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Nikos G. Charalabopoulos

Excerpt

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## I

## SETTING THE STAGE

**The ‘paradox’ of the dialogue form**

The literary form of Plato’s works has always been felt by scholars to be an extraordinary feature, and has generated a number of responses as a result. According to the historical/biographical explanation this form was natural because the dialogues were records of actual Socratic conversations. A political answer is also possible, namely that it was Plato’s device to avoid persecution for the publication of his unorthodox views. The majority of approaches, however, are those adducing philosophical considerations. One type of answer, related to the so-called ‘proto-essay’ view of the dialogues, resolves the paradox by cancelling it. Since Plato’s works are *philosophical* writings, their form has hardly any bearing on their content; hence it makes no real difference whether a philosopher expresses himself in treatises or resorts to more literary forms. The dialogue is simply one format for the presentation of the author’s arguments. The dialogues are philosophical texts in which theories are expounded, positions are argued for or against, and, significantly, theoretical systems are carefully constructed. Argumentation forms the sole means of producing legitimate propositions. Unwarranted premises, deficient syllogisms or other fallacies are painstakingly discovered by the modern reader, who may then pronounce judgement on the quality of the writer as a thinker. Given that Plato, whether he would like it or not, has been placed at the head of the Western philosophical tradition, he is evidently to be viewed as conforming with the image of the archetypal *philosopher*. What is uttered counts for much more than the way this utterance is made, or, to put it differently, the content takes precedence at the expense of the form. On such a reading, the dialogue form seems, understandably,

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something of an oddity that may be ignored, explained, or explained away.<sup>1</sup>

Another solution to the ‘paradox’ derives from an alternative method of interpretation, developed partly as a reaction to the predominance of the content-oriented reading. Here the focus of attention has shifted from the *what* to the *how* of the text. Characterisation and the pragmatics of conversation are more thoroughly examined as less irrelevant to a proper understanding of a dialogue. Ambiguity and irony become prime interpretative tools. Most important, the recorded and implied action, the things done, gets carefully analysed as a necessary complement to the arguments expressed, the things said. The variations in setting and the detailed descriptions of, say, cancelled departures or late arrivals do not represent dispensable embellishments but contribute to the overall philosophical character of the work. While endorsing the image of Plato *the philosopher*, this approach attempts, at the same time, to ‘save the appearances’, that is, to show that form equals and corroborates content as a means for the expression of philosophical truths. Therefore the dialogue form is welcomed as a successful device for pedagogical and (meta)philosophical purposes. It is this realisation of the philosophical significance of the dialogue that resolves the ‘paradox’. Accordingly, Plato’s dialogues are considered the archetypal *philosophical dramas*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of suggested answers to the question of the dialogue form see Sayre (1995) 1–10; Moes (2000) 1–24; Gill (2006); Byrd (2007) 365–74; Lavery (2007) 191–5; Rowe (2007a) 1–7; Griswold (2008). A neat example of this content-oriented line of interpretation is Beversluis’ (2000) statement that for Plato the dialogue form is ‘a *carte blanche* stylistic format . . . the ideal vehicle for celebrating his mentor and concluding his own philosophical investigations’ (20). An alternative, admittedly original, philosophical expansion of the ‘paradox’ has been suggested by Sedley (2003a): Plato remained faithful to composing dialogues because ‘conversation, in the form of question and answer, is the structure of thought itself . . . these same question-and-answer sequences can legitimately be read by us as *Plato thinking aloud*’ (1). See Rowe (2007a) 33–7 for a critique.

<sup>2</sup> Press (2007) remarks that in Plato’s dialogues ‘drama is a form of argument and argument a form of drama’ (5). For this dialogical interpretative mode see the articles in Press (1997). The pedagogical/protreptic function of the dialogue has been argued for, among others, by the members of the ‘Tübingen School’. See Szlezák (1999) and, for a critical reappraisal Mann (2006). For more answers to the ‘paradox’ of the dialogue form based on this ‘dramatic’ approach see Desjardins (1988); Griswold (1988); Klagge and Smith (1992); Press (1993) and (2000); Gonzalez (1995); Nails (1995); Gill and McCabe (1996); Hart and Tejera (1997); Michelini (2003a); Yamagata (2005) 122–4.

