

that such imaginativeness has led to, finally allows us to appreciate how clearly Plato, unshackled from the chains placed upon him for so long, can with good reason claim to be their forebear.

8

How to Read a Platonic Dialogue

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In discussing Plato, it is possible to explain Plato's theory of literary composition—as if he had written a treatise about it—by extracting from the dialogues all references to the subject and then straining here, squeezing there, omitting here in order to fabricate some kind of system. I shall not attempt this. It is also possible to look at the dialogues themselves to try to explain Plato's practice of his literary craft. Such is what I plan to do. First, however, I must say a few words about what I think Plato was doing and where most readers of Plato have gone wrong.

Most of the problems in understanding Plato arise from studying the dialogues as if they were a part of the tradition in which Plato did not participate. When readers try to find systematic, consistent, straightforward positions in the dialogues, with sound arguments and clear, unambiguous meaning, they knock against an iron wall—the dialogues are anything but systematic. How could they be? After all, they imitate the rambling and disjointed talk we find in living conversations. They are anything but consistent: we find contradictory conclusions in the dialogues—even on matters like the theory of forms, supposedly the ethereal bedrock of Platonic thought.¹

1. It is obvious that the *Parmenides* and the *Republic*—if both are taken literally—are incompatible. In my book *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), I argue that we are not to take such dialogues literally. I do not think it is possible to know from these dialogues what Plato's views

The dialogues are anything but straightforward: look at all the wildly varying ways in which critics handle the metaphors of the cave and of the divided line.² And very often the dialogues contain arguments that are anything but sound: recall all the equivocations, logical errors, and intellectual games that all the characters engage in.³ Scholars have always found Plato a gold mine for papers because each reader can find a new twist to explain some difficulty in the text.

When various astronomical phenomena presented difficulties to ancient astronomers, the astronomers, using what they believed to be sound fundamental principles, worked out the theory of epicyclic motion to explain the apparent irregularities in celestial and especially planetary and lunar motion. They came up with the theory in part because they took as a fixed principle of nature the necessity of perfectly circular motion. Plato scholars, like those who created the Eudoxan and Ptolemaic system, took as their own fixed principle of nature that no philosopher would knowingly and willfully put into his philosophical text views that were unsystematic, inconsistent, unclear, and—perish the thought!—unsound. Thus, to deal with the apparently aberrant features of the Platonic universe, they invented a sort of analytical theory of epicycles, that is, the theory of the cycles in Plato's life. Thus arose the theory of the early, middle, and late dialogues—with suitable transitional periods for the dialogues that could not fit neatly into any period.

The chronological theory to explain difficulties seems to me defective on several grounds: first, as any survey of the various chronologies will show, especially those based on stylistic variations, it is impossible to be certain of any proposed order.⁴ That Plato wrote the dialogues sequentially and not simultaneously is undoubtedly true—but every proposed chronology depends on the caprice of the proposer—from those who would place the *Phaedrus* as Plato's first dialogue "because Plato could not have written so passionately about love unless he were a young man himself"⁵ to those who would put it among the late dialogues because it mentions the world of ideas. My view is that we can no more put Plato's dialogues in order than we could Shakespeare's plays or the films of Cecil B. DeMille—if we lacked external

concerning the forms are.

2. E.g., R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophic Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1964), though they collaborated on an analysis, disagree between themselves on the interpretation of the metaphors of the divided line and of the cave (196-230).

3. These are discussed at length in *Interpreting Plato*.

4. For a full discussion of chronological confusions and the relevant scholarship, see *Interpreting Plato*, Ch. 1.

5. See, for a discussion of the dating of the *Phaedrus*, W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 396, n. 1.

evidentiary data. Second, the theory of chronology ignores the crucial question of audience. If we don't know who Plato's audience was for any particular dialogue, how can we presume to know why he did or did not include various arguments? Perhaps an analogy would clarify this point. If Albert Einstein had been asked late in his career to speak to a group of boy and girl scouts, he would surely have spoken in simple, even simplified, language about simple or even simplified subjects. If many years later we found the speech among his papers, it would be erroneous to assume an early date on account of simplicity or simple topic. So with Plato. Short, seemingly simple dialogues like the *Laches* or *Crito* may have been written after longer, difficult dialogues, like the *Theaetetus* or *Parmenides*. We simply do not know.

