Author and text

I PLATO AND THE DIALOGUE

Why did Plato write dialogues? His motive for favouring this format has sometimes been construed as a kind of radical self-distancing:[1] as the mere dramatist of the conversations rather than a participant in them, Plato enables himself to suppress his own authorial voice, avoiding any degree of commitment that might obviate further thought by himself or the reader. I am reluctant to go all the way with this. Plato is an overwhelming presence in his dialogues. Most of his readers over two and half millennia have found it hard not to speak of, think of, and criticise the ideas and arguments defended in the dialogues as Plato's own, and we too should feel no embarrassment about talking that way.

Plato's real reason for persisting with the dialogue form is, I think, a very different one, his growing belief – more than once made explicit in his later work[2] – that conversation, in the form of question and answer, is the structure of thought itself. When we think, what we are doing is precisely to ask and answer questions internally, and our judgements are the outcome of that same process. Hence it seems that what Plato dramatises as external conversations can be internalised by us, the readers, as setting the model for our own processes of philosophical reasoning. More important still is the converse, that these same question-and-answer sequences can legitimately be read by us as *Plato thinking aloud*. And that, I suggest, is in the last analysis how Plato maintains the dominating and inescapable presence in his own dialogues that few if any mere dramatists can rival.

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[1] M. Frede 1992, Wardy 1996: 52–6, most chapters of Press 2000, and Blondell 2002: 18–21; a more nuanced version in Cooper 1997: xviii–xxv. The more traditional view, which I broadly favour, is expounded by Kraut 1992: 25–30, Irwin 1992: 77–8, Barney 2001: 18–20. In Sedley forthcoming I argue for a separation of main speaker from author in the *Theaetetus*, but even there I maintain that the authorial voice is a strong presence throughout.

[2] *Tht.* 189e–190a, *Sph.* 263e–264b, *Phlb.* 38c–e.

They are an externalisation of his own thought-processes.[3] Plato's very word for philosophical method, 'dialectic', means quite literally the science of conducting a conversation in this question-and-answer form, and it is vital to appreciate that the inter-personal discussion portrayed in the dialogues is not the only mode in which such discussion can occur: internal discussion is another, and perhaps even more fundamental, mode.

One might at first feel inclined to restrict any such description of the dialogues, as Plato thinking aloud, to the stretches of co-operative dialectic portrayed in his writings, the ones where questioner and respondent are engaged in a joint search for the truth: surely that is the only kind of interrogation that can plausibly be thought to have its counterpart in one person's internal reasoning? But no, Plato imposes no such restriction. In his *Charmides* (166c–d), at a point where Critias has just complained about Socrates' attempt to refute him, Socrates remarks that what he has been doing to Critias is no different from what he might well do to himself, namely cross-question himself out of fear that he may inadvertently think he knows something which in fact he does not know. Thus even adversarial questioning aimed at refutation is a proper style of internal reasoning. You or I may well have a tendency to some belief, along with the intellectual resources to challenge and refute that very same belief: to bring the two into opposition is simply to think self-critically.

In the *Cratylus* this issue of the relation of dialectic to Plato's own thought becomes crucial for two reasons. First, both styles of dialectic – the co-operative and the adversarial – play their part in it. Second, there is a very particular circumstance that enables Plato's own thinking to be read off from the flow of the conversation. I mean by this the fact that the two main points of view that, as the dialogue proceeds, come increasingly into conflict, represent two main elements of Plato's own intellectual background. For the confrontation is between the thinker who was the first major intellectual influence on Plato, namely Cratylus, and Socrates, to whom Plato in due course definitively transferred his allegiance. In writing a dialogue in which the second of these interrogates the first and puts him in his place, Plato

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[3] Although Plato's dialogues had their historical origin in the genre of the Socratic dialogue, there is no reason to think that any other practitioners of this genre developed their own philosophy by means of it in a way comparable to Plato. (On Plato's relation to this background, see the excellent chapter 1 of Kahn 1996.) What for him no doubt started out as the external imitation of Socratic questioning gave way in time to the conviction that Socratic dialogical conversation *is* philosophy. Cf. *Gorg.* 505c–507b, where, in the absence of a willing interlocutor, Socrates still keeps the argument going in question-and-answer form, and *Hippias Major*, where the anonymous dialectician continually cited as challenging Socrates turns out at the end to be, in effect, his own inner voice, even though it says only what anyone might have said (298d6).

is thinking aloud in a very particular way: he is sorting out the relation between two major components in his own intellectual make-up. That is, at any rate, how I shall be attempting to read the dialogue. And it is among the reasons why, in my final chapter, I will not hesitate to attribute the dialogue's conclusions to its author.