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## THE 'PARADOX' OF THE DIALOGUE FORM

Now there can be no doubt that the recognition of the dramatic nature of the dialogues restores a longed-for balance and moves scholarship towards the right direction of a holistic interpretation of Plato. All the same, despite their opposition as regards the philosophical significance of the dialogue form, both the 'proto-essay' and the 'dialogical' view have been developed out of a common matrix: the conceptual framework of modern insitutionalised philosophical discourse. It is very likely then that the question of why Plato wrote dialogues reveals more about modern readers' expectations than about authorial dilemmas.<sup>3</sup> For the problem arises only if one would expect Plato to have followed the normative genre of philosophical writing, that of the treatise. As long as one's perception draws on elements pertinent to later, ultimately modern, experiences, there will always be present a split between Plato the formidable dialectician and Plato the literary artist.<sup>4</sup> The division has a rather prescriptive character, favouring a model of the irrelevance or, at best, the subordination, of the artist to the thinker. Consequently, even when the drama of the dialogues comes to the fore and is duly acknowledged, there is still in many cases a tendency to show that these formal aspects are no less liable to philosophical use and interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Content then still

For the interrelation between the drama and the philosophy in the dialogues see Krentz (1983); Stokes (1986); Frede (1992); Rossetti (1993); Rutherford (1995); Tejera (1999); Giuliano (2000a); Corlett (2005); MacCabe (2006); Kahn (2010). Cossutta (2003) offers arguments in favour of the inherent dialogism of Plato's dialogues using current philosophical terminology. For a critique of the dialogical model see recently Beversluis (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Intriguingly, although one can find articles with exactly that title, namely why Plato wrote dialogues (Hyland 1968), there is, so far as I am aware, no scholarly text bearing on 'Why Aischylos wrote tragedy' or 'Why Sappho composed monodies'.

<sup>4</sup> Vlastos (1991) characteristically asserts that 'the artist in Plato could not have displaced the philosopher. We must assume that philosophical inquiry was the *primum mobile* in the composition of those earlier dialogues no less than of any he was to write thereafter' (52–3).

<sup>5</sup> A number of scholarly contributions that reveal the intrinsic value of the dramatic aspect in Plato are worth mentioning. In her insightful book Gordon (1999) emphasises the extralogical elements of the Socratic/Platonic dialectic (e.g. emotional engagement 19–42, images 135–72) and treats Plato as a dramatist (63–92). In his lengthy article Gifford (2001), in an exemplary way, examines Plato's use of tragic irony in *Republic* I. In the first two chapters of an ambitious study Blondell (2002) offers the most comprehensive discussion of the subject by giving her own version of a dramatic reading of Plato (4–37) and examining the reasons that led Plato to the use of the dialogue form (37–52). Finally, Puchner (2010) offers the most promising interpretation of Plato as a prose dramatist so far by arguing persuasively that he was a radical theatre reformer (3–35).

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legitimises form and the original unity of the Platonic dialogue is cancelled for the sake of a selective reading, though one more comprehensible to a modern taste.<sup>6</sup>

## Chronology

A similar tendency to appeal to the expectations of the audience each time has been at work in the vexed problem of the Platonic chronology. The standard view throughout the twentieth century has been that, as regards their period of composition, Plato's works may be divided into early, middle and late dialogues. This tripartition, backed up by the results of stylometry, goes, as a rule, hand in hand with a developmentalist theory about Plato's philosophical route. In the early dialogues Plato's main objective is to draw the portrait of his master by presenting and elaborating on the basic tenets of the historical Sokrates while still writing under his spell (*Ion*, *Laches*). In his middle works he has left the Socratic legacy behind and produces his own fully formulated doctrines, such as the Theory of Forms, expounded and defended by a Platonic Sokrates, now more of an authorial creation and mouthpiece (*Republic*, *Symposium*). In his last phase Plato, disillusioned and more critical than ever, scrutinises basic principles of his doctrines while indulging in the technicalities of dialectic and dogmatic exposition and gradually dispensing with Sokrates as a mouthpiece (*Sophist*, *Laws*). The scheme provides also for transitional dialogues that cover the borderline between two periods such as the *Gorgias* (early–middle) and the *Theaetetus* (middle–late).

A reaction to this consensus has recently been articulated. Those who argue against the traditional division point out the arbitrary

<sup>6</sup> Ancient commentators seem to have followed a rather different way. The author of the *Prolegomena*, a Neoplatonic introduction to Plato of the late sixth century AD, provides seven answers to the 'paradox' of the dialogue form (15. 1–67 Westerink), only one or two of which are likely to be found in modern scholarship. On the other hand, Rowe's (2006a) attractive position that Plato resorted to dialogue as a means to overcome the 'radical difference of perspective' between himself and his audience 'combined with the urgent requirement to communicate (to change others' perspectives)' (10) restores Plato as a flesh-and-blood thinker who was writing for *his* contemporaries. Long (2008) articulates a provocative but salutary warning, namely that it is almost impossible to discover a meaningful answer for Plato's use of dialogue form that is applicable to his entire corpus.