It also seems to me a fundamental error in interpretation to require the understanding of one dialogue to depend on what is said in another, except, perhaps, for a very few that refer to preceding dialogues, like the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, or the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*. But even in these cases, there are many puzzles: for example, if the conversation of the *Timaeus* is really to be understood as following that of the *Republic*, why is there so violent a change in the cast of characters?⁶ This point seems obvious when we think about other authors. For example, it is not necessary to understand the *Antigone* to understand the *Oedipus Tyrannos*. They were written many years apart, and one play makes no reference to the other. Moreover, it would seem absurd to suppose that an earlier text requires a later one in order to be comprehended: if the author had died before completing the later one, would comprehension be lost forever? Scholars of an author can, perhaps, gain some insight into an author's mind by reference to another work, but such understanding cannot rely on the other work. In fact, such references are as likely to contaminate understanding as to promote it. And yet how often have we heard that such and such a point in Plato can be understood only by reference to an argument in another dialogue?

I should like to propose an alternative theory to the philosophical difficulties which we find in the dialogues, and to do so, I would like to do just one thing. I would like to toss out the premise of virtually all work on Plato: that he is writing the kind of philosophical work in which the philosopher writes as clearly, as straightforwardly, and as soundly as he can. Instead, I should like to take as my premise that Plato is not writing this kind of philosophy at all—the kind we have come to know since Aristotle. Instead, I should like to assume that he is writing works of drama—works whose intention is principally to inspire—and that the inspiration in the dialogues is to engagement in a life of the mind, to the doing of philosophy with other people, and not with dead or even lively texts. Plato, I would venture to say, has been

6. See *Interpreting Plato*, 19-20, and especially n. 4.

enormously successful in his purpose, for very many who have chosen an impoverished life devoted to philosophy have done so because of the inspirational capital he has bequeathed to us.

Long after we have forgotten the wandering maze of arguments in the *Phaedo*, for example, we still remember the heroic figure of Socrates cheerfully drinking hemlock, and we think to ourselves: I wish I could be like that! What has moved us has been the courage of Socrates in pursuing the arguments about the immortality of the soul wherever they led. We were moved because unlike most people, who are dismayed when the arguments get tough, Socrates persevered even though he didn't know whether he would succeed. And in the end of the *Phaedo* no absolute proof is found—how could it be? Socrates knows that no proof has been found and that he lacks knowledge about his soul's immortality. Thus, he is able to be heroically courageous, as he could not have been had he proved his immortality—after all, what courage would be needed if you are sure you're going to Paradise?

Let us take another dialogue written to inspire—the *Crito*. In my view, what matters here is the drama—not the arguments—though to be sure, the arguments need to be understood to grasp the dramatic point. The dramatic situation tells all: the ship sent to Crete for the annual religious rite is returning, so executions can again take place. Crito tries to persuade Socrates to escape. It is difficult for us to imagine a situation more stressful than that Socrates finds himself in. He is to be executed though he has a sure sense of his innocence, and he now knows the precise day of his execution. His death is no theoretical far-off possibility but a certainty in three days. How does he respond? Despite all the temptations to live, despite the easy out of granting the legitimacy of Crito's arguments, Socrates inquires into the philosophically correct course of conduct. Even in the midst of the urgent crisis, he engages his mind in order to determine the most rational conduct. Most of the scholarship on this dialogue deals with the question of whether the arguments of the imaginary Laws are valid or not. But the arguments of the Laws don't seem to me to be the heart of the dialogue's teaching. Their truth or validity is not the issue. What matters in the play is that the character Socrates cannot refute them, that Socrates believes them to be the best arguments available. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates challenges Crito to come up with a better argument if he has one. He doesn't, and Socrates decides to follow the best argument he has. He does not say, "I'll escape; maybe I'll come up with a better argument tomorrow." No, the drama shows him acting on the basis of the best argument he has at the moment when he has to make his decision. And here lies the inspirational and dramatic point of the dialogue: a person of the mind, no matter how stressful and unnerving the situation, decides—even in matters of his own life and death—on the basis of the best rational argument that he has at the moment when he must decide. This is the point of the dialogue, and it does not matter whether scholars find loopholes in Socrates'

