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Excerpt

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Introduction

I The aim, and central thesis, of this study

On a very common account of Plato's early dialogues – so common in the literature that it may be thought to go without saying and be beyond question – it is characteristic of these dialogues that they start with a *ti esti* ('What is it?') question, and the demand for a definition, and end in *aporia*.¹ On this account, the enquiry that makes up an early Platonic dialogue is set in motion by a *ti esti* question, which, therefore, is primary in the order of enquiry; and *aporia* is the final state of perplexity and the actual end-point of these enquiries when, as typically happens, Socrates and his interlocutors fail to come up with a satisfactory answer and to discover the demanded definition.²

¹ Nothing substantial is supposed to hang on whether we think that these dialogues are indeed early. In no particular order, the dialogues I shall consider include: *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Hippias Major*, *Euthydemus*. I shall also consider the first book of the *Republic*, without supposing that it was written as a self-standing dialogue. For a minimal, purely style-based defence of the view that these dialogues belong to an early group, see Kahn (2002). Whether there is a unity to these dialogues; and, if there is, whether it is thematic or methodological; and what form or forms it takes: these are not questions I want to prejudge, but, rather, want to address as being entirely open. We shall also make some substantial reference to the *Phaedo*, especially at the end of the last chapter. While not generally considered an early dialogue, *Phaedo* does belong to this group by the style-based criteria summed up by Kahn.

² This, the definition-based account of Plato's early dialogues, will I am sure be recognised as thoroughly familiar and traditional. In the English-speaking literature, it is especially associated with Richard Robinson's classic study of 1953. Indeed he wrote: "These primary questions [i.e. the primary questions in Plato's early dialogues] have, roughly speaking, one of two forms: either "Is X Y?" or "What is X?" *Of these two types it is the What-is-X? form that stands out and catches the attention of every student of Plato's early dialogues*' (1953, 49, emphasis added). In fact, the same account was put forward, as more or less self-evident, a generation earlier by A. E. Taylor: '[This] will suffice to explain the general character of most of the earliest "Socratic" dialogues. The procedure adopted is commonly this. Some term of moral import for the conduct of life, one of those words which everybody is using as familiar expressions daily without much consideration of their precise meaning, such as "courage", "self-mastery", or even "virtue" itself, is taken and we ask the question whether we can say exactly what it means. A number of answers are suggested and examined, but all are found wanting. None of them will stand careful scrutiny. Usually the result arrived at is a negative one. We discover to our shame that we do not really know the meaning of the most familiar epithets

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The aim of the present study is to examine Plato's method of argument and enquiry in the early dialogues; to show that the traditional, definition-based account of the enquiries that make up these dialogues is mistaken; and to defend a different account, according to which these enquiries are set in motion by an *aporia* – in the sense of a particular problem – and it is the inability to answer the *aporia* that motivates and justifies the demand for a definition.³

There are philosophical reasons, and there are textual reasons to question the traditional, definition-based account of these dialogues. Philosophically, it would be most puzzling if Plato were to start his enquiries with the demand for a definition; especially once it is recognised just how heavy, and in need of justification, this demand really is. For it is not simply the request for an answer to a particular *ti esti* question, but rather the demand for an answer that may not be by appeal to a particular example and exemplar (as when Hippias answers Socrates' question 'What is beauty?' by appeal to a particular beautiful girl) but must be, on the contrary, general, unitary and

