

serves to announce that behind Socrates' ironical mask there is only another mask. His practices are thoroughly transparent, while his deepest beliefs are exemplified through these practices. Hence the constant testing of himself⁴⁴ in the activity of truth-telling is central to Socratic ethics.

Duquesne University

secured and bound fast, if it is not too rude to say so, with arguments of adamant and iron. So, at any rate, it would seem, and unless you, or someone younger and more daring than you, shall unbind and loose those arguments, it is impossible to speak well and yet say other than what I am saying now."

⁴⁴At *Gorgias* 486a, Socrates says: "If my soul were gold, Callicles, don't you think I'd delight in finding a touchstone (*basanos*) to put that gold to the test?" He elaborates by saying that whoever would test the good or bad life of the soul must possess three qualities: "knowledge, kind regard, and frankness (*parrhēsia*). " This use of *parrhēsia* illustrates its positive application in Plato.

Knowledge as Vision in Plato's Dialogues

Gerald A. Press

*A theory in the sense of a vision of the world
and not a theory in the sense of an
explanation of it, is what is found . . .
Seeing is exalted above explaining and doing.*

— Frederick J. E. Woodbridge,
The Son of Apollo

I. INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of Plato's dialogues is a notoriously difficult matter, and Platonic scholars are continually arguing not only about interpretations offered, but also about the proper methods to be employed in arriving at interpretations.¹ This is not accidental. Beyond

¹Some recent collections illustrating the methodological diversity are Charles L. Griswold, ed., *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1989), James Klagege and Nicholas Smith, eds., *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues* (OSAP Suppl. Vol. 1992), Gerald Press, ed., *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations*, (Savage, MD: Rowman

the difficulty that is common to the study of all philosophers of analyzing and assessing arguments both individually and in the context of the whole work in which they are found, Plato makes the task of interpretation even more difficult by his use of dialectical conversations, metaphorical language, myths and fables, various forms of play and humor. Moreover, his carefully preserved anonymity makes it difficult to know whether or what arguments and conclusions can be attributed to him.²

The reader who goes to the dialogues looking for Plato's philosophic doctrines will find them doubly contradictory documents. First, and most obviously, there are contradictions between what appears to be the doctrine articulated in one dialogue and that of another. To take just a few of the many examples, 'minding one's own business' is said to be the essence of Justice and the principle of a just society in *Republic* (432b), but in the *Charmides* (161b-163c) Socrates describes it as an enigma and subjects it to

and Littlefield, 1993) and Francisco Gonzalez, ed., *The Third Way in Contemporary Plato Studies* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, forth-coming). For other alternative approaches, see note 20, *infra*.

²By 'anonymity' I mean that there is no character called Plato who speaks in any dialogue, nor does Plato anywhere speak to us in his own voice. None of the Platonic epistles is today widely considered to be an authentic work written by Plato. On anonymity recently, see the articles by Kosman (73-92) and Frede (201-20) in Klagge and Smith, eds. (1992).

dialectical refutation not once but twice. In the *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Republic* 4, the soul is said to have many parts, but in the *Phaedo* and again in *Republic* 10 the immortality of the soul is proved from its simplicity. In the *Gorgias* and elsewhere, rhetoric *per se* is considered pernicious, while in the *Phaedrus* Socrates outlines a good or philosophic rhetoric. At *Meno* 99e Socrates finally concludes that virtue is an unteachable divine gift, but in *Republic* 4 virtue is being taught to the future rulers of the just society.

Besides these apparent, and more obvious, contradictions about particular doctrines, there are contradictions at a deeper level: between the professed goal of philosophy and therefore presumably of the dialogues, knowledge (*epistēmē*), and what is actually produced in the dialogues. It's not only that so many dialogues actually end without a definite answer to the question with which they are ostensibly concerned.³ Even where truth or knowledge is

³Of the generally accepted dialogues Socrates leads the discussion in all except *Laws*, *Soph*, *Pli*, *Parm*, *Tim*, *Critias*. Of the remaining twenty, only five could be considered straightforwardly conclusive or non-aporetic: *Phd*, *Phdr*, *Phlb*, *Rep*, and *Sym*. However, both *Phdr* and *Sym* are concerned with love rather than what some would consider a more centrally 'philosophic' notion, and the latter's 'doctrine' of love is actually a speech that Socrates says he was given by a certain Diotima. In the *Phd* Socrates does assert that they've proved what they set out to prove (106e), namely that the soul is immortal, but he immediately reminds Simmias and Cebes that this proof is based on certain hypotheses (107b), which attentive members of the audience will recall have *not* been proved.

seemingly gained in the dialogues, as Walter Watson has argued, four polarities arise between what is supposed to be the case about knowledge and what is actually the case in particular contexts: it is said to be divine, but is actually human; said to be universal, but always individual; said to be rational, but as often the product of irrational intuitions and myths; intended to be final, but Socrates always insists that not only the conclusions reached but also their premises are provisional and remain open to discussion.⁴

In addition we might note other oppositions between which the dialogues oscillate. At one moment they focus on the empirical, at another on the transcendental; at one moment on the ideal, then on the real; on the eternal and then on the temporal; on the universal, and then on the particular; on the abstract and then the concrete.⁵ At one moment they are serious, at the next humorous,⁶ at one time

⁴"The Dogmatic Plato, the Skeptical Plato, and the Dialogic Plato," in Gonzalez, ed. (forthcoming).