arguments for this point to be true.⁷

Next, I should like to discuss briefly the intellectual milieu in which Plato was writing. In the beginning and middle of the fourth century a great many schools of rhetoric were thriving in the Greek world. The power of speech to effect one's will in the increasingly democratic political assemblies and in other public gatherings, the ability to stir citizen-armies to a high pitch of martial enthusiasm, the skill to manipulate the truth in legal disputes before juries—all made facility in speaking a very valuable and sought-after quality. Schools opened and actively competed with one another. Isocrates, for example, began a school to teach the liberal arts and to turn out men capable of writing speeches for all occasions. Alcidas, a major rival of Isocrates, promised to turn his students into first-class extemporaneous speakers.⁸ These and many other schools competed with each other for students. It is my view that a number of Plato's dialogues have as a fundamental, if not primary, purpose, to show that those who enrolled in the Academy—Plato's school—could compete with and surpass the students of the rivals. This is why so many of the dialogues involve oratorical competition and, in fact, why such competition is the focus of so much drama in the dialogues. Let me support my observation by referring to two very famous dialogues, both of which are about oratory: the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. Now it is only after a lot of thought and internal turmoil that I say this. The *Symposium* is the first dialogue I read in Greek as a sophomore at Grinnell College, nearly thirty years ago; after reading it, I fancied myself an expert à la Socrates about love, and heaven knows how many lines I borrowed from the dialogue in discussing romance. But that's all to the wind now, for I no longer think that love is a serious doctrine in the *Symposium* or in Plato.

The *Symposium* takes place at a party, where the partygoers all agree to have a rip-roaring good time competing with each other in an oratorical contest in which they all are to deliver speeches about eros—sexual desire. Eryximachus introduces the discussion by pointing out that while Prodicus has written an outlandish praise of salt, no one has ever praised sexual desire. (Let me add that it has long been a mistake to translate "eros" as "love." The word, as Kenneth Dover points out in his edition of the *Symposium*, means "sexual desire."⁹ If it meant "affection" or something of this sort, the claim

7. In fact, the more loopholes they find, the more likely it is that Plato wants us to see the dramatic point. When we see a drama, we understand that the characters say what is appropriate for them to say as characters in the drama; the "truth-value" of what they say is of interest as it enhances their characterization. Only when it comes to Plato's philosophical drama do readers simply assume that Socrates is to be understood as speaking in perfect arguments.

8. In an essay "On the Writers of Written Speeches."

9. K.J. Dover, *Symposium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1.

that no one had ever praised it would be self-evident nonsense, as from Homer and the lyric poets are numerous praises.) The various guests then deliver their speeches, in which the most noteworthy quality of each is the way the god "Eros" resembles each speaker. Thus, for example, Dr. Eryximachus' Eros is a healing doctor, Aristophanes' Eros is a comic division and comic searching for an original half; Agathon's eros turns out to be a tragic poet with tender feet; and Socrates' Eros, Socrates' "sexual desire," is revealed to be a barefooted philosopher! Who wins the oratorical contest? Why Socrates does! He leads us along slowly, step by step, plausible step after plausible step, until we get the magnificent conclusion that sexual desire—sexual desire!—is philosophy. Surely many philosophers (if not all) are sexual dynamos—but are we to believe that sexual desire *is* philosophy? And yet the dialogue is so beautiful that we are convinced that it is so! Here lies a warning: aesthetic beauty is *not* truth, despite what Keats might say. Why should sexual desire be a barefooted philosopher à la Socrates rather than a tragic poet with tender feet à la Agathon? The last great scene, when Alcibiades enters, is, I think, meant to reinforce this point. In Alcibiades we see the failure of Socrates' scheme of sexual desire. If sexual desire is bringing forth in the beautiful, what was more beautiful than Alcibiades to bring forth in? Must we not see in this portrayal of Alcibiades Socrates' failure? Is not the appearance and speech of Alcibiades a sign of how empty are even Socrates' comments about sexual desire? In a broader sense, perhaps Plato is suggesting that the kind of relationship Socrates had with Alcibiades is insufficient to render such a one a decent citizen, much less a philosopher. Perhaps he is suggesting that a much more systematic relationship, such as might be found in his new academy, will be more effective.