which we use every day of our lives to convey moral approval or censure' (1937, 28; the first edition was in 1926). So too Grube (1935, 1 ff.). A fine example of this tradition is R. E. Allen's book of 1970. The definition-based account of these dialogues is so widely accepted that Charles (2010, Introduction) takes it for granted in his summary statement of the state of the art. For an excellent recent example of this line of interpretation, which is all the more notable for being aware that the definition-based account of these dialogues may be challenged, but which stands up for it, I refer the reader to Dancy (2004). For me, the most memorable statement of the definition-based account goes back to Zeller, who expressly claims that the demand for definitions and search for essences is 'the principle of Socratic philosophy': 'Hiemit ist bereits der Punkt bezeichnet, an dem wir *das Prinzip der sokratischen Philosophie* zu suchen haben. Das wahre Wissen ist es, auf dessen Entdeckung Sokrates im Dienste des delphischen Gottes ausgeht, das Wissen vom Wesen der Dinge' (1922 [orig. 1888], 105, emphasis added). And Apelt (1912, 33) sums up Socrates' 'Lebensaufgabe' as that of defending a 'Begriffsphilosophie'. So too Natorp (1903/1921). There is not, to my knowledge, much French literature on the method of the early dialogues; my impression is that the definition-based account of these dialogues is as prevalent as in the English-speaking and the German critical literature. In a recent study, Dixsaut (2001, see esp. 28–32), refers, for the *ti esti* question and its epistemic priority, to Richard Robinson. Notable here (also because it is before Robinson) is Goldschmidt (1947b, 28), when he distinguishes between, on the one hand, 'the initial question' ('la question initiale'), such as Hippothales' question, in the *Lysis*, how to become a friend of Lysis, or the question, in the *Euthyphro*, whether Euthyphro's act of prosecution is an act of piety, and, on the other hand, 'the prior question' ('la question préalable'), that is, precisely, the relevant *ti esti* question, which, Goldschmidt says, needs to be asked *in order* to answer these other, initial questions. Forster's 2006 paper, 'Socrates' Demand for Definitions', however distinctive his sceptical reading of Socrates may otherwise be, is another example of the definition-based account, in this case read back into the *Apology*. And this irrespective of the fact that there is not a trace in the *Apology* of the demand for definitions or the search for definitional knowledge. For an early example of a reading of these dialogues that, apparently, is not so wedded to the centrality of the *ti esti* question and the demand for definitions in them, and is more careful and nuanced in the way in which it situates within these dialogues the *ti esti* question and the demand for definitions, I refer the reader to Shorey (1933, see e.g. 69).

³ For a compressed and summary version of the overall argument, see Politis (2012b). That paper is in effect a distillation of the present, full-length study.

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explanatory. A major aim of the study is to argue that the demand for, in this sense, a fully fledged definition stands in serious need of justification; and that, on the supposition that this demand is primary in the order of these enquiries (this being, of course, the supposition that I shall go on to question), it is not possible to find such a justification in the dialogues.

A major concern here is the status of Plato's so-called thesis of the priority of definition, when, in a number of places in these dialogues, he states that it is not possible to know a general proposition about a concept Φ (e.g. the concept of virtue and the proposition that virtue can, or that it cannot, be taught) unless one knows the definition of Φ . It will be argued that, again on the supposition that the demand for a definition is primary in the order of these enquiries (i.e. the supposition that I think we should question), this thesis, which clearly cries out for justification, is not justifiable on the basis of the materials that the dialogues provide us.

There is textual reason to question the traditional, definition-based account of Plato's early dialogues. It does not at all fit certain dialogues, such as the *Protagoras*. This dialogue (as I have argued in Politis 2012b, 'What Do the Arguments in the *Protagoras* Amount to?')⁴ does not start with the question 'What is virtue?' and with the demand for a definition of virtue; it starts with the question whether or not virtue can be taught. And it is only at the very end of the dialogue, when both Socrates and Protagoras have, each of them individually, argued extensively on both sides of this question and the question has, in this sense, emerged as articulating an *aporia*, that the demand for a definition of virtue is made; and made, precisely, as a condition of and means for resolving that *aporia*. A similar worry about the traditional, definition-based account arises with regard to a number of other dialogues, including ones that we might think of as directly supporting it. Thus the *Euthyphro* does not, despite appearances, start with the question 'What is piety?', rather it starts with a puzzle about a certain kind of action such as Euthyphro's action of prosecuting his father on certain grounds and in certain circumstances; the puzzle being that there appear to be equally good reasons for thinking that the action is impious as for thinking that it is pious. In this study, I provide systematic and comprehensive examination of the structure of enquiry in each of Plato's early dialogues. I conclude that the question that is primary in the order of these enquiries is not a *ti esti* question, but rather a two-sided, whether-or-not question;⁵ and one that, in the course of the dialogue, emerges as

⁴ I have argued for a similar conclusion about the *Charmides* in Politis (2008).

