CHAPTER 1

Opposed hypotheses about Plato's dialogues

1.1 A DATUM: THE TWO DIFFERENT MODES OF SPEAKING OF PLATO'S SOCRATES

The Socrates of Plato's *Apology*, on trial for his life, announces an intention to his jurors:

> While I breathe and am able, I will not stop philosophizing (*philosophôn*) . . . saying the sorts of things I usually do. (29d)[1]

His example of what he usually says is this:

> Best of men – being an Athenian, from the city the greatest and most reputed for wisdom and strength – are you not ashamed that you are concerned about having as much money as possible, and reputation and honor, while you are not concerned for (*epimelê(i)*) nor do you think about thoughtfulness and truth and how your soul will be the best it can be? (29d–e)

He also says:

> My total concern is to be practicing nothing unjust or impious. (32d)

We can then infer that concern for "how your soul will be . . . best" is for Socrates concern about how to live justly and piously.[2] So Socrates' usual address involves issuing a challenge about the rightness of your way of living.

Socrates further reports that his challenge can lead to examination and that the examination can lead to reproach under certain conditions:

> And if one of you disputes this and says he is concerned, I won't directly let him off or go away, but I will question him and examine (*exetasô*) and test (*elegxô*) and if he does not seem to me to possess virtue, but says he does, I will reproach him that things that are worth the most he makes least of, but the more trivial things he makes more of. (29e–30a)

[1] Translations from the *Apology* are my own. The text is Duke *et al.* (1995).
[2] Vlastos (1971, 5–6) discusses this point.

So Socrates' philosophizing, his usual or habitual activity throughout his life, as he describes it in the *Apology*, has several components. First he makes a challenge. Then he examines: that is, he subjects his interlocutor to a test – an elenchus – concerning how he conducts his life. Then, under certain conditions, Socrates reproaches. The examination that can follow upon an initial challenge is evidently an especially important component, for Socrates elsewhere closely links philosophizing with examining (28e: "philosophizing . . . and examining (*exetazonta*)").

His examining others involves examining himself, since he says to his jurors that they have heard him "examining both myself and others" (38a).

At the end of the *Apology* Socrates further describes his lifelong activity:

> [W]hen my sons grow up, punish them, paining them with these very same things with which I pained you, if they seem to you to care for money or something else before virtue, and if they are reputed to be something when they are nothing, reproach them just as I did you, that they do not care for what one ought, and they think they are something when they are worth nothing. (41e)

Here Socrates considers his constant activity to have involved paining people by reproaching them that they don't care about living in the best way and – a new detail – that they think they are something when they are worth nothing.

This Socrates of the *Apology* who describes himself as constantly examining seems to many readers to contrast with the Socrates of some of Plato's other dialogues.[3] The Socrates of certain other dialogues, for example, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, apparently enunciates and recommends to his audience extraordinary views that he does not examine with them. He is

[3] Sedley (1995, 3–26):

> Later we tend to find Socrates – or whoever replaces him as main speaker – using his interlocutors as partners in the development of his own constructive proposals.

Kenny (2004, 37–39):

> Plato's dialogues do not assign a consistent role or personality to the character called Socrates. In some dialogues he is predominantly a critical inquirer. In other dialogues . . . notably *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Symposium* . . . Socrates appears not as an inquiring questioner but as a teacher in full possession of a system of philosophy.

Kenny (2004, 41) contrasts "the didactic philosopher" of some dialogues with "the agnostic inquirer" of certain other dialogues. See also Shields (2003, 61):

> [W]e must be struck by an important shift in Socrates' self-presentation across the Platonic corpus. [In some dialogues] Socrates professes his analytical ignorance . . . He is also agnostic about such important matters as *post-mortem* existence. This contrasts sharply with the Socrates of the *Phaedo*, who . . . retails proof after proof of the soul's immortality . . . Assuming that the Socrates of the *Phaedo* now represents Plato's views rather than those of the historical Socrates, we can identify a first major Platonic departure from Socrates. Plato, unlike Socrates, has not only positive convictions, but is prepared to argue for them at length.

an apparently doctrinal Socrates. I emphasize that the positive theses that this new Socrates offers to his interlocutors are controversial, and yet he leaves the theses quite unexamined. The fact is that Socrates appears to have contrasting manners of conversation in Plato's dialogues.