Or, consider the *Phaedrus*—a dialogue that contains three competing speeches. Two are on an outrageous theme, like the speeches in the *Symposium*: here on the hideous proposition that you ought to grant sexual favors not to your lover, but to someone else. Phaedrus first reads Lysias' speech on this repulsive theme. But we are not to think too ill of Phaedrus: he doesn't really care about sex; his interest is in speeches; and in Plato he represents a sort of stock character—the speech enthusiast. What enchants Phaedrus is the terribly clever way in which Lysias defends his thesis. After hearing the speech, Socrates criticizes it as a speech: it lacks organic unity and a decent architecture, and he proceeds to deliver a much more artful and balanced speech, still on the repulsive theme. Midway through he stops to deliver a better speech on eros, a speech that he analyzes, together with the first two speeches, in the second half of the dialogue. The second half of the dialogue contains a rather splendid discussion of how education in rhetoric ought to take place and in fact is remarkably similar to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*—giving, I think, a lot of weight to the idea that Aristotle taught

rhetoric in the Academy.¹⁰ The dialogue ends with a reference to Isocrates, one of Plato's rival school directors. Embodied in the dialogue is another controversy concerning rhetoric—the controversy raging in Plato's day, the debate between Alcidas and Isocrates on whether speeches best should be written in advance—Isocrates' view—or extemporaneous—Alcidas' view. The debate is dramatically portrayed in the *Phaedrus*: we have first the written speech of Lysias—read aloud to Socrates by Phaedrus—and then two spontaneous, extemporaneous speeches delivered by Socrates. Again, I think, the dialogue is meant to persuade Plato's contemporary audience that it too can get a better education in oratory at the Academy than at either the school of Isocrates or that of Alcidas.

Another dialogue that does the same sort of thing and also perhaps makes a comment on the Alcidas-Isocrates debate is the *Menexenus*, in which we find Socrates—whom I take here to be the stand-in for the one taught at the Academy—delivering an extemporaneous funeral oration. Socrates' point seems to be that a knowledge of the *topoi*—of the standard sort of commonplaces made at such occasions—renders the job very easy: no genius is required if you know the rules of the genre. This is the point of the dialogue. The speech is so good, however, even though it is put together from ready-made parts, that many readers—mesmerized by its beauty—have taken it as a serious work. But the dialogue's point, as I see it, is to persuade those listening to it that they too could become good speakers if they enrolled in the Academy.

Other dialogues also contrast Plato's school with those of other rivals, as we see confrontations with the schools established by the students of Protagoras, Gorgias, and various others.

In the space I have left I should like to look at two dialogues in a little bit of detail to see how Plato practices his art in the matter of characterization. I should like first to look at a few lines from the *Meno* in order to examine how Meno is sketched by just a few words spoken by himself and by Socrates and how this portrayal fits into the dialogue as a whole. I should then like to do the same for the *Euthyphro*. In the *Meno*, I see Plato's purpose as competitive: Plato wants to expose the insipidity of Meno's education—an education obtained in Gorgias' school. In the case of the *Euthyphro*, I see Plato's purpose as defending Socrates from the charge of corrupting youth. The defence, however, comes not so much from the arguments as from the drama.

First, the *Meno*. Meno, I think, is fully characterized in the first two

10. See W. Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. vol. 3. Translated by Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 185; also his *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, translated by R. Robinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 37.

Stephanus pages. Let us look at the opening question and Socrates' response.

Can you tell me, Socrates—is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?

