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CHAPTER I

Introduction

I. READING DIALOGUES

Plato wrote brilliant dialogues. Compare this:[1]

SOCRATES: Once someone – whether a god or a godlike man – discovered that sound is unlimited. The Egyptian story says this person was Theuth, who first discovered that the vowels in the unlimited are not one but many; and that there are others that have no voice but still some kind of sound, and that these too have a number; and he separated a third kind of letter, which we now call mute. After that, he divided the soundless mutes down to each unit, and treated the vowels and the intermediates in the same fashion, until he grasped a number for each of them, and he gave all of them together the name 'letter'. And since he saw clearly that none of us learn one of them itself by itself without understanding them all, and reasoned that this bond is a single one, and that it somehow unifies them all, he called it the art of literacy, which is one over them all.

PHILEBUS: I have understood the relations between these things even more clearly than I did the last example, Protarchus; but the explanation suffers from the same shortcoming now as it did a little earlier.

SOC.: You mean, Philebus, what it has to say to the matter in hand?

PHIL.: Yes – that is what Protarchus and I have been asking for some time.

SOC.: But what you have been seeking for a long time is right under your nose.

PHIL.: How so?

[1] The translations throughout are my own except where I indicate otherwise; for passages of Plato they are of the Greek text printed in the OCT except where I indicate otherwise. I have generally avoided Greek in the main text, limiting direct quotation of Greek to the notes: I hope that this will make my argument accessible to the Greekless reader. I have used transliteration only in cases where the transliterated word has become established in English (e.g. *mimesis*), or where the translation of the word is problematic (e.g. *sophrosune*) so that the transliterated expression is retained in my main text.

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SOC.: Our discussion was about intelligence and pleasure from the start, wasn't it; and we wanted to know which of them was to be chosen?
PHIL.: Yes, indeed.
SOC.: And we say that each of them is one.
PHIL.: Absolutely.
SOC.: This is exactly what our preceding discussion asks: how is it that each of these is both one and many, and how instead of becoming unlimited straight away, each of them has some determinate number before it becomes unlimited?
PROTARCHUS: Socrates has thrown us into no mean puzzle, Philebus, by leading us round somehow or other in a circle. (*Philebus* 18b–19a)

with the clumping style of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*:

PHILONOUS: Again, try in your thoughts, Hylas, if you can conceive a vehement sensation to be without pain or pleasure.
HYLAS: I cannot.
PHIL.: Or can you frame to yourself an idea of sensible pain or pleasure, in general, abstracted from every particular idea of heat, cold, taste, smells etc.?
HYL.: I do not find that I can.
PHIL.: Does it not therefore follow that sensible pain is nothing distinct from those sensations or ideas – in an intense degree?
HYL.: It is undeniable; and, to speak the truth, I begin to suspect a very great heat cannot exist but in a mind perceiving it.
PHIL.: What! are you then in that *skeptical* state of suspense, between affirming and denying?
HYL.: I think I may be positive in the point. A very violent and painful heat cannot exist without the mind.[2]

or with the grandeurs of Cicero:

CATO: And yet there had to be something final, and – as in the case of orchard fruits and crops of grain in the process of ripening which comes from time – something shrivelled, as it were, and prone to fall. But this state the wise man should endure with resignation. For what is warring against the gods, as the giants did, other than fighting against Nature?
LAELIUS: True, Cato, but you will do a thing most agreeable to us both – assuming that I may speak for Scipio too – if, since we hope to become old (at least we wish it) you will, long in advance, teach us on what principles we may most easily support the weight of increasing years.

[2] *First Dialogue*, p. 15–16.

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CAT.: To be sure I will, Laelius, especially if, as you say, it is going to prove agreeable to you both.

LAEL.: Unless it is too much trouble to you, Cato, since you have, as it were, travelled the long road on which we also must set out, we really do wish to see what sort of place it is at which you have arrived.[3] (Cicero, *de senectute* 5–6, trs. Falconer)

Plato can write vivid and compelling accounts of the verbal engagements between Socrates (usually) and various interlocutors. And his brilliance may work, after all, to Plato's disadvantage; for the success of the dialogue form threatens the success of his arguments. Sometimes Plato's readers feel he must be cheating, just because he does it so well. The first encounter with Plato, therefore, may be the last, when the disenchanted reader feels that the swiftness of his rhetorical hand deceives the philosophical eye, or that the allure of his style covers up his real argumentative purposes. So *should* Plato have written dialogues?