1.2 TWO HYPOTHESES TO EXPLAIN THE DATUM

Some readers think that the contrasting conversational manners of the depicted Socrates are irreconcilable.[4] Gregory Vlastos, for example, says this to account for the division between the Socrates who questions and examines, for example in the *Euthyphro*, and the Socrates who offers unexamined instruction, for example in *Republic* books 2–10:

> I submit that to make sense of so drastic a departure from what Plato had put into his portrayals of Socrates from the *Apology* to the *Gorgias*, we must hypothesize a profound change in Plato himself. If we believe that in any given dialogue Plato allows the persona of Socrates only what he (Plato) at that time considers true, we must suppose that when that persona discards the elenchus as the right method to search for the truth, this occurs only because Plato himself has now lost faith in that method.[5]

Vlastos explains further:

> This is the grand . . . hypothesis on which my whole interpretation of Socrates-in-Plato is predicated.[6]

[4] Robinson (1969a, 74) finds that there won't be an explanation only with reference to the historical figure of Socrates because the Socrates Plato depicts would have an unlikely fluctuation in views. He goes on to look for an explanation in terms of Plato's intentions in writing.

But Robinson (1953, 83) also finds that Plato did not fully have his material under his control and was unaware of his distortion of Socrates' views.

[5] Vlastos (1991a, 117).

[6] Vlastos (1991a, 117, n. 50). Vlastos' full phrase is "grand methodological hypothesis." Others had earlier taken what amounted to Vlastos' hypothesis as an unstated or understated assumption. They had not seemed to recognize it as a hypothesis needing testing against the content of the dialogues. For example, Guthrie (1978, vol. v, 5–6) says:

> Plato, for all his reverence for Socrates as the inspiration and starting point for his own reflections, is a more sophisticated philosopher and marks a new and fateful development in the history of thought . . . One gets a strong impression that he was an essentially different philosophical character from the master through whose mouth he so often expresses the results of his own maturer and more widely ranging mind . . . [T]o him Protagoras and Gorgias, Prodicus and Hippias, were still opponents whose challenge had not been adequately met; but to meet it called for something more radical and comprehensive than the simple ethical intellectualism of Socrates. It called for nothing less than a new vision of the whole of reality, involving metaphysics, human psychology, and not least cosmology, . . . Since he claimed to have found what Socrates all his life was seeking, and since the personal impact of Socrates had been for him an unforgettable experience of his most impressionable years, he could see nothing improper in putting into Socrates' mouth some (not all) of the discoveries which in his eyes provided . . . the answers to the questions that [Socrates] had asked.

And again,

> [M]y hypothesis . . . proposes that Plato in those early works of his, sharing Socrates' philosophical convictions, sets out to think through for himself their central affirmations, denials, and reasoned suspensions of belief . . . Employing a literary medium which allows Socrates to speak for himself, Plato makes him say whatever *he* – Plato – thinks *at the time of writing* would be the most reasonable thing for Socrates to be saying just then in expounding and defending . . . [Plato's] own philosophy . . . The writer's overriding concern is always the philosophy . . .
>
> As Plato changes, the philosophical persona of his Socrates is made to change, absorbing the writer's new convictions . . . [7]

Much interesting scholarship has accepted Vlastos' grand hypothesis as confirmed and has treated it as no longer a hypothesis but as a sort of axiom or datum.[8] Vlastos, however, emphasized that he was treating it as a hypothesis under testing throughout his writings:

> That it is offered as hypothesis, not dogma or reported fact, should be plain. Such it will remain as I pursue it step by step. Of its truth the reader must be the judge.[9]

In the judgment of this reader, Vlastos' hypothesis is false. I propose a different hypothesis. Pursuing it, I have found that it more adequately accounts for the same features of Plato's dialogues for which Vlastos was attempting to account. Other readers may find it worth the effort to judge the adequacy of this different hypothesis.