The question is startlingly abrupt—a sophisticated and complicated question about virtue. The very formulation of the question shows a substantial training in philosophy—Meno knows all about the controversy between *nomos* and *physis* and is open to the possibility that something else may be responsible for a man's acquisition of virtue. And so the question is designed to make Meno appear to think himself intelligent. But to ask a question that is so complete, that so well covers all the possibilities, shows that Meno must have worked out the intricacies of the matter. The question—so fulsomely formulated—has as its motive a desire to show off, to initiate a debate that will illustrate one's learning and ability in eristic. What Plato is portraying in Meno's opening speech, then, is a stock character of a sort we still find around us, the trained—how shall I put it—the first-year graduate student in philosophy, who knows all the answers and is confident in his ability to acquit himself well in any debate. The question Plato gives to Meno is not an earnest request for understanding, it is a challenge to a fight.

Now my view is that Plato's dramatic point in this dialogue has nothing to do with the precise question of whether virtue can be taught—or, for that matter, with virtue. What Plato is doing is showing the ineffectiveness of his rivals' teaching methods. What they are producing are students who know set arguments with set questions and set answers. They are like those guides you run into on tours who have memorized a certain amount of information about their particular site but are unable to answer any kind of question that is just a little bit different from standard. They have no real knowledge because their knowledge depends on mere memory, not understanding.

Socrates' response to the question completely trips up Meno: it also shows the satyr-play quality of the dialogue. Socrates is going to have fun with Meno!

Socrates at first seems wholly beside the point, as he talks about the old Thessalian reputation for wealth and horsemanship. Now, he adds, they are philosophers too. Socrates shows that he was not taken in by Meno's question. Gorgias taught the Thessalians and particularly Meno's friend Aristippus to answer confidently any question they were asked—the kind of thing Mr. Memory did in Hitchcock's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. This, says Socrates, is what Gorgias himself does in claiming to answer any question put by anyone in the Greek world. And now Socrates makes his most shocking and indeed ridiculous claim of all: he attributes to all Athenians his own claim of ignorance: "Here at Athens there is a dearth of wisdom. At any rate, if you

put your question to any of our people, they will all alike laugh and say, 'You must think I am singularly fortunate, to know whether virtue can be taught or how it is acquired. The fact is that far from knowing whether it can be taught, I have no idea of what virtue itself is.'" Socrates claims this same Athenian ignorance and modesty for himself. How, he asks, can he know any of the properties of virtue if he doesn't know what virtue is; how can he know what Meno is like if he is totally ignorant of Meno?

How shall we say that Plato has characterized Socrates in his opening remarks? He too is portrayed as a sophisticated fellow—one who knows how to avoid answering the kind of question put to him and who, like any skilled politician, knows how to reformulate the question in his own terms. But no one will grant his claim about all the Athenians: it is a mere maneuver intended to throw Meno off guard. The lie does not, I think, reflect well on Socrates here, but it shows his agility in discombobulating his adversary. It works admirably well. Meno is thoroughly discombobulated. Instead of challenging the wild assertion, Meno asks, "Is this true about you, Socrates, that you don't even know what virtue is? Is this the report we are to take home about you?" Meno has thus already lost track of the strategic course of his argument. He is now lost in the morass of the idiosyncratic nature of Socrates. And so on. As I point out in the discussion of the dialogue in my book *Interpreting Plato*, Socrates over and over again slips out of the various set-traps Meno has laid to catch him. In fact, I believe the famous episode with the slave boy, in which the lad learns how to double a square, indeed, the introduction of the entire passage concerning the theory of recollection, takes place in order to elude Meno's trap.

It doesn't take long, then, for Plato to sketch Meno's persona. And, as we have seen, that depiction of the essential elements of his character, his complete reliance on prefabricated philosophy, memorized set-pieces, is key to understanding what the play *Meno* is all about.

Now a brief glance at the *Euthyphro* and the way in which the title character is portrayed. Let me say at the outset of the discussion that I do not believe the dialogue to be about piety or holiness. This usual view, that the dialogue is about holiness, arises predictably because Socrates and Euthyphro discuss piety. It is, however, as much a mistake to assume that any of the dialogues is about what the *personae dramatis* discuss as it would be of Shakespeare's plays. *Lear* is not about how much the old king's daughters love him: it is about self-delusion, madness, and nature. The *Euthyphro* is also about self-delusion, about the self-delusion that drives a man to act with absolute certitude; it is about self-delusion so intense that it thrives even when the hollowness of its foundation is absolutely manifest.

