

THE PLAY OF CHARACTER
IN PLATO'S DIALOGUES

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CHAPTER I

Drama and dialogue

The reader of Plato's dialogues is seduced by a dazzling interplay of unity and multiplicity. This is generated in part by a series of interlocking and overlapping dualities, the chief of which is presented most often – and most reductively – as a tension between “philosophical” content and “literary” form. By articulating these two factors as interdependent we have already created an artificial split that distorts the lived experience of reading Plato. This emerges vividly from the way Cornford omitted certain “dramatic” elements from his translations of Plato, whereas Livingstone printed dialectical passages of *Phaedo* in smaller type “so that they can be either read or omitted.”¹ Yet the “Western” history of ideas in general, and of Platonic studies in particular, makes some such formulation inescapable. Ironically, Plato himself is in part responsible for this situation, through his focus on the “quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (*Rep.* 607b). Indeed, it has recently been argued that he was the inventor (rather than an inheritor) of this supposedly “ancient” quarrel.² If so, he was also the inventor of his own mutually hostile, or at least mutually suspicious, interpretive communities, which may be crudely divided into “literary” and “philosophical” camps.³

Throughout the last century, however, increasing numbers of interpreters have acknowledged that it creates a false dichotomy, and one that undermines the specific power of Plato's writings, either to disregard the “dramatic” elements, or to view “the arguments as subordinate to the drama.”⁴ The challenge posed by this admission is not merely to accord

¹ Livingstone 1938: 73; contrast e.g. Cornford 1941.

² See Nightingale 1995: 60–67 and cf. Murray 1996: 230–31.

³ I use these terms as shorthand for the two main branches of Platonic interpretation recently identified by Nails as “literary contextualist” and “analytic developmentalist” respectively (1995: 24–7, 34–50). On “interpretive communities” see Fish 1980: ch. 13–16.

⁴ This was the fundamental insight of Schleiermacher that initiated much of the modern debate about Plato as “literature” (see Dobson 1836: 5–19). The latter view, though much less common, is exemplified by Arieti, who is the source of the quotation (1991: 11).

due weight to both content and form, but to address their interrelationship. The present book attempts to do this by looking closely at Plato's use of characterization. As the site of an intrinsic and indissoluble connection between aspects of Plato that are still often viewed as distinct, characterization provides a unique point of purchase for approaching the interdependence of the "literary" and the "philosophical." Since dialogue form entails the representation of persons, a concern with human character and its portrayal is literally essential to reading Plato's works in a way that takes their form into account. At the same time a concern with human character, its formation and representation, pervades the dialogues on the discursive level.⁵ Form and content are further reciprocally related by means of Plato's preoccupation with the effects of literary characterization on the moral character of an audience. His own manipulation of his dramatic characters thus intersects in a unique way with issues of moral philosophy, literary form, cultural tradition, and philosophical and pedagogical method.⁶ It is integral both to the "literary" enterprise of representing human interaction in spoken dialogue, and the "philosophical" inquiry into the best form of human life and behavior.

This approach to Plato raises a series of questions that will recur throughout this book. Many of these concern human individuality and its transcendence, which are explored on a dramatic level through Plato's representation of characters ranging from the uniquely particularized to the bland and generic. Not least of the ironies that pervade his writings is the fact that the philosopher who did so much to discredit idiosyncrasy was also the most compelling individual portraitist of the ancient world. Most strikingly, and paradoxically, Sokrates, who is represented by Plato as unique in his commitment to the universal, is characterized with an unparalleled degree of particularity. Plato's varying modes of characterization thus replicate a tension in his thought regarding the value of human individuality as such, its philosophical and ethical significance. This echoes a tension in ancient aesthetics between admiration for richness of detail (*poikilia*) and a restrained ideal of human perfection. And this in turn is related to concerns about the impact of artistic representation on the consumer. Mimesis also provides us with

⁵ By this I mean the level of what is said, as opposed to the circumstances in which it is said, which I call the dramatic level.

⁶ Compare the way Aristotle's definition of dramatic *ēthos*, or "character," as what reveals a moral choice (*prohairesis*), becomes a site for the intersection of mimesis and moral philosophy, poetics and ethics (Halliwell 1986: ch. 5; Blundell 1992a).

Plato's most notorious model for the relationship between the material and transcendent worlds.

Dramatic characterization thus offers us one way of approaching the Platonic concern with placing the particular, or the individual, in larger contexts. On a metaphysical level, there is the problem of how individual human beings, who are inescapably grounded in the particular, can transcend that condition. On a pedagogical level, the different kinds of individual interaction that Plato dramatizes pose various questions, including how such personal relationships may lead to transcendence of their socio-cultural circumstances. Those circumstances include social and especially familial relationships, both synchronic and diachronic, which may themselves have philosophical or pedagogical significance. When such questions are linked to issues of mimesis, they generate anxiety about reproduction of the philosophic or authorial self for future generations, as a mode of immortality or transcendence. Above all, Plato is concerned with the possibility of Socratic self-reproduction. This in turn raises issues surrounding the significance of various modes of "imitation" of character by author and reader, and authorial strategies for attempting to control the uses and effects of the text.

My first two chapters are devoted to clarifying certain preliminary matters that underlie this way of approaching Plato. I begin, in this chapter, with some general questions about "dramatic" form and "literary" interpretation, which will help to clarify my methodology. Chapter 2 explores issues surrounding literary and philosophical notions of character and its interpretation in ancient texts generally, and in Plato in particular, with special attention to the figure of Sokrates. Subsequent chapters offer readings of a select number of individual dialogues: *Hippias Minor*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*. These works were chosen in part to exemplify a broad range of Platonic styles and methods, and in part because most of them have received relatively limited "literary" study, but also because their discursive content connects with my particular concerns, especially in their focus on the representation and use of literary character. Thus *Hippias Minor*, besides being an exemplary "aporetic" dialogue, airs an issue of huge importance to Plato: the adequacy of traditional heroes as educational models, and their reform or replacement by a newly philosophical ideal. *Republic* notoriously shares this preoccupation with the ethical effects of the representation of character. It also provides a special opportunity for examining the various uses Plato makes of dramatic form, because of the clearly marked shift in style between Book 1 and the remainder of

the dialogue. *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* are of particular dramatic interest because of their interconnections as a triad and the replacement of Sokrates with the Eleatic visitor as the dominant character.⁷ This triad is also concerned with issues of likeness and pedagogy, especially *Sophist*, which revisits questions about appropriate and inappropriate imitation and their educational effects on an impressionable audience.

