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978-0-521-85932-5 - Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing

Christopher Rowe

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Preliminaries: reading Plato*

I INTRODUCTION

This is a book about Plato as a writer of philosophy: probably the most accomplished and sophisticated such writer the western world has known, but also one of the most puzzling. One of the chief puzzles about Plato's writing, and the one from which I shall begin, is its enormous *variety*. Why should he write in so many different ways? Philosophers, surely, only need to write in one way – as clearly and intelligibly as possible. Granted, virtually every item within the Platonic corpus is written in the same general format, that of imaginary conversations (reported or direct) between two or more interlocutors. However, this format is deployed in markedly varying fashions, and not only that, but often with what appear to be markedly varying outcomes. It sometimes appears almost as if different parts of the Platonic *oeuvre* might have been written by different people.¹ Most strikingly, while a significant number of dialogues, mainly short ones, take the form of an apparently open-ended exploration of particular subjects (often particular virtues – what I shall prefer to call 'excellences': *aretai*), led by a Socrates who continually advocates the importance of such – apparently open-ended – exploration and inquiry, other dialogues seem to show us a quite different Socrates, and a different Plato. Thus, most notoriously, the Socrates of the *Republic* – a work which will figure prominently in the present book – appears, at least on first reading, as an advocate of a closed society in which philosophy, instead of being the instrument of intellectual liberation that those other shorter dialogues seem to promise to make it, becomes the instrument of a political structure in which 'liberation' would

¹ By and large there is now consensus about which dialogues within the traditional corpus are by Plato and which are spurious; only one or two items are still debated, notably the *First Alcibiades*, *Hippias Major*, and *Clitophon*. (I myself think all three of these certainly spurious, along with all the *Letters*. *Menexenus* is by now surely off the doubtful list.)

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evidently consist, for the majority of the population, in their control and manipulation by the few (philosophers).

How to explain this and other examples of the way Plato apparently changed, or wavered, in his approach to philosophy and to the writing of it: that will be one of the major tasks to be attempted in the following pages,² along with the task of explaining what it is, exactly, that Plato wanted to achieve, and thought he could achieve, by writing as he did. And that, for anyone who has seriously read any part of his *oeuvre* (i.e. by reading any dialogue from beginning to end, rather than just conning pre-selected passages, torn from their contexts), is the biggest question of all. As one of a fine group of undergraduates in Durham recently put it to me, Plato is 'weird', because he makes any reader work so hard to see what it is that he is up to – what he is using his characters to *say*, or in other words what he wants the reader to extract from his text.³ Studiously (it seems) leaving himself off the list of speakers on every occasion, or at least not appearing in person, he leaves us to guess where to locate his voice. The best guess must be that it is normally the main speaker that speaks for him – and so, since Socrates is usually that main speaker, the chances are that Socrates' voice will also, normally, be Plato's (see section 4 below).⁴ But then Socrates himself so often tells us that he has no answers – and when he does seem to come up with answers, they are not always the ones we might have expected, or hoped for (I refer again to the *Republic* as my central example).

At issue here is nothing less than what some might call the meaning of Plato, and of Platonism: 'Platonism', that is, in the sense of what it is that Plato stands for. At the most basic level, is he a philosopher who wishes for nothing so much as to *make his readers think for themselves*, somehow to make use of their own inner resources, without trying to weigh them down too heavily with doctrine? Or is he, on the contrary, someone who writes in order to impart *doctrines*? These are the lines along which the longest-running dispute among Plato's interpreters – beginning, strangely, even with his immediate successors, who might have been expected to know how to read him – has permanently been drawn. However, each of the two types of interpretation appears just as problematical as the other. If the

² The outcome of my argument will be to put the emphasis on that 'apparently' in 'apparently changed'. Plato changed a great deal less than appearances might suggest.

³ 'Nothing is a matter of course; everything can be called into question. To read Plato demands a far higher degree of vigilance and activity than any other philosopher asks for. Time after time, we are forced to make our choice, to decide how we should interpret what we are reading' (Tigerstedt 1977: 99).

⁴ See also Kraut 1992: 25–30.

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1 Introduction

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first is right, then why is there so much by way of what look like positive doctrines in at least a significant proportion of the dialogues? And if the second, then why on earth did Plato not try to impart his teaching in a more direct way?

