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“Sun and Good from the Perspective of the History of Philosophy”

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Platonic studies are in a time of significant change. Basic assumptions that have conditioned the interpretation of the dialogues for more than a century are shifting. I consider the following to be prevalent views of Plato’s dialogues and his philosophy as found in them that have operated as assumptions for at least the last one hundred years.¹

1. Plato is a dogmatic philosopher. That is, that he has definite teachings that he means to communicate in the dialogues, even though these teaching may have changed during his career. These teachings include, for example, a theory of Forms, an epistemology, a metaphysics, definitions of various moral virtues, and an ideally just society.
2. Plato is a systematic philosopher. That is, the doctrines that he teaches in the dialogues are intended to fit together into a complete and coherent philosophical system.
3. A compositional chronology can be established by means of conceptual content, stylometry, or a combination of the two.
4. This compositional chronology enables us to view his doctrines in a developmental way. The developmental picture thus established enables us to explain the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions among teachings on the same topic in different dialogues.

¹ For fuller statements of these assumptions, see G. Press, “The Dialogical Mode in Modern Plato Studies,” pp. 1-28 in *Plato’s Dialogues: The Dialogical Approach*, ed. V. Tejera and R. E. Hart (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); “Introduction,” pp. 1-7 in *Plato’s Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993); and F. Gonzalez, “Introduction,” pp. 1-13 in *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995). For a review of the recent literature see G. Press, “The State of the Question in Contemporary Plato Studies,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 34 (1996), 507-532. Reprinted pp.309-332 in *Plato: Critical Assessments*, ed. Nicholas D. Smith. Vol. I, (New York: Routledge, 1998).

5. The leading speaker in any dialogue can be taken automatically as Plato's own mouthpiece.
6. The dialogues are essentially expository and didactic, not dramatic works. That is, in order to grasp the doctrines that Plato is teaching we may ignore the literary and dramatic elements of them and focus solely on the philosophical arguments.

I want to emphasize that these are *assumptions*, rather than propositions that have been established by argument and evidence. Neither clear evidence nor cogent argument warrants these assumptions, however, and increasing numbers of scholars no longer accept some or all of them. The most important problem facing Plato scholars now is to find ways of interpreting the dialogues as simultaneously literature and philosophy.

As for me, I remain committed to the "principles" of Platonic exegesis I articulated in 1993: contextualism, holism, and organicism.² Contextualism signifies that the meaning of a text is conditioned by its historical, cultural, and linguistic context. This principle conditions all else. Holism means that passages, images, and arguments are to be understood primarily in relation to the dialogue in which they occur taken as a whole. Organicism means that the dialogues are carefully crafted literary works (whatever else they are) in which parts such as passages, images, and arguments are organically related to each other. This is *not* Strauss' principle of logographic necessity, which seems to me intrinsically excessive and to have fostered arbitrary and poorly grounded, though often interesting interpretations.³

To these primary three, I would now add two "principles of inversion" that arise from reflection on the dialogues as works that are simultaneously literary and philosophical and that are to be used in looking for what is philosophically most important in each dialogue. First, surface vs. depth (or foreground vs. background): what is on the surface or in the foreground in a dialogue is ordinarily not as philosophically important to Plato as what is to be found at a deeper

² See my "Principles of Dramatic and Non-Dogmatic Plato Interpretation," pp. 107 – 127 in Press, ed. (1993).

³ L. Strauss, *The City and Man, What is Political Philosophy? and other studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), p. 60.

level or in the background. This principle is a compositional replica of the relationship between sensation and thought, individual things and Forms as stated in some dialogues. One application of this rule is to the philosophical arguments themselves. Often the immediate content of the argument is not as important as something else that is being accomplished *by means of* the argument. Second, humor vs. seriousness: what is stated humorously is often more philosophically important to Plato than what is stated with apparent seriousness and *vice versa*. These two principles may be thought of as explaining the fundamentally ironic nature of the dialogues as distinct from the irony of particular passages.