My hypothesis is that the Socrates in any of Plato's dialogues is examining his interlocutor and so engaging in the central component of the complex activity, philosophizing, which Socrates calls in the *Apology* his habitual activity throughout life. But examination is itself a multi-stage activity. Its first step is revealing the interlocutor. Socrates' awareness of

[7] Vlastos (1991a, 50–53).

[8] Morgan (1992, 232–233) treating it as a datum, offers a nuanced statement:

> That shift [in the portrayal of Socrates] may be either from a historically attentive portrait to one that employs Socrates as a Platonic mouthpiece or from an earlier to a later Platonic perception of Socrates.

Kraut (1992, 3–4) says:

> How can Socrates be so opposed to himself: a seeker who professes ignorance about the one subject that absorbs him – the human good – and yet (in the *Republic* and elsewhere) a confident theoretician who speculates at length not only about morality, but also about knowledge, reality, politics, and the human soul?

Kahn (1996, 100) says: "In . . . [the] great didactic dialogues [*Phaedo* and *Republic*] the ignorant inquirer of the *Apology* has almost disappeared."

[9] Vlastos (1991a, 53).

what is appropriate to reveal his interlocutors occasions Socrates' different speaking styles, tailored to different interlocutors in different dialogues. With certain interlocutors Socrates appears to be recommending teachings of which he is certain. With them he appears to be teaching in those very areas of which he disclaims knowledge in the *Apology*. That is because Socrates as depicted realizes that appearing to enunciate doctrine, and observing his interlocutor's receptivity to it, is the best way of revealing for certain interlocutors their beliefs and inclinations that need to be examined. Revealing a receptive interlocutor, Socrates thereby enacts the first stage of an examination. So in the apparently doctrinal dialogues we still see Socrates living the single-minded life of examination that he attributes to himself in the *Apology*.[10]

While I pursue my alternative hypothesis in this book, I will nevertheless be retaining some assumptions that underlie Vlastos' hypothesis. I retain the assumption that Plato's character Socrates has a special status: what Socrates says must be taken very seriously as our best clue to Plato's own convictions. I also retain the assumption that Plato's "overriding concern is always the philosophy." I will later discuss the force these assumptions have for me.[11]

1.3 MORE ON THE GRAND HYPOTHESIS AND MY ALTERNATIVE

Vlastos' grand hypothesis says that Plato enunciates, through the character Socrates, some striking teachings in dialogues written in the middle of Plato's writing career. For example, the *Republic* recommends a novel political system. The *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic* offer what the secondary literature calls "the theory of forms."[12] The *Republic* and *Phaedo* offer some specialized conceptions of what a philosopher is and does. The

[10] The recurrent Socrates that I find in all the dialogues is close to the Socrates that Vlastos (1991a) finds in the dialogues he considers early and to the Socrates that Brickhouse and Smith (1994, viii) find in the dialogues they consider early.

[11] Wolfsdorf (2008, 253) finds that the character even of the group of dialogues in which Vlastos finds the ignorant and examining Socrates is not consistent. Wolfsdorf believes it serves Plato's larger purpose – to do philosophy – to present an inconsistent Socrates. My chapter 7, n. 5 (p. 198) indicates why I do not find convincing Wolfsdorf's interesting argument that Socrates in the *Euthydemus* is "psychologically inconsistent or implausible" (2008, 255).