⁵I have in mind here not only the familiar pattern of Socrates' inductions from specific, concrete examples to abstract, general propositions, but also the shifts from introductory and transitional conversations about personal, familial, or political details to more 'elevated' philosophic discussions. E.g., *La*, *Lys*, *Charm*, and note esp. the recurrent interruptions of such details in *Symp*, *Phd*, and even *Tht*.

⁶E.g., the serious opening section of *Prt* 309a-314c followed by the slapstick sequence of arrival at the house of Callias 314c-

we follow careful and difficult arguments, at another a myth or a fable;⁷ sometimes the argument seems truly dialogical, but at others a thinly veiled monologue.⁸ Finally, and in sum, frequently the dialogues seem like great philosophy that happens to be presented in literary form, at others like great literature that happens to be philosophic.⁹

Like their content, so the history of interpretation of the dialogues has oscillated between the dogmatic (and, until recently, Neoplatonic) and the sceptical.¹⁰ That is, the response to the perception of the apparently contradictory philosophic characteristics has been to assume that philosophic texts can only be dogmatic or sceptical and to choose one side to the exclusion, elimination, or deemphasis of the other. Until the early nineteenth century little attention was paid to the literary and dramatic characteristics of the dialogues as essential to their philosophic meaning. Since Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century increasing attention has been paid to these aspects by a

316a, or the light, bantering of *Phdr* 227a-230d followed by the formal speeches.

⁷E.g., the rhythm of long, difficult dialectical inquiry concluded by a myth in *Phd* and *Rep*.

⁸E.g., the central portions of *Soph*, *Plt*, *Rep*, and *Laws*.

⁹E.g., *Phdr*, *Symp*, *Prt*, *Hp Mi*, *Ion*, *Mx*.

¹⁰See Luigi Stefanini, *Platone* 2 vols. (Padova, 1932, 1935; 2nd ed., Padova, 1949; repr. Padova, 1991), Ch. 1-3; E. N. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1977).

growing number of interpreters who recognize, as Luc Brisson has put it recently, that "the nature of the mode of communication used shapes, in a significant manner, the content of the message conveyed; it defines its limits and determines its orientation".¹¹ Of these, one branch puts literary and dramatic analysis to work in discovering what are taken to be Plato's (or Socrates') doctrines.¹² But there is another branch, that takes the dialogues' literary and dramatic characteristics as essential and finds in them a non-

¹¹Brisson, "Premises and consequences of an esotericist interpretation of Plato," p. 3 (ms tr of "Présupposés et conséquences d'une interprétation ésotériste de Platon," *Méthexis* 6 [1993], 11-35). Tejera (*Plato's Dialogues One by One* [New York: Irvington, 1984]) overstates a correct point in saying that literary form is "constitutive of their philosophic meaning." For others who follow similar observations, see note 20, *infra*.

¹²The Straussians, on the one hand, analyze literary and dramatic structure to reveal what they take to be Plato's doctrines. The Vlastosians, on the other hand, analyze the 'early dialogues' to discover Socrates' doctrines, while denying, oddly, that they are able to distinguish between the historical Socrates and Plato's Socrates. Since their argument depends crucially on the dialogue chronology, it follows that they mean by "Socratic philosophy" what other scholars, also following the developmental view, would call "early Platonic philosophy," or Plato's early doctrines. Since attempts to establish the chronology have failed both in principle and in fact, the entire enterprise ought to be reconsidered.

dogmatic philosophy that is not only not the quasi-religious metaphysics of Neoplatonism but also not the two-worlds idealism of much modern interpretation.¹³

A seemingly powerful objection to the dramatic and non-dogmatic approach is sometimes made explicitly, but more often implicitly: namely, if we deny that Plato teaches his doctrines in the dialogues, then we must make him into either a sceptic or a mere dramatist.¹⁴ In the following pages I want to defend the non-dogmatic interpretation against this objection by arguing (1) that there is something wrong with the objection itself, (2) that *theōria* is a more adequate

¹³I have attempted to sketch the principles of this branch of Plato interpretation in "Principles of Dramatic and Non-Dogmatic Plato Interpretation," pp. 107-27 in Press, ed. (1993). I sketched the evolution of the movement in "The Dialogical Mode in Modern Plato Studies," in V. Tejera and R. Hart, eds., *Plato's Dialogues: The Dialogical Mode* (forthcoming). Both Kosman (73-92) and Halperin (93-129) in Klagge and Smith, eds. (1992) come to similar conclusions.