⁵ In Greek: *poteron . . . ē . . .* questions. They include both questions of the form *whether or not p* and questions of the form *whether p or q* where *p* and *q* are intended as clearly incompatible propositions.

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articulating an *aporia* in that it appears that there are good reasons on both sides and it is not at all clear how this conflict of reasons is to be resolved.⁶ I defend the same conclusion in greater depth, by examining the place and function of *aporia* in four select dialogues: the *Euthyphro*, the *Charmides*, the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*.

This, I believe, provides us with a basis for determining what, in these dialogues, motivates and justifies the demand for general, unitary and explanatory definitions; and what justifies the thesis of the priority of definition, which (on one formulation of it) says that knowing the general, unitary and explanatory definition of Φ is the one and only way or means of knowing a general truth about Φ . The argument is not so difficult to state, whereas it requires considerable effort to defend it both philosophically and textually. In summary, it goes as follows. Let us suppose, first, that what sets these enquiries in motion is not a *ti esti* question, but a two-sided, whether-or-not question articulating an *aporia*; and that the *ti esti* question is raised precisely in order to resolve that *aporia*. Let us suppose, further, that these *aporiai* are, in a particular sense, radical; namely, in the sense that they render questionable whether a generally recognised example-and-exemplar of a thing that is Φ (e.g. a teacher of virtue) genuinely is such an example-and-exemplar. On these suppositions, it can be demonstrated that the *aporia* (e.g. *whether or not virtue can be taught*) can be resolved only by demanding a general, unitary and explanatory definition of Φ (e.g. *virtue*); and that such a definition is, precisely, the means for resolving the *aporia*.

In sum, therefore, what I shall be arguing for in the present study is the following thesis, the central thesis of this study:

Plato's Justification of the Demand for Definitions

The justification of raising a question of the form 'What is Φ ?' and demanding a definition of Φ is that:

- If (1) there is a general question of the form *whether or not Φ is Ψ* ,⁷ and
 (2) this question articulates an *aporia* (in the sense that, as it will typically have emerged from enquiry addressed to the whether-or-not question, there are what appear to one and the same person to be good

⁶ That this notion of *aporia*, namely, in the sense of problem and dilemma, is present already in the early dialogues was argued, against a commonly held view to the contrary, in Politis (2006). I defend this further in Chapter 6, section 1.

⁷ I ask the reader to note that, throughout, the Greek capital letters, Φ and Ψ , stand for concepts (e.g. *beauty/the beautiful*, *piety/the pious*). For simplicity, I allow the same letters sometimes to denote instantiations of properties (*being beautiful*, *being pious*). This will be obvious from the context. Thus, when I write 'O is Φ ' (i.e. the schema instantiated by 'Charmides is beautiful'), where O picks out an individual, Φ picks out a property.

reasons on both sides, and the person does not at all know how to resolve this conflict of reasons), and (3) this *aporia* is radical (in the sense that it renders questionable whether things that are generally acknowledged as examples-and-exemplars of things that are Φ , genuinely are such exemplars), then raising the question 'What is Φ ?', and answering it with a general, unitary and explanatory definition, is the one and only way of answering the question *whether or not* Φ is Ψ and resolving the *aporia* that it articulates.

2 The notion of a radical *aporia*, and its significance

A central claim of the present study is that Plato does not assert, or imply, that knowledge of whether or not Φ is Ψ requires and is based on a general, unitary and explanatory definition of Φ . What he asserts is that knowledge of whether or not Φ is Ψ requires and is based on a general, unitary and explanatory definition of Φ , *if* the question *whether or not* Φ is Ψ articulates an *aporia*, and *if* this *aporia* is, in a particular sense, radical with regard to the concept Φ . The phrase 'radical *aporia*' means, of course, an *aporia* that goes to the root of things. But, as I am using this phrase, it means: an *aporia*, articulated by a question of the form *whether or not* Φ is Ψ , that renders questionable whether generally recognised examples-and-exemplars of things that are Φ genuinely are such. I use this phrase in this sense because I think that the *aporiai* articulated in these early dialogues, if they are associated with the *ti esti* question and with the demand for a definition, are, and are supposed by Plato to be, radical in just this sense.