Defenders of the first type of interpretation will typically concentrate their fire on the talk of 'doctrines'. They will propose that Plato has few if any of *those*, pointing to that very richness (I called it variety) of Plato's writing, and explaining it either as proof of his versatility, or else as a sign of the kind of process of continual development and maturation that we should expect of any good philosopher. Talk of 'versatility' is in danger of suggesting that we can retreat into interpreting each dialogue on its own (as some scholars in the last two centuries have attempted to do), and there are too many connections between them, too many constants, to make that a viable proposition.⁵ But again, if Plato was a doctrinalist, why was he not more open and direct about it? Because, say some defenders of the 'doctrinal' sort of interpretation, Plato thought his ideas incapable of being properly conveyed in writing; the dialogues are a sort of invitation to the feast, offering an initial encounter with fundamental ideas that could not be fully grasped without deepened contact through the medium of oral discussion within the walls and porticoes of the Academy. Yet what these interpreters generally propose for the main feast centres on a metaphysical system (including a set of first principles) that generally seems a good deal less interesting philosophically – whether to most ancient or to modern tastes – than what we find on or just under the surface of the dialogues themselves. Even more importantly, such interpreters fail to explain why, on their account, Plato needed to write out so many and such varied invitations: so many dialogues, small, medium-sized, large, massive, containing a wealth of action, argument, imagery, all sorts of other varieties of brilliance – why go on writing them, throughout a lifetime, if they were only the first step, and to be superseded by a higher (and not so far obviously more illuminating)⁶ state of understanding?

Despite what I have just said, my own interpretation of Plato, or at any rate of Plato *as a writer*, as it unfolds, will turn out to have at least as much

⁵ That is, if we want (as I presume most will want) to take Plato seriously as a philosopher. Of course if one decides in advance that he is (e.g.) a dramatist rather than a philosopher, then the objection might not apply. Grote 1865, a brilliant account in its own way, may be said to have tested to destruction the idea that we can appreciate Plato fully without at some point trying to relate systematically what we discover in one dialogue to what we discover in another. (Grote himself was reacting to what he – rightly – saw as the oversystematization of Plato by Neoplatonizing interpreters.)

⁶ I refer here simply to the apparent philosophical aridity of the reconstructed 'unwritten doctrines' (Aristotle's phrase) of Plato on which such interpreters often pin their hopes.

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in common with that of the second, 'doctrinal', group of interpreters as with that of the first, who may be very loosely termed 'sceptical'.⁷ I shall certainly want to reject the understanding of Platonism put forward by the particular 'doctrinal' interpreters I had in mind in the preceding paragraph,⁸ but there are certain things that they seem to me to have got right (as, for example, when they insist that Plato does not always say, at any one point, everything that he has in mind, or in hand; or, more generally, when they tell us that we frequently need to look below the surface of the text to find its real intention). It is interpreters of the 'sceptical' mould that I shall treat as my more immediate opponents, and among that rather broad group, one set of interpreters in particular: those who divide off certain parts of the Platonic corpus as 'Socratic' – the 'Socratic dialogues' being those mainly shorter, allegedly 'exploratory' dialogues that I have referred to, dating (it seems) from somewhere near the beginning of Plato's writing career – and who by so doing shift the locus of what is most authentically Platonic to the period of writing that followed. The key moment in Plato's development, from that perspective, was the break from the master, Socrates, the moment when the younger man started writing more ambitious and positive works (especially the *Republic*), whatever the degree of attachment he may have felt to the successive outcomes of these.⁹

Perhaps as much as anything else, it will be my aim in the present book to replace this way of dividing up Plato's work, which in my view has become the single greatest obstacle to a proper understanding of Plato and