¹⁴The troubling presumption underlying this is made more explicitly in Ernest Sosa's contrast between "serious-minded" philosophers and (presumably flighty) "literary critics" ("Serious Philosophy and Freedom of Spirit," *J Phil* 84 [1987], 207-26). Of course, there is another option: Plato is an esotericist whose real doctrines were communicated only orally. I will not address the Tübingen position here; its more extreme versions have been refuted many times, most recently by Luc Brisson (1993) and Franco Fronterot, "Une énigme platonicienne: La question des doctrines non-écrites," *Les Études Anciennes* 11 (1993), 115-57.

notion of the kind of knowledge to be found in the dialogues than *epistēmē*, and (3) that reframing the quest to understand Plato's philosophy in this way will allow us to comprehend *all* of the apparently contradictory characteristics of the dialogues without turning Plato into a dogmatist, a skeptic, or a mere dramatist. It will also be more consistent with what is known about the intellectual context in which the dialogues were produced.

II. NEITHER DOGMATIST NOR SKEPTIC

What's wrong with thinking that if Plato isn't a dogmatist, then he must be a skeptic?

There are two overlapping arguments in reply to the criticism. First, the proposition that if a text isn't dogmatic then it's either sceptical or 'merely literary' implicitly presupposes that philosophy is defined as a matter of dogmas or doctrines and their systematic interconnections and that philosophy is centrally concerned with knowledge as certainty and as the sort of thing that might be the subject of epistemology. But these definitions, made explicit, are *prima facie* at least disputable. Consider the Bonaventura's *Itinerarium mentis*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, the pseudonymous writings of Kierkegaard, and the entire body of Nietzsche's writings; they are philosophic but neither dogmatic nor sceptical. Each addresses a question or a set of questions—about happiness, the good life, political societies, education, the nature of knowledge, and so on—that are philosophical, and each offers an answer,

though it is not quite clear whether More really considers the Utopian system practicable.

One could reply that these are not *really* philosophers, or not philosophers in the full sense; but then the definition of philosophy and philosopher is merely stipulative, and we will wind up arguing about the canon. If one wants to define terms, it seems more reasonable to begin from the available data, the set of those who consider themselves and whose writings are widely considered to be philosophical.

Second, however, the definitions are not only open to question, they actually represent a particular nineteenth century philosophical view,¹⁵ and thus to apply them to Plato without showing that these are actually Platonic views is to commit the fallacy of retrojection or anachronism: to read interests, concepts, problems, and intentions of our own time and place into texts from another.¹⁶ The fallacy of

¹⁵ Articulated philosophically in Hegel, developed and applied to the history of philosophy in the most influential way by Zeller. For an account of how this has affected Plato studies, see Tigerstedt (1977), esp. 16ff.

¹⁶ "Retrojection" is Cherniss's term and figures prominently in the argument of *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkeley, 1945). An objection could be raised that these notions actually *originate* in the dialogues. In reply I would argue that they do not originate there without atheism and excision on the part of the interpreter. For a recent attempt to mediate between the Charybdis of anachronism and the Scylla of historicism, see Rorty *et al.*, eds., *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); for a critique of this attempt, see my review article,

anachronism extends also to the assumptions, underlying a good deal of interpretive practice, that Plato's dialogues are disguised treatises, written to be read for their doctrines and arguments by an established tradition of specialist philosophers.

The question needs to be raised explicitly: Is there some third alternative besides dogmatism or scepticism (in the broadest sense)? Is there some way to account for the contradictory data other than to either choose one of the allegedly exhaustive alternatives or else demote Plato to something less than a philosopher in the full sense.¹⁷ And the question needs to be considered without the imposition of presupposed or later definitions, looking at the dialogues as documents that arise from the their specific time, place, and context.

Journal of Chinese Philosophy 16 (1992), 235-247.

¹⁷There is a conceptual problem here. Are 'skeptical' and 'mere dramatist' distinct options or is the latter a special case of the former? The answer depends on your point of view. If 'skeptical' means essentially someone who is a technical philosopher and opposes dogmatism, then 'dramatists' are something different. If 'skeptical' means anyone who fails to find dogmas in Plato's dialogues, then 'dramatists' are 'skeptics'.

III. KNOWLEDGE AS *THEŌRIA*

I propose as this *tertium quid* or middle way that we consider *theōria* rather than *epistēmē* as the *kind* of knowledge that is to be found in the dialogues, the kind of knowledge that Plato can have intended to communicate, can have intended to teach, can have expected his readers or hearers to acquire from the dialogues, can have believed defined philosophy and philosophers. The solution to the puzzle, I am suggesting, is that there *is* knowledge of a sort to be found in the dialogues, but that it is *not* the dogmatic sort of knowledge that has been sought by many interpreters of Plato.