2 AN OUTLINE

At this point it is a good idea to recapitulate the contents of the *Cratylus*, because even to seasoned readers of Plato it is not always a very familiar text.[4]

The conversation, which carries no adequate indication of dramatic date,[5] involves three parties: Socrates, Cratylus and Hermogenes. Of these, Socrates needs no introduction, and Hermogenes was likely to be familiar to readers as an inner member of the Socratic circle, later present at Socrates' trial and execution.[6] Of Cratylus I shall have much more to say later in this chapter, although Hermogenes will have to await Chapter 3 for his own day in court.

Part I (383a–390e)

Cratylus and Hermogenes have already been engaged in heated debate, and as the dialogue begins, without any of the usual prefatory material, we find them approaching Socrates and inviting him to act as umpire. Their dispute is about the 'correctness of names' – what makes a name a *correct* name? The two positions that quickly emerge are ones which commentators on the dialogue label linguistic 'naturalism' and 'conventionalism'.[7] Cratylus

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[4] The only translation into accessible modern English is Reeve 1998. However, all translations in this book will be my own. The text followed, except where otherwise indicated, will be the excellent new Oxford Classical Text – Duke et al. 1995 – which I shall refer to as OCT². I also follow its line numbering, which differs slightly from previous editions.

[5] Allan (1954) dates the dialogue dramatically to 399, on the evidence of Socrates' playful suggestions that his etymologies have been inspired by Euthyphro, with whom he says he spent time this very morning: Allan takes this to be a reference to the dialogue *Euthyphro*, set in 399 just before Socrates' trial. Against Allan's arguments, see those of Owen summarised by Baxter (1992: 28 n. 73): (a) on the day of *Crat.* Socrates was with Euthyphro 'from dawn' (396d5), whereas the *Euthyphro* conversation cannot be held nearly so early because dramatically it follows the *Theaetetus* conversation (*Tht.* 210d2–4, *Euthyphro* 2a1–b11); (b) in *Euthyphro* we are shown the entire conversation between Socrates and Euthyphro, and it includes no etymology at all. If I am right, §5 below (pp. 18–21), that the conversation predates Cratylus' full conversion to Heracliteanism, it therefore predates by longer Plato's own Cratylean phase, which itself predated his years with Socrates, putting the dramatic date at least a decade before Socrates' death in 399.

[6] Trial: Xen. *Apol.* 2. Execution: Plato, *Phd.* 59b.

[7] This terminology was, I believe, introduced by Kretzmann (1971).

holds that all names – a loose linguistic category, understood as including common nouns and adjectives as well as proper names – belong naturally to their nominata. Each thing has its own natural name (whether just one, or potentially more than one, he never specifies): call it anything else, and that is not its name at all. He has, before the start of the dialogue, intensely annoyed Hermogenes by informing him that Hermogenes is not his real name.

Hermogenes himself replies that, on the contrary, nothing but arbitrary convention determines what is the name of what. If his parents named him Hermogenes, he means, that is all it takes or could take to make Hermogenes his name. Any given human group, of whatever size, has complete power to determine for itself its names for things. When pressed, Hermogenes accepts as the limiting case of his conventionalist position that we may each legitimately have our own private name for each thing, kept distinct from that same thing's public name. There is no reason in the world why my own private name for the thing whose public name is 'man' should not be 'horse'.

Thus far Hermogenes' position seems, at least as far as Plato's own intentions are concerned, totally unobjectionable.[8] It is only now that Socrates launches a critique of his stance, in several stages.

385e–386d: In the first stage, Hermogenes is helped to see why he disbelieves in the kind of relativism preached by the sophist Protagoras, according to which each individual's viewpoint is decisive in determining what is true for that individual.

386d–387c: Hence Hermogenes goes on to accept, against Protagoras, that things have their own objective natures, and that there are therefore objective skills for dealing with them. Speaking is one such skill, and naming too, being one part or species of speaking, must also be an objective expertise.

387c–388c: Naming is in fact a skill analogous to cutting or weaving. Like other skills, it has its own tools, viz. names. A name is a tool used for instructing by separating being, much as a shuttle is a tool for separating the threads of a web.

388c–390e: Being a tool of this kind, a name needs to be properly made to do its job. We must therefore postulate a name-making craftsman, the 'lawmaker' or *nomothetēs*, who looks to the Form of name, and embodies it in letters and syllables. Different languages arise from the fact that different sounds can be used for embodying the same Form or function, just as a

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[8] This, however, is controversial: see Ch. 3 §1 below (pp. 51–4).

drill can be made out of more than one kind of metal. Finally, just as any manufacturer must take instructions from the expert who will be using the tool once it is made, so the name-maker must take his instructions from the name-user *par excellence*, who is the dialectician.