Perhaps not. A different complaint against the dialogue form alleges that it is not so much devious and rhetorical, as overly particular – just because it dramatises the encounter between individual, individually characterised, people and their views. This gives no guarantee that the conclusions of the discussion apply beyond the narrow scope of this encounter here and now (or there and then). But philosophy – this complaint supposes – looks to the universal and hopes to transcend the here and now. Philosophy and drama, then, do not mix.

This objection might be a silly one. We do not suppose that *King Lear* matters only to Lear, Cordelia and Gloucester; nor that there is no more general understanding to be carried away from watching their tragedy than that they came to a sticky end. Drama does not wear its meaning on its sleeve, sure enough, but indirectly particular dramas are after all universalisable.[4] Moral philosophers, consequently, have been more charitable towards the dialogue form than metaphysicians. For in ethics we need to see the interaction of general principle with particular situation; the ethical must be both universalisable (principled) and absolutely particular (about the individual things we do, the individual lives we

[3] The echo of *Republic* 328e in this passage emphasises the point: Socrates' resonant words to Cephalus there lack the bland obsequiousness of Laelius' to Cato.

[4] See Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b1 ff. This has become a *topos* for modern discussions of the inadequacies of philosophy; see e.g. Williams 1996, Nussbaum 1986.

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lead). Here, indeed, philosophers often fall short in their portrayal of example: how dismal it is to describe an ethical problem as 'One man meets another at a cross-roads, murders him, then unknowingly marries his own mother; on discovery she kills herself, he blinds himself – were they right?' when we could read or watch the *Oedipus Tyrannus*; and how inadequate for the purposes of ethics, which need to consider not just what was done but why and how. Ethics wonders, therefore, what was said about what was done. So Plato's portrayal of full character, of people leading lives and discussing the principles upon which they should do so,[5] fits the demands of ethics very well.

But the metaphysician may still have a point. It may be that ethical reflection benefits from the indirect provocation of drama or tragedy, but is the same true for the principles of logic or the assumptions we should make about 'being qua being'? In cases such as these, if a dialogue presents an argument *indirectly*, by presenting it within some particular encounter between two individual people, would not clarity be better served by directness?[6] If Plato's style is designed merely to make his arguments more attractive, then to understand what he really means we need to pare away the literary skin to find the philosophical fruit within. This process has been particularly associated with the modern analytic approach to philosophy, although it has been increasingly questioned in recent years.[7] For the contrast between the literary and the philosophical may in general be tendentious; and in particular cases it may be inaccessible – where the argument and the dialogue form are so closely interwoven that it becomes impossible to decide which is which. In this book, however, I shall argue that the attempt to make such a decision is misguided anyway. For, I shall argue, the relation between the form of the dialogues and their argument is itself a philosophical relation, whose importance is denied by the suggestion that form and argument simply belong to different genres, or different types of thinking (or whatever other

[5] For the moral philosopher, the crucial thing about dialogue is that it represents moral agents, *persons* – and this is a central idea in Plato's conception of *mimesis*, as Kosman has argued recently, 1992.

[6] Plato's complaint against the poets might bounce back on him. If he knows what he is talking about why does he not say it? If he does not know what he is talking about, why does he not stay silent? Cf. e.g. *Republic* 598d ff.

[7] See, for example, the essays collected in Klagge and Smith, 1992, and in Gill and McCabe 1996.

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difference the contrast between the literary and the philosophical is supposed to capture).