By *theōria* or vision I mean something that is in some ways the opposite of the kind of knowledge that has been the focus of much of Western philosophy since Aristotle. For one thing, it refers to a mental image¹⁸ or seeing rather than to a proposition or set of propositions. *Theōria* in this sense refers to something inner, immediate, comprehensive, and experiential. It is not mediated, at least in the beginning by discursive thought or language, nor is it inferential. Thus it will not take the form of an argument in the usual technical

¹⁸Both the term 'vision' and the term 'image' are, at least in English, metaphorical. Metaphors are useful for conveying indirectly some understanding of a subject an understanding of which cannot be conveying by more direct means. But it is important to remember that we are using metaphorical language, and that the analogies on which metaphors are based, like all analogies, are not identities. In this case, the situation is more complicated because the term in question, 'vision', is used with a range of meanings from the physical to the psychical.

sense. Thus, too, a vision is more personally persuasive, but at the same time, because it is neither public nor intersubjective, it is less open to confirmation.¹⁹ Because it is a vision it is not essentially presentable in expository form. If Plato means to give us knowledge as vision, it will be a showing rather than a telling how things are.²⁰

¹⁹This is similar to Aristotle's view of the intellectual act by which we come to know the principles which will serve as the bases of scientific knowledge (*An Post* 2.19; 100b4-18). Of course, Aristotle calls this activity *nous*, often translated 'intuition'; but 'intuition' would not be a bad translation of Plato's *theōria* in some contexts, and despite the many differences between Aristotle's doctrines and those he takes to be Plato's, his deepest views more often seem consonant than dissonant with Platonic views. Likewise, Platonic *theōria* should be connected with Plotinus and with various forms of medieval Platonic mysticism; but these latter offer accounts of what the vision is or of how to come to it that are more dogmatic than anything in Plato.

²⁰Variations on this theme will be found in: Frederick J. E. Woodbridge, *The Son of Apollo* (1929; repr. Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1988), Robert S. Brumbaugh, *Plato for the Modern Age* (NY: Crowell-Collier, 1962), Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), Jerome Eckstein, *The Platonic Method: An Interpretation of the Dramatic-Philosophic Aspects of the Meno* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), John Herman Randall, *Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), Rudolph

To the extent that a vision can be put into words it will be always partial and perspectival, just as physical seeing is. This is partly because of an incommensurability between the syntactic structure of language and the paratactic structure of psychical experiences such as dreams and visions.²¹ While it may be true, as Merleau-Ponty points out,²² that seeing takes itself to have a complete view of the world—or, rather, that we tend to assume this of our seeings—it is still true that we actually only see parts of what we see and see them from our particular perspective at the time.

Vision in the sense I mean here, in contrast with knowledge as usually understood, will be synthetic rather than analytic, inclusive rather than exclusive, integrative rather than discriminatory. Plato's vision is dramatic (not simply drama) or narrative, rather than expository. Not a

Weingartner, *The Unity of the Platonic Dialogue* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), Mitchell Miller, *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980) and *Plato's Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Victorino Tejera, *Plato's Dialogues One by One: A Structural Interpretation* (New York: Irvington, 1984).

²¹I extend here the contrast between syntactic and paratactic structures that has been developed in the scholarly literature on orality and literacy. See, esp., Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

²²*The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 67ff. I thank Gary Scott for this reference.

statement or a set of statements that assert, describe, or tell how the world is, but a mental image that shows how things are and at the same time, by a variety of literary and dramatic devices, draw the reader or hearer into the imaged world.²³

There are a number of plausible but inconclusive arguments for my proposal, some derived from the texts and others from the context. To begin with textual arguments, ancient Greek, unlike modern English, had a variety of different words for knowledge, besides epistasthai-episteme. *Sophia*, *gnōmē*, *gnōsis*, *synesis*, *mathēmata*, *mathēsis*, *historia*, and *nous* are familiar and, like *epistēmē* and *technē*, have been studied.²⁴ I suggest that *theasthai-theōria*

²³See my "Plato's Dialogues as Enactments" (Gonzalez, ed.). I associate this with the literary-intellectual practices and audience effects of Dante, Thomas More, and Cervantes. The same point is made, more simply, by the novelist Tim O'Brien: "What stories do, I guess, is make things present" (Sunday, October 9, 1994, *New York Times* Book Review, p. 1).

