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978-1-107-03145-6 - Plato and the Post-Socratic Dialogue: The Return to the Philosophy of Nature

Charles H. Kahn

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POST-SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

Plato's late dialogues have often been neglected because they lack the literary charm of his earlier masterpieces. Charles H. Kahn proposes a unified view of these diverse and difficult works, from the *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus* to the *Sophist* and *Timaeus*, showing how they gradually develop the framework for Plato's late metaphysics and cosmology. The *Parmenides*, with its attack on the theory of Forms and its baffling series of antinomies, has generally been treated apart from the rest of Plato's late work. Kahn shows that this perplexing dialogue is the curtain-raiser on Plato's last metaphysical enterprise: the step-by-step construction of a wider theory of Being that provides the background for the creation story of the *Timaeus*. This rich study, the natural successor to Kahn's earlier *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, will interest a wide range of readers in ancient philosophy and science.

CHARLES H. KAHN is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy in the University of Pennsylvania. His publications include *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (3rd edn., 1994); *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: A New Arrangement and Translation of the Fragments with Literary and Philosophical Commentary* (1979); *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (1997); *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* (2001).

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107031456

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First published 2013

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Kahn, Charles H.

Plato and the post-Socratic dialogue : the return to the philosophy of nature / Charles H. Kahn.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-107-03145-6 (hardback)

1. Plato. I. Title.

B395.K235 2013

184-dc23

2013014286

ISBN 978-1-107-03145-6 Hardback

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Preface

I offer here a study of six late Platonic dialogues, from the *Parmenides* to the *Timaeus*. This is a sequel to *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), in which I discussed Plato's earlier work, from the *Apology* to the *Phaedrus*. The current study represents an entirely new project. Although the author of these later dialogues is the same, the material is very different in both form and subject matter. Whereas Plato's earlier writing represents the finest literary achievement of ancient prose, with dramas such as the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* designed to compete with the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, these later dialogues were scarcely designed for such artistic success. Instead of the brilliant conversational style of Plato's earlier work, the writing here is often difficult to the point of obscurity, and the reasoning more intricate, as if these dialogues were addressed to a less literary, more strictly professional audience. The philosophical content is even more surprising. There is nothing in Plato's earlier work to prepare us for his attack on the doctrine of Forms in the *Parmenides*, for the empiricist bias of the *Theaetetus*, or for the intricate conceptual analysis of the *Sophist*.

As a result, the interpreter of Plato's later work faces an entirely different task. To begin with, there are striking changes in literary form. We must take account of the replacement of Socrates as principal speaker, first by Parmenides, then by a visitor from Elea, and finally by the statesman-scientist Timaeus from another western Greek city. (In the *Laws* Plato himself will make a masked appearance in the person of an anonymous Stranger from Athens.) Even the Socrates who does return as chief speaker in the *Theaetetus* and *Philebus* is a less dramatic figure, less directly involved in the social life and conflicts of the Athenian *polis*.

To this eclipse of Socrates as a personality corresponds a new, more problematic treatment of the theory of Forms, the central philosophical doctrine of the preceding dialogues. We begin with the radical critique of this doctrine in the *Parmenides* (echoed by a reminder of similar problems in

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the *Philebus*), then a systematic avoidance of all reference to this theory in the *Theaetetus*, followed by its partial reappearance in the *Sophist* and *Philebus*, with a final, full-scale reformulation in the *Timaeus*. It will be our task to identify the underlying unity of Plato's intellectual project within the bewildering diversity of these six dialogues.

Formally considered, the dialogues discussed here, from the *Parmenides* to the *Timaeus*, are quite independent of one another (except for dramatic continuity between the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*); and they can be interpreted individually, without reference to the series as a whole. I claim, however, that as the work of a single philosopher, in the last decades of his long life, these dialogues are best seen as moments in a single project: namely, the coming to terms with natural philosophy on the basis of a system of thought (the Theory of Ideas) that had been worked out in earlier dialogues, with a different set of problems in view.

The classical theory was designed as a framework for Plato's original project: to develop the moral and intellectual legacy of Socrates in the context of Athenian political life. Thus, Plato's earlier work was addressed to a wider audience, the reading public of Greece, conceived as potential citizens in a reformed society. The dialogues to be considered here have a very different goal in view: to reshape the theoretical basis of Platonic philosophy in order to include the study of the natural world.