It is often supposed that the *Phaedrus* explains all this.[8] Theuth, the inventor of writing, went with his discovery to Thamus the king of Egypt, only to be met with dismay. Writing is a drug for the memory (anyone who has worked with a computer will concur . . .) – fixed, unresponsive and inflexible:

> SOCRATES: Writing has, I suppose, Phaedrus, this extraordinary feature, and it is in truth very much like painting. For its offspring stand there as if they are alive, but if they are asked a question, they preserve a haughty silence. It is the same with written words. You might think they spoke as if they were intelligent, but if you asked them a question in the hope of learning something, they always say just one thing, the same all the time. For once it is written down, any written word rolls around just as much in front of those who know as in front of those who have no business with it, and it does not know whom it should talk to and whom not. When it is wronged or abused unjustly it always needs the help of its parent; it is not able to protect itself or to come to its own aid. (*Phaedrus* 275d–e)

Socrates' remarks are thoroughly provocative.[9] They pretend to the directness of oral discussion, but they are themselves fixed and recorded by the written word against which they inveigh. This has two immediate effects. First, it calls the reader's attention to the fact that Socrates is indeed represented here in writing. We are not hearing his words live, but merely reading an image of him, an image which cannot answer our questions back. So we notice the form of the representation, and the fictionality of its characters: the writing is self-conscious. Second, if Socrates is right, then the truth he enunciates undermines the very context in which it is said. He may mean, simply, that the reading of philosophy is second-best, compared with an actual encounter with Socrates himself on the banks of the Ilissus. Or, more radically, he may mean that written philosophy is entirely unreliable, just because it is so inflexible that it is insusceptible to scrutiny. The point of this

[8] This has become the *locus classicus* for discussion of Plato's literary skills; cf. also *Epistulae* VII, which if it is genuine, re-emphasises the *Phaedrus'* point; even if the Letter is not genuine, it attests the importance of the puzzle about writing in the Academy.

[9] Indeed, they have provoked a great deal of attention especially in recent years, when scholars have turned their attention to the dialogue form; see in particular, Ferrari 1987, Mackenzie 1982b, Rowe 1986, Gill 1996b.

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may be the posing of the paradox itself, since paradoxes have a philosophical dynamic of their own;[10] or it may be to provoke us into reflecting on the formal aspects of philosophical writing; or it may be merely to explain that what Plato does when he writes dialogue is to represent the way that real philosophy should be done – by question and answer, person to person, live and face to face.[11]

If that is Plato's claim, we may begin to feel a deep sense of disappointment when we come to read the later dialogues. By this time, perhaps, Plato had decided that the methods of Socrates were pretty dull and unproductive after all; he replaced them first by the superb vision of the *Republic*, and then later he offers an entirely fresh and different account of dialectic to replace that. Correspondingly, the *Republic* is a great speech (interrupted by conversation), while the *Sophist* and the *Politicus* are as dramatic as collection and division is exciting. I shall wonder whether this story is true.

It is commonly thought that the late dialogues are arid and flat from a literary and dramatic point of view. To rebut that thought, I shall consider a quartet of late dialogues, which are connected both dramatically and thematically in complex ways: the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Politicus* and the *Philebus*.[12] I do not propose an exhaustive treatment of these dialogues.[13] I start, instead, with this question about the dialogue form: how, if at all, is the dialogue form of philosophical importance in this quartet? I shall reflect upon this question in terms dictated by Socrates' story about Theuth. There it seems that Socrates wants philosophy to be done by conversation: so I shall, to begin with, focus my attention on the people who have the conversations in these dialogues.

But there are two sorts of conversation to be found in my quar-

[10] See here Quine 1966, Sainsbury 1988.
[11] See here Gill 1996a.
[12] Why just these four? You might complain of the omission of the *Timaeus*, or of the *Laws*. I shall argue that there is a peculiarly organic connection between the dialogues of this quartet; I shall not devote a great deal of time to showing discontinuity between them and other, possibly late, works. Nor shall I return yet again to the question of dating (but see McCabe 1994, Appendix A for some of my assumptions) save to say here that I take it that these four dialogues were at least written to be read in the order I give them: *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*. I should add, however, that I find it a virtue of the late dialogues that they are able to reflect on, and revise, the assumptions of earlier ones: but for two different approaches to the issue of chronology see e.g. Kahn 1996, Rowe 1999, 12 n.1.
[13] I have, I fear, already quite exhausted my reader's patience on some subjects, McCabe 1994 passim.