I have said that I am an historian of philosophy. The presuppositions of all history are thoroughness and accuracy with respect to the evidence. One must take into consideration *all* the available evidence rather than an arbitrary selection of it. This means that even the philosophical interpreter must take account of the philological as well as the more narrowly defined philosophical evidence. Then, one must present the evidence accurately rather than subsuming it to external categories or forcing it to accord with *a priori* assumptions. From this perspective, it seems to me self-evident that Plato neither teaches doctrines nor expounds a doctrinal system in the dialogues. However, let me also sketch two arguments for this conclusion.

First, accurate observation of the dialogues shows them to be dialogues, not didactic, expository treatises; and it shows them to be exceedingly artful, literary and dramatic works. To believe that, despite their *prima facie* dramatic character, the dialogues are actually intended by Plato to be read as didactic treatises requires a proof that, to my knowledge, no one has so far offered. Second, accurate observation shows that, as in the dramas of other authors, only characters speak, never the author, never Plato. In this and many other ways Plato has hidden himself and his views from the audience. To believe that, despite Plato's *prima facie* anonymity, he means for us sometimes to read the words and arguments of Socrates, other times those of Parmenides, and yet other times the Eleatic Stranger as his own words and arguments requires

proof that, to my knowledge, no one has yet offered.⁴ My general point is that the burden of proof is on those who want to interpret the dialogues according to assumptions in conflict with the *prima facie* character of the dialogues.

In making these claims, I do not mean to assert that Plato does not have views; only that he does not teach them directly in the dialogues. I do not deny that Plato, like other dramatic writers, usually sympathizes with the views of his main protagonist, Socrates. However, sympathizing with the protagonist's views does not entail believing or asserting the words he puts into their mouths. Also, a dramatist can sympathize more with one protagonist than another. That Plato sympathizes with Socrates does not entail that he does so or does so to the same extent with Parmenides or the Eleatic Stranger. Moreover, my denial that the dialogues teach directly is not meant as a denial that they teach indirectly.⁵ Finally, I accept that there were intra-Academic discussions and I believe that the dogmatic teachings that came to constitute the "Platonic tradition" in antiquity originate there rather than with Plato himself.

From the historical perspective, as I have said, it is important to distinguish among types of texts and their functions: dialogues are not treatises. Plato's dialogues, unlike those of Aristotle or Augustine, are truly dialogical and gain our adherence as much by non-logical as by logical means, including the imaginative and the emotional.⁶ Plato does have certain beliefs, principles, and orientations, but these he passes on to readers most effectively in indirect ways.⁷

For example, certain things are said so often that it is difficult not to believe that Plato himself believed them. I have in mind propositions such as the following: a human consists of both a body and a soul, the soul is higher and more valuable than the body, a healthy soul is more valuable than wealth, status, or power, right action improves, wrong action harms the soul, there

⁴ For a collection of essays on the issue of whether characters in the dialogues should be taken as Plato's mouthpieces, see G. Press, ed., *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

⁵ For the concept of indirection and its application to Plato, see Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* and *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*.

⁶ Cf. D. Blank, "The Arousal of Emotion in Plato's Dialogues," *Classical Quarterly* 43 (1993), 428-39

⁷ I make the argument more fully in "Plato's Dialogues as Enactments," pp. 133-152 in Gonzalez, ed., 1995. Drama (setting, character, and plot), myth, narrative structure, quotations and allusions, metaphor, humor, irony, and other aspects of the dialogues are deployed to this end as well.

is a real difference between right and wrong action (i.e., such things as virtue, beauty, justice, friendship, and temperance exist), and that the way to a healthy soul is to be continually seeking knowledge by inquiring. I would even venture that Plato believes that there is a reality of things that is distinguishable from individuals, that is not material, and is discernible by thought rather than by sensation. However, I observe that although such propositions are often repeated and are also inculcated in other indirect ways (e.g., myths), yet they are never really proved. Moreover, these are generalities, rather than the kinds of specific propositional assertions and definitions desired by modern philosophers under the rubric of “knowledge.” When it comes to the details of these views – the precise meaning of terms such as ‘soul,’ ‘knowledge,’ justice,’ etc. – the dialogues are inconsistent, contradictory, or silent.