READING PLATO

To approach Plato through his characters is clearly to throw in one's lot with the "literary" camp of his interpreters. It is an article of faith among many such scholars that their approach subsumes the philosophical, since on this view no interpretation that neglects the "literary" or non-argumentative features of dialogue form can count as philosophically adequate. A "philosophical" reader will agree with this, of course, only if she shares the "literary" assumption on which it is based, namely, the fundamental literary-critical axiom that every detail of a text contributes to the meaning of the whole.⁸ This assumption has its origins in Greek antiquity. The idea that any discourse should compose an organic whole, with properly proportioned parts, occurs most famously in *Phaedrus* (264c). But it is pervasive elsewhere in Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient authors, and is never challenged within Plato's works.⁹ Even the famous story of Plato "combing, curling and rebraiding" his dialogues, suggests an organic model that extends to the minutest detail of the text.¹⁰

⁷ The phrase "dominant character" is adopted from Dickey 1996: 112.

⁸ See e.g. Griswold 1986: 11–16. This hermeneutic principle remains axiomatic in the contemporary interpretation of literary texts (see Fish 1980: 322–7). Note, however, that it does not presuppose any one model of what "unity" consists in. As Heath argues (1989), the classical Greek conception of "organic unity" is rather different from e.g. an aesthetic requirement for thematic unity (which was introduced by the neo-Platonists [Coulter 1976: ch. 3]), meaning only that "the text must have all and only the parts proper to it" (Heath 1989: 21; cf. Heath 1987: 98–111).

⁹ Cf. e.g. *Gorg.* 503d–504a, 505d, *Phileb.* 64b, *Tim.* 69b, 87c–88b. An organic model is also suggested by the repeated likening of written works to statues or paintings of human beings (e.g. *Euth.* 11b–e, *Rep.* 361d, *Stat.* 277abc, *Arist. Poet.* 1448a1–18, *Dion. Hal. Comp. Verb.* 25). The unity of other kinds of items is also conceptualized in organic terms, including the state (cf. *Laws* 964d–965b, *Rep.* 420cd, 423d, 462a–d, 464ab, d), and the universe itself (cf. *Laws* 903bcd, *Tim.* 30b–31b and below, p. 370). Conversely, in *Tim.* the artistic model is applied to the human body, in which every detail, down to hair and nails, is an artistic "product," and as such has its function as part of an organic whole (76e; cf. *Laws* 768cd, 769a–e). See also e.g. [Longinus] 40.1 and see further Heath 1989: 19–20.

¹⁰ *Dion. Hal. De Comp. Verb.* 25. This and other ancient anecdotes portray Plato as a supremely careful author (Riginos 1976: 185–6). Cf. the Eleatic visitor's declaration that nothing is too trivial to serve the dialectician's purposes (*Soph.* 227a).

Neither Plato nor other ancient authors translated the principle of organic composition into an interpretive principle (cf. below, p. 94). But we are (fortunately) not bound by the canons of ancient criticism. As with other methodologies, the application of the organic axiom to the interpretation of Plato depends on the critic's agenda. If, for example, the goal is to explicate an argument, to assess its validity in abstraction from its interpersonal and cultural context (if such a thing is possible), or to use it as stimulus to philosophical creativity, then such features as scene-setting and characterization may be irrelevant. But such an activity is distinct from the interpretation of the dialogues as such. If one's aim is to gain a better understanding of the Platonic texts in themselves, or to use them as evidence for "Plato's philosophy" as expressed through those texts, then the "literary" principle of organic unity, which is presupposed by this approach, must stand.

This does not, of course, mean that everything in the text matters *equally*. What matters, and how it matters, are always questions of interpretation. The framework within which one understands and assesses the relative importance of details inevitably shapes the meanings that one finds in the text as a whole. Nor does the axiom commit the critic to the impossible task of explaining everything in a Platonic text. Any interpretation can only look at parts of the text from a partial perspective. But whatever one's starting point, the axiom suggests that it is desirable to try to retain an interconnected vision of parts and whole, in ways that respect both the text itself and the insights provided by a range of interpretive strategies. In order to minimize the risk of arbitrariness, the interpretation of details should be supported by their place in the larger web of textual evidence. All this is also true, of course, of interpreting other kinds of writing, including philosophical treatises. (The axiom is not exclusively "literary.") But it has special implications for the Platonic dialogues. For if everything in the text matters, so do its formal and "dramatic" aspects.

A corollary of the "literary" axiom is that any work presented as a whole by author to audience must be considered in the first place on its own terms.¹¹ Plato himself encourages this approach by the paucity of cross-references in his dialogues.¹² The resulting formal autonomy

¹¹ On the role of the author-function in determining what constitutes a discrete work see Foucault 1984: 103–4. For Plato, as for many ancient texts, there are sometimes difficulties in ascertaining what counted as a unified text for the author himself (see Haslam 1976: 337–8). But the general principle is clear enough.