Part II (390e–427d)

390e–427d: The final stage of Hermogenes' refutation (for that is surely their strategic function in the dialogue)[9] is the etymologies, which constitute the large central section of the dialogue. Socrates demonstrates over a massive range of terms how names can be judged to have been expertly manufactured in ancient times so as to impart information about their nominata. First he dissects a set of Homeric names, as establishing a strong *prima facie* case for the principle that names are expertly encoded descriptions. Then he works systematically through a series of cosmological terms, starting with theology and continuing with physics, before turning to the vocabulary relating to virtues and vices, both moral and intellectual, which he interprets as conveying the picture of everything as being in flux. Finally, in this section, he asks how the atomic names of which longer names are composed get their own meaning, and concludes that this comes from the imitative significance of primary sounds, corresponding to single letters of the alphabet.

Part III (427d–440e)

Socrates donates this whole etymological survey to Cratylus. Cratylus welcomes it as confirming his naturalist stance. But from now on Cratylus is himself put in the line of fire. Socrates shows that, however well a name may describe, it is likely to be less than a perfect description of its nominatum, and linguistic convention must play some part. He goes on to argue that names are not a secure route to the truth about their nominata, (a) because the name-maker may not have known the truth, (b) because they do not tell as coherent a story as Cratylus hoped. Rather than channel our inquiries through names, we should directly investigate the things themselves. Besides, the thesis that everything is in flux, which the etymologies supported, must be false about at least one set of entities, namely the Forms.

[9] At 390d9–391a3 Hermogenes accepts that his original conventionalist position has been defeated, and the etymologies then follow in response to his request for further elucidation of the naturalist position which Socrates has now vindicated in its place.

3 DATE

I apologise both for the length and for the brevity of the above summary. One feature which it brought out was that the Socrates portrayed in this dialogue is a proponent of Forms – Platonic separated Forms, often called the Ideas. These are, moreover, presented in terms which most readers recognise as typical of Plato's so-called 'middle-period' dialogues – dialogues like the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, in which what one may dare call a 'classical theory' of Forms is in evidence.[10] Is the *Cratylus* itself a middle-period dialogue? That is a favoured, but not unanimous, view among modern scholars.[11]

Platonic chronology has been a major industry over the last century and more,[12] and although it remains contentious in certain aspects what remains most remarkable is, I think, the degree of consensus that has emerged. What the vast majority of scholars would agree on is that Plato started out, probably soon after Socrates' execution in 399 BC, by joining in the current fashion for writing Socratic dialogues, seeking to capture and keep alive whatever it was that had been unique and compelling about Socrates' way of so conversing with people as to force them to rethink their own lives and values. At some point, the consensus continues, Plato became more optimistic than Socrates had been about finding the answers to the key questions regarding value and knowledge, and increasingly put into Socrates' mouth positive doctrines about the soul, about the nature of justice, and about the metaphysical nature of the objects of inquiry, a process which culminated in the postulation of a separate realm of transcendent entities, the Forms. This constitutes his middle period. His late period, finally, is marked by a variety of characteristics – the disappearance of Socrates from the lead role in most dialogues, major reconsideration of his earlier utopianism, a new concern with systematic conceptual analysis by the method of division, a foray into the study of physics in his supremely influential dialogue the *Timaeus*, and much more besides. In some sense this is a developmental hypothesis, but whether that development involved

[10] Irwin (1977: 2) argues that the forms at 439c–440d are not separated Platonic Forms, merely stable natures, believed in as much by the historical Socrates as by Plato. On this, see Ch. 7 §8 below (esp. p. 167 n. 36).

[11] Pre-*Republic*: many, including Ross 1955, Luce 1964, Calvert 1970, Kahn 1973, Levin 2001: 4 n. 4. Close to the *Theaetetus*: Kirk 1951, Allan 1954, Barney 2001: 3–4 n. 4. From the late 'critical' group of dialogues: Owen 1953: n. 39, Mackenzie 1986.

[12] For judicious recent surveys, especially regarding how much we can hope to learn from stylometry, see Young 1994, Kahn 2002.

Plato actually recanting any of his earlier views is a separate question, on which I shall have a little to say later.