It is worth emphasising that, clearly, it is not the case that all *aporiai* articulated by a question of the form *whether or not* Φ is Ψ are *radical aporiai* in the above sense. And there is, I think, good evidence for thinking that Plato recognises this. In the *Euthydemus* (275d2–278c1; I argue this point in Chapter 8, section 2, when I discuss this argument in the *Euthydemus*) he has two sophists articulate an *aporia* about learning: whether it is the wise or the ignorant that are capable of learning. But, remarkably, he does not think that the resolution of this *aporia* requires a definition, or a search for a definition. All its resolution requires, he thinks, is a distinction between two uses of the word 'to learn' (*to manthanein*), and a distinction that is readily available and does not require any major search or enquiry. This shows, I argue, that Plato does not think that *all aporiai* require, for their resolution, a definition. And, if we add that he thinks that *radical aporiai* do require this for *their* resolution (argued for in Chapter 8), we obtain

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that he does not think that all *aporiai* are radical – as indeed it is clear that they are not.

3 The main points of argument in Parts I and II of the present study

The aim of Part I is to show that the traditional, definition-based account of Plato's early dialogues is subject to a number of serious difficulties, and that it is so subject in its own terms and on its own merits. I identify *three* main difficulties to which, I argue extensively, the traditional, definition-based account of these dialogues is subject.

First, it fails to recognise, or to take sufficiently seriously, the fact that the *ti esti* question as raised by Plato, that is, as a demand for nothing less than a general, unitary and explanatory definition, and as being the one and only way of answering certain other questions (as per the thesis of the priority of definition), stands in need of justification. It fails to recognise this, I argue, because of a common assumption by critics in this tradition, namely, that the *ti esti* question, as raised by Plato, is not an everyday question, but a peculiarly Platonic, technical question. I argue extensively that the *ti esti* question, as raised by Plato, is, on the contrary, an everyday question, and that it is so even while Plato, on particular grounds, objects to a distinctively everyday way of answering it, namely, by appeal to an example-and-exemplar.

Secondly, critics in this, the definition-based tradition have commonly associated the *ti esti* question, as Plato raises it, with a certain peculiarly Platonic theory of knowledge. I argue that it is questionable whether there is a theory of knowledge, of any kind, in these dialogues. But, more important, I argue that, even if we suppose that there is a theory of knowledge in these dialogues, this supposition cannot serve to motivate and justify the *ti esti* question as Plato raises it, that is, as the demand for a general, unitary and explanatory definition, and with the heavy-duty function to which he puts it, that is, he thinks it is the one and only way of answering certain other questions (as per the thesis of the priority of definition).

Thirdly, critics wedded to the traditional, definition-based account of Plato's early dialogues, and in particular to the assumption that it is the *ti esti* question and the demand for a definition that sets in motion the enquiries that make up these dialogues, have simply not addressed the basic question: Why, then, does Plato raise, and make so much of, the *ti esti* question? Why does he seek definitions? As White (2009, note 14) perceptively observes: 'Surprisingly Richard Robinson's *Plato's Earlier*

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Dialectic, for instance, which so helpfully initiated the current discussion of all of these matters, neglects (so far as I can discover) to broach the question why definitions are sought – so fixed a place defining has come to have as something that philosophers simply *do*.⁷ But this question does, I think, need to be raised, addressed, and made as much of as possible.

The aim of Part II is to propose and defend an alternative account of these dialogues – we might call it the *aporia*-based account – one of whose strengths is that it addresses and resolves the problems with the traditional, definition-based account. The basic point of this account is that what sets in motion an enquiry that makes up an early Platonic dialogue is not a *ti esti* question, but a whether-or-not question; and that the *ti esti* question is raised, precisely, for the purpose of answering the whether-or-not question, *if and when* this question has emerged, through enquiry, as articulating an *aporia* – or rather, as I think we must add (I shall not always do so, it would be too cumbersome), has emerged as articulating not just any odd *aporia*, but a radical *aporia*.