⁷ The term will roughly fit, insofar as the ancient and original sceptics – one variety of whom developed their views inside Plato's Academy itself, a few generations after Plato's death – were people who perpetually *looked* (the Greek verbs are *skopein*, *skopeisthai*, the noun *skepsis*), without ever finding anything solid they could rely on. Academic sceptics read Plato *as* a sceptic: some of the dialogues – especially the so-called 'Socratic' group (see below) – may superficially attract such a reading, but no modern interpreter would be likely to find it satisfactory. It is thus safe enough to borrow the term 'sceptical' for that broad church of non-'doctrinalist' readers of Plato. The members of this same broad church tend also to suppose that their non-doctrinal Plato was typically ready to review his ideas, to modify, abandon and replace them – to 'mature' and 'develop', as I put it in the preceding paragraph: in short, to use a standard term, the majority of such interpreters are 'developmentalists', by contrast with the 'unitarianism' of the their 'doctrinal' rivals, and I shall generally, if somewhat loosely and inaccurately, treat the labels 'sceptical' and 'developmentalist', on the one hand, and 'doctrinalist' and 'unitarian' on the other, as more or less interchangeable. I shall shortly be picking a quarrel with one very common kind of modern 'sceptical developmentalist': the kind that divides up the corpus into 'Socratic' ('early'), 'middle' and 'late' periods.

⁸ These are the members of the so-called 'Tübingen school', including most importantly Hans-Joachim Krämer, Konrad Gaiser, and among contemporary scholars, Thomas Szlezák: see especially Szlezák 1985 and 2004.

⁹ Since I am speaking here of 'sceptical' interpreters as opposed to 'doctrinal' ones (in my admittedly very crude distinction), the attachment will be less than would be implied by the use of the term 'doctrine'. Doctrines, for some philosophers, will not be suitable things for philosophers to have – as opposed to ideas or theories, which will be perfectly respectable.

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1 Introduction

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Platonism.¹⁰ For it will be one of my core claims that in fact the post-‘Socratic’ dialogues in all central respects depend and build on, even as they may extend, ideas and arguments contained in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues. (The scare quotes around ‘Socratic’ are to be taken seriously; there is in my view no group of dialogues which can helpfully be labelled ‘Socratic’ as opposed to others.) That is, these dialogues, along with others not normally labelled as ‘Socratic’ but nevertheless apparently predating the *Republic*, do crucial philosophical work which is not only not superseded by what comes later, but which we need to have properly grasped – and also to *keep in mind* – if we are fully to understand what we find in the *Republic* and other supposedly post-‘Socratic’ dialogues.¹¹ Importantly, I shall also claim that Plato remained faithful to the very notion of philosophy that is developed in, and in part illustrated by, the ‘Socratic’ dialogues. (Even the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic* will turn out to be formed after Socrates’ image.¹² But this is to anticipate.)

For many if not most readers of Plato these will look unlikely claims – to say the least. As it happens, the ‘doctrinal’ interpreters¹³ tend to be hardly less *Republic*-centred than the ‘sceptical’ ones, insofar as for them too it is

¹⁰ The next greatest, in my view, is the idea, much favoured by ‘doctrinalists’ of all eras, that Plato was, more than anything else, an other-worldly metaphysician who thought that the highest kind of existence would be spent in the contemplation of pure being (*vel sim.*). See especially chapters 2, 7, 8 and 9 below. This approach, for its part, entails leaving out so much of the content of the dialogues, takes so little account of what Plato actually *wrote*, that I for one find it hard to take it at all seriously. Or, to put it another way, a book like the present one, which aims to explain why Plato wrote as he did, is not likely to be favourable to an approach that by its very nature leaves it entirely mysterious why Plato should have written so much that had so little bearing on what he supposedly intended his readers to sign up to.

¹¹ I shall not of course, impossibly, deny that there are also apparent, and important, discontinuities between the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues and what follows. But it will be my argument that these discontinuities are best seen against the background of an essential continuity – one that after all would be no less than one would expect, given that Plato keeps Socrates on, both in the *Republic* and in other ‘non-Socratic’ dialogues, as main speaker. I agree wholeheartedly with David Sedley (Sedley 2004: 14) that Plato ‘emphasiz[ed] the continuity in his development [i.e. with what Sedley calls the “semi-historical” Socrates featured in the early dialogues’: 3] rather than acknowledging any radical break’. However while acknowledging Plato’s own perspective on the matter, Sedley himself ‘separat[es] an early Socratic phase from one or more subsequent Platonic phases’ (ibid.), thus aligning himself with Vlastos 1991, and against Kahn 1996 – for whom the ‘Socratic dialogues’ are written to look forward to the *Republic* and other ‘middle’ dialogues, and so ‘can be adequately understood only from the perspective of these middle works’ (Kahn 1996: 60). My own view is exactly the reverse of Kahn’s (though I register unease about the use of the term ‘middle’: on dating in general, see section 10 below).