¹² Dramatic form of course precludes "cross-references" in the formal scholarly sense, but there are also remarkably few internal links among the various conversations portrayed in the dialogues (see Clay 1988a). On the dialogues' open-endedness see also Schaerer 1969: 84–92.

suggests that the individual dialogue should be the primary object of interpretation on the textual level. Moreover the general principle of the primacy of the individual work applies particularly to works of fiction like Plato's (as opposed to e.g. a treatise), each of which presents us with a freshly-imagined world (even when the subject is historical). We are not entitled to *assume*, for example, that Plato's oeuvre as a whole presents us with a coherent set of characters or ideas. This might turn out to be the case, but such issues cannot be decided a priori. Another way of putting this is to say that the dialogues should not be treated as an ahistorical unity, like a single composite work of art. They may be called a "cosmos" by neo-Platonist commentators, but it does not follow that "*Plato viewed his dialogues . . . as a kind of literary cosmos held together by a variety of dramatic and thematic devices,*" at least not the orderly kind of cosmos envisaged by Plato and the commentators from whom the metaphor is derived.¹³

The primacy of the individual dialogue does not, of course, mean that nothing *outside* the text matters, or that Plato's texts are "hermeneutically sealed" with respect to each other or other cultural artifacts of their time. On the contrary, the open-endedness of the corpus suggests that the dialogues should be read against a larger intellectual background. Philosophy itself is presented as an open-ended process, and no single conversation as complete. The dialogue form invites us to locate these events in a web of spatial, temporal and cultural contexts. And despite the lack of dramatic cross-references, there are obvious thematic links among Plato's works on the discursive level, some more explicit than others. As with any author, tracing such interconnections may shed interpretive light on our understanding of individual works and the corpus as a whole. I shall therefore proceed by assuming the hermeneutic primacy of the individual work, but at the same time try to follow Plato's own textual indicators of the relative importance of shared themes and apparent ties to other dialogues.

Plato's works are also dramatically linked through their shared historical framework, most notably in the case of the series of dialogues surrounding Sokrates' death.¹⁴ Some critics, ancient and modern, have taken this particular mode of interconnection as an invitation to read

¹³ The quotation is from Howland 1993: 30 (my emphasis). On the neo-Platonists see Coulter 1976: ch. 4. For a sensible weighing of this issue see Griswold 1999b.

¹⁴ The dramatic dates of the dialogues, in so far as they can be ascertained, range from before Plato's own birth (e.g. *Parm.*, *Prot.*) to the death of Sokrates, when Plato was in his mid twenties. The issue is complicated, however, by the fact that some of them are reported or narrated many years later (e.g. *Symp.*, *Thet.*).

these dialogues in the order of the events depicted. One recent scholar writes, for example, of *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Cratylus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, “there is an unbroken dramatic sequence, guaranteed by the speeches of Sokrates himself, that arranges [these dialogues] in that order, a sequence that makes of them an evident entity and thus a true hermeneutic object.”¹⁵ But we must be cautious here. Despite their common dramatic setting on the verge of Sokrates’ death, these works share no formal links of a kind that invites us to view them as subordinate parts of one artistic whole. There is, of course, a sense in which the entire Platonic corpus constitutes a “true hermeneutic object.” Equally, any writer’s oeuvre in a sense creates and presents us with a complete authorial “world.”¹⁶ But this should not be allowed to obscure the differences between the works viewed discretely as productions over time. We must always bear in mind the possible – though unknown – variety of contexts, both methodological and pedagogical, in which particular Platonic dialogues may have been produced. The fact that we do not know the dates or circumstances of composition of any of them does not mean that we can overlook the more general fact that each was in fact composed in a particular situation, for particular purposes, and at a particular point during an extended period of time in which the author’s intellectual and pedagogical concerns are likely to have varied considerably.¹⁷ It is therefore dangerous to put too much weight on simple arrangement by “plot” for works that may have been composed many decades apart, each for its own purposes.

This kind of connection may of course be significant, but without entailing either close coherence among a group of works or an authorial desire to establish a specific reading order. We may contrast, for example, Aeschylus’ trilogy, *Oresteia*, with Sophocles’ so-called “Theban Plays” – *King Oedipus*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus* – which are connected by their interlinked stories of the house of Oidipous, overlapping dramatis personae, and clear cross-references within each script. The three plays of *Oresteia* not only have a close internal coherence of theme, character and imagery, but were written to be performed together as a single tripartite work of art, like a triptych. Sophocles’ three tragedies, by contrast, were

¹⁵ Cropsey 1995: ix.

¹⁶ It is worth recalling, in this context, that as far as we can tell, all Plato’s dialogues have survived. But the picture of “Plato’s world” that we recover from them will depend on how many of them – and which ones – are deemed authentic.

¹⁷ Though few details of Ryle’s imaginative account carry conviction, it has the merit of reminding us of the many possibilities for the circumstances of the dialogues’ composition and performance (1966).

composed and produced many years apart, in a different order from the mythic sequence of events that they portray. The interconnections between them, like allusions to other works by Sophocles and other writers, may shed light on the author's shifting purposes. But they do not make the three plays into a single work.

The distinction between triad and trilogy is specially pertinent to Plato's *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*, which are often referred to as Plato's "trilogy" since they are linked not just thematically but dramatically.¹⁸ In this respect they form a striking (though limited) exception to the absence of clear internal links among Plato's dialogues. But the term "trilogy" remains misleading, in so far as the dramatic model suggests a strong *presumption* of unity that is unwarranted. Since we have no knowledge of the original circumstances of performance of Plato's dialogues (below, pp. 22–5), there is no clear criterion for the employment of this kind of technical dramatic terminology. Certainly there is no reason to believe that simply because the central conversations of *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* are dramatized as occurring on subsequent days, they were therefore meant to be performed together. Nor may we infer that they were *composed* either close together in time, or in the order in which the conversations they dramatize take place.¹⁹ Both these things *might* be true, but to use the dramatic order as evidence for them is analogous to dating Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* before his *Antigone*, simply on the basis of plot sequence. At the same time, the links among *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman* do invite us to read them as a developing set, regardless of the original order or circumstances of composition. In my chapters on these dialogues I shall therefore try to respond appropriately to this invitation.

A closely related problem concerns the way in which one chooses to read the many figures of Sokrates with which Plato presents us. Some critics, both "literary" and "philosophical," are committed to the view that Plato's oeuvre represents a single coherent Sokrates for which each dialogue provides further evidence. Others have seen some avatars of Sokrates as more "real" or "historical" than others. To place this problem in context, it is helpful to compare parallel practices in other ancient Greek genres, such as epic and tragedy, many of whose characters appear

¹⁸ See esp. Klein 1977. For ancient critics see below, p. 15.