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tet. One is the directly reported conversation between the protagonists who are, as it were, live to the actual encounter – Socrates, the Eleatic Stranger, Theaetetus, Theodorus, Young Socrates, Philebus and Protarchus. The other is a collection of indirectly reported conversations between Socrates or the Eleatic Stranger, on the one hand, and some imaginary interlocutors. These are many and various. At times they are personifications, such as the pleasures and the knowledges of *Philebus*. At times they are simply in dialogues embedded within the dialogue itself, such as the discussion between the Eleatic Stranger and the idealists at *Sophist* 247 ff. But there is a particular set of imaginary conversations where the interlocutor surprisingly fails to turn up; the conversation turns out lop-sided. More strikingly still, these missing persons are Plato and Socrates' own predecessors: in each case, the conversation should be between Socrates, or the Eleatic Stranger, and someone who takes up a particular philosophical position. I shall argue that in each case the interlocutor turns out to propose a philosophical position that cannot be occupied; and this is why he fails to turn up. There are four of these missing philosophers: Protagoras, Parmenides, some strict materialists, and Heraclitus. I discuss the complex arguments to refute them in Part I, The Opponents.

There are two other dramatis personae who go missing: the hedonist Philebus, and Socrates himself. In his eponymous dialogue Philebus gradually fades out of the conversation; whereas Socrates effectively disappears for the two dialogues which are conducted by the Eleatic Stranger, the *Sophist* and the *Politicus*. I shall argue that these absences are evidence of two positive theories to be advanced in the quartet. In the case of Philebus, he lacks a teleology in which to participate; by contrast Plato offers a teleology of order (I argue for this in Part II, Teleology). In the case of Socrates, he is confronted by an account of philosophy, philosophy as a holistic epistemology, which seems inimical to his method of question and answer, to the conversational way of doing philosophy. One running theme in what follows is the various ways in which the method of conversational dialectic is presented, and how this is marked off both from Socrates' earlier endeavours, and from the conversations with certain opponents which fail. Socrates' reappearance in the *Philebus*, I shall suggest, is the mark of Plato's reconciliation of his new, late epistemology with the conversational method of dialectic, where that is conceived as a positive

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philosophical method, vitally person to person, and no longer negative in its outcome. I argue for this conclusion in Part III, Reason and the Philosopher.

So one theme in what follows is philosophical method, where that is understood in two rather different senses. On the one hand, we need to know what method to use for doing philosophy. In the case of Plato's late investigations, then, what is the relation between the method of question and answer represented by Socrates and the more formal epistemology proposed in the dialogues themselves? I return to this theme repeatedly, especially in Ch. 2§5 and Ch. 9. On the other hand, Plato's own representation of philosophical conversations demands a defence, in particular a defence against the complaints either that it is a mere literary flourish or that it is hopelessly specific to the encounter he describes. I shall argue that these dialogues do provide a complex and subtle defence of his method of writing philosophy, against any such dismal view of the significance of the dialogue form (this claim will appear throughout the book).

2. FRAMES AND REFLECTION

That defence, I shall suggest, begins with his missing persons. There are a lot of characters who do not turn up in Plato's dialogues. Of course, you do not, and I do not; nor does René Descartes, nor does Karl Marx. But there are some ostentatious absentees.

Two of them are famous. While – as Plato reports it – Socrates was preparing himself for death and explaining how the health of the soul is far more important than the health of the body, Plato was off sick (*Phaedo* 59b10). And as in the *Sophist* and *Politicus*, in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* the protagonist is not Socrates, but instead someone who may lay claim to the expertise relevant to the matter in hand (Timaeus and the Athenian Stranger). Why? These literary devices might make philosophical sense – they may, for example, suggest that the subject in hand is genuinely a matter of expertise or, more plausibly, they may distance Plato from the views expressed in the dialogue.[14] But they do something else: they make us notice *that the dialogue is fiction*. How, we ask ourselves,

[14] This interpretation has sometimes been adopted for the late dialogues: cf. M. Frede, 1996. For the *Phaedo* the disavowal this represents is less attractive – although here we may only be moved by sentiment.

