This book presents a new paradigm for the interpretation of Plato’s early and middle dialogues as a unified literary project, displaying an artistic plan for the expression of a unified world view. The usual assumption of a distinct “Socratic” period in Plato’s work is rejected. Literary evidence is presented from other Socratic authors to demonstrate that the Socratic dialogue was a genre of literary fiction, not historical biography. Once it is recognized that the dialogue is a fictional form, there is no reason to look for the philosophy of the historical Socrates in Plato’s earlier writings. We can thus read most of the so-called Socratic dialogues proleptically, interpreting them as partial expressions of the philosophical vision more fully expressed in the Phaedo and Republic. Differences between the dialogues are interpreted not as different stages in Plato’s thinking but as different literary moments in the presentation of his thought. This indirect and gradual mode of exposition in the earlier dialogues is the artistic device chosen by Plato to prepare his readers for the reception of a new and radically unfamiliar view of reality: a view according to which the “real world” is an invisible realm, the source of all value and all rational structure, the natural homeland of the human soul.
PLATO AND THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUE
for Edna,
loving and joyful companion
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**Appendix: On Xenophon's use of Platonic texts**

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Preface

I offer here an interpretation of Plato’s early and middle dialogues which aims to do justice to the genius of Plato not only as a thinker but also as a writer. For Plato is the only major philosopher who is also a supreme literary artist. There is no writer more complex, and there is no other philosopher whose work calls for so many levels of interpretation. Plato was the first author to offer a systematic definition of the goals and methods of philosophy. But he was also a social reformer and an educator, whose conception of philosophy entailed a radical transformation of the moral and intellectual culture of his own time and place. Much of his writing is designed to serve this larger cause. Hence a perceptive interpretation of Plato’s dialogues calls for attention to his revolutionary cultural enterprise as well as to the literary and philosophical dimensions of his work.

My understanding of Plato reflects three quite different traditions. As a student at the University of Chicago, I learned from David Grene to read Plato as a great dramatist who belongs in the company of Shakespeare and the Attic tragedians. As a doctoral student in Classics at Columbia University, I was initiated into the mysteries of historical philology by Ernst Kapp and Kurt von Fritz. There I came to see Plato’s dialogues as central texts for Greek culture of the fourth century BC, in the perspective of the great Plato commentaries of John Burnet and E. R. Dodds. Finally, for the last thirty years I have taught Plato to philosophy students, in an intellectual setting where the natural parallel is not with Shakespeare or Euripides but with Aristotle and Descartes, Kant and Wittgenstein.

Thus what I have to offer is a comprehensive interpretation, at once literary, historical, and philosophical, the fruit of a lifetime of reading and teaching Plato. My starting-point is Plato’s career as a
writer, one who makes use of the Socratic dialogue form that was practiced by other Socratic authors of his generation. But Plato is the only Socratic writer to turn this popular genre into a major art form, in rivalry with the great works of fifth-century Attic drama. He was also the only Socratic writer to utilize the dialogue form as the device for presenting a full-scale philosophical world view. However, as a result of Plato’s choice of this form of discourse, in which he himself never appears, his thought is presented to us in a manner very different from that of a treatise. The task of the interpreter is inevitably compounded by the fact that the exposition of Plato’s philosophy in the dialogues is deliberately indirect, impressive, and incomplete.

The Plato presented here is a thinker with a unified world view, consistent throughout his life. That is to say, he belongs rather with philosophers like Descartes or Hume, whose philosophical position remains essentially unchanged once their thought attains maturity, than with philosophers like Kant and Wittgenstein, whose conception of philosophy undergoes radical change. Thus I firmly dissent from the standard view of Plato as an author who defends fundamentally different philosophies at different stages of his career.

Since the dialogues are so diverse, both in form and in content, even great scholars have been tempted to suppose that Plato changed his mind as often as he changes the literary presentation of his thought. And the traditional division of the dialogues into early, middle, and late encourages the belief that we can trace Plato’s philosophical development through these successive phases. However, this developmental approach systematically underestimates Plato’s cunning as an author. Not only does it assume (as Jaeger put it) that Plato must say in each dialogue everything he thought at the time. It also assumes that what Socrates says is also what Plato thinks. I shall argue that this is occasionally true, for example for many passages in the Gorgias, Phaedo, and Republic, but that in most of the early dialogues Plato’s use of Socrates is more devious and artistically more complex.

The developmental view also presupposes that Plato writes dialogues like other philosophers write essays or treatises: in order to solve problems for himself, or to announce his solutions to the world. But this, I believe, is to misconstrue Plato’s motive in writing. His principal aim, above all in the earlier works, is not to as-
sert true propositions but to alter the minds and hearts of his readers. Plato’s conception of philosophical education is not to replace false doctrines with true ones but to change radically the moral and intellectual orientation of the learner, who, like the prisoners in the cave, must be converted — turned around — in order to see the light. It is, I suggest, with this end in view that most of the early and middle dialogues were composed. Accordingly, the dialogues in question must be interpreted primarily from the point of view of this intended impact on the reader, an impact designed to be provocative, stimulating, and bewildering.