¹⁹ Pace e.g. Bostock 1988: 2–3. The fact that *Tht.* refers "forward" to *Soph.* and *Stat.*, and the latter two "back" to *Tht.*, could easily be a product of later editing. In particular, *Tht.* 210d could have been added in revision, or started life as a casual reference to a non-specific future conversation (Friedländer 1964–9: III.243; Bostock 1988: 10, 14; cf. *Phileb.* 50e, *Crat.* 396e).

and reappear in more than one work. A single name and attached identity lead us to expect such figures to display a single coherent character across various works. To the ancient Greeks as well, the name of a well-known mythic or historical figure would evoke certain fairly well defined characteristics that would be familiar, at least in broad outline, to most of the audience. At the same time, such figures are treated in surviving texts with considerable flexibility. In tragedy, for example, a single myth-historical figure may receive strikingly different treatments in different plays, even by the same author. A character like Odysseus retains salient features (such as verbal dexterity or cleverness) from his traditional epic character; but these traits may be interpreted and re-interpreted, often with a varied moral coloring, as with the figures of Odysseus in Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, or the various Helens in Euripides' oeuvre.

As with Odysseus, the fact that the many Platonic Sokrateses are all named "Sokrates," and linked to a single formal and historical identity, raises certain expectations of adherence to a core identity, expectations that are partly satisfied by the large areas of overlap in the character of Sokrates in different dialogues. Plato's Sokrateses are more than just a collection of figures with the same name who just happen to appear in a variety of works. The accumulation and repetition of numerous, often consistent, details of character contributes to the strong unitary sense of "Plato's Sokrates" experienced by many readers. And the more of these details we encounter, the stronger a presumptive backdrop we acquire against which to assess new avatars of Sokrates. Yet this family resemblance among Plato's various Sokrateses, strong though it is, does not entitle us a priori to treat them as an essentially single or coherent figure. We cannot posit a single Platonic Sokrates any more than a single Oidipous, Odysseus or Kreon in Sophocles' various plays – unless we find that the texts do in fact present us with a single cohesive figure. As it is, his shifting persona remains one of the most significant variables in Plato's works. This does not mean, however, that we may not draw useful comparisons between these Sokrateses, as we can between the two figures of Odysseus in *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, who share a recognizable core of character traits despite the differences in their dramatic presentation.

Depending on our purposes, then, we are entitled to posit an indefinite number of Platonic Sokrateses, ranging from a "maximal" Sokrates – the figure constructed out of everything attributed to Sokrates in Plato, with all his inconsistencies as well as commonalities – to the particular Sokrates of each dialogue in which he appears. In between lies a range

of overlapping figures who have more or less in common with each other and with the maximal Sokrates. The Sokrates of each dialogue must be assessed both on his own terms, as a fresh literary/philosophical creation, and as a more or less distant relative of these other Sokrateses. Both similarities and differences among these various avatars of Sokrates may be important for understanding individual works and the particular manifestations of Sokrates that they contain.²⁰ These refractions of the Socratic persona accompany, and are intrinsically related to, Plato's exploration of various approaches to philosophical method and pedagogy, as we shall see.

For my purposes, three of these more general figures will be of special use. One of these, whom I shall call "Plato's Sokrates," "the Platonic Sokrates," or just "Sokrates," is the maximal figure who emerges from the corpus as a whole, who maintains, at a bare minimum, the same identity and name, with all the ideas and traits that are ascribed to him. The second I shall call the aporetic or elenctic Sokrates. This is the figure that dominates such dialogues as *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, and *Laches* – works in which Sokrates employs the method of question and answer commonly known as the elenchus, which he describes in *Apology* as his life's mission. This character and his methods will be discussed in more detail below (pp. 115–27). For the present, it suffices to say that he claims to know nothing, his mode of argument is essentially adversative and ad hominem, and its results usually aporetic (though he also has a proreptic side). He appears to a more limited extent in some other works, such as *Meno*, *Republic* and *Symposium*. Though his methods cannot be boiled down to a single formula, and the edges of his dramatic persona are somewhat blurry, he is for the most part quite easily recognizable.²¹

This Sokrates, fleshed out with biographical and personal details from other works – especially *Symposium* and *Phaedo* – is the figure whose personality has dominated the European intellectual imagination, as "a kind of vessel into which men and whole epochs projected their own ideals."²² But he is not the only Sokrates in Plato's dialogues. In other incarnations Plato's Sokrates can be wildly creative, dogmatic, or a polite

²⁰ This is also true to some extent of the interlocutors: e.g. Glaukon and Adeimantos appear in both *Rep.* and *Parm.* (cf. Miller 1986: 18–21, 65–7).

²¹ The philosophical criteria that distinguish this figure are rigorously – indeed, too rigorously – articulated in Vlastos 1991: ch. 2–3. For a critique see Nails 1995: ch. 5.

²² Jaspers 1962: 18. For the appropriation of Sokrates by the later European tradition, in particular by Christianity and humanism, see e.g. Priestley 1803; Merlan 1947: 416 n. 33; Marcel 1951; FitzPatrick 1992; Nehamas 1998; C. C. W. Taylor 1998: 83–99; Lane 2001: ch. 2.

and dutiful listener. From this range I extract my third general Socratic figure, whom I shall call “constructive.” This Sokrates dominates several major dialogues, including *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and most of *Republic*. Despite expressions of uncertainty and misgiving, he is willing to develop positive and sustained ideas. He is usually richly characterized, and discourses positively and at length about a wide range of subjects, with great dramatic and rhetorical power. His ideas are highly original and often controversial in nature. He displays a greater concern with, and a wider range of, philosophical methods than the elenctic Sokrates. He also uses creative imagery and myth, often in a highly poetic style and at considerable length, to elucidate and supplement his ideas. His thinking is not exclusively constructive but, in contrast to the typically ad hominem strategies of the elenctic Sokrates, he often articulates and critiques substantial ideas either in their own right, or as the opinions of absent thinkers or imaginary objectors. This Sokrates may coexist with the aporetic figure, as he does in various ways in dialogues such as *Crito*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Republic* and *Theaetetus*. But in such cases there is often a tension between these two personas, manifested most obviously in Sokrates’ reluctance to produce positive ideas or extended speeches in his own voice.