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could Plato have been absent from Socrates' deathbed, when it is Plato (as we know from circumstances *outside* the dialogue) who reports the whole scene to us? To this kind of emphasis on the fictional character of the dialogues I shall return, especially in discussing the use Plato makes of his predecessors, and the way in which he exploits myth (in Ch. 3§6, Ch. 4§6, Ch. 5§2). For, I shall argue, this use of self-conscious fiction both distances the reader from the dialogue (it forces us to cease suspending disbelief about what is represented to us), and makes the reader reflective on the content of the fiction itself. By provoking an attitude of disbelief, that is to say, these moments in the dialogues bring the arguments themselves under reflective scrutiny, and focus our attention on the form and principles of the arguments themselves.

Consider some earlier dialogues when characters are introduced in an imaginary dialogue within the dialogue.[15] For example, in the *Crito* Socrates imagines himself having conversation with the Laws, who represent the argument that Socrates must stay in prison and abide his punishment, an argument which Socrates endorses by doing so. Here the very fictionality of the Laws makes us wonder just whose side Plato is on here; and thereafter it makes us wonder further, not so much about Socrates' individual decision to stay in prison, but about his standing relative to the Laws, and the justification for the Laws' exercise of authority over him.[16] Or in the *Hippias Major*, in his discussion with Hippias Socrates imagines another discussion which Socrates *might* have with another Socrates. Once again, there is an obvious philosophical effect: it allows the Socrates figure who is present to disavow authority for his own views, while suggesting that there may be some authoritative view (on obeying the law, for example, or on defining beauty) available. Then, it forces us to inquire what it would be to have such an authoritative view anyway.[17] So the effect of introducing *someone else* at a distance, embedded within the present dialogue, is to provoke the reader into reflecting on the status of the theory itself; the philosophical pay-off *of the device itself* seems to be epistemological or metaphysical, rather than ethical or political.

Compare the discussion in the *Apology* (which is not, otherwise, a

[15] There is an analogy between this sort of dialogue within a dialogue and the reporting of the dialogue 'proper' by some observer or series of observers – for an extreme example of the latter compare the reporting of the meeting between Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates at the beginning of the *Parmenides*.
[16] See here Harte 1999b.
[17] M. Frede 1996.

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dialogue at all) between Socrates and Meletus, one of his accusers. This contrivance (in a work which is evidently not an accurate historical record)[18] has the effect of emphasising Socrates' appropriation of the terms of normal legal process to the quite different standards of the elenchus.[19] Philosophy, Plato suggests, has higher conditions on truth and discovery than is demanded by the law (Plato suggests it, not Socrates – for Plato makes the suggestion by virtue of the fiction itself, by holding up the two techniques for comparison). Or at *Phaedo* 100c ff. Socrates, outlining his 'method of hypothesis', explains that once we propose a hypothesis we should base our answers on that.[20] He imagines an interlocutor, and then has him wait until the analysis of the hypothesis itself is complete before asking questions. And this fiction brings out clearly a point, once again, about the nature of philosophical inquiry – that we must do it in the right order, and not answer questions before they are appropriate.

This might allow us a preliminary thought. In even the earliest dialogues, arguments (arguments *pure and simple*, we might say) are *framed* in the narrative of the dialogue, in the drama of the debate. But the frame itself reflects on the argument; in particular, it reflects on the conditions under which that argument is conducted – on its assumptions and its conditions. So the frame, in these cases, investigates the methods and principles of philosophy itself. It is as such, I shall argue, that the dialogue form not only persists but gains in importance in the late period: especially in my late quartet. Central to this, I claim, is the fact that the drama of the dialogues is fiction; all of these characters, including Socrates himself, are imaginary.[21]

3. HISTORICAL FICTIONS

Yet many of these people are historical figures. Indeed, the frame often emphasises the historicity of Plato's characters at the same time as it reminds us of the artifice of drama. Socrates, of course,

[18] But see Kahn 1996, 88.
[19] Consider, for example, the commonplace: 'My opponent says he tells the truth, but he lies; I on the other hand, will tell you the whole truth, unvarnished'; and compare *Apology* 17a–b.
[20] I avoid analysing this thoroughly vexed passage in detail.
[21] This does not imply, of course, that there may not be some connections between any particular fictional figure and its historical counterpart; but those connections should not be taken for granted.

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