Indeed, despite the frequency with which “knowledge” (*episteme*, *phronesis*) is reiterated as the sole or principle desideratum, the only knowledge actually found in the dialogues is knowledge as vision (*theoria*). This term expresses how we encounter the Forms in *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*.⁸ Seeing with the eye of thought or of the soul is the kind of thinking characteristic of the philosophy in *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Sophist*, and *Gorgias*.⁹ Properly understood, that is to say, the so-called doctrine of ideas is actually what Thesleff has called Plato’s two-level vision.¹⁰ Thus, I think that Plato means us to acquire from the dialogues a vision, rather than a dogma or any propositional knowledge, and it is a vision of reality as having two asymmetrical levels rather than as consisting of two separate worlds or realms.

From the historical point of view, furthermore, it is important to distinguish between beliefs and doctrines reasonably attributable to a philosopher and those only attributed to the

⁸ *Phaedrus* 249e: p©sa m□n enqrèpou yuc¼ fÚsei teqšatai t| Ônta. *Symposium* 211d: qewmšnJ aÙtÔ tÔ kalÒn. *Republic* 479e: T... d□ aâ toÝj aÙt| »kasta qewmšnouv ka^ ce^ kat| taÙt| æsaÚtwj Ônta; «r' oÙ gignèskein èll' oÙ dox£zein; 486a: 'Hi oân Ôp£rcei diano...v megalopršpeia ka^ qewr...a pantÔj m□n crÒnou, p£shj d□ oÙs...aj, oCEÒn te oþei toÚtJ mšga ti doke«n e□nai tÔn enqrèpinon b...on; 518c: aktšon e□nai, »wj "n e„j tÔ ×n ka^ toà Ôntoj tÔ fanÔtatou dunat¼ gšnhtai enascšsqai qewmšn: toàto d' e□na... famen.

⁹ *Symposium* 219a: tÁj diano...aj Ôyij. *Republic* 519b: t¼n tÁj yucÁj Ôyin. *Sophist* 254a: t| g|r tÁj tîn pollîn yucÁj Ômmata. *Gorgias* 523d: prÔ tÁj yucÁj tÁj aOtîn ŃfqalmoÝj. Cf. Paul Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*. Tr. Meyerhoff (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1958), pp. 13-16.

¹⁰ H. Thesleff, *Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1999).

philosopher by immediate students and later generations. I mention two historical parallels. First, there is the misleading picture of Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza as contrasted with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, representing the supposed opposition of “rationalism” and “empiricism.” This originated as a story told by Kant and his followers to show why modern philosophy culminates in Kant.¹¹ Second, and closer to home, is the influence that Aristotle’s criticisms of the pre-Socratics exercised on modern scholarly interpretations until quite recently.¹² I suggest that something similar has happened in the study of Plato. Stimulated by Gaiser, Krämer, Merlan, and Tigerstedt we should recognize that the views attributed to Plato by Plotinus and others in antiquity who considered themselves Platonists represent something other than the philosophy of the dialogues strictly speaking, probably intra-Academic discussions.¹³

Finally, there is no historical basis for attributing a privileged status to the *Republic* or to elements of it among the corpus of Plato’s dialogues. I am persuaded by Thesleff that in general Plato revised dialogues and in particular that the *Republic* was composed and revised over a long