[12] Dancy (2004, 4) says:

> Socrates in certain dialogues produces arguments to defeat proposed definitions without committing himself to the idea that the things to be defined are to be found in an eternal, unchanging, and ontologically pure realm. In other dialogues definition takes more of a back seat, and Socrates does commit himself to that metaphysical view. The metaphysical view is the Theory of Forms.

Phaedo gives memorable arguments for the immortality of the soul. John Cooper comments about these offerings:

> [It is] the overwhelming impression not just of [ancient readers] but of every modern reader of at least many of his dialogues, that Platonism . . . constitutes a systematic body of "philosophical doctrine" – about the soul and its immortality; . . . the eternal and unfaltering Forms whose natures structure our physical world and the world of decent human relations within it; the nature of love and the subservience of love in its genuine form to a vision of that eternal realm. These and many other substantive philosophical ideas to be explored in Plato's dialogues are his permanent contribution to our Western philosophical culture.[13]

Given this comment, it is remarkable that so many readers, including Plato scholars, find Plato's "permanent contribution to our Western philosophical culture" quite unbelievable.[14] I will later discuss the constituents of the Platonic "systematic body of 'philosophical doctrine'" in more detail. For now I simply record the reception by very many prominent readers. Readers find the political arrangements of the *Republic* loathsome.[15] Many readers agree that the theory of forms of the *Republic* and *Phaedo*, on the standard account of that theory, is a "baroque monstrosity."[16] The conception of the philosopher in the *Republic* excludes almost everyone. The conception of the philosopher in the *Phaedo* is unworkable for anyone living an ordinary life. And even first-year undergraduates who are convinced of their souls' immortality for reasons of their own find the *Phaedo*'s arguments for the immortality of the soul to be foolish.

Here is one reader's statement of his incredulity about the views of Plato as expressed by a putatively doctrinal Socrates:

> Plato's philosophical views are mostly false, and for the most part they are evidently false; his arguments are mostly bad, and for the most part they are evidently bad. Studying Plato . . . can . . . be a dispiriting business: for the most part, the student of Plato is preoccupied by a peculiar question – How and why did Plato come to entertain such exotic opinions, to advance such outré arguments?[17]

[13] Cooper (1997a, xxv). I have quoted selectively from one side of Cooper's very balanced account in order to outline more sharply the view I oppose.

[14] For example Sedley (2002, 41) says: "[M]ost of Plato's interpreters long ago abandoned any commitment to the truth of his doctrines . . . "

[15] Rowe (2007, 16) speaks of "in the *Republic* . . . all those appalling political proposals." Ackrill (2001, 230–251), while recognizing the hostility with which some readers have reacted to the *Republic*, defends it.

[16] I borrow the phrase "baroque monstrosity," for the theory of forms as traditionally understood from Meinwald (2008, 3). Speaking of interpreters who find the Theory of Forms hopelessly flawed, Meinwald (1992, 390) says, "[T]he attribution to Plato of a middle theory that can only be nonsense is a problem."

[17] Barnes (1995, xv–xvi).

For my alternative hypothesis this question does not arise, since my hypothesis does not suppose that the depicted Socrates who appears to assert exotic views and to assert weird arguments actually does so and in so doing speaks what Plato believes.

My alternative hypothesis that Socrates often speaks to reveal interlocutors who would profit from examination provokes its own different questions. For example: how do we tell when Socrates' apparent assertions in Plato's dialogues are not straightforward assertions or endorsements but are instead revelation of an interlocutor? I will answer that question with different details for each dialogue I consider. Subsequent chapters will find evidence hitherto overlooked that Socrates' apparent offering of doctrine is mere appearance. The evidence is often within what Socrates' interlocutors ask him to do. They sometimes request of him a particular type of contribution to the discussion, and he responds entirely literally. He has listened to his interlocutors much better than they seem to have listened to themselves.

There is also the question: why would Plato think that any readers would be interested in Socrates' revelation that various interlocutors are inclined toward "exotic opinions" and "outré arguments"? I will answer that question later.