For the purposes of this book, these various manifestations of Sokrates and his methods, and their interrelationships, are more important than other, more conventional ways of organizing Plato’s works, including the traditional grouping into “early” and “middle” dialogues – despite the obvious overlaps between these groups and my portraits of the elenctic and constructive Sokrateses. In general, I accept the findings of modern scholarship showing that chronological claims based on the putative development of Plato’s style and/or the content of the dialogues are untenable.²³ I am interested in a dialogue among the dialogues that neither presumes nor proves anything about either relative dating or the internal coherence of the corpus. The purely elenctic works may or may not reflect the philosophical practice of the historical Sokrates. But we cannot know this; nor can we assume or infer that they were all composed early in Plato’s life. Thus in the absence of other evidence, the fact that a dialogue presents us with an aporetic or constructive Sokrates does not prove that it was written before or after any other dialogue.

The only exception to this chronological uncertainty is the group of dialogues known as “late.” The stylistic similarities among six

²³ See esp. Thesleff 1982; Howland 1991; Nails 1995; cf. also Annas 1999: ch. 1.

works – *Critias*, *Laws*, *Philebus*, *Statesman*, *Sophist* and *Timaeus* – were observed long ago, and have been confirmed by computerized stylometry. There is also some (limited) ancient evidence that *Laws* was written late in Plato's life.²⁴ The combination of these two facts generates a group of "late" dialogues, whose cohesiveness is the only finding that may be said to enjoy something like a scholarly consensus, even among stylometry's severest critics. From a strictly chronological perspective, however, even this group should be handled with care. The ancient evidence does not *prove* that *Laws* was Plato's last work, or that it was not revised in light of *Republic* or other dialogues. There is independent evidence that Plato worked on and revised his works over an extended period of time.²⁵ Such revisions may be undetectable. For example, without being told by an ancient commentator, we would be unaware that an alternative opening of *Theaetetus* once existed.²⁶ The extreme length of some dialogues, including the "late" ones, makes such compositional layers more likely. Even if, then, we accept these "late" dialogues as a group, their similarities may conceal chronological layers of composition, editing or tampering by others. Despite these caveats, I shall continue to refer to this group as "late," and assume that their final versions were generated fairly close to each other in time, somewhere towards the end of Plato's life. But this does not exclude the possibility that Plato may have had his reasons – pedagogical or otherwise – for employing other styles right up to the end of his long life.

Scepticism about our ability to determine the chronology of the dialogues does not mean that the perceived differences between various dialogues, groups of dialogues, or Platonic styles are entirely arbitrary or fictitious, or that Plato's oeuvre may appropriately be treated as an indiscriminate whole. But it does mean that we will need some other way of looking at the interrelationships among Plato's various styles, dialogues and concerns. For example, how are we to talk about the aporetic dialogues if they are no longer a discrete chronological group or a simple reflection of the "historical" Sokrates? One way is to think of them as part of a persistent layer in Plato's thinking about philosophical method. In many dialogues – not just those known as "elenctic" – the critical assessment of ideas deemed false or misleading by the dominant character goes hand in hand with the development of positive ideas. In fact this

²⁴ Arist. *Pol.* 1264b 26–7; Diog. Laert. 3.37.

²⁵ See Thesleff 1967: 16–18; 1982: 83–7; Howland 1991: 201–203; Nails 1995: 123–7. For the possible involvement of other hands, and the concept of "semi-authentic" dialogues, see Thesleff 1982: 88–96.

²⁶ See Thesleff 1982: 85, 152–7; H. Tarrant 1988: 117–18.

interdependence is present in principle in almost every work of Plato, in so far as even the aporetic Sokrates is portrayed by Plato as striving towards positive knowledge. Conversely, there is no sign that Plato ever stopped believing in the value of elenctic argument, in some form, for certain purposes.²⁷

There *are*, however, signs that he was sometimes uncomfortable with the elenctic mode of argument as employed by Sokrates the gadfly, more specifically with its ad hominem aspects and failure to generate positive results. Some dialogues, or groups of dialogues, seem to criticize the elenctic Sokrates for such reasons. I shall be arguing in chapter 4 that *Republic* 2–10 constitutes a critique of the method portrayed in Book 1, and a similar case may be made for other dialogues, especially *Gorgias* and *Meno*.²⁸ The dramatically linked triad of *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman* also moves away from the elenctic Sokrates, while continuing to acknowledge the value of elenctic refutation as one method among many (see ch. 6). This pattern suggests both a critique of the aporetic Sokrates and his methods as a means of reaching positive results, and a striving to go beyond them, without, however, displacing them from their role in clearing away the dead wood of mistaken ideas.

The fact that these works seem to embody a critique of such methods and go on to explore others (such as hypothesis and division) suggests an intellectual movement away from the elenctic Sokrates, presumably coinciding with Plato's own awareness of his inadequacies. This is not a speculation about Plato's personal intellectual development over time as extrapolated from themes within his works. We have no external knowledge of that development, nor can we assume either that it was linear, or that it is reflected in a linear fashion in the dialogues, whose purpose and circumstances of composition are unknown. Rather, the kind of intellectual movement I am suggesting is one that can be inferred from the internal structure of the works themselves, a structure recurring often enough to constitute a pattern. The pattern in question suggests that the elenctic Sokrates and his methods embody a central strand in Plato's thinking about how to do philosophy – a strand of which he was at times critical. In this sense, a case can be made for the *conceptual* priority of this Sokrates to the constructive Sokrates in Plato's thought. This is a claim not about the chronology of particular dialogues, but about Platonic methods and concerns. The pattern does not show that the

²⁷ See e.g. Davidson 1985.

²⁸ See Nehamas 1992b: 289–90, 1998: 87–9. On *Meno* see also Vlastos 1991: 118–25. On *Gorg.* see Irwin 1986 and cf. Nightingale 1995: 81–4.

so-called aporetic dialogues are Plato's earliest compositions: it is still possible in principle that *Euthyphro* was written after *Theaetetus*. But it provides *dramatic* evidence, from the internal structure of these works (or groups of works), for a broader kind of development in Plato's thinking.