¹¹ David Fate Norton, “The Myth of ‘British Empiricism,’” *History of European Ideas* 1 (1981), 331-334. William Righter, *The Myth of Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹² Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944) showed the essentially partisan nature of Aristotle’s discussions of his predecessors. Aristotle’s views became the foundation of the doxographies and Hermann Diels, *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1879) with its long, detailed “Introduction”, has long constituted the basic source on Presocratic philosophy. Diels’ view has been powerfully attacked by Jaap Mansfeld; see, *Studies in the Historiography of Greek Philosophy* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), *Heresiography in Context* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), esp. Ch. 1, “Diels’ Error,” and, more recently, J. Mansfeld and D.T. Runia, *Aëtiana. The Method and Intellectual Context of a Doxographer*. Vol. I. The Sources (Leiden, 1997). Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), is one of the few to have faced the consequences of Cherniss’ arguments, though his own have not met with wide acceptance. For an attempt to escape from Aristotle’s influence, see Antonio Capizzi, *La Repubblica Cosmica* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1982), English tr., *The Cosmic Republic: Notes for a Non-Peripatetic History of the Birth of Philosophy in Greece* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1991).

¹³ K. Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1963) and H.-J. Krämer, *Arete bei Plato und Aristoteles* (Heidelberg: Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1959) collected, sifted, and organized all of the evidence. They took it to demonstrate the existence and content of Plato’s own “unwritten doctrine” as passed down by an oral tradition. This has become known as the Tübingen view, esotericism, or esoterism. E. N. Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato: An Outline and Some Suggestions* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1974) and others have taken a very critical view of esoterism, claiming, among other things, that it falsely substitutes the content of the “secondary tradition” for that of the dialogues. I agree with P. Merlan, “The Old Academy,” p. 14-38 in A. H. Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) and others, who take the evidence to show the nature of a “Platonic philosophy” that was accepted as Plato’s own by his immediate students and followers throughout antiquity, although it does not align well with the philosophy of the dialogues and thus cannot be shown with certainty to be Plato’s own doctrine.

period of time and probably not “published” in Plato’s lifetime.¹⁴ If this is the case then it does not seem likely to articulate Plato’s doctrinal system, even if, as I think is not the case, he did intend to propound doctrines or a system.

These principles and observations lead me, as already suggested, to positions at variance with older assumptions. As opposed to both the dogmatism and the skepticism that have characterized traditional interpretations of Plato, I consider his philosophy “non-dogmatic,” a kind of fideism or “constructive skepticism.”¹⁵ I use the term “visionary” to describe this aspect of Plato’s philosophy. Plato does not teach doctrines in the dialogues, nor does he deny that things are knowable; he offers us a vision. As opposed to a purely chronological or non-chronological reading of the dialogues, I accept the mitigated view of Thesleff, Nails, Cooper and others that there are no identifiable “early” or “middle” dialogues, though there is a group of dialogues that share “late style” characteristics.¹⁶ Thus, neither the widely accepted developmental approach to Plato’s philosophy nor the older dogmatic unitarianism of Shorey¹⁷ can be supported on chronological grounds. Instead my position may be called a visionary unitarianism. The vision remains unchanged though differing emphases and explorations are to be found in different dialogues. I take the dialogues to be “enactments” of Plato’s non-dogmatic vision rather than either pure dramas or pure treatises.¹⁸ And I believe that the words of no single

¹⁴ H. Thesleff 1999.115. The view is more fully developed in Thesleff’s “The Early Version of Plato’s *Republic*,” *Arctos* 36 (1997), 149-74. For earlier versions of the argument, see his *Studies in the Styles of Plato* (Helsinki: Societas Philosophica Fennica, 1967), 12–25 and *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1982), 101–110, 137–140, and 184–186.

¹⁵ Luigi Stefanini, *Platone* (Padova: CEDAM, 1949; repr. Padova: CEDAM, 1991), vol. I, pp. XXVIII–XLIII.