²⁴Early work by: Bruno Snell, "Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens in der vorplatonischen Philosophie," *Philol. Unters.* 29 (1924) and *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* (Hamburg: Claassen und Goverts, 1948) = *The Discovery of Mind*, tr. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); René Schaerer, "Epistēmē et Technē": *Étude sur les Notions de Connaissance d'Homère à Platon* (Mâcon: Protat, 1930); Julius Stenzel, "Zur Entwicklung des Geistesbegriffes in der griechischen Philosophie," *Die Antike* 1 (1925), 244 ff; and Kurt von Fritz,

belongs in this constellation of Greek words of knowing in its particular use to refer to mental seeing, a mental image or vision.²⁵

It is used in interesting contexts by some of those whom we consider Plato's philosophical predecessors and with some frequency in contemporaneous fifth- and fourth-century writers,²⁶ but Plato is the first writer in whom these terms become very common and seem to have a stronger or more systematic meaning. The difficulty is that, while *theōria* is associated with specifically mental activity in one of its primary uses in ancient Greek and in Plato, it is not

four studies of *noos* and *noein*, *CP* 38 (1943), 79, *CP* 40 (1945), 223-242, *CP* 41 (1946), 12-34, and *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 9 (1964), 87-102. More recently, esp. on *technē*, *epistēmē*, and *sophia*, see John Lyons, *Structural Semantics: An analysis of part of the vocabulary of Plato* (Oxford, 1967) On *historia-historia*, see G. Press, *The Development of the Idea of History in Antiquity* (Montreal, 1982).

²⁵While *theasthai* before Plato seems always to refer to a looking on or viewing with the eyes, *theōria* can also mean a viewing with the mind or contemplation, being a spectator at the games or the theater, or, being a *theōros* or state ambassador.

²⁶It is found in the fragments of Anaxagoras, Democritus, Empedocles, Leucippus, Parmenides and Philolaus. Among fifth-century writers, it is used occasionally by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, and is fairly common in Aristophanes (usually in relation to missions and ambassadors) and Isocrates (again, usually relating to missions and ambassadors).

usually thought of or translated by 'knowledge' as the other terms frequently are, but arguments can still be made.

First, the terms are sometimes used in contexts related to important Platonic topics such as particular Forms.²⁷ In other places the language of *theōria* is used about the kind of thinking characteristic of the philosopher.²⁸ It is also employed in relation to Er's vision of the afterlife (*Rep* 614d) and Socrates' own mythic vision of the true earth (*Phd* 110b). And there are other passages in which *theōria-theasthai* is used for typically philosophic kinds of thinking.²⁹

²⁷E.g., *Phdr* 250b, (justice, temperance), 250e (beauty), *Sym* 211d (beauty), *Rep* 402d (beauty).

²⁸*Rep* 7, 517d speaks of the descent from divine *theōria* to that of human things. *Rep* 5, 486a speaks of the philosophic nature as "a mind habituated to thoughts of grandeur (*megalooprepeia*) and contemplation (*theōria*) of all time and all existence" (Shorey) or "an understanding endowed with magnificence and the contemplation of all time and all being" (Bloom). Shorey (Loeb *Rep ad loc*) compares the passage with 500b-c, *Tht* 173e and 174e where similar things are said about the philosopher. His references to similar *sententiae* in Marcus Aurelius (7.35), Livy (24.34), and Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2 suggest that it became a commonplace in ancient discussions of philosophy.

²⁹At *Phlb* 38b it refers to "contemplation of the difference" between the pleasure of knowledge and that of ignorance. At *Rep* 511c it is associated with dialectical knowledge of reality and

Second, the notion of *theōria* as the kind of philosophic knowledge to be found in the dialogues is consistent with the language and imagery of psychic seeing that recurs in the dialogues.³⁰ Such passages as these suggest—and in this they are consistent with the 'philosophic' passage of the *Seventh Letter*³¹—that true philosophy, the true and ultimate aim of the dialectical and educational processes, is neither the accounts we give in words nor even the ability to do so, but rather a kind of psychic activity.³²

Third, it is a cognate of *theatron* via *theasthai*, which forms an interesting link with the formal structure of the dialogues as dramas and the numerous connections between the dialogues and the conventions and details of ancient mime, comedy, and tragedy.³³ Plato chose to write dramas,

the intelligible segment of the Divided Line.

³⁰E.g., *Grg* 523d, *Phd* 99c, *Rep* 518-519, 529.

³¹Esp. 341c-d. In fact, of course, in this passage it is denied both that philosophic truths *can* be put into words and that Plato himself has ever done so. Moreover, the passage is almost *verbatim* identical with a passage in *Ep.* 2 (314c), which almost no one any longer considers authentic.

³²Kenneth Sayre comes to a similar conclusion in "A Maieutic View of Five Late Dialogues," pp. 221-43 in Kluge and Smith, eds. (1992).

³³J. Peter Euben sees the connection between vision and drama in Plato as part of a larger schema in which 'theory' as a whole evolves from tragedy. This fascinating idea is developed in his

however different they may be from the tragedies of an Euripides or the comedies of an Aristophanes. As Kitto pointed out,³⁴ Greek authors expected and trusted their audiences to get the point without being told explicitly.