PLATO THE "DRAMATIST"

The problems bedeviling all attempts at a systematic organization or ordering of the Platonic corpus testify to the diversity that is arguably its most salient trait. Nevertheless, all his works do share one thing: their "dramatic" form. This simple formal fact is fundamental to the approach to Plato adopted in this book. It is therefore important to clarify what a word like "dramatic" can mean in this connection. Such language pervades contemporary discussions of Plato's dialogues, especially the recent florescence of "literary" interpretation. But as we have already seen (above, pp. 7–8), such usage can have misleading implications, and it is rarely examined with any care. Certainly, the philosophical dialogue owes much to ancient Greek drama, including tragedy and Aristophanic comedy.²⁹ Other dramatic genres for which we have less evidence may also have been important for Plato, such as satyr play, the comedies of Epicharmus, and mime.³⁰ But Plato's models are not confined to drama. His dialogues also participate, through imitation, appropriation and parody, in a whole spectrum of other ancient Greek literary forms – most notably epic, but also such genres as oratory and lyric poetry.³¹ Yet they cannot be neatly aligned with any of these.³² As Nightingale puts it, in Plato's works "the boundaries between philosophy and 'alien' genres of discourse are created, disrupted, and created afresh." Plato's relationship to the drama of his formative years is particularly complex. He was clearly steeped in it, yet equally clearly the dialogues compose a distinct genre, with salient differences from drama as well as striking similarities. He is concerned to appropriate drama, but also to critique and displace it.

²⁹ For tragedy see esp. Kuhn 1941 and 1942; Raphael 1960: 79–88; Patterson 1982: 78–81; Nussbaum 1986: Interlude 1; Irwin 1988. For comedy see Mader 1977; Clay 1994: 37–41; Nightingale 1995: 87–92 and ch. 5; Hyland 1995: 128–36; Rowe 1997; Michelini 2000a.

³⁰ The influence of mime on the dialogues is hard to assess, since our evidence is scanty (though Aristotle links the two at *Poet.* 1447b 9–13; see also Riginos 1976: 174–6). See further McDonald 1931: 80; Haslam 1972; Clay 1994; Gordon 1999: 68–73.

³¹ Note that nearly every poetic genre was attributed by ancient critics to Plato himself as author (Riginos 1976: 43–8). His relationship to Homer and the tradition of epic heroism has been much discussed (cf. most recently Hobbs 2000, and see further below, ch. 3). For other genres see esp. Nightingale 1995 (the following quotation is from p. 195).

³² They do, of course, belong to the genre of Socratic writings (on which see below, p. 32).

Some of the ambiguities of this relationship are nicely captured in an ancient story about the young Plato’s literary beginnings. It is said that he composed lyric poems, dithyrambs and tragedies, and also painted; but when he was about to enter the Athenian tragic competition, he heard Sokrates speaking and thereupon consigned his poetry to the flames, with an accompanying line of verse adapted from Homer: “Come here, Hephaistos [god of fire]; Plato now has need of you” (Diog. Laert. 3.5).³³ Such anecdotes, regardless of their veracity, provide revealing evidence about ancient responses to Plato. This one tells us succinctly of the presumed importance of tragedy in his intellectual formation and his potential as a dramatist, as well as his critical stance towards the genre and the potential incompatibility between tragedy and philosophy. It tells us that the dialogues are in some sense a substitute for drama, but also that they are *radically* different. And it suggests that philosophy emerges from the ashes of poetry. The same kind of complex understanding is conveyed by the way ancient critics arranged the dialogues in the tetralogies still used today, even claiming (however unconvincingly) that Plato himself published them like that in response to the tetralogies of the dramatic festivals.³⁴

A “literary” approach to Plato must therefore begin by asking exactly what it means to call his dialogues “dramatic.” Many proposed explanations do not serve to differentiate Plato’s dialogues – or drama itself – from other imaginative works.³⁵ Chief of these is the notion that the dramatic quality of the dialogues lies in the tension or interrelationship between various views, rather than the clear assertion or dominance of any one view. This accords well with a common understanding of drama, namely that it intrinsically involves conflict. This assumption originates in the practice of the ancient Greek theater, where a substantial number of plays include one or more *agōnes*, or semi-formal debates, between characters taking opposing views on some central issue. Many writers on Plato take some such assumption for granted, viewing the dialogues as “dramatic” precisely because – and in so far as – they embody conflicts of ideas. It is obviously possible to distinguish in this way between various dialogues as more or less “dramatic,” and such evaluations are often made, usually to the disadvantage of the “late” dialogues. According

³³ Cf. Aelian *VH* 2.30, *Anon. Prolog.* 3.17–20 (Westerink), *Comm. Alc.* 2.76–9 (Westerink).

³⁴ In the tragic competition each playwright produced three tragedies followed by a satyr-play, so that a dramatist’s total entry was four plays, or a tetralogy. For this and other ancient groupings of the dialogues see Diog. Laert. 3.56–62, *Anon. Prolog.* 24–6.

³⁵ E.g. Arieti 1995: 121 (“works whose intention is principally to inspire”). Press acknowledges that by his criteria Dante, More and Cervantes are also “dramatic” authors (1995: 141–4).

to Ryle, for example, “the dramatic form of Plato’s dialogues becomes more and more of a pretence. They have no denouements. They are conversations, not combats.”³⁶ The word “combat” is revealing.

This criterion has its practical uses, but does not serve to distinguish what is peculiarly dramatic about Plato’s dialogues as a genre. For one thing, it disqualifies many of them altogether as “dramatic” (as Ryle’s judgment of the late dialogues shows), since they do not all contain a strong clash of ideas or personalities. Conversely, there is nothing to prevent a conventional treatise from articulating conflicting ideas and thus being “dramatic” in the relevant sense. But the use of “drama” simply for the conflict of ideas is a secondary one, a metaphor derived from interpersonal conflict. To be dramatic in a primary sense, the conflict must be embodied in characters. This is, arguably, the defining feature of drama: the imaginative presentation of persons. This criterion reflects ancient and modern theater practice, and may be traced back theoretically to the Greeks themselves. According to both Plato and Aristotle, poetic mimesis represents *persons* doing things.³⁷ In *Republic*, the defining criterion of dramatic mimesis is the impersonation of others, so that narrative becomes more or less “mimetic” depending on the quantity of direct discourse that it contains (392d–393d).³⁸ Modern theories of drama, even when they depart explicitly from ancient conceptions of mimesis, focus similarly on the (re)presentation of persons.³⁹ In all forms of drama, including those derived from the performer’s own life, performers imaginatively project a persona other than themselves. Even a monologue may be dramatic in this sense. If it also ventriloquates other voices, it becomes “dramatic” on a metalevel too, in so far as the imagined character takes on the writer’s or actor’s role of “impersonating” others.