The little play begins as Euthyphro expresses surprise to see Socrates at the royal porch, a law court, instead of at the Lyceum, where he could talk to youngsters as usual. Note, by the way, how different is Euthyphro's question

from Meno's. Euthyphro's is a question that actually seeks information:

This, Socrates, is something new? What has taken you from your haunts in the Lyceum, and makes you spend your time at the royal porch? You surely cannot have a case at law, as I have, before the Archon-king.

The characterizing element here is the contrast Euthyphro draws between himself and Socrates: he uses his own situation to define Socrates' situation. We shall see him do this over and over again.

Socrates explains that he has been indicted by Meletus, a young man he doesn't know, on the serious charges of corruption of youth. The very fact of the charge is evidence of Meletus' excellence, says Socrates, for to bring such a charge he must care a lot about the young. Surely, he adds, Meletus will have a great future.

Euthyphro suspects that the charge arises from Socrates' reference to his special "sign," the voice that sometimes keeps him from doing things he should not. Euthyphro scoffs at the charge even while acknowledging how easy it is for such things to be misrepresented in court; he says he suffers a similar fate: when he makes predictions in the assembly, the Athenians laugh at him, even though his predictions are always right. The character Euthyphro presents himself as a man infinitely confident of his abilities. A moment later, Euthyphro predicts that Socrates' case will come out well (3E)—and we realize from the dramatic irony how good a prophet he is.

It turns out that Euthyphro has come to court to bring an indictment against his father for murder. Although his family has scolded him quite severely, he knows he is doing the right thing. Socrates expresses amazement and says that Euthyphro must be far advanced in wisdom to do so unusual a thing as prosecute his own father (4A). Yes, says Euthyphro in another self-praise, he is very far advanced indeed (4B).

Euthyphro begins his account with some very Socratic-sounding statements. We must not consider whether or not a man is related when making prosecutions, only whether or not the prosecution is right. We learn, however, that the case is not a simple one. As Euthyphro tells the story, a laborer became drunk and killed one of the domestic slaves. Euthyphro's father tied up the culprit, threw him into a ditch, and sent a servant to Athens to ask what to do. In the meantime, the man died. The delay, presumably, is accounted for by the fact that the incident occurred on the family farm in Naxos, an Athenian possession. Those, Euthyphro says, who criticize him for prosecuting his father surely do not know what divinity is or its relationship to holiness! Socrates asks Euthyphro whether his knowledge of divine things is so excellent that in the circumstances he has described he can rightly accuse his father (4E). And again (5A) Euthyphro boasts about his special knowledge.

The play begins, then, with a young man absolutely convinced of the

rightness of his case. He is plagued with not a single doubt, not a single moment's hesitation, not a single question. The case he has described, however, is by no means an obvious one; it certainly cannot have been self-evident to Plato's audience that Euthyphro is acting rightly. On the surface it seems as though the drunken laborer had death coming to him. Surely it does not seem as though Euthyphro's father murdered him; at worst, he might be guilty of negligence. Of course we recognize that a commonsense view and a legal view, especially in litigious societies like our own and ancient Athens, are quite often diverse. No matter; however one looks at it, the case is complex and would give any reflective man pause. But not Euthyphro! He is totally sure that he knows just what the holy thing to do is.

What we have, of course, is a reflection of Socrates' situation. Meletus, a young man like Euthyphro, is prosecuting Socrates, an old man like Euthyphro's father. Both youngsters must be very sure of themselves to take such action upon themselves! What we shall see in the play, I think, is an arrogance in Euthyphro that we can assume to be present in Meletus. Even when Euthyphro will be given every cause to question his own judgment, he will persist in believing in the rightness of his accusation. Socrates will effect no change whatsoever in his young interlocutor. The audience will be left with this question: if Socrates has had no effect at all on Euthyphro, how then could he have dented the consciousness of any youth enough to have corrupted him? The true danger is the other way around: it comes from youth, who, without benefit of wisdom, experience, or knowledge, cavalierly prosecute their elders. Plato's point is this: watch out for the young! If they're not educated properly (as they would be in the Academy), look at all the trouble they can cause. We also see, of course, how very difficult it is for Socrates to convince anyone of anything. If he cannot convince the well-meaning if confused Euthyphro, how will he ever convince a jury full of people like him?