It might follow from this that to look only to the theme explicitly raised and the definitions explicitly stated, is to miss the point. A recent translator of the *Symposium* has, perhaps, slightly overstated a similar idea, speaking of the argument from 199e to 207a: "It is clear that the insights are what are important to Plato, and that the logic of how he persuades his readers of these insights is secondary."³⁵

Some caveats: *theasthai-theōria* is also used in quite other ways, both elsewhere and by Plato. As often as not in the Platonic corpus, it has to do with physical seeing.³⁶ I do not claim that it is the one, only, or main technical term for the kind of knowledge to be found in the dialogues. (I

increasingly believe that there are actually *no* technical terms in the dialogues, but that's another story.) So I do not mean that *theōria* is more frequent or more central term in the actual texts and I do not mean that *epistēnē* should really be understood as *theōria*. I would suggest, in fact, that *epistēnē* be understood as species of the genus *theōria* and that, in a serious sense, what we find in the dialogues is a general *theory* of knowledge: that is, a vision rather than a doctrine of what knowledge is. Likewise we find a *theory* rather than a doctrine of Ideas, of Love, of Virtue, of Piety, of Temperance, of Courage, and so on.

Perhaps I should emphasize that when I propose knowledge as vision, I do *not* mean to propose a different account or doctrine of knowledge as Plato's; nor do I attribute to him what is sometimes called a 'sight metaphysics,' if by 'metaphysics' is meant a metaphysical doctrine or system. Rather, the vision is the framework within which propositions and doctrines can be discussed. It functions in ways that resemble the three-dimensionality of the physical world. As a matter of ordinary everyday experience, we just see and experience things that way and take it for granted that they *are*, in fact, three-dimensional; it is not a statement or doctrine about the world that we believe to be true, but rather a framework assumption that conditions all proposed beliefs and doctrines about the world. We can—and intellectual inquirers frequently do—focus on, think about, try to assess the evidence for, or reconstruct the processes by which people have come to experience the world this way, but it is an exceedingly speculative and inconclusive project. The same can be said for Plato's vision.

So, Plato's vision is not identical with some one statement or set of statements about the notion in question in

"Creatures of a Day: Thought and Action in Thucydides," pp. 28-56 in Terence Ball, ed., *Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) and *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), esp. 50-58, 202-77.

³⁴"*Poiesis*": *Structure and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), esp. 243-56.

³⁵Robin Waterfield in Plato, *Symposium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), xxvii.

³⁶E.g., *Crito* 52b, *La* 178a, *Charm* 154c, *Symp* 190e, *Rep* 529b.

a given dialogue or passage; it is a kind of mental picture that lies behind, provides the co-ordinates or dimensions or categories for particular statements but is not itself expressible or communicable in particular statements. Thus the statements put forward by Socrates or other interlocutors in one place need not agree with those put forward in another. A vision is the sort of thing about which it can truly be said, as Socrates does about the Parable of the Cave, "God knows whether it is true."³⁷ Plato's vision, however, is focussed on what might be called the psychic and evaluative aspects of reality rather than on its physical and scientifically knowable aspect; and it is enacted rather than asserted.

Plato's vision is framed by what Holger Thesleff calls the 'two-level model', an "intuitional vision of reality . . . illustrated by pairs of unequal opposites" such as one-many, same-different, changing-unchanging, invisible-visible, soul-body, knowledge-opinion. Thesleff writes,

What is essential in this model . . . is that the two principal levels, the "higher" and the "lower" one, are not mutually exclusive or definitely separate as the "two worlds" tend to be in the traditional interpretations of Platonism . . . The two levels belong and fit together so as to constitute two "sides" or aspects of reality, although the upper level is

³⁷Rep 517b.

in all respects primary, more valuable, and in some ways more real.³⁸

The picture is this: the material, changing, imperfect, temporal, sensible so-called "real" world is that in and through which we gain enrapturing intellectual glimpses of an immaterial, unchanging, perfect, eternal, purely thinkable ideal world. Frustratingly, the ideal remains beyond our grasp just because we live in time and space; wherefore we must keep on striving, inquiring for it. Our only access to it in this life is through dialogue, but every dialogue is a conversation with a real, not an ideal, interlocutor and therefore is partial, from a particular point of view or orientation, and subject to the limitations and specificities of the time, place, and interlocutor.

How do the dialogues relate to this? As already said, they do not assert it. Rather, they are representations of it, all of it. In this sense we can speak of a *theory*, not a doctrine, of Ideas, a *theory* that the object of knowledge is Ideas, and so on. But they are theories that are also instantiated both in the words and in the deeds (or characters) of the dialogues' participants;³⁹ and by this means they become theories of which we have experience, not merely propositions with whose content we have acquaintance.

³⁸"Looking for Clues: An Interpretation of Some Literary Aspects of Plato's 'Two-Level Model'"; 20ff in Press, ed. (1993).

³⁹An exemplary study of the role of character in Plato's dialogues is Mary Whitlock Blundell, "Character and Meaning in Plato's *Hippias Minor*," pp. 131-72 in Kluge and Smith, eds. (1992).