¹⁶ H. Thesleff 1982 and “Platonic Chronology,” *Phronesis* 34 (1989), 1-26, D. Nails, “Platonic Chronology Reconsidered,” *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 3 (1992), 314-27 and *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), 53–135; and J. M. Cooper, “Introduction” pp. viii–xviii in Cooper, ed., *Plato. Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

¹⁷ P. Shorey, *The Unity of Plato’s Thought* (Chicago: Decennial Publications of the University of Chicago, 1903) and *What Plato Said* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933). Cf. H. Cherniss, “The Philosophical Economy of the Theory of Ideas,” *American Journal of Philology* 57 (1936), 445-56.

¹⁸ See my “Plato’s Dialogues as Enactments,” pp. 133–152 in Gonzalez, ed., 1995.

character in any dialogue may be simply extrapolated and taken to express Plato's own beliefs or arguments.¹⁹

Now, let me turn to the image of the Sun and the idea of the Good in the *Republic*. The idea of a conference bringing into confrontation the many different "images of Plato" that are now found among scholars is an excellent one; and I congratulate the Institute for Ancient Philosophy and the International Plato Society for co-sponsoring the meeting that led to this volume. In order to both obtain the greatest clarity about what the various orientations are and facilitate comparative assessments, the organizers prudently asked contributors both to describe their particular approach and to apply that approach to an identical object of study. Given the importance that has been attached to them in the history of Plato studies, the Sun and the Good seem like reasonable choices for such objects. The *Republic* has long been considered the dialogue in which the various parts of Plato's philosophy can be seen most thoroughly worked out and systematically related to each other. Within that systematic structure the Idea of the Good seems to be defined as standing at the heart of what seems to be the core doctrine of Plato's philosophy, the theory of Forms or Ideas. And the Sun, of course, is its metaphorical correlate. From the non-dogmatic, visionary standpoint that I support, the *Republic* does seem to represent the most comprehensive and integrated treatment of Platonic themes of any dialogue; but I would maintain that what comes out of it is a vision rather than specific teachings.

The reason that I am trying to explicate the thinking behind the task we have been assigned is this. From my perspective, it is not so much the particular content of the Sun and the Good or their role in the *Republic* about which I have a contribution to offer. As an historian of philosophy, my contribution concerns instead the assumptions behind the choice of Sun and Good as focal points of our discussions. For the implication of my principles, observations, and positions is that the seeming importance or centrality of the image of the Sun and the Idea of the

¹⁹ My "The Logic of the Attributing Characters' Views to Plato," pp. 27–38 in G. Press, ed., 2000 builds on earlier work by Richard Robinson (*Plato's Earlier Dialectic*. New York: Garland, 1980. Repr. of 2nd edn.: Oxford: Clarendon, 1953; 2ff.) and John Mulhern, "Two Interpretive Fallacies," *Systematics* 9 (1971), 168–172.

Good in *Republic* is an artifact of the tradition of interpretation subsequent to Plato rather than something that Plato propounded or would have recognized as constituting the core of a dogmatic philosophical system that was his.

The Sun is a rich and powerful image and metaphor, like many others in Plato's dialogues. Compare the ladder of loves, the Charioteer of the soul, the ball of wax and the aviary, the Line, the Cave, and the city and soul as images of each other.²⁰ Compare, too, the images of Socrates as a gadfly, a stingray, a midwife, a bust of Silenus and the satyr Marsyas.²¹ The dialogues utilize many such metaphors. Metaphors, fables, and myths are, in fact, among the principle non-logical means by which Plato gets us to think about things in new ways. The sun is employed metaphorically as a comparison with the good, however, only in the *Republic*. It is certainly central to the vision presented in that dialogue, but its significance for a broader synthesis of Plato's philosophy is small. There are terms and images that recur frequently, but the sun is not one of them.