In the early tradition that stretches from Thales to Democritus, Greek philosophy had been primarily a philosophy of nature. Plato adopted the person of Socrates as his symbol for a deliberate turning away from this philosophical tradition and towards an investigation of the conditions for a good human life and a just society. Natural philosophy became, in this sense, pre-Socratic. What we have in these late dialogues is a new Platonic philosophy that can be seen as deliberately post-Socratic – an investigation in which Plato systematically returns to problems that were of primary concern for Socrates' predecessors: the nature of knowledge and the nature of the physical world. The symbol for this return is the replacement of Socrates by Parmenides as chief speaker, and by his sequel, the Stranger from Elea. Plato's return, then, is to a philosophical tradition that is independent of Socrates and directed towards the physical sciences, but founded now on the metaphysics of unchanging Being introduced by Parmenides. Thus, the project of these later dialogues is to reclaim the study of nature within the framework of a Platonic-Eleatic philosophy of intelligible Form.

Since the present work is designed as a sequel to *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, it may be appropriate to recall my principal claims in the earlier

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volume. One aim of that book was to oppose the then prevailing view of Plato's philosophical development before the *Republic* as divided into two distinct sections, one typically Socratic and the later, more fully Platonic, with some tension between the two. In reaction against this two-stage approach I denied the existence of any distinctively Socratic period in Plato's philosophy. I argued instead for a more unitarian view of these early-middle dialogues, from the *Apology* to the *Republic*. I introduced the hypothesis of deliberate withholding on Plato's part, specifically his withholding any full statement of the metaphysical notions that I found implicit in the dialogues of definition. I suggested that Plato will have had much of his theory of Forms in mind when, in dialogues such as the *Euthyphro* and *Meno*, he introduced the notion of essence as object of definition.

Today I would formulate my view more cautiously, to avoid the impression that Plato never changed his mind, or that he knew where he was going from the start. I would now rely less on the notion of prolepsis as suggesting such a plan in advance, for which there is no direct evidence. Although I still believe that we can detect proleptic intentions in many of the earlier dialogues (for example, in the *Lysis* and *Euthydemus*), I do not regard this as a thesis to be defended here. Instead, limiting my claims to what is explicit in the text, I would clarify my position by recognizing three stages in the sequence of dialogues that stretches from the *Apology* to the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*:

- (1) the initial (pre-metaphysical) stage of Plato's writing, represented by the *Apology*, *Crito* and *Gorgias* (as well as by the *Ion* and *Hippias Minor*);
- (2) the implicit theory of essences in the dialogues of definition (*Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Meno*);
- (3) the explicit theory of Forms in the *Cratylus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*.

(This division leaves out several dialogues that do not directly involve a search for definition, notably the *Protagoras*, *Lysis* and *Euthydemus*. I assume that these were written at roughly the same time as the dialogues listed under stage 2, and before the dialogues listed under stage 3.)

In my view, then, the dialogues of stage 1 represent the so-called Socratic period in Plato's writing, when he was fiercely loyal to the Socratic moral position but had not yet – even in the *Gorgias* – developed a metaphysical basis for this position. On the other hand, the beginnings of such a basis make their appearance in the conception of essences presented in dialogues such as the *Euthyphro* and *Meno*. Hence, without making any assumptions about Plato's unspoken intentions, we can recognize a clear progression from the Socratic moral position, as expressed in the *Gorgias*, to the search

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for a theoretical basis for this position, which we find in the dialogues of stage 2: namely, the notion of essences corresponding to the virtues. (It is no accident that, in all three stages, the argument appeals to what I call the normative trio – the just, the noble (*kalon*), and the good – as the conceptual basis for Socrates' pursuit of *aretē*.)

After the dialogues of definition we can recognize a further progression from an implicit ontology of essences to the explicit metaphysics of the Forms, beginning with the Beautiful (*kalon*) in the *Symposium* and culminating in the Good of the *Republic*. Hence the view which I previously described as unitarian can perhaps be more accurately formulated as the progressive working out of a theoretical basis for what was at first an essentially practical conception: the ideal of virtue modeled on the figure of Socrates.