¹² Still more surprisingly, from the perspective of any current interpretation, the same will be true of the members of the Nocturnal Council in the *Laws* (see chapter 10, n. 2 below).

¹³ Or at least, modern ‘doctrinalists’; for their ancient counterparts, it was the great cosmological dialogue *Timaeus* that counted as more central. But Plato himself takes care to link *Timaeus* with *Republic*, making the conversation represented (fictionally ‘recorded’) in the former take place on the day after the conversation, ‘reported’ by Socrates, that constitutes the latter.

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the *Republic* – and other dialogues that the ‘sceptics’ call ‘mature’ – that take us closer to the heart of Plato: thinking of Platonism as nothing if not a *system* of thought, and more or less unchanging, they then propose *Republic*, along with *Philebus* and *Timaeus*, as the works that will give us the most information for fixing the outlines of that system. The so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues (so-called, that is, mainly by the ‘sceptics’), for the doctrinalists, are of relatively little interest in themselves, just as for the ‘sceptics’ these dialogues tend to represent the parts of Plato, i.e. those Socratic parts, that he left behind, whether this is taken to be a bad or a good thing.¹⁴ One of the main tasks of the present book will be to show that both the ‘sceptical’ approach, which sees the *Republic* as marking Plato’s break with Socrates, and its ‘doctrinalist’ counterpart, which tends to assimilate the ‘Socratic’ dialogues to the *Republic*, are mistaken: the Socrates of the *Republic* is, with certain important qualifications, the Socrates of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues; but this latter Socrates is not fashioned after the ‘doctrinalists’ image. What should have emerged from my argument by the end of the book is a quite unusual, not to say revolutionary, picture of Plato and his thought. However whether or not this picture will appear plausible will depend entirely on my ability to persuade the reader of the usefulness of certain interpretative moves; or, to put it the other way round, my ability to persuade the reader to share my analysis of Plato’s strategies as a philosophical writer. The title of the book may in this sense be taken as a true disjunction: I hope to understand what Plato stands for by understanding the reasons, methods and purposes of Platonic writing. (I admit, however, that many times over the detailed argument will turn out to be the other way round; what Plato wants to say and how he says it are mutually interdependent topics.)

It will be useful here to give a quite full and detailed outline of the key interpretative moves that will underpin my approach, before I turn, in the main part of the book, to particular themes and particular dialogues. The Table of Contents gives a fair indication of the selection of dialogues that will provide the main material for my discussion. Particularly prominent will be *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*,

¹⁴ It will be a bad thing for those who prefer what they see as Socrates’ mode of doing philosophy in those dialogues to what they see as his appalling demeanour in the *Republic* (see above); a good thing for those many people who – quite misguidedly, in my own view – tend to think of Socratic methods and ideas as interesting but naïve and limited. There has been talk in recent years, especially among North American scholars (of whom Francisco Gonzalez is among the most eloquent: see e.g. Gonzalez 1998), of a ‘third way’ of interpreting Plato, i.e. one that is describable neither as ‘sceptical’ nor as ‘dogmatic’. Insofar as that could be said of my own reading, it too will belong to this ‘third way’. However the main defining feature of this ‘third’ mode of reading seems to be just that it isn’t either of the other two, both of which – as I began by saying – are plainly, by themselves, unsatisfactory.

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[More information](#)2 *The nature and importance of dialogue*

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Republic, and *Timaeus*. I shall have a fair amount, too, to say about *Theaetetus*, but rather little about the *Parmenides*, and nothing or virtually nothing about *Cratylus*, *Laws*, *Philebus*, *Protagoras* and two dialogues closely connected with the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Politicus*. I shall, however, advance a general thesis about those five big dialogues *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Timaeus* and *Laws*, in which Socrates is not assigned the role of main speaker, as he is in every other genuine dialogue; clearly, given my overall thesis about the closeness of Plato to his Socrates, this is likely to appear a significant shift, suggesting – perhaps – that disciple did after all finally give up on master (for, as it happens, all five of these dialogues appear to be datable to the latest part of Plato's life: see section 10 below). I shall suggest, rather, that in demoting Socrates Plato distances *himself*, in varying degrees, from the positions he assigns to Socrates' replacements.