The vision is not of ideals to the exclusion of reals but of both in their mutually interdependent tension. Every dialogue is *about* not only some subject, topic, concept, or question on which conversation focuses; it is also about many subsidiary topics and about the characters of the participants, their actions and beliefs, as paradigms of concepts and possibilities. As such the dialogues' vision is of philosophy not as doctrines proved but as the never-ending activity of philosophic inquiry.⁴⁰

⁴⁰A point made by Stefanini (1949), xxxii-lviii, reiterated by Tigerstedt (1977), 105-108, and recognized already by John Dewey ("From Absolutism to Experimentalism"): "I am unable to find in [Plato] that all-comprehensive and overriding system which later interpretation has, as it seems to me, conferred upon him as a dubious boon. The ancient skeptics overworked another aspect of Plato's thought when they treated him as their spiritual father, but they were nearer the truth, I think, than those who force him into the frame of a rigidly systematized doctrine. . . . Nothing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a "Back to Plato" movement; but it would have to be back to the dramatic, restless, co-operatively inquiring Plato of the Dialogues, trying one mode of attack after another to see what it might yield; back to the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and political turn, and not to the artificial Plato constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor." More recently, Kosman and Frede (in Klägge and Smith, eds., 1993) have come to similar conclusions.

Thus every dialogue is double in two senses. First, it presents Plato's vision, but from a particular point of view and with particular orientations and limitations provided by the situation and the personalities.⁴¹ Second, precisely because of their disconcerting combination of the eternal and the ephemeral, the ideal and the real, the dialogues actually *embody* (what some of them try to articulate) how the eternal and ideal is glimpsed but never really grasped in the ephemeral real world in which alone we philosophize.

IV. THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONTRADICTIONS:

KNOWLEDGE AS *THEŌRIA*

One of the main advantages of my proposal to reframe what Platonic philosophy means as *theōria* rather than *epistēmē* is that it enables us to find a middle way between dogmatism and either scepticism or belle lettrism.

The vision, I would argue, *is* philosophic, intellectually sophisticated, full of suggestive ideas, insights, and theories about the entire range of problems that have become the traditional subject-matter of philosophy.⁴² One question

⁴¹Schleiermacher writes that in "the philosophy of Plato . . . form and subject are inseparable, and no proposition is to be rightly understood, except in its own place, and with the combinations and limitations which Plato has assigned to it" (*Schleiermacher's Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, tr. by William Dobson [Cambridge and London 1836], p. 14).

⁴²It may be a commonplace to say of Plato that "what's really important [is] contemplation of the intelligible" (Brisson *Iloc*

to which this brings us, as I have already suggested, concerns the nature of philosophy itself. Consistent with the view of Plato sketched here, I would submit that in the proper sense of the word no *definition* of what philosophy is nor of what it is to be a philosopher is offered in the dialogues, even though we tend to read our definitions into the dialogues (not without some help from him). But there is a vision of it, embodied and enacted by Socrates in many ways, which is less technical than our own and which is not asserted dogmatically; indeed, I don't think it's *asserted* at all.⁴³ But yet there *is* something definite presented for our thought and contemplation, so it would not be correct to say that Plato is a skeptic either in the strong sense of someone who asserts that nothing can be known or in the weak sense of someone who (systematically? dogmatically?) maintains a state of doubt.⁴⁴

cit)), but, having said it, modern scholars tend to act (i.e., write their books) as if what's really important is the doctrines finally arrived at.

⁴³See my "Plato's Dialogues as Enactments," in Gonzalez, ed. (forthcoming). Michael Frede also recognizes that "A good part of [the dialogues'] lesson does not consist in what gets said or argued, but in what they show ("Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form," p. 219 in Klägge and Smith, eds. [1992]).

⁴⁴It is an important point, already argued by Stefanini (Vol. 1, Ch. 2) against Woodbridge and others and a valid objection against the conclusions of Halperin (93-129) and Sayre (221-42) in Klägge and Smith, eds. (1992), that although Plato's

The idea of vision also offers a middle way between the other seeming contradictions discussed earlier. From the doctrinal or dogmatic point of view the different statements mentioned above (e.g., between the soul as simple and as compound) are contradictions; propositions are true or false, not both and not neither. But in a vision, as in a dream, inconsistent, mutually exclusive entities can be included and coordinated. From the standpoint of discursive reason, the myths and fables Socrates tells are problematic, apparent abondoments of the very rational discourse he professes to champion. From the standpoint of Plato's philosophy as vision there is no problem; for as dramas or narratives, the dialogues are unified and flow smoothly from casual conversation to laborious dialectic to jokes to parables to rhetorical *tours de force* to myths.

From the dogmatic point of view it is a problem that the dialogues jump back and forth from one type of focus or subject to another. But from the point of view proposed here, it would appear as part of what makes Plato's vision so powerful that it comprehends the empirical and the transcendental, the ideal and the real, the eternal and the temporal, the universal and the particular, the abstract and concrete.⁴⁵ On the hypothesis that the knowledge or

philosophy may not be expressed as distinct doctrines it is not therefore *no* philosophy or a merely negative one or restricted to a method of inquiry.