This theoretical basis was provided by the metaphysics of Forms, as presented in the great “middle” dialogues (*Symposium*, *Phaedo* and *Republic*) and invoked also in the *Cratylus* and *Phaedrus*. The underlying ethical motivation for this theory is revealed in the central role of the normative trio – the Just, the Beautiful and the Good – even before the Good itself is identified as the supreme concept in the *Republic*. In the *Phaedo* the theory was expanded to include mathematical Forms (beginning with the Equal); and these will remain fundamental in all future versions of the doctrine. The *Cratylus* flirts with an extension to artifacts such as the spindle; and so we have the Form of Bed in *Republic* X. But this is an extension about which Plato may have had second thoughts, since such artifacts tend to disappear from later versions of the theory.

What is conspicuous by its absence in these earlier dialogues is any application of the theory of Forms to the realm of nature and to natural kinds. We recall that Socrates introduces this theory in the *Phaedo* as an alternative to – even an escape from – the natural philosophy pursued by his predecessors. But the application of the theory to such concepts as human being, fire or water remains a serious problem, as Parmenides will point out (*Parm.* 130c). A central theme of my present study will be Plato's systematic clarification and extension of the concept of Form in order to apply it to the domains of physics and biology, that is, to the territory explored by his predecessors the Presocratics.

From the *Parmenides* on, I suggest, Plato is preparing the basis for this long-postponed reunion with *peri phuseōs historia*. As a result, mathematics will begin to play a new role. Instead of leading upwards to the Forms and away from the visible world (as it is intended to do in the educational scheme of the *Republic*), geometry and number will now be directed

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downwards, to project a formal structure onto the realm of change, and thus to reveal a stable pattern underlying the flux of coming-to-be and passing-away. This new role for mathematics will involve some recognition of a middle ground between Being and Becoming, a revision of the sharp dualism between intelligible and sensible realms that is characteristic of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. It is this ontological space between Forms and sensible particulars that will be opened up by the recognition of “beings that have come-to-be” in the *Philebus*, and by the mathematical structures imposed upon the Receptacle in the *Timaeus*. What we have, in effect, in Plato’s later theory is a new notion of immanent form, conceived in mathematical terms. It is this gradual (and partial) emergence of a new theory of nature and change within the framework provided by a revised metaphysics of Form that will be the theme of this book.

Of course, Plato in his later years had not lost interest in issues of ethics and politics. That interest is reflected even in the titles of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*; and the *Philebus* is primarily devoted to the place of pleasure in the good life. The long and unfinished project of the *Laws* testifies that Plato was to the end preoccupied with the philosophical reconstruction of life in the polis. These practical concerns are reflected in the introductory conversation of the *Timaeus*, with its echo of the *Republic*, as well as in the political myth that follows in the *Critias*. Instead of promising a third volume to deal with these topics, I offer here an Epilogue to take some account of Plato’s concern with moral and political philosophy in his latest period.

In conclusion, let me record my sincere thanks to David Sedley, Verity Harte, and Leslie Brown for valuable comments on different parts of my text, and in particular to Leslie Brown for allowing me to make use of her excellent (and as yet unpublished) translation of the *Sophist*.

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I take for granted the chronological division of the dialogues into three stylistically distinct groups, established in the nineteenth century by the studies of Campbell and Ritter. According to this division, the *Cratylus*, *Symposium* and *Phaedo* belong to the earliest Group 1 (together with the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Gorgias*, *Meno* and some nine other dialogues). Group 2 consists of the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theaetetus*. The latest Group 3 includes the *Sophist-Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*. Although this chronological sequence is clearly marked by stylistic changes, it does not correspond to important stages of philosophical content. On the contrary, the so-called middle group of dialogues (*Symposium-Phaedo-Republic*), which is characterized by the classical doctrine of Forms, is divided between stylistic Groups 1 and 2; whereas the two last dialogues of Group 2 (*Parmenides* and *Theaetetus*) mark a sharp break with this classical doctrine. A new, more complex conception of Form will gradually emerge in the dialogues of Group 3, culminating in the *Timaeus*; while, on the other hand, a different kind of metaphysical restraint will later characterize the *Laws*. Although stylometry is our best guide for the chronological ordering of the dialogues, it tells us very little about the changes in philosophical content. For there is no simple story to be told of Plato's philosophical development corresponding to the chronological ordering of the dialogues.

For fuller discussion of the stylistic evidence, see Kahn (2002a) 93–127.