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grounds on which it is founded. Evidence from stylometry should be treated with caution, not least because of the pitfalls inherent in the use of literary techniques, such as the avoidance of hiatus, for establishing chronological order. That the philosophy of the historical Sokrates may be traced in and retrieved from the early/Socratic dialogues is a premise not fully supported by the evidence. Sokrates' theses may sometimes differ greatly among the early dialogues (cf., for example, his hedonistic views in the *Protagoras*), while to extract a philosophical edifice out of arguments addressed to particular interlocutors in specific moments requires a certain leap in reasoning. In any case one is not entitled to take Sokrates, or any other main speaker, as Plato's mouthpiece because this violates the principle of authorial anonymity imposed on us by Plato's choice of not speaking *in propria persona*. Finally, there is no compelling reason why criticism of distinctive doctrines should necessarily mean Plato's wholesale rejection of them – as the arguments against the Theory of Forms in the *Parmenides* might imply.<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly it is not very easy to decide whether the 'traditionalists' or the 'revisionists' present a more persuasive case. It is true that the developmental model has served Platonic scholarship very well for the last hundred years or so, offering a plausible hermeneutic paradigm that accounts for stylistic and philosophical affinities or discrepancies among the dialogues. At the same time, that model remains essentially little more than a very influential interpretation that often does not do justice to the wealth of textual evidence and suffers from the circular character of some of its premises – such as the relationship between the early dialogues and the philosophy of the historical Sokrates. On the other hand, this urge to 'dethrone' the developmental thesis may in fact be due to no other reason than a predictable fatigue on the part of the scholarly community.<sup>8</sup> Or, it may be that the success of the

<sup>7</sup> A recent instantiation of this debate with solid argumentation from both factions is to be found in Annas and Rowe (2002). For a critique of developmentalism as well as a survey of various chronological taxonomies see Nails (1995) 53–135. Cf. Rowe (2003a) 104–6, 119–22 and (2007b) 90–2; Bonazzi et al. (2009).

<sup>8</sup> So Sedley (2003a), for whom the attacks on the model 'represent, so far at least, little more than the understandable fact that people are getting bored of it' (7).

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tripartite division has turned a working hypothesis into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Equally important to the question of chronology is the context in which this ‘battle of arguments’ is aired. The developmentalist edifice will stand or fall primarily on philosophical grounds.<sup>9</sup>

I wish to draw attention to the importance of this feature in order to put the debate into perspective. As has been the case for more than two millennia now, it is the self-image of the communities of Plato’s readers, laymen, teachers and exegetes alike, that sets the agenda for Platonic interpretation.<sup>10</sup> In modern times this community is a scholarly one, consisting of teachers of and researchers on Plato in universities and other academic institutions. Any new reading of his dialogues is legitimate to the degree that it deepens the community’s understanding of the author’s content or method of philosophising. Developmentalism has proved so hugely influential precisely because it familiarises Plato’s compositions for a modern professional philosopher by (a) signposting turning points in Plato’s intellectual explorations, so that the theories he held in different periods of his life may be safely mapped out, and (b) building an implicit belief in the superiority of a later over an earlier dialogue on philosophical grounds. As a result, the interpreter gains a more or less direct access to Plato’s arguments, bypassing the admittedly awkward dialogue form and placing him safely in the company of later thinkers. He can also flatter himself that Plato’s later, hence more authoritative, word on issues of argumentation and dialectics comes closer to modern preoccupations – as shown, for example, by a comparison between what is said about knowledge in the *Theaetetus* and Wittgenstein’s theories. But this

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that there are developmentalists whose criterion is the evolution of Plato not as a philosopher but as a literary author: Li Volsi (2001) postulates three chronological groups on the basis of Plato’s use of the dramatic, narrative or the mixed form. Similarly, the acceptance of Plato’s philosophical development does not necessarily commit one to the early–middle–late scheme, as the neo-unitarian approaches adopted by Kahn (1996) and Rowe (2007a) aptly prove (cf. Kahn 2000; Griswold 1999 and 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Tigerstedt (1974); Gerson (2005). Interestingly, Platonism as a comprehensive, trans-historical philosophical system extracted from Plato’s texts but not confined to them seems to have been an invention of the Roman period, between the first century BC and the second century AD. For a brief survey of the development of the Platonist tradition see Brittain (2008).