Since the earlier dialogues are so indirect in form and so frequently and deliberately inconclusive, it is not given to us to see Plato’s thought in the making. What we can trace in these dialogues is not the development of Plato’s thought, but the gradual unfolding of a literary plan for presenting his philosophical views to the general public. One function of Plato’s sustained use of the aporetic dialogue form, including such literary masterpieces as the Protagoras, must have been to create as wide an audience as possible before presenting his own unfamiliar and very unconventional views in the Symposium, Phaedo, and Republic. In Plato’s eyes, the traditional Greek world view, as represented by Sophocles and Thucydides as well as by Homer and Hesiod, was radically false. In developing the Socratic dialogue as a major literary form to rival his great predecessors, Plato sought to replace Achilles, Oedipus, and Pericles with his own hero, Socrates. In this Plato was at least partially successful, since Socrates did in fact become the hero figure for a new tradition, in which philosophy takes the place of religion for the educated public. At stake for Plato, then, was a different view of the meaning of human life, embedded in a radically new view of the nature of reality. When exactly this world view and this literary plan were formed, we cannot know. But they must predate many of the dialogues that are traditionally classified as Socratic. For it is only from the moral and metaphysical standpoint defined by the Phaedo and Republic that we can properly understand Plato’s philosophical intention in composing such dialogues as the Laches, Charmides, Euthyphro, and Protagoras. Such is the central thesis of this book.

My interpretation is to this extent unitarian, in that I contend that behind the literary fluctuations of Plato’s work stands the stable world view defined by his commitment to an otherworldly meta-
Preface

physics and to the strict Socratic moral ideal. These views were formed relatively early and maintained consistently throughout his life. But to claim that the general framework of Plato’s philosophy remained unchanged is not to imply that his thought was ever stagnant or ossified.

The continuity of Plato’s metaphysics is marked by the fact that the Parmenidean dichotomy between unchanging Being and variable Becoming, first hinted at in the Protagoras (343D–344A) and announced in the Symposium, continues to structure his thought, not only in the Phaedo and Republic but also in the Statesman, Philebus, and Timaeus. On the other hand, the classical doctrine of Forms, which serves to articulate this dichotomy, is formulated differently each time it appears. The Forms can even be ignored in the Theaetetus, and subjected to criticism in the Parmenides and Sophist. We can see that this doctrine, although never abandoned, was frequently and substantially revised. Thus the notion of participation proposed in the Phaedo, as a relation between sensibles and Forms, is given up in later works, and replaced in the Sophist by a participation relation between Forms. Plato’s substitute for the rejected notion of participation, the sensible imaging of Forms, is given an entirely new dimension in the Timaeus by his introduction of the Receptacle as the locus within which such imaging takes place. These innovations, together with the new direction given to dialectic in the later dialogues, demonstrate the extent to which Plato’s philosophy retains its creative vitality. But these and all other advances are worked out within the fixed framework of the Parmenidean dichotomy.

To defend this thesis in any detail for the later dialogues would require another book. I am concerned here with the early and middle dialogues, and with what I take to be a unified literary project that comes to a conclusion in the Republic and Phaedrus. I count all these dialogues as Socratic in a literary sense, since in all of them Plato makes use of the popular genre of “Conversations with Socrates” (Sōkratikoi logos). These works of Plato, like those of the other Socratic authors, are designed to be read by a broadly educated public. After the Phaedrus the literary form changes. Other speakers replace Socrates; and even in the Theaetetus and the Philebus, where Socrates remains the chief speaker, the content becomes much more technical and the discussion is addressed to a narrower, more professional audience. Hence a different, less lit-
ery mode of interpretation would be called for in dealing with these later works. I limit myself here to exploring the essential unity of Plato’s thought, and the literary devices by which it is articulated, in the so-called early dialogues and in the great central works.

I want to take this opportunity to reflect briefly on the background of this book, and thus to acknowledge my debt to various persons and institutions.

My general understanding of Plato’s work began to take shape in my student days. But the first occasion for a public presentation of my views came in 1979–80, in a paper entitled “Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?” which was read in Paris and Cambridge. In the Paris audience was Pierre Aubenque, who asked me what I intended to say about Aristotle’s account of Socrates, since this account seemed to support the standard view of Plato’s earlier dialogues as representing the philosophy of Socrates, and since it was on this notion of an early Socratic period that the developmental conception was based. Having learned in work on the Presocratics never to take Aristotle’s report on his predecessors without a large measure of salt, I did not at first see this as a serious objection to my denial of the alleged Socratic period in Plato’s own work. After all, no student of the Presocratics would accept Aristotle’s account as taking precedence over the original texts. And in Plato’s case we do have the relevant texts, namely the dialogues, on which Aristotle’s own view was based. Hence it was only later, in reflecting on Aubenque’s point (as reiterated by others, including Gregory Vlastos, in his book on Socrates) that I came to understand what a long shadow the Aristotelian account of Socrates has cast over our belief in the “Socratic” element in Plato’s early dialogues – a belief that goes back to Hermann’s work in the early nineteenth century. And so I came to see the need for the systematic critique of Aristotle’s report that is given here in Chapter 3.