To begin the task of re-consideration and of defending an alternative account of Plato's early dialogues, comprehensive and systematic textual examination is necessary; especially on the following two textual questions. First, what is the relative place and position, in the enquiries that make up these dialogues, of the two principal forms of question in them, *ti esti* questions and whether-or-not questions?⁸ Secondly, at what point in these enquiries is the thesis of the priority of definition put forward? I shall carry out this examination both through a comprehensive survey of each of these dialogues and through a number of in-depth case studies of select individual dialogues (the *Euthyphro*, the *Charmides*, the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*).

What we shall find through this examination is, above all, that there is a major presence of *aporia*-based argument in Plato's early dialogues: argument that is addressed to, is set in motion by, and is tied up with enquiry that is structured by, precisely, a two-sided, whether-or-not question with what appear to one and the same person to be good reasons on both sides and this person's not at all knowing how to resolve this conflict of reasons. And Plato, as we shall see, is careful to distinguish *aporia*-based argument from a kind of argument with which it might easily be confused but which is, he thinks, really very different, namely, argument that amounts to a controversy and dispute between different people or parties on opposite

⁸ For an excellent systematic analysis of the different kinds, or forms, of questions in Plato's early dialogues, see Longo (2000).

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sides of a two-sided, whether-or-not question. The difference is, basically, that between intra-personal conflicts of reasons and inter-personal conflicts of reasons: between arguing against oneself and arguing against another.

Most of us, on reading, studying and becoming familiar with Plato's early dialogues, have the impression that Socrates, as Plato presents him in them, really is searching for knowledge, and doing so for the purpose of finding it, however difficult he may think that it is to find it. A significant aim of this study is to defend this impression, also against those critics who question it;⁹ and to defend it by, as Lane (2011, 247) requires of such a reading, situating this reading of these dialogues – Lane describes it as 'one sort of reading of the dialogues, in which Socrates appears as the sceptical enquirer, genuinely seeking knowledge through elenctic examination and collaborative enquiry' – within a 'global interpretative framework for the dialogues'. To defend such a properly zetetic account of these dialogues, however, we shall need to take up the following question: How, according to Plato, can *aporia*-based enquiry aim at knowledge? And how must Plato conceive of reasons, that is, the reasons on each side of a whether-or-not question that articulates an *aporia* (or rather, a *radical aporia*; I shall not be repeating this), if the enquiry that is set in motion by such an *aporia* is aimed at knowledge? This issue will occupy us considerably. I shall argue that, in the context of such *aporia*-based enquiry aimed at knowledge, Plato needs to make, and that he does make, the following distinctions in reasons: (1) inconclusive reasons versus conclusive reasons; (2) apparently good reasons versus genuinely good reasons; (3) subjective (i.e. person-relative) reasons versus objective (i.e. not person-relative) reasons.

I come now to the crux: How does all this contribute to our ultimate aim, which is to determine and establish why, and with what justification, Plato, first, demands general, unitary and explanatory definitions, and, secondly, thinks that knowing such definitions is the one and only way of answering certain other questions (as per the thesis of the priority of definition)? Answering this crux question requires a great deal of thought, and preparation. Above all, it requires recognising, clearly and distinctly, that the first thing that needs to be done, and that we must expect of Plato, is: establish a connection – a link, a bridge, a bridging-principle – between a whether-or-not question, even if that question articulates an *aporia*, and a *ti esti* question and demand for a definition. For, as is clearly recognised

⁹ E.g. Forster (2006), who argues that Plato's point of having Socrates without exception failing to find the demanded definitional knowledge (Forster is wedded to the traditional, definition-based account of these dialogues) is to show that such knowledge is not possible for us humans and is the province of god alone.

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by many philosophers today – I am thinking, in part, of the defenders of a method of argument and enquiry in philosophy commonly referred as the method of reflective equilibrium, and, in part, of the defenders of a naturalised, experimental method of argument and enquiry, in philosophy as in the natural sciences – and as I think was recognised also by the Pyrrhonian sceptics in antiquity: *it is not the case that*, wherever we think there is an *aporia*, we must, if we want to resolve the *aporia*, search for a definition.