The science, or quasi-science, of stylometry – the statistical analysis of an author's style as a dating tool – has to some extent fostered or confirmed this picture. The supposedly late group of dialogues – *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Philebus* and *Laws* – have certain stylistic features in common, including most famously a systematic avoidance of hiatus between words. That, of this group, at least the *Laws* was a late product – indeed, Plato's last – was already a matter of consensus in antiquity. A further group – *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides* and *Phaedrus* – have enough of these same features to be classified as somehow transitional to the late period. And that is all: the remaining dialogues cannot be convincingly ordered on the basis of stylistic evidence, and for these we have to fall back on our better- or worse-founded preconceptions about how Plato's development is likely to have proceeded. Nevertheless, as far as it takes us the stylometric evidence is in encouraging agreement with the chronological hypothesis.[13]

There have been some recent proposals to jettison this whole chronological structure,[14] but in my view they represent, so far at least, little more than the understandable fact that people are getting bored with it. There is actually much to lose if we say goodbye to it. For by reading Plato's development along the lines I have summarised, we are enabled to understand how the youthful admirer of the maverick critic Socrates became in time the teacher of Aristotle and the august founder of a metaphysical system which was to dominate philosophy for the last half-millennium of antiquity and well beyond.

Such, at any rate, is my justification for continuing to assume the traditional chronology. The present question is simply, where does the *Cratylus* fit into it? And my answer is: not in any one place. Regardless of when it may have been first composed, I see very good reason to assume that the *Cratylus* which we have is a second or later edition, incorporating changes made by Plato himself in later life. There are two initial items of evidence that point this way.

Towards the end of the dialogue, at 437d–438a, one major manuscript, the Vindobonensis, carries an extra passage which was clearly intended as a

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[13] The lack of a stylistic criterion to separate 'early' from 'middle' should not be invoked as counter-evidence to this thesis. There was no reason for major philosophical changes to coincide with detectable stylistic changes.

[14] Notably Annas 2002.

direct alternative to what the whole tradition has in the lines 438a3–b7. The new Oxford Classical Text of Plato rightly recognises the intrusive passage as a genuine variant from Plato's own pen.[15]

The version preserved by the main tradition reads as follows (438a3–b4):

SOCR. . . . but let's go back to where we were before we got here. A little earlier, if you recall, you said that one who assigns names must necessarily possess knowledge when assigning names to the things he assigns them to. Is that what you still think, or not?

CRAT. I still do.

SOCR. Are you saying that even the person who assigned the *first* names possessed knowledge when assigning them.

CRAT. Yes.

SOCR. Well from what kind of names had he either learnt or discovered about things, if the first names had not yet been assigned, and if, furthermore, we say that it is impossible to learn and discover about things in any way other than by learning about their names or by finding out for ourselves what the things are like?

CRAT. I think you've got a point there, Socrates.

The variant version (437d10–438a2) reads like this:

SOCR. . . . But let's consider whether or not you agree on the following too. Listen, weren't we recently agreeing that those who at any given time assign names in cities, Greek and foreign cities alike, are lawmakers and practise the expertise which has the capacity to do this, namely the legislative art?

CRAT. Absolutely.

SOCR. Well tell me, did the first lawmakers assign the first names with knowledge of the things, or in ignorance of them?

CRAT. With knowledge, I'd say, Socrates.

SOCR. Yes, they presumably didn't do it in ignorance, my friend Cratylus.

CRAT. I don't think so.

Apparently both versions then resume with the mainstream text, as follows (438b4–7):[16]

SOCR. Then how are we to say that they possessed knowledge when they assigned names, or that lawmakers exist before any name whatsoever has even been assigned

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[15] The passage's Platonic authorship has now been fully and convincingly argued by Valenti (1998). For a conspectus of other views on its authorship, see Dorandi 2000: 169–72.

[16] I am thus not following Kapp and the OCT² in transferring these lines to the variant version, nor the latter in its consequent deletion of δοκεῖς τί μοι λέγειν, ὦ Σώκρατες after b3. It is quite true that the use of the plural at 438b4–7 goes more smoothly with the variant version than with our mainstream text, but I take that to be a vestige of the imperfect editorial process whereby Plato supplanted the former with the latter. See also Valenti (1998) on this question.

and they have knowledge, if it is impossible to learn about things other than from names?

It is, I think, easy enough to see that the variant version could not belong to the *Cratylus* as we now have it, and must in fact belong to an earlier, superseded edition. In our text, Cratylus has already asserted a few pages earlier, at 436b–c, that the original namegivers had the advantage of privileged knowledge, which they embodied in the names they assigned to things. Socrates' new question is: if – as Cratylus immediately confirms – that assumption applies even to the very first of all the namegivers, where did *he* get the knowledge from? In order to launch the new question, Socrates simply refers back to Cratylus' recent assertion. The variant version, by contrast, was evidently written for an edition of the *Cratylus* in which that previous part of the conversation had not taken place;[17] which is why, in it, Socrates initiates his new move by first reminding Cratylus of their earlier agreement that names are produced by specialist namegivers or 'lawmakers', then proceeding to *ask* him – apparently for the first time – whether or not the original lawmakers had knowledge. To this extent, the change is simply a mechanical adjustment designed to accommodate changes made elsewhere in the dialogue.