⁴⁵As against two-worlds dualisms of Neoplatonic and modern varieties. Rosamond Sprague has described Plato as "the philosopher of the intermediate" (paper given at SAGP, Binghamton University, 1993). Certainly this is the conclusion to be drawn

philosophy Plato presents to us in the dialogues is a vision, there is no problem of philosophy versus literature or drama; literary form in general, dramatic form in particular is the perfectly appropriate mode in which Plato might show us what he thinks philosophy is. The problem we have in understanding this, I suggest, is our own expectation of something more technical and dogmatic rather than the intrinsic difficulty of comprehending what Plato has written.

Similarly, the idea of Plato's philosophy as *theōria* provides a context for Watson's assertions that the individual truths or knowledge (*epistēmē*) seemingly arrived at or implied by the dialogues transcend traditional philosophic polarities: neither simply universal nor simply individual, they are characterized by an ideal particularity, at once universal and particular, like the forms themselves; neither simply rational nor simply irrational, they exhibit a rational connectedness (from *ratio*) always limited by irrationality; neither simply final nor simply provisional, they exhibit in their tentativeness a timeless finality and perfection.

Let me conclude by briefly observing that my proposal is also consistent with modern research about oral cultures and with the view, persuasively argued recently by

from the words of both Socrates and Diotima in the *Sym* as well as from other indications in the dialogues. I believe that view is consonant both with Thesleff's 'two-level model' and with the view being developed here.

Kevin Robb,⁴⁶ that Plato's dialogues are documents of the transition from orality to literacy. Not only is it true, as Robb shows, that the world of the dialogues is the world of that transition; it might also be that the difference between *theōria* and *epistēmē*, between vision and knowledge as aims of a practice called *philosophia*, reflects Plato's thought from that transitional point of view.

If we step back from the doctrinal contradictions between dialogues and from the overarching contradiction between the stated pursuit of *epistēmē* and its striking absence from the outcomes of nearly all the dialogues; if we step back from these details and look instead at the general vision presented, at the thought enacted in the dialogues, it could be characterized by many of the traits of oral culture as defined by Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy*.⁴⁷ It is additive rather than subordinate and aggregative rather than analytic;⁴⁸ it is characterized by redundancy or

⁴⁶*Literacy and Paideia in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. Chs. 6-8. Also see his, "*Ascheia* and *Simousia*: The Issues Behind the Indictment of Socrates," pp. 77-106 in Press, ed. (1993).

⁴⁷NY: Metuen 1982, Ch 3. These are traits of what he calls the "psychodynamics of orality."

⁴⁸This is to say, in other words, that the thought structures are syntactic rather than paratactic. More particularly, consider how the picture of Socrates as The Philosopher is built up through numerous small details of his life and behavior in almost all of the dialogues, but especially *Sym*, *Phd*, *Crito*, and *Ap*; the details hang together and make a coherent whole. When one

copiousness and by a tendency to be conservative or traditionalist; it remains close to the human lifeworld; it is agonistic,⁴⁹ empathetic and participatory rather than distanced,⁵⁰ situational rather than abstract, and involves oral memorization.⁵¹

attempts the same thing with what is taken to be Plato's doctrine of, say, the soul, one finds, on the contrary, inconsistency and incoherence.

⁴⁹Not only can speakers in the dialogues be characterized as being competitive with each other in, e.g., the *Phd*, *Sym*, *Meno*, *Rep*, and *Grg*, but Plato's literary output as a whole can be seen as competing with the work of poets, playwrights, sophists, and politicians for intellectual adherence and for the leadership of a renewed *Paideia*. "... the *Republic* can be understood as a tragedy that self-consciously competes with those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and Plato can be understood as heir to the tragedian's vocation of civic educator. But given the corruption Euripides and Thucydides depict, that inheritance and vocation require a new conception of what tragedy can be, where it can be 'performed', and who is its projected audience" (Euben 1990. 275).

⁵⁰I argue in "Plato's Dialogues as Enactments," Ch. 9 in Gonzalez, ed. (forthcoming) that Plato deliberately and artfully uses both emotion and imagination to involve us in the world as he sees it.

⁵¹I think of the feats of memory attributed to Socrates by the narration of the *Rep*, to Apollodorus in *Sym*, to Phaedo in the *Phd*.

What this suggests is that if we shift our attention from the details of the sorts of knowledge-claims that interest contemporary philosophers, that is, from a focus on *epistēmē*, to the vision, the *theōria*, that is sometimes indicated as the goal of philosophy within the dialogues themselves, then we shall find a Platonic philosophy that is more consistent with the intellectual and cultural context in which Plato actually lived and wrote.

Hunter College of the City University of New York

And think of the feats of memory required of the audience of these dialogues as presented orally, whether that is only within their dramatic structure or was actually the case in reality. Cf., Gilbert Ryle, *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 21-54.