It follows that dramatic mimesis just *is* the suppression of the authorial voice.⁴⁰ A philosophical lecture, or the performance of a treatise in the author’s own voice, may certainly be *theatrical*, in so far as it is a conscious self-display, but it is not *drama*, since it does not represent an imagined act, but simply *is* the activity it presents. It may also, of course, be “dramatic” in the secondary sense that it quotes other voices, or in the derivative

³⁶ 1966: 194. ³⁷ *Rep.* 603c, *Poet.* 1448a 1; see further below, p. 30.

³⁸ Aristotle is also aware of this sense of *mimēsis* (*Poet.* 1460a 5–7).

³⁹ Cf. Beckerman 1970: 7–8, 17–21.

⁴⁰ I mean this in the sense of the authorial “I,” as opposed to the implied author, whose voice can never be suppressed (below, pp. 43–6). Nor do I mean to identify either of these figures with the physical author. On these matters see Booth 1961: ch. 3; Riffaterre 1983: 4–5; Foucault 1984; Nehamas 1987.

sense that it presents conflicting ideas. But it is not “dramatic” in the same fundamental way as Plato’s dialogues, whose form is that of a theatrical script.⁴¹ This is presumably what one critic means when he asserts that “the original *text* is a drama,” thereby erasing the basic theatrical distinction between script and achieved drama.⁴² Another moves directly from “dialogue *form*” to “dramatic *form*” to “Plato wrote *dramas*.”⁴³ It would be more accurate to say that there is a *dramatis personae* of specific characters, who deliver speeches in their own voices, whose identity is other than that of the underlying author or performer, and who therefore project (in Beckerman’s terms) a “fictitious story” or “imagined act.” As the Sokrates of *Republic* would say, they are “mimetic,” in that a reader or performer must adopt the voice of each speaker in turn. That Plato’s dialogues are “dramatic,” then, is a simple formal fact about these works as texts. It is this *form*, presumably, which has seemed to some critics “more suited to a stage play than to philosophic argument.”⁴⁴

From a purely formal perspective, this resemblance to theatrical scripts is unproblematic, at least in regard to the direct dialogues. The situation with the reported dialogues is murkier, since they feature a controlling narrative voice that quotes or reports the speeches of the other characters. But this voice is never Plato’s own.⁴⁵ There is therefore always at least *one* dramatic character in the sense that I have defined it. The reported dialogues resemble the kind of novel that employs a fictitious narrative voice, thus establishing a distance between narrator and author. We may also compare the messenger speeches in tragedy, or the Homeric poems, which include a number of lengthy inset tales narrated by one of the characters.⁴⁶ Such narratives, like Plato’s reported dialogues, usually proceed to put direct speech into the mouths of other characters, as quoted by the narrator. This privileged character thus dramatizes others in the secondary sense noted above. But as long as the narrator is fictitious, these works also remain “dramatic” in a more basic sense, simply in virtue of their form.

⁴¹ Note that the texts of e.g. tragedy were in circulation, so Plato will have known what such a script looked like.

⁴² Seeskin 1987: ix (emphasis added). ⁴³ A. A. Krentz 1983: 33 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ Howland 1993: 25.

⁴⁵ I.e. the narrative voice is never identified with the voice of the implied author (cf. Kosman 1992a: 82–5). Contrast e.g. Herodotus and Thucydides, who both begin their histories by naming the author as narrator (cf. Tigerstedt 1977: 93).

⁴⁶ Most significant of these is Odysseus in *Od.*, who narrates much of the tale of his own adventures, thus taking on a role analogous to, but distinct from, that of the author. Another important example is the speech of Phoenix in *Il.* 9, which well illustrates how the fictitious narrator’s character and personal agenda may color the telling of his tale.

This simple formal fact has logical consequences for the interpretation of Plato, the chief of which is that none of the characters' voices can be identified in any direct sense with that of the author.⁴⁷ Since Plato, like a playwright, never speaks in his own voice, none of the views expressed by his characters can be attributed to him directly, any more than the views of Hamlet or Polonius are directly attributable to Shakespeare. Like Homer, Plato "conceals himself" (*Rep.* 393c11). Had he so wished, he could easily have conveyed his "own" ideas through the voice of a character identified as Plato, rather than as refracted through other speakers.⁴⁸ As it is, however, the self-effacement of the authorial voice is absolute, the dramatic form unequivocal. He not only excludes himself as a character from all his works, but at times goes out of his way to draw attention to his own absence. This is most obvious when we are actually told that "Plato" was not present (*Phd.* 59b). But this absence is also signaled more obliquely elsewhere, for example through the presence of his brothers in *Parmenides* and *Republic*.⁴⁹ In *Theaetetus* he underlines his absence by making Eukleides the "author" of the central dialogue. Still more subtly, some dialogues represent Sokrates alone with his interlocutor, leaving the thoughtful reader to infer that Plato himself could not have been present at the putative historical event that it fictionalizes.⁵⁰

None of this means, of course, that Plato never personally held any of the views explored in the dialogues. Obviously, they all air ideas which were sufficiently interesting to him to seem worthy of inquiry, and it seems *prima facie* likely that he held many of them himself at some time in his life. He also uses dramatic and rhetorical techniques (especially characterization) to induce sympathy in his audience for some speakers together with their attitudes and views, and distance us from others. These sympathetic characters – most obviously, Sokrates – voice certain persistent and fundamental themes, such as the immortality of the soul, which it is hard to believe were not among Plato's abiding personal beliefs in some shape or form.⁵¹ To put it another way, I suspect that the character of Sokrates voices far more of Plato's own views than the character of Polonius or Hamlet does of Shakespeare's. Yet, for

⁴⁷ See Press 2000a, especially his own contribution (2000b).