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chronological taxonomy does more than recreate an updated Plato: it gives Sokrates a philosophy of his own. And this is a prize that is unlikely to be abandoned today. If Sokrates and Plato do not have a recognisable system or a successful method, or both, as philosophers, then they, along with Aristotle, will cease to act as the founding figures for the Western philosophical tradition and need to be replaced by, say, St Augustine or Thomas Aquinas – not an option for a post-Renaissance frame of mind.

This is the reason why I believe that, unless another model offers a more appealing portrait of Sokrates and Plato *qua* philosophers, the tripartite division will continue to enjoy its privileged status, regardless of its arbitrariness as a latter-day construct. For it is clearly a product of the evolutionism and scientific optimism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a firm belief in linear progress and the model of the natural sciences as the ultimate road to knowledge. Similarly, the reaction to that pattern may be rooted in post-war experiences and currents of thought. That Plato did not hold doctrines and use Sokrates as his mouthpiece, thereby committing himself to an intentional anonymity, echoes postmodernist theories on the ‘death of the author’. The construction of the Platonic dialogue as an open-ended, ambiguous, ironic text and of philosophising as a limitless question-and-answer process may run parallel to the modern rhetoric of the liberal, democratic, anti-authoritarian societies of Western culture.<sup>11</sup> In other words, it is almost inevitable that Platonic scholars will be influenced by the cultural milieu and scholarly traditions they live in – witness the geographical distribution of, say, the analytical philosophers, the esotericists, the Straussians, the dialogists. Of course there is nothing improper in using the interpretation of the dialogues as

<sup>11</sup> On the origins of the current hermeneutical models in Platonic studies see Taylor (2002). The reluctance to accept a ‘doctrinal’ Plato may stem in part from his appropriation by Nazi Germany and the discovery of totalitarian tendencies in his political thought as the cases of Crossman and Popper demonstrate (cf. recently Forti 2006). One way Platonists could defend their author was to deny that he is committed to the arguments Sokrates puts forward in the *Republic* or the *Laws*, for example, and that one should not read Kallipolis as a blueprint for social reform (Strauss). For the demonisation of Plato as a proto-anti-Jew see Goldhill (2004) who holds that Plato’s views have been ‘instrumental in shaping Hitler’s fascist state and the communism of the Soviet Union. *Plato has a lot to answer for*’ (195, emphasis added).

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a means of fostering group or school identities provided that the reading will bring us closer to Plato and not vice versa.<sup>12</sup>

It is in this light that the question over the standard tripartite taxonomy could be fruitfully engaged with. Despite the extremely slim evidence available, it would be worth trying to investigate the relative or even absolute dates of composition for particular dialogues whenever possible. The evidence from stylometry may prove useful but cannot be trusted unreservedly. There is always the possibility that revised and inauthentic dialogues could affect the results, or that a non-chronological explanation could be developed for clusters of stylistically close dialogues – the intended audience, for instance. Most importantly, whatever knowledge is acquired cannot be used as a pretext for hypothesising about the evolution of Plato's thought. A professional reader of Plato today would have a lot to gain if he were willing to free himself of the notion that the value of a dialogue *as a work of philosophy* depends heavily on how old its author was when he composed it. There is no such criterion for judging Euripides' tragedies *as poetry* or Isokrates' speeches *as oratory*. I see no compelling reason why Plato should be treated differently.

The premise of a Socratic philosophy retrievable from the early dialogues is also problematic. There is nothing in the texts themselves that invites the reader to harmonise the arguments of Sokrates in the dialogues and produce a defensible theoretical system. For instance, the difference between the incomposite soul of the *Phaedo* and the tripartite soul of the *Republic* is not *necessarily* explicable in terms of Plato's abandoning an earlier, Socratic doctrine of a single, rational soul in favour of his own belief in a composite soul with an irrational, lower part that accommodates our desires and passions. It may not even be clear why this 'inconsistency' should matter. The issue is whether Sokrates convinces his friends about the immortality of his soul and theirs, a few hours before leaving them for ever, or whether he teaches Plato's ambitious brothers the necessity for a just society in which citizens

<sup>12</sup> As Penner (2007) rightly says, 'the point of studying Socrates and Plato is not simply to identify their errors from modern philosophical points of view, but to learn from them enough to see how much modern philosophical work could be improved with some deep study of Plato, and of Socrates in Plato' (5).