But Plato has also taken the opportunity to introduce a philosophically significant correction. In the superseded version, Socrates and Cratylus both *agree* that the lawmakers who introduced the very first names must have had knowledge about the things they were naming. This is completely out of tune with the *Cratylus* as we have it, in which the lawmaker is a specialist in name-design alone, while understanding of the objects named, if available at all, is the province of his natural overseer, the dialectician (388c–390e). Nowhere is it so much as hinted by Socrates, on his own behalf, that the early linguistic lawmakers themselves had knowledge of the things they were naming.[18] In the revised version the unwanted implication has been edited out. The lawmakers, those specialists whom Socrates himself originally brought into the discussion, are no longer mentioned here, and the assertion that the first name-maker must have had knowledge is now put into Cratylus' mouth alone, just as elsewhere in the dialogue (e.g. 436b5–d4), without Socrates indicating his agreement. It seems, then, that in the

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[17] The variant version at 437e3–4 refers back to a passage in which Socrates and Cratylus agreed on the existence of a 'legislative art', νομοθετικὴ τέχνη. This may be a reference to 428e–429a, but the impression given is that the passage cited is one that used the term νομοθετική explicitly, in which case once more it is a passage no longer in our text.

[18] The knowledge possessed by name-makers at 424b–d, according to Socrates, is only knowledge of how to correlate sounds to things, not knowledge of the things.

earlier edition which shows through in the variant passage Plato had not yet introduced the separation of roles between the linguistic lawmaker and his overseer, the dialectician, but had postulated the former as a specialist embodying both roles. Here it may be significant that the separation of their roles is based on a hierarchical distinction between manufacturer and user which – leaving aside the *Cratylus* itself – does not occur in Plato's dialogues until *Republic* x (see Chapter 3 §4 below (pp. 62–4)).

Here then we have a rare glimpse of an editorial process which has every chance of dating from Plato's own lifetime. Some Platonic scholar in antiquity, we may conjecture, came across an early edition of the *Cratylus* and copied variant versions of passages into the margin; in due course, it seems, one of them got mistakenly copied into the text, and survived in one branch of the subsequent tradition. Whether this earlier *Cratylus* was one that had been published and had entered the public domain, or a draft preserved privately in the Academy, is likely to be and remain a matter for pure speculation.[19]

Once we recognise that this has happened, a rather more interesting second case springs to light. A passage at 385b2–d1 looks thoroughly out of place, since it interrupts a continuous argument[20] with which it has no apparent connection. In an influential article, Malcolm Schofield[21] pointed this out and proposed that it should be transposed to a slightly later position, immediately after 387c6. Like the editors of the new Oxford Classical Text, among others, I agree with Schofield that the passage cannot belong where it now stands,[22] but also agree with them that it cannot with sufficient

[19] In the Roman literary world, for which we have much better evidence on publication procedures, there would be no doubt that two successive published editions were a possibility (Cicero's *Academica* being probably the best-known case so far as philosophical works are concerned). For the Greek world we have less evidence, but still sufficient. See Emonds 1941, Dorandi 2000 (esp. ch. 6), Heyworth and Wilson 1997. Regarding Plato, there is one partial parallel in the variant proem to the *Theaetetus* which was said to be 'in circulation' (φέρεται: anon. *In Tht.* 3.28–37) around the time of the early empire; whether it was genuine or (as the source believes) spurious, it provides some evidence for the continuing circulation of variant drafts of Platonic texts; and it may well represent an earlier edition (προέκδοσις) of the *Theaetetus*. Plato himself refers to premature publication of a work at *Prm.* 128a6–e1, where his character Zeno complains that his youthful treatise was published in a pirate edition without his consent; Zeno does not, however, give any indication that he has subsequently revised it.

[20] Omitting it, we get a completely smooth transition from 385a1–b1 (whatever each person calls a thing is its name) to 385d2 (therefore, what each person says is a thing's name is its name).

[21] Schofield 1972. His transposition is adopted by Reeve (1998), and endorsed by Barney (2001: 28 n. 9).

[22] Baxter (1992: 32–7) and Ademollo (forthcoming) argue for its appropriateness to its present context, but it seems to me that their arguments can at best show that it is appropriate to the dialogue as a whole, and not to the exact location.