I think that Plato does establish such a connection, or link, between a whether-or-not question, even if that question articulates an *aporia*, and a *ti esti* question and demand for a definition; he does not simply *assume* a connection. Plato's link, I submit, is the supposition that the question *whether or not* Φ is Ψ articulates not simply any odd *aporia*, but an *aporia* that is radical with regard to the concept Φ ; in the sense that it renders questionable whether things that are generally recognised as examples-and-exemplars of things that are Φ genuinely are such. This peculiar link is, if I may use a hyperbole, the key to everything.¹⁰ For, as we shall see in the final chapter of this study, once this link is in place, it is not so difficult to defend, indeed demonstrate, the thesis of *Plato's Justification of the Demand for Definitions* (as stated earlier); and thus to accomplish our ultimate task, which is to determine and establish why, and with what justification, Plato, first, demands general, unitary and explanatory definitions, and, secondly, thinks that knowing such definitions is the one and only way of answering certain other questions.

4 Assumptions – what assumptions?

There is a basic assumption in the traditional, definition-based account of these dialogues, and it is that the demand for definitions is primary in these dialogues; primary not merely in the order of knowledge – we must, I think, acknowledge that the demand for definitions is primary in this sense – but in the order of enquiry. A major aim of the present study is to challenge this assumption and to defend an alternative account of what sets in motion, gives direction to, and indicates the aim of these enquiries. However, there is a potential worry, namely, that the alternative account that I am defending is itself beholden to certain questionable assumptions.

¹⁰ Failure to take proper account of the place that this link, and the notion of a *radical aporia*, occupies in my argument is likely to result in incredulity in response to the central thesis of this study, that is, the thesis of *Plato's Justification of the Demand for Definitions*. Denyer (2014) responds with such incredulity to my 2012b paper.

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This is not a worry I want to take lightly. For, as the title of Chapter 4 indicates ('What are Plato's early dialogues about?'), I am trying to get to the bottom of these things.

There is indeed an assumption in the positive account of Plato's early dialogues that I am defending with regard to the structure of the argument and enquiry that makes up these dialogues; in fact a pair of assumptions. The First Assumption is that Plato thinks that knowing the definition of Φ – definition not only in the sense of any answer to the question *ti esti* Φ ? but in the sense of an answer that is general, unitary and explanatory – is the one and only means of knowing certain other things that are about, or that employ, the concept Φ . (This is the thesis of the priority of definition for knowledge.) The Second Assumption is that Plato is indeed searching for knowledge of the *ti esti* of Φ , for a familiar scope of that variable ranging especially over ethical concepts, and doing so with the purpose of finding this knowledge – though, as we all know, he does not think that he succeeds in finding it.

Is it reasonable to adopt these assumptions? They are, precisely, shared by the traditional, definition-based account of Plato's early dialogues. For the purpose of the criticism of that account, therefore, it is reasonable to adopt them. Both assumptions, however, have recently been questioned. The Second Assumption has been questioned by Forster (2006).¹¹ He argues that Plato's purpose of having Socrates search for the *ti esti* of Φ , for a familiar range of that variable, is not to find such knowledge but, on the contrary, to show that such knowledge, knowledge of the essence of ethical matters and thus knowledge of *the most important matters* (*ta megista*), is not possible for us humans and is the province of god alone. This, Forster argues, is the point of having Socrates without exception failing to find the demanded definitional knowledge. The Plato that emerges from Forster's reading of the early dialogues is, as we may say, Plato-the-Sceptic. The First Assumption has been questioned by Catherine Rowett (formerly Catherine Osborne).¹² She argues that the point of having Socrates without exception failing to find the demanded definitional knowledge is to show that we do not need the possession of, and should not be aiming at, such knowledge,

¹¹ Also, some time ago, McPherran (1985).

¹² Osborne (1999); Rowett (2015, forthcoming). See also Nightingale (2004), chs. 2–4; Gerson (2004) and Gerson (2009), ch. 3. For an excellent example of the dispute between Plato-the-Demander-of-Definitions and Plato-the-Visionary, see the controversy between Cross (1954) and Bluck (1956). One may surmise that, especially with the consolidation as a standard work of Robinson's 1953 *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, the Plato-the-Visionary line of interpretation defended by Bluck pretty much disappeared from view; and in fact it has remained absent from the literature (certainly in the English-speaking world) until fairly recently.