'Good,' on the other hand, is a term that figures in many dialogues. Whatever else is true of Plato's dialogues, they reveal a constant emphasis on the evaluative aspect of things. Discussions of 'the Good' occur more rarely. In the *Lysis* and the *Philebus*, for example, the Good is said to be self-sufficient. In the *Lysis* and the *Symposium* it is associated with the beautiful. In the *Gorgias* and elsewhere it is shown to be the end of action. But in none of these dialogues is the Good discussed as a Form or an Idea. In none of them is it said to be superior to other Ideas. In none is it said to be "beyond *ousia*." My point is that, like the metaphor of the Sun, the special role assigned to the Idea of the Good is unique to the *Republic*. In fact, references to "the Idea of the Good" are virtually unique to the *Republic*. The one exception, as Harold Tarrant reminds me, is *Philebus* 64a: $\phi\gamma\alpha\kappa\tilde{\omicron}\nu\ \kappa\alpha^{\wedge}\ \tau\ldots\eta\alpha\ \mu\delta\sigma\alpha\eta\ \alpha\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\eta\eta\ \epsilon\eta\eta\alpha\ldots$, which might be taken as a reference to the Idea of the Good.²² However, it is an exception that actually

²⁰ *Symposium* 210a-211d; *Phaedrus* 246a-248b; *Theaetetus* 191c, 197c-198b; *Republic* 509d-511a, 514a-517c, 441c-449a.

²¹ *Apology* 30e; *Meno* 80a-c; *Theaetetus* 149a-151d; *Symposium* 215b-222a.

²² As Jowett, e.g., did in his translation *ad loc*, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4th edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

serves to prove the rule that discussion of the Idea of the Good really is almost non-existent outside the *Republic*. In any case, as already said, the Idea of the Good in *Philebus* does not have the superordinate or super ideal status that are such marked characteristics of it in the *Republic*.

This all suggests that the Idea of the Good as presented in the *Republic* should not be accorded a special position in Plato's philosophy. If that dialogue were not published in Plato's lifetime, the conclusion would be even more strongly supported. In any event, I think that the burden of proof is on those who want to treat it as having a special role in a systematic exposition of Plato's philosophy that it is *entitled* to such treatment. The Idea of the Good is certainly important in the vision and argument of the *Republic* taken as a whole and it is emblematic of Plato's core interest in values, but it is not a Platonic doctrine or part of a broader doctrinal system propounded by Plato.

It has come to seem important (and doctrinal and systematic) through two sorts of influence: that of later writers and the expectations of modern interpreters about what Plato "must have" been doing, given that he was a "philosopher." The "later writers" I have in mind are Aristotle, the earliest Academics (Speusippus and Xenocrates), and Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists as conditioned by them and by the doxographers who followed them.²³ Briefly, I take the historical evidence to suggest the following scenario. Although the dialogues do not propound doctrines or a system, emphasizing instead a vision and the perpetually on-going activity of inquiring, Aristotle and the earliest Academics wanted definite answers. They wanted closure rather than the open-ended philosophizing of the dialogues. And they wanted specific doctrines rather than a general vision, perhaps to better engage in the philosophic controversies that were already beginning and that were to characterize so much of Hellenistic philosophy.

Why did they attribute doctrines to Plato? Perhaps they thought Plato had propounded orally a doctrine not propounded in the dialogues; perhaps they thought that ideas only presented

²³ Besides Merlan *op.cit.* n. 9, A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, too, seem to think that the doctrinal system was a Hellenistic invention. See *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2. J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977; 1996), 2-3 is more optimistic about whether the doctrinal system was Plato's own, but see V. Tejera, "The Hellenistic Obliteration of Plato's Dialogism," pp. 129-144 in G. Press, ed. 1993.

in the dialogues *should have been* propounded as doctrines. The evidence on this issue is highly equivocal, as is shown by the on-going debates between esoterists and their critics for the past fifty years.²⁴ In any case, for reasons of their own, they attributed settled teachings to Plato. In some cases, e.g., the world-soul, we can see from the dialogues where and how one might have thought that Plato propounded such a doctrine. In other cases, e.g., the Infinite dyad, we can only surmise.