2 THE NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE, FOR PLATO

Plato evidently held dialogue to be fundamental to philosophy: Socrates never ceases to treat dialogue in this way, and for the most part – in Plato's works – carries on his business, which he calls philosophy, through dialogue. But why should dialogue be so important for the philosopher? The answer, it seems, has something and everything to do with Socrates', and Plato's, recognition of the need for *questioning*: only if we go on questioning our ideas can we ever hope to reach the truth, if we can reach it at all.

Some modern interpreters have understood this questioning in terms specifically of 'refutation',¹⁵ because of the overwhelming tendency of Socrates' questioning, in the 'Socratic' dialogues, to end in the discomfiture of whoever or whatever is being questioned.¹⁶ They have then gone on to propose that refutation could even somehow generate, discover, truth, by itself; and such interpreters have reconstructed on Socrates' behalf the assumptions that would be required to make that possible.¹⁷ (I take it that

¹⁵ See chapter 3 below.

¹⁶ Such interpreters typically call Socrates' method 'elenctic'. In fact the Greek noun *elenchos* and the associated verbs, which Plato frequently applies to Socratic activity, as often refer to questioning and challenge as to refutation as such: see Tarrant 2002. I myself will propose that the fact that Socratic dialectic, in the 'Socratic' dialogues, nearly always ends in the refutation of the interlocutor has rather more to do with Plato's rejection of the positions Socrates' interlocutors represent than with the essential nature of Socratic method.

¹⁷ Here is Donald Davidson, building on Vlastos 1983: 'the elenchus would make for truth simply by insuring [*sic*] coherence in a set of beliefs if one could assume that in each of us there are always unshakable true beliefs inconsistent with the false. It is not necessary that these truths be the same for each of us, nor that we be able to identify them except through the extended use of the elenchus. Thus someone who practices the elenchus can, as Socrates repeatedly did, claim that he does not

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Socrates and Plato would have been repulsed by any special theories that find dialogical conclusions, in certain contexts, as all that there is to *constitute* truth;¹⁸ whatever else they hold, they will certainly hold that the truth is the truth regardless of what anyone thinks it is, and indeed regardless of whether anyone at all has it in mind.) Reconstructions of this sort are a reaction, in itself noble enough, to the need somehow to square Socrates' repeated claim that he knows nothing with his more than occasional tendency to behave as if there are some things, at least, that he is pretty sure about, even knows. However the combination in Socrates of these two features – as a know-nothing, and (as one might put it) as a conviction philosopher – is perfectly intelligible without any such rich supplementation of Plato's text.¹⁹ The most for which we have textual warrant is the idea that a continuous process of questioning, whether of one person by another or of oneself by oneself, along a particular line may lead to results that for all practical purposes are reliable and unlikely to need to be abandoned. This process of questioning represents the essence of the Socratic – and, as I hold, also the Platonic – notion of philosophy, and it is one that is most consistently displayed in action in the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues. Philosophy, as an activity, *is* the 'art of dialogue', whether internal or with others:²⁰ *dialektikē technē* in Greek, and hence 'dialectic'. (The 'art of dialogue': sc. through progressive questioning, and on the sorts of subjects expertise in which contributes to wisdom, *sophia*, *philo-sophia* being the love or pursuit of wisdom.)

know what is true; it is enough that he has a method that leads to truth. The only question is whether there is reason to accept the assumption.

'I think there is good reason to believe the assumption is true – true enough, anyway, to insure that when our beliefs are consistent they will in most large matters be true. The argument for this is long, and I have spelled it out as well as I can elsewhere' (Davidson 1993: 184–5, referring to Davidson 1983 [2001]).

¹⁸ I mean no disrespect here to the late Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose subtle take on Plato is beautifully expounded by François Renaud in Renaud 1999; Gadamer himself accepts that a Plato who saw the true implications of his position would no longer be a Platonist ('Platon war kein Platoniker', cited by Renaud from Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 1977: 508).