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consider themselves brothers and for the deterrence of civil strife at any cost. Arguments are always contextualised. They are apparently the most important element in the Platonic textual edifice but not the only one; the means not the end.<sup>13</sup>

That is why Plato can portray Sokrates arguing for positions that are not always compatible with each other. The condemned prisoner of the *Crito*, the satirist of the *Ion*, and the stubborn debater of the *Protagoras* share the same name, love for discussion, and authoritative stance, but to think of them as the same *individual* misses the point. They are three characters inhabiting a different fictional world in each dialogue. Evidently they need to comply with a minimal set of features evoked by the name of Sokrates, but this is a process carried on in the context of the Socratic literature and the Platonic dialogues in particular. It is often overlooked that Sokrates the philosopher is Plato's literary creation, the indisputable hero of his philosophical dramas who confronts opponents, fights for his rights, constructs utopias. As a leading speaker in most of the dialogues he dominates the discussion, but one should resist confusing the hero with the mouthpiece. In ancient classical drama even privileged views or paradigms are always challenged and make the latter notion redundant. Mouthpieces are expendable and often flat and dry. Heroes are not.<sup>14</sup>

The fictional nature of the genre of the Socratic dialogue makes the search for the historical Sokrates in Plato a misguided enterprise. Not that any doubts about whether he ever existed may be seriously raised. It is rather that we can never access his thoughts in an unmediated manner because he wrote nothing. In the present state of evidence all we are left with are three literary portraits by

<sup>13</sup> For an attractive presentation of the standard identification of the Sokrates of the early dialogues with the historical Sokrates, referred to by the author as the Early Dialogue Thesis, see Graham (1992). Cf. Penner (2002); Rowe (2006a). On the composite nature of the soul see Miller (2006); Ferrari (2007a); Rowe (2007a) 164–85; Lorenz (2008); Barney et al. (forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> Therefore I endorse Wolfsdorf's (2004: 38) alternative to the mouthpiece theory, namely the conception of Sokrates 'as Plato's favoured character' who 'expresses or develops views Plato intended to advance' although 'Plato did not intend to endorse all the views Sokrates asserts'. See also Trablatoni (2003); Gill (2007, 62–3). In the case of the *Theaetetus* Sedley (2002) argues for 'a radical separation of the speaker Sokrates... from a master dramatist Plato' (312). On the other hand, Rowe (2007a: 15–20) insists on the complete identification of Plato with Sokrates.

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Aristophanes, Plato and Xenophon. It was all too predictable that the reconstruction of Sokrates and his philosophy should result from dismembering the Platonic corpus. In this way, one body of texts could suffice to provide on its own direct access to the theories of two of the greatest thinkers ever. This economical solution offered by developmentalism contributed immensely to its success among Plato's modern professional readers.<sup>15</sup>

For the modern historian of philosophy does not get much help from a thinker who lacks a body of extant writings in which his basic doctrines are stored. Admittedly there have been a couple of other ancient philosophers who wrote nothing and their views, like Sokrates', are known from the texts of their followers, namely Pythagoras and Epiktetos. But in the latter's case the surviving document called *Discourses*, written by his student Arrianos, is a faithful record of the master's teachings, from which his doctrines may be directly engaged with – in sharp contrast with the style of the Platonic dialogues. As for Pythagoras, his silence was not so much of a problem because his image as a pioneer in mathematics, harmonics and the philosophy of numbers is in all probability a construction of later Pythagoreanism, whereas in reality he was probably a sage who taught about metempsychosis and the salvation of the soul (*KRS* 238). But neither the image of the sage nor metaphysical claims verging on the religious were fitted for a non-conformist, rational iconoclast as Sokrates must have been. The founder of dialectic and the champion of reasoned argument could not but reflect the post-Enlightenment thought-world of his modern readers.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The impossibility of recovering the historical Sokrates – or the historical Plato for that matter – is argued for by Michelini (2003b). Osborne (2006) provides a persuasive philosophical explanation for the incompatibility of Sokrates' theses in different dialogues. For the most recent expression of the *status quaestionis* on the Socratic problem see Dorion (2011). Cf. Morrison (2006); Prior (2006); Cooper (2007); Trapp (2007a).

<sup>16</sup> The quest for the historical Sokrates appears to have some similarities with that for the historical Jesus. In both cases the scholarly reconstruction of the 'man behind the myth', as it were, exhibits an unmistakable zealot's commitment to the liberation of these historical figures from their traditional textual/cultural context, with the ultimate goal of deplatonising and dechristianising them respectively (a: Sokrates vs Plato; open-ended elenchus vs doctrinal exposition; b: Jesus vs Christ; synoptic gospels vs John; scholarly community vs Church).