The second source of belief that the *Republic* has a special status among Plato's dialogues and that the metaphor of the Sun and the idea of the Good have special doctrinal and systematic roles is modern expectations about what constitutes a "philosophy" and a "philosopher." From Hegel and Zeller modern philosophers have accepted it as a requirement that being a philosopher means propounding a dogmatic system.²⁵ Now, it may be logically or systematically "true" that to be a philosophy just is to have a dogmatic system, but that does not make it historically accurate as a description of prior philosophers.

The question is, What did *Plato* think it was to be a philosopher? But the prior question is, Where ought we to look for the answer? Both the ancient and modern sources of belief in the systematic and dogmatic importance of the *Republic* lead to an identical problem: the disjunction between the image of philosophy and philosophizing that is conveyed in the vast majority of the dialogues and the image of philosophy as a kind of dogmatizing that is presupposed in the secondary tradition that attributes doctrines to Plato. I believe that we ought to consider as primary what is said about philosophy and what Socrates is and does in the dialogues; the

²⁴ The critics include, among others, Kurt von Fritz ["Zur Frage der 'esoterischen' Philosophie Platons," *AGPh* 49 (1967), 255-68 and "The Philosophical Passage in the Seventh Letter and the Problem of Plato's 'Esoteric Philosophy'," pp. 408-47 in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. Anton and Kustas (Albany: SUNY Press, 1971)], Vlastos ["On Plato's Oral Doctrine: Rev. of Krämer's *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*," *Gnomon* 41 (1963), 641-55, reprinted in Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (2nd ed; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 379-403], and Isnardi-Parente, "Per l'interpretazione dell'exkursus filosofico della VII epistula Platonica," *Parola del Passato* 19 (1964), 241-90. Tigerstedt's *Decline and Fall* is intended as an extended refutation. Among more recent critiques, see Luc Brisson, "Présupposés et conséquences d'une interprétation ésotériste de Platon," *Méthexis* 6 (1993), 11-35 and Franco Fronterotta, "Une énigme platonicienne: La question des doctrines non-écrites," *Les Études Anciennes* 11 (1993), 115-57. And most recently, Thesleff 1999.

²⁵ E. N. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977), ch. 1, with references to Hegel and Zeller.

secondary tradition should be taken as just that, secondary. And inconsistencies between them should be resolved, by looking for an explanation of the secondary tradition that is consistent with the dialogues. There are many reasons for this.

First, the dialogues are known to be Plato's chosen form of philosophical writing. They clearly show enormous time and effort on Plato's part, which is difficult to reconcile with the idea that he expressed his *true* philosophical views in a different form. Moreover, evidence for oral communications is indirect, scarce, mostly late, and not very consistent. Although there are reports of a "Lecture on the Good," there is no conclusive evidence that this was other than a unique event and the testimonies about the content of it are very inconsistent. Again, to understand the dialogues, it is necessary to integrate their literary and dramatic with their logical or argumentative aspects; and this is better achieved by taking them as primary than by assuming that, underneath it all, Plato was a dogmatic philosopher.

Now Socrates' character and practice and statements made about philosophy in the dialogues agree in defining philosophy over against both the practical life of politicians and the rhetorical concerns and practices of the sophists. Crucial elements are live conversation (*dialegesthai*) and being together (*synousia*). Philosophy is, thus, a kind of activity rather than doctrines, which would be the results of some kind of activity. And the true philosopher is a continual questioner, morally serious, intellectually seductive, a theorist in and of the practical world rather than the abstracted figure of the *Theaetetus* digression²⁶ or the ivory-tower intellectual of the *Republic*'s philosophical education.

