 358a–359a.

¹⁰ *Chrm.* features Critias and Charmides, who were notoriously intemperate historical actors. Euthyphro can be described as a religious fanatic.

conventional *versus* philosophic or true meanings of central terms. The paradoxical conclusion of the *Meno* derives from Socrates' shifting to Meno's conventional belief that *aretē* produces wealth and political power. The *Charmides* analogously plays off a range of intellectualistic, conservative political views of *sōphrosunē* against an implicitly very different philosophic one.

Irony subverts the explicit mission of the Platonic Socrates—and, plausibly, implicitly, of Plato himself—to exhibit personal, social, and political dimensions of ideas under discussion broader than what can be stated in formal definitions or verbal accounts and to induce interlocutors in the dialogues and readers of them to rethink conventional views and provoke an inner reorientation (Lesser 1982; Bussanich 2006). With respect to interlocutors, irony is provocative. Socrates' role as an intellectual *provocateur*, or philosophic pirate, is stated in a general, social way in the *Apology* (29d) and described as inevitable in the *Laches* (187e–188a), but stated more explicitly and epistemologically in the *Republic* (7,522e–525b).¹¹ It is illustrated in many dialogues by the various tactics Socrates uses to draw interlocutors into (or back into) dialogue. Especially noteworthy are Socrates' multiple attempts, ultimately successful, to draw Theodorus into the central conversation of the *Theaetetus* (161a–162c, 165a–e, 168c–169c), the 'divine matters' that draw Meno away from his eristic argument (*Meno* 81a), his flattering of Callicles into dialogue (*Gorgias* 486d–488a), and his appeals to the other participants (*Protagoras* 348).

Similarly, the dialogues' communication is rendered complex and indirect by their double nature as mythic and logical, as simultaneously stories and arguments. They are ultimately stories Plato tells or plays he puts on, involving characters, settings, actions, and historical and literary allusions; but each story's heart is conversation about ideas which Plato clearly thinks are important. We want to know what *his* views are about these ideas, but the dialogues transcend the *mythos/logos* dichotomy and leave us, as it is reasonable to suppose Plato wished, to think about them for ourselves rather than to be given an authoritative answer. The dialogues employ verisimilitude through historical characters, places, and events; but they do so for philosophic ends, not for the sake of the historical truth and not reliably.

Given all of this, the dialogues are not obscure treatises or essays, but rather a different, uncommon, and complex form of philosophic text that unites what are more often taken as dualisms. This means that literary and dramatic elements

¹¹ On the importance of provocation, see Byrd 2007. Byrd translates παρακαλοῦντα as 'summoners', for which I think 'provocations' is a richer and more appropriate term. See Press 2012.

are integral parts of what constitutes ‘philosophy’ for Plato, which is thus *both* literary and logical. The descriptor ‘dialogical’ signals this. The dialogues are dialogical in several senses. In most of them Socrates engages in dialogue rather than authoritative exposition with richly different individuals as interlocutors whose own positions—intellectual and existential—in part determine not only what gets said but what meanings are made available to readers. The arguments have always gotten most of the attention from interpreters, but besides the dialectical passages, the dialogues include much that is not so easily accessible to the usual kinds of philosophic analysis and interpretation: lectures (*Timaeus* 27c–92c, *Protagoras* 320c–328d), exhortations (*Gorgias* 526d–527e, *Apology* 29d–31a), *faux* dialectic with ‘compliant’ interlocutors (*Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*), Socrates’ cross-examination by the city and the laws (*Crito* 50a–54d), cross-examinations of himself (*Hippias Major* 286c–304a, *Gorgias* 506c–524a) and of deceased interlocutors (*Theaetetus* 165e–168c), proems as long as or longer than the dialectical portions (*Laches* 178a–190c), and several dialogues in which supposedly ‘Socratic’ or Platonic doctrines are refuted.¹² There are also orations (*Phaedrus* 230e–234c, *Menexenus* 237d–249c), prayers (*Phaedrus* 279b–c), numerous myths,¹³ eschatologies (*Republic* 10, 614b–621b, *Phaedo* 109a–115a, *Gorgias* 523a–526d), and catalogues of reincarnations that trouble dogmatic interpreters.