Over and over again, Euthyphro is compelled to admit that he is confused or cannot follow the argument. None of these defeats shakes his confidence in himself. His confidence is expressed as he compares himself to both Cronos and Zeus; again when he boasts that he knows that the gods approve of what he is doing; again when he says that he knows what art serves the gods because he knows more about divine things than any other man; and finally again, at the end, when he tells Socrates he will tell the whole story about piety at a later meeting.

And so, it seems to me, the play is about Socrates' complete failure to affect Euthyphro's erroneous self-confidence. Not only does Euthyphro not know that he is ignorant, even when he has admitted his confusion, he persists in trusting his knowledge. In a sense, then, I would link this dialogue with the *Symposium*, for both it and the *Symposium* show the cavalier presumption that dominates people's pronouncements about the gods. If the results were good fun in the party at Agathon's house, we see here how dark is the flip side of

such presumption: it can convict and execute a man.

It may appear from the preceding remarks that I do not believe that Plato had a philosophy or any philosophical positions. Such is not the case. Surely Plato held positions. The question is whether we can discern those views with any certainty in the dialogues.¹¹ I think we can see hints of some positions through the mist of the dialogues, just as we can see hints in the works of Shakespeare, Sophocles, and Euripides of what they thought. But it is not easy. We can surely tell many of the issues to which they directed their attention; then we can apply our minds to try to deduce what the plays as a whole tell us, if anything.

Perhaps it would be useful to give examples of the kinds of teaching to be derived from the dialogues when they are looked at as whole plays. Let us remember, however, that the kind of teaching that one receives from art is very different from that which one receives from a philosophical treatise; art works primarily by appealing to our emotions, and this will be true of the dialogues insofar as they are works of art, albeit intellectual works of art. When we read or see a tragedy, for example, these are the lessons that we learn: to honor the gods, to reverence the gods, to believe oracles, to bury the dead, not to behave hybristically. These are not lessons that are startlingly new, but when they unfold in the various plays, the audience sees their truth, sees that human life and the order of the cosmos depend on their being true. The lessons do not dazzle with breathtaking novelty, but they convey lessons of significance nevertheless. The teaching in the Platonic dialogues will be more like the teaching in drama than like that in discursive works of philosophy.

A few of the dialogues seem to have as their lesson the inspiration of Socrates' memory. Thus the *Phaedo* shows how courageously Socrates met his death; the *Crito* shows him sticking to his post and choosing to stand by the best argument he has, even when such a choice means death. The *Euthyphro* shows how little Socrates corrupted youth. Even if his conversations with the various characters in these dialogues are aporetic and leave the youths bewildered, how has bewilderment harmed them? In the case of *Euthyphro*, the conversation seems to have had no effect at all, and if there has been no effect, there has obviously been no corruption.

Some of the dialogues seem to have attacked presumption. No doubt Plato was continuing the Socratic mission of testing those who proudly trumpeted

11. In the *Seventh Letter*, if the letter be genuine, Plato denies ever committing to writing his serious doctrines. The letter's authenticity is with remarkable cyclical regularity either affirmed or rejected. I do not know whether the letter be spurious or not; its sentiments seem to me valid. For a discussion of the letter, with references to the relevant secondary material, see *Interpreting Plato*, 14-15.

their wisdom to the world. Thus the *Symposium* mocks those who presume to knowledge about the gods; it teaches us to beware of those who make up stories about the gods and expect them to be believed: people tend to create gods in their own images or to promote their own interests. This surely is a teaching usefully learned in all generations. The *Phaedrus* is an attack on uncritical enthusiasm for listening to speeches. Cleverness like Lysias's is no guarantee of truth or sense. Almost the same teaching is found in the *Menexenus*, where Socrates shows how easily speeches on set themes may be made up.