The question, then, is whether the term "Plato's philosophy" refers to what we find in the dialogues or to that rather different sort of thing which has been taken to be his philosophy by the tradition of interpretation of the dialogues after his death. From the historical perspective this is an important question. It is a fact, for example, that Aristotle seems to attribute to Plato a

²⁶ Rachel Rue has argued persuasively that this image is a satire or caricature rather than a serious portrayal of Plato's idea of the philosopher. "The Philosopher in Flight. The Digression (172-177) in Plato's *Theaetetus*," *OSAP* 11 (1993), 71-100. See also, Burton Waymack, "*Theaetetus* 172c-177c," Andrew Barker, "The Digression in the *Theaetetus*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976), 457-62, David Bradshaw, "The Argument of the Digression," *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1988), 61-68.

doctrine of Forms or Ideas and the view that the arrangements sketched in the central books of the *Republic* represent Plato's own view of a perfectly just city. It is not a fact, but an inference that Plato *did* propound such views as doctrines. I have argued that the testimony of the dialogues should be primary. The testimony of the dialogues alone – apart from the views of his students and representatives of the later Platonic or Neoplatonic tradition and apart from assumptions that we may make based on our own ideas about what a philosophy is or what a philosopher must be doing in order to be a philosopher – does not support that inference. We are, I believe, free to take the *Republic* as enacting a vision of the highest knowledge contained within a caricature of an ideal society, much in the way that Alcibiades describes knowing Socrates as finding a vision of the divine inside the grotesque image of Silenus.

I have been arguing that the sun as a metaphor for the idea of the Good does not occur at all and the idea of the Good itself does not occur with this systematic role or importance in other dialogues. Hence, to elevate them to that role and importance requires that the *Republic* be the central dialogue of the Platonic corpus in which the system of his philosophy is most fully and coherently presented. But that view of the *Republic* is not supported. For Plato had the habit of revising his dialogues, the *Republic* in particular seems to have been revised continuously throughout his lifetime, and, therefore, it seems likely that it was never finished or “published” in his lifetime.²⁷ Hence, from the historical point of view, the *Republic* does not have the special status among the dialogues that might justify taking it as a or the source for “Plato's philosophy.”

I have not attempted to answer the kinds of questions about the metaphor of the sun and the Idea of the Good that some other contributors have discussed: questions about what justifies the claim that Forms exists and what it means to say that the Form of the Good is the cause of knowability, existence, and essence, the superordinate Form, and beyond being. The reason is that I try to keep three different possible aims of inquiry distinct. One aim is to assess the

²⁷ For references to Thesleff on the composition history of *Republic*, see n. 9. For a sketch of the interpretation history of the *Republic*, see G. Press, “Continuities and Discontinuities in the History of *Republic* Interpretation,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 28 (1996), 61-78.

meaning and “truth” of a doctrine regardless of whether it was Plato’s. This is actually a systematic, not a historical question. A second aim is to assess “Platonic” doctrines regardless of whether they were Plato’s or only those of other and later “Platonists.” This is a more historical issue, but is insufficiently critical. From the historical point of view, the difference between Marx and the Marxists, Hegel and the Hegelians, Aristotle and the Aristotelians is essential. So, too, the difference between Plato and the “Platonists.” A third aim is to discuss doctrines or views that may be historically attributable to Plato. This is the historical question and the one with which alone I am concerned.

Insofar as the contributors to this volume are discussing and comparing “images of Plato,” it might be suggested that Gerson’s image of Plato tends to conflate his philosophy with contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of science, whereas the esoterists’ image tends to conflate him with the later Platonic tradition. My image is intended to be simply historical. The historical perspective is neither better nor worse than other perspectives. It is just different; and different perspectives have different uses and values.

There is value in seeing how a rationally reconstructed “Platonic” metaphysics would measure up to modern accounts, but this value should not cause us to confuse the rational reconstruction with a position that is historically Plato’s own. Similarly there is value in understanding the metaphysical doctrines that Aristotle, Speusippus, Xenocrates, and other ancient Platonists attributed to Plato and that became the meaning of “Platonism” for many centuries. But that value should not lead us to substitute this “Platonism” for the views and orientations that are ascertainably Plato’s own in the dialogues which are his principal literary and philosophical products.