Another important moment in the genesis of this book was provoked by the generosity of Gabriele Giannantoni, who donated free copies of the preliminary version of Socrates et Socraticorum Reliquiae to participants in a conference in Amalfi in 1985. This fundamental publication of the material on Socratic literature enabled me to see the importance of the fact that the Socratic genre was well developed, and practiced by at least half a dozen different authors, before Plato transformed it into his own philosophical
instrument. This led directly to my composition of the typescript entitled Sókratikoi logos, which began to circulate in 1986, and which appears here in briefer form as Chapter 1. The comments of Klaus Döring were particularly helpful on the earlier version of this chapter. (The section on Aíchesines was published separately in Vander Waerdt [1994].)

The first draft of this book was largely written on sabbatical leave in Cambridge in early 1991, where it benefited from discussion and criticism by a number of friends and colleagues, including David Sedley and Malcolm Schofield. The critical comments of Myles Burnyeat were exceptionally valuable in awakening me from my dogmatic slumber on the subject of the Socratic reading of the earlier dialogues. I had innocently supposed that the old developmental view of these dialogues had by then collapsed of its own weight, and hence that the world was ready and waiting for my alternative interpretation. (Gregory Vlastos’ Socrates had not yet appeared ... ) Myles’ comments made clear to me the need for a full statement of the case against a Socratic reading of the Protagoras and the dialogues of definition, and in favor of a unitarian view. The result was a general presentation of my argument in Chapter 2 and a radical rewriting of Chapters 6 and 8.

A number of other friendly critics have helped to make this work less imperfect than it might otherwise be. As readers for the Cambridge University Press, Anthony Price and Christopher Rowe both contributed extremely useful comments. Diskin Clay read long stretches of the typescript and persuaded me that what I was calling the “pre-middle” dialogues would be more felicitously referred to as “threshold” works, immediate preliminaries for the middle dialogues. My colleague Susan Sauvé Meyer read several chapters and improved them with her criticism. In Athens my friend Vassilis Karasmanis did likewise. Michael Ferejohn offered penetrating comments on the Protagoras interpretation. Others who made helpful comments on one or more chapters include John Cooper, Daniel Devereux, George Klosko, Alexander Nehamas, and Gisela Striker. It is not possible for me to acknowledge individually all the colleagues and graduate students who responded with helpful criticism, or occasionally with encouragement, to parts of this book presented in various colloquia and seminars over the last ten years. But I must single out for special thanks my two research assistants, Mary Hannah Jones who worked with the manu-
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script in 1990–1, and most particularly Michael McShane, who has loyally tended it since 1993. To all of these, my thanks.

It remains only to express my gratitude to the institutions that have helped to make this work possible. First to the Guggenheim Foundation for a Research Fellowship in 1979–80, and to Balliol College, Oxford, for a Visiting Fellowship in the same year, when the initial spade work for this project was begun. Next to the American Council of Learned Societies for a research grant in 1985–6, and to Clare Hall, Cambridge, for a Visiting Fellowship in fall, 1985, when the research for Ἱσχράταινοι ἱγοὶ was carried out. Then to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a research fellowship in 1990–1, when the first draft of eight or nine chapters was completed. Finally to my own institution, the University of Pennsylvania and its Philosophy Department, which have loyally supported my research throughout this time, and to the University’s Research Foundation which has twice provided grants towards the preparation of this manuscript for publication.

I want also to thank my faithful typist, Connie Cybulski Donnelly, who has persevered through every chapter and every revision. At Cambridge University Press I am grateful to my editor, Pauline Hire, for her patient and helpful support over the last few years, and to my copy-editor, Glennis Foote, for an outstanding job in preparing the typescript for printing.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the contribution of my wife, Edna Foa Kahn, who has not only put up with the long labors involved in completing the manuscript and supported me with her enthusiasm for the project, but who has often offered penetrating criticism. And it was she who, browsing in the Fitzwilliam Museum on a Sunday afternoon, discovered the Cambridge Plato which appears here as frontispiece. It is with love and gratitude that I dedicate this book to her.

C.H.K.
Philadelphia, November 1995

Addendum, June 1996

While correcting proof I have been able to see Andrea Nightingale’s Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy (Cambridge,
Preface

1995). Her discussion of the relations between Plato and Isocrates provides an important supplement to my account of the contemporary context of Plato’s work in Chapter 1.

I want to add a word of gratitude and appreciation for my three students, Michael McShane, Daniel McLean, and Satoshi Oghara, for their invaluable help in reading proof and preparing the indexes.

C. H. K
Abbreviations

D.L.  Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Philosophers