These non-dialectical elements along with the literary and dramatic elements are less problematic if seen as parts of a richer and more diverse array of strategies used to guide the audience to an inner reorientation rather than as impediments to grasping a propositional doctrine (Bussanich 2006, 200, 203). The dialogues (and with them Plato’s philosophy) are neither dogmatic nor skeptical, or perhaps both. They put forward propositions about which, however, they do not assert truth, and arguments about which they do not assert validity, but rather, as dramas, suspend such judgments. Many arguments, carefully analyzed, turn out to be invalid.¹⁴ At the logical level of specific answers to questions discussed they remain open-ended, meaning they deny that a final answer to the question has been given but do not, as a skeptic might, deny that the answer can be found. On the contrary, Socrates is usually at pains to insist that answers *can* be found if

¹² The *R.* account of justice, ‘minding one’s own business’, is refuted twice at *Chrm.* 161b–163b, ‘virtue is knowledge’ is refuted at length in the *Men.* 89c–96d, the theory of forms is criticized on multiple grounds at *Prm.* 130b–135b.

¹³ The myths, e.g., *R.* 3, 414d–415d and *Smp.* 203b–d, have generated a substantial subset in the vast bibliography on Plato.

¹⁴ E.g., *all* the arguments for and against the immortality of the soul in *Pbd.* are unsound.

we are persistent, critical, rational, and humble enough. While it remains unclear logically exactly what piety is at the end of the *Euthyphro*, it is perfectly clear dramatically that Socrates and Plato think Euthyphro is ignorant and impious. It has been well said that the dialogues have literary closure but remain intellectually open-ended (Tejera 1984, 6).

The Plato who wrote these dialogues, therefore, should not be assumed to be a philosophy teacher in the sense of a preceptor or authority in the usual sense, but rather in the sense of one who guides¹⁵ his readers and means the dialogues to serve as occasions for or incitements to a particular kind of learning. This Platonic guidance is different from being a 'teacher' in the usual sense of someone who imparts to a student propositional knowledge that the student previously lacked and which is able to be successfully so communicated. Historical facts, references of technical terms and proper names, scientific laws and mathematical equations for rote memorization can be so communicated, but are *not* the subjects that interest Plato or his Socrates. It is *paideia* rather than *didaskalia*. The guide leads the person guided to see for her- or himself rather than telling that person a propositional truth by reasoning. This guidance is provided in the dialogues simultaneously through argument and drama, through the combination of arguments, emotive and imaginative identification with the complex character of Plato's Socrates, and emotional distancing or aversion from the characters, attitudes, and beliefs of the interlocutors with whom Socrates is represented as coming into confrontation and dialogue thus utilizing all three means of persuasion that Aristotle distinguishes (*Rhetoric* 1.2, 1356a): *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Guidance is exercised also by the sheer pleasure of the seemingly endless richness and complexity of reading the dialogues and their capacity to evoke new responses and new meanings.

The aim of Plato's guidance and of the dialogues, as already indicated, is to recognize internally the truth or preferability of general principles and values, among which is the value of leaving even the most assured view open-ended, always open to reconsideration and revision *if* it should be found wanting or another view should be found preferable.

The principles of which Plato and his Socrates seem most confident—views expressed with some frequency and consistency—are usually more general than the sort of specific definitions and precise theories that most modern philosophers are looking for and unhappy not to find in the dialogues. They seem sure

¹⁵ The youth ascends the ladder of loves guided by a guide (*hēgoumenos*) in *Smp.* 210a–211d. Both Sedley 1997 and Karamanolis 2006 emphasize the non-authoritative character of Plato's philosophic work.

that everyone always seeks to be happy; but in this, Plato is just like Aristotle, Hellenistic philosophers, Plotinus, and Augustine. They are confident that there is a soul, that it is more important than the body, that we ought to care more for the soul than for the body, and that caring for it involves the pursuit of knowledge. But they are not so sure about what exactly the soul is like or exactly which method for the pursuit of knowledge is right. They seem confident that something like the theory of Forms must be true (because otherwise we cannot think or speak), but are not clear about exactly how it works. They are confident that there is a difference between knowledge and opinion, that the former is preferable to the latter, and must be of something stably true; but no specific answer is given to the question what knowledge is. They are confident that the virtues exist, but not committed to a particular view of either their exact definitions nor of whether virtue is one or many. In fact, they seem confident that a person is both epistemically and morally better for *not* being certain of a precise answer and for *always* being willing to submit a view to critical examination.

If Plato were the dogmatic philosophy teacher my undergraduate philosophy professors thought he was, these would be serious problems and we would not be wrong to wonder whether he was a failure. Since it is clear from the subsequent history of Western philosophy that Plato was among the greatest successes, we should conclude—by a paradoxical *modus tollens*—that he is not that kind of philosopher.

Hunter College

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered in St. Petersburg at the 23rd International Conference of the Russian Plato Philosophical Society in June 2015. A Russian translation of that paper will be published in ПЛАТОНОВСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ (*Platonic Investigations*).

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