As preliminary to outlining the plan of this book I consider briefly the naturalness of my alternative hypothesis from two slightly different approaches.

1.4 One Approach That Leads Naturally to My Alternative Hypothesis

If one feels a need to explain certain dialogues' drastic departure from the portrayal of Socrates in other dialogues, then one has done some background reasoning as follows. There appears to be a departure. Therefore there is a departure. Therefore we should ask: how can we explain the departure?

But another approach is to reason differently from the same starting point. There appears to be a departure. But there are strong reasons to expect that there would not be a departure. After all, Plato does not change Socrates' physical description, the details of his biography, or his mannerisms of speech.[18] Socrates reports no conversion experiences – for example,

[18] Halliwell (1995, 87–121) reports on a recurring feature of Socrates' address to interlocutors. Through Socrates' distinctive use of vocatives, some common in and outside Plato's works, and some rare, "Plato has succeeded in turning such phrases into one strand of the peculiarly Socratic manner of focusing his attention upon his respondents" (1995, 100–101).

no conversion from his avowed ignorance about death in the *Apology* to the conclusions of the (unconvincing) arguments for immortality thirty days later in the *Phaedo* as he awaits execution. Therefore we should ask: how can we explain why there would seem to be a departure if there is no departure? Having asked that question, one is naturally led to suspect that apparent presentation of doctrine might be a way of examining, and to ask how that could be so.

1.5 A SECOND APPROACH TO MY HYPOTHESIS FROM FOUR OBSERVATIONS

A second approach begins from four observations after dwelling on which the hypothesis that the Socrates of Plato's dialogues is constantly the examining Socrates might, again, naturally occur to one as something worth testing in the way this book's chapters test it.

A first observation concerns the kind of question-and-answer discussion via which Socrates, as depicted in certain of Plato's dialogues – the aporetic or puzzle-raising dialogues – elicits views of his conversational partner. Such question-and-answer discussion does not at all commit Socrates the questioner to any of the premises of the arguments he constructs. Socrates is committed at most to the connection between the premises and the conclusion: it is his answerer who is responsible for any assertions in the course of the argument.[19]

A second observation is that serious study of certain arguments that Plato presents leaves a vivid impression that Plato's logical acumen is substantial. (My own favorite arguments are in the *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist*.[20]) Even as one makes this observation, one will be aware that Plato's writings have many other arguments, some of which one has not yet understood. And of course one's views would be better grounded if one understood everything. But there will not be sufficient reason to think that anyone else understands everything, either. So one may reasonably consider oneself warranted in starting from where one is, with one's very strong impression that Plato is capable of solid reasoning.

[19] The memorable formulation of Frede (1992) first made me think about this point. See also Stokes (2005). See chapter 4 (pp. 93–97) for some conventions of stylized question-and-answer discussion. Socrates and Alcibiades in *Alcibiades* I (113a–b) discuss the matter of who owns the answers in a question-and-answer conversation: they conclude that the answerer has full ownership.

[20] Ackrill (2001, 72–79) discusses some arguments of the *Sophist*. Dancy (2004, 137–147) discusses a complex argument in the *Euthyphro*, as does Cohen (1971).

Granted, capacities are not always actualized. And we have seen one opinion that Plato's arguments are "mostly bad." So the impression that we should expect Plato to reason expertly is not universal. But still one may reasonably start from one's own vivid impression.