⁴⁸ Aristotle seems to have been a character in his own (lost) dialogues (cf. Cic. *Ad Att.* 13.19.4).

⁴⁹ Cf. W. A. Johnson 1998: 583 and below, p. 190.

⁵⁰ E.g. *Crito*, *Euth.*, *Ion*, *HMaj.* (see Vlastos 1991: 50).

⁵¹ It is highly misleading to claim, as Gerson does, that an "anti-mouthpiece" position means "Plato must be accounted indifferent to the conclusions arrived at by his readers" (2000: 209).

simple *formal* reasons, we are not entitled either to *assume* the equivalence of any of Plato’s characters with the voice of the author, or to *infer* it from the dialogues themselves. To do either is a basic methodological mistake.

This point is fundamental to the interpretation of the dialogues as dialogues, and as such is axiomatic to many recent interpreters. But it still requires some emphasis, since it runs counter to the influential tradition of dogmatic interpretation of Plato, which attributes the views of the dominant speakers to Plato personally. This tradition began in antiquity, with the Academy and Aristotle, and remained the predominant current in ancient criticism.⁵² It is hardly surprising that ancient critics treat Plato this way, since this is how they routinely treat all kinds of dramatic texts: quoting characters out of context and conflating their sentiments with those of the author (see further below, p. 94). Some modern interpreters of drama have adopted a similar approach, trying to determine which (speeches of which) character(s) speak directly for the playwrights. Thus E. R. Dodds identified the views of Euripides’ “philosophical” characters with those of Euripides himself, arguing that “if we find . . . that . . . the thoughts of these various thinking characters spring from the same fundamental attitude towards life . . . then we are justified in assuming that this attitude was the author’s.”⁵³ It is no coincidence that this argument forms part of Dodds’ attempt to characterize Euripides as a “philosophical” dramatist – as if calling a text “philosophical” required one to identify the author’s own views for analysis. This understanding of what it is to be “philosophical” forms part of the legacy of the first-person treatise that has dominated the tradition of philosophical writing since Plato’s time, but which he himself eschewed. It is reinforced by the need for professional philosophers in the contemporary academic milieu to have determinate views and arguments, attributable to an identifiable human owner, for their dissection.⁵⁴

In dramatic criticism this kind of analysis now seems naïve and outmoded. But it is still commonly found in the study of Plato, where many

⁵² E.g. Diog. Laert. 3.52, *Anon. Prol.* 10–11; see further Tejera 1993: 129–35; Press 1997; H. Tarrant 2000. But there is also an anti-dogmatic strand in ancient interpretation (e.g. Diog. Laert. 3.51; see Howland 1991: 190–97; Press 1996a: 508–9, 2000a: 1–2; Cooper 1997: xxiii–xxiv, and below, p. 30).

⁵³ Dodds 1973: 80 (first published 1929). Cf. also e.g. Bowra 1944: 9–12 and see Ausland 2000: 183–4.

⁵⁴ E.g. Kraut seems to argue that we must treat the dominant character as Plato’s mouthpiece, otherwise we have no way of knowing what Plato believes (1992: 29; cf. also Brisson 1995: 349). Levi argues that the professionalization of philosophy has led to the demise of the philosophical dialogue as a form (1976: 19–20).

readers take it for granted that Plato's dominant characters, especially Sokrates, serve as mouthpieces for Plato's own ideas, and influential scholars defend this position.⁵⁵ There are understandable reasons for this. Besides the fact that the treatise has become the prevalent model of philosophical discourse, the sheer proportion of Plato's text occupied by the dominant character of each work far outstrips that of any single character in extant ancient drama, and most later dramas too. Sokrates is no mere Polonius, or even a Hamlet. But the fact that he occupies a more extensive role than any character in the corpus of a single author, though significant for many reasons, does not alter the basic implications of dramatic form. Nor does the heavily didactic manner of the Eleatic visitor who dominates *Sophist* and *Statesman* show that *he* is Plato's mouthpiece. Pace e.g. Campbell, it does not follow from the fact that the visitor is more didactic than Sokrates, and *his* tone "more in the manner of a treatise than of a dialogue,"⁵⁶ that the *dialogue itself* has become a treatise. Dramatic form is simply being deployed in a different way.⁵⁷ Despite the diminished sense of "realism" in these works, in strictly formal terms they just are *not* treatises. And the Eleatic visitor just is not Plato.

This argument from form is buttressed by the many signs of Plato's own awareness of the distinction between author and character, and thus of the implications of his own practice. Prominent among such indications are the well-known formal division between mimesis and narrative in *Republic* (392c–394c) and the curious opening of *Theaetetus*, where the distinction in question is explicitly applied to a "Socratic" dialogue composed by Plato but not attributed to him (143bc; cf. *Rep.* 394b). In light of this awareness, Plato's choice of "dramatic" form self-consciously raises the question of whether one person can ever speak for another. He further problematizes the issue structurally through the various uses he makes of the form, for example by using reportage (as by Sokrates in *Republic*), by making one character impersonate another (as Sokrates impersonates Protagoras in *Theaetetus*), or by developing a complex chain of transmission for the ideas and speeches that he dramatizes (as in *Symposium* and *Parmenides*). All these strategies draw attention to the non-identity of author, narrator and character, thereby further distancing Plato as author from the voices of his characters. By his practice, then, Plato

⁵⁵ E.g. Rowe 1984: 4; Kraut 1992: 25–30; Irwin 1992: 77–8, 1995: 7–8; Gerson 2000. See the critiques by Nails 1995: 39–42; Mulhern 2000: 225 n.; Press 2000b: 35–7.

⁵⁶ Campbell 1867: l.xxiii.

⁵⁷ See Stenzel 1940: 75–8; Miller 1980: x–xii and cf. Corlett 1997: 431–2.