In other dialogues, like the *Cratylus* and (perhaps) the *Symposium*, we learn to follow the mean. In these dialogues, various extreme positions are taken, by Socrates or the interlocutors, and the absurdity of each extreme is depicted. The audience or reader goes away from the dialogue realizing the folly of the extremes and thinking that perhaps wisdom lies in the mean. Thus in the *Cratylus* we learn that the positions of excess naturalism and excess conventionalism are alike unable to explain language; in the *Symposium*, we see perhaps the sorrows that come from the excessively sexed life of Alcibiades and the deficiently sexed life of Socrates.

These are some of the teachings that emerge from a dramatic reading of Plato.¹² I admit that they are devoid of the metaphysical, epistemological, ontological, logical, political, ethical profundity that philosophers have found in the dialogues. Yet they are positive teachings and the kind of teachings that art provides. They are also teachings that would be good to absorb into our consciousness. The history of the world—the dismal record of theological charlatans, of demagogic propagandists, of bleary-eyed philosophers and mindless politicians, of scientific hucksters, and of people who abandoned argument whenever it threatened some practical advantage—shows how important to the world were the lessons Plato had to teach in his dialogues.

Now what seems to me the best way to ascertain Plato's views about the precise philosophical issues that his *dramatis personae* raise is to look at what Aristotle says about them. Here, let me be bold: I maintain that to find out what Plato's views generally are, we should look, not at what Aristotle says those views to have been, but at what Aristotle himself says about the matters! Two simple examples will, I think, illustrate my notion. When we look at the latter part of the *Phaedrus*, we find a scheme for education in rhetoric that seems to serve as the model for what Aristotle actually does in his *Rhetoric*; when we look at the idea of a good life that is argued in many dialogues (for example, in the *Gorgias*) we find a definition of happiness that is essentially the same as that worked out in the first book of the *Ethics*. And the correspondence seems to me repeated over and over again. Furthermore, as

12. For more, see *Interpreting Plato*, 247-250.

I have argued in *Interpreting Plato*, Plato very often is arguing dramatically against views put forth by his interlocutors, rejecting the views of both Socrates and his disputant, sometimes arguing that the solution lies in the mean, sometimes suggesting that the method the disputants are using to pursue a conclusion is fallacious or even silly. When Aristotle argues against a position found in the dialogues, he is arguing discursively against a position against which Plato is arguing dramatically. Thus, the two actually agree!¹³

Let me conclude with this last thought. When I read Plato with my students, we are, to be sure, interested in what Plato had to say—to the extent that we can make sense of it—but we are still more interested in the truth of the matter. *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*: we love Plato, but we love truth more. We continue to argue where the dialogues have left off. We too ask what justice, what piety is; we look at what Thrasymachus and Euthyphro and Callicles and Meno and Socrates had to say, but then we keep on arguing among ourselves. The dialogues thus become not ends in themselves, but a means to further philosophical reflection. Such a use, I hope, is true to Plato's spirit.

9

Plato's Dialogues as Enactments¹

Gerald A. Press

It is common, and commonsensical, to assume that the dialogues, however peculiarly, contain and assert Plato's philosophical doctrines.² It is assumed that philosophers have doctrines that they present in their treatises, and so the dialogues come out of much scholarship looking like treatises. This means that their primary mode of operation is conceived as *saying*; they are only secondarily thought of as perhaps *doing* something.³ The problem is that what

1. This paper has benefitted from the comments of Debra Nails, Holger Thesleff, Joanne Waugh, and Elinor West. The errors that remain are my own.

2. E.g., I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines* (London: Routledge, 1962). By "doctrine" I mean, as the word itself indicates, a settled teaching, a definite view about something that is or can be communicated to others in words. Examples would be references to "Aristotle's doctrine of the mean," meaning his view of the nature of the moral virtues, or to "Christian doctrine," meaning the theological and moral beliefs that constitute Christianity. It is consistent with this usage that ones teachings may change from time to time, but it is not to be assumed that anyone who writes prose, even that anyone who writes "philosophical prose," *eo ipso* has doctrines or that such doctrines are being communicated in that prose. These are propositions that, it seems to me, are to be proven if they are not evident *prima facie*.

3. On uses of language as doing rather than saying, see J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*

13. Why Aristotle would misunderstand Plato, even when he had studied for many years at the Academy, is a question I try to answer in *Interpreting Plato*, 9-10.

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