Let us recall here a familiar distinction, among flawed arguments: some are flawed by invalidity because they rest on an objectionable pattern; others are flawed because they have a false premise, although they may have a valid pattern. In many instances one can most usefully view the arguments that Socrates elicits from his interlocutors as captured by this irreproachable, simple pattern. Socrates asks: "Do you accept that p?" (What "p" represents may be a complex conjunction of several premises.) Socrates asks. "Do you accept the conditional premise that if p, then q?" If his interlocutor assents to these questions, Socrates may conclude: "Then you must accept that q." The second question about the conditional is sometimes not stated by Socrates. Nevertheless, an interlocutor who accepts an inference to the conclusion that q from a certain premise that p has implicitly accepted the conditional – if p, then q – that yields the result that q. On occasion the conditional premise that underlies an argument that Socrates has extracted from an interlocutor is questionable. But the argument extracted from an interlocutor, and its flaw, belongs to the interlocutor, not to Socrates or Plato. Plato almost never has Socrates, as depicted, presenting invalid arguments. Socrates usually employs the simple inference pattern of *modus ponens* outlined above decisively.[21]

Although this overall form of many of Socrates' arguments is irreproachable and available to any ordinary thinker, the inner details of the arguments and the choice of premises display Plato's ingenuity.

To arrive at this observation that Plato can argue with outstanding ingenuity and care, one uses only one's simple reflective common sense. Plato's depicted Socrates, often deploying outstanding arguments in examination, is evidently convinced that such reasoning is nevertheless available to any patient interlocutor for self-scrutiny.

[21] The idea that Socrates sometimes elicits fallacious arguments for a purpose (Sprague 1962) can be preserved if we understand "fallacy" widely enough to include arguments whose inferential transitions are valid but which have false premises.

The useful discussion in Klosko (1983, 363–374) would not agree that every argument Socrates elicits can legitimately be understood as inferentially irreproachable. But I think it is mind-clearing to recognize the power of our common human capacity to use *modus ponens* and to focus instead on what false conditional premises may be at work. Klosko (1983, 368–369) observes that Socrates and his interlocutor may understand the premises of an argument that Socrates extracts differently. Klosko seems to think Socrates unfair for not clarifying premises for his interlocutor. I think it revealing of, and a potential lesson for, the interlocutor if he accepts something unclear.

Having arrived at the observation that Plato could reason very well, one will naturally arrive at a two-part third observation. First, it is unlikely that a Plato who shows a mastery of critical examination would rely on conspicuously bad arguments to support his own unexamined convictions. And, second, it is quite difficult to believe any account of Plato that implies that he at some time in his life had views that would not withstand persistent commonsense examination of the sort that the Socrates of the aporetic dialogues uses. It then will become pretty much impossible for one to believe that Plato created – or at the least fully understood – the solid arguments of dialogues that according to the grand hypothesis were written early in his career and then declined into a middle phase in which he no longer had a grip on critical reasoning, and still later got his grip back. To arrive at the third observation is to be unable to accept that in mid-life writings Plato fell into ill-supported views that he used his old character Socrates to present.

I would like to make clear that the last observation is not a symptom of a disabling interpretative attitude. One interpreter of Plato gives this diagnosis of the attitude:

> Some scholars may be suspected of dismissing this or that remark in a Platonic text as "ironic," without specific evidence, for no better reason than misplaced charity – the apparent desire to rescue Plato from believing something which they themselves find either naïve or distasteful.[22]

For one thing, I do not dismiss any remark on the ground of irony. And, so far as I can tell, my standard for what Plato could believe is not my personal impression of naïveté or distastefulness. My standard has been the thought – based on the evidence of certain dialogues – that Plato can employ the shared human capacity for commonsense examination – the reflective consideration that is available to an ordinary person – as well as anyone can. I assume that if an ordinary reader can see on the basis of commonsense reflection that an argument is bad, or that a proposal does not withstand examination because of inconsistent parts, Plato could see it too, and probably faster. I have not been supposing, anachronistically, that Plato had at his disposal logical developments after the nineteenth century.[23]

[22] Sedley (2002, 41).

[23] Beversluis (2006, 102, n. 27) worries about "misinterpretation by abstraction," which is "concluding that since you think a particular inference is fallacious, Plato thought so too." Beversluis says, citing a point made by Ryle (1966, 206–207):