¹⁹ Briefly: there are things that Socrates will happily claim to be sure about, and even, in unguarded moments, to know, on the basis of argument; e.g., at the most general level, that knowledge and excellence matter more to everyone than anything else. But underlying his general position is a sensitivity to the limits of what mere human beings can achieve, which causes him typically to deny that *he* knows what he is talking about, even while he allows that others, perhaps, may know (or come to know) more than he does. See especially section 10, and chapters 1 and 8, below.

²⁰ Because of his position as a know-nothing, Socrates typically stresses his own need to be in conversation with others. But when Plato has others describe him, as in the *Symposium*, they vividly describe, among other habits of his, a tendency to spend long periods in self-absorbed thought; and he typically refers to examining *himself* in the same breath as he talks about examining others. See chapter 3 below; for thinking described explicitly as internal dialogue, see, e.g., *Theaetetus* 189D–190A.

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[More information](#)3 *'The art of dialogue' vs written dialogue*

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3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'THE ART OF DIALOGUE'
(‘DIALECTIC’) AND THE WRITTEN DIALOGUE FORM

It would be all too easy to slip from the simple proposal that all Platonic dialogues are ‘philosophical’ (at least to the degree that they were written by an author everyone agrees to have been a philosopher) to supposing that all equally display philosophy in action; and from there, given that the kinds of discussion we find in different dialogues are different, to supposing that Plato had different ways of conceiving of philosophy. Sometimes, as in the *Timaeus*, dialogue gives way to monologue: by the argument in question, Plato will on that occasion have given up on dialogue as the proper medium of philosophy. For the ‘sceptical’ brand of philosophers, this is likely to be a perfectly acceptable outcome, since few of them will share any great commitment to dialogue as such over monologue as a way of conducting philosophy in the first place,²¹ and for them it might even be something of a relief to be able to think of Plato as giving up on it (as their Plato regularly gives up on things);²² and for the ‘doctrinalists’ Plato, too, dialogue may be equally dispensable – a means to a preliminary cleansing of minds from misapprehensions, and as a kind of intellectual gymnastics, but hardly the stuff of real philosophy.²³

However, such responses would vastly underestimate the nature and complexity of written dialogue in its Platonic mode.²⁴ Above all, we need to remember the fact that a written dialogue possesses two extra dimensions, one of which will always, and the other will usually, be absent from a real dialogue, i.e. from any live conversation (or indeed one that is merely recorded in writing): (1) an author, and (2) an audience. It is hardly in doubt that Plato constructed and wrote his dialogues *for* an audience (or audiences), given the earnestness with which his main speakers address their interlocutors. He had a purpose in writing – he had things he wanted to say to his audience, ways in which he wanted to affect them. And he was presumably free to write as he pleased: he could set up the conversation as

²¹ Especially, perhaps, if the dialogue may be internal; what harm will it do to redescribe any serious internal thought as a kind of questioning? (That, however, would be to miss Socrates’ point, which is about the need to *challenge* one’s own and others’ thinking.)

²² A special impatience with dialogue form is evinced by the habit some interpreters have – those brought up within the analytical tradition – of trying to reducing Socratic arguments to a series of numbered (and impersonal) propositions.

²³ ‘Dialectic’ itself, on this account, ultimately becomes severed from conversation and dialogue altogether, and becomes a term for whatever method will lead to philosophical truth.

²⁴ That is, whatever other writers of philosophical dialogues might make or might have made of the medium; let them be set to one side.

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he liked, where he liked, and between whatever characters/interlocutors he liked. If, then, we are fully to understand what is going on,²⁵ and indeed if we are even to have any chance of grasping Plato's underlying argument, we have no option but to try to come to terms in each case with a whole series of different relationships: between author and text (and its argument – both the philosophical argument, and the 'argument' in the sense of the overall direction or directions of the text); between author and characters/speakers, especially the main speaker;²⁶ between author and audience; between the speakers themselves. But this already means that a written dialogue is something considerably more than a piece of philosophy. It is philosophy with its participants, and their utterances and actions, shaped, directed, set up, stage-managed by someone for someone else.

I do not mean to deny that it would be perfectly possible to write philosophical dialogues in which the dialogue and the philosophy (in the Socratic-Platonic sense, of progressive questioning; see above) were simply co-extensive. Interlocutor A, a voice perhaps with a name but no necessary identity, would state a position, which interlocutor B, another similarly unspecific voice, then questioned, leading A to restate the original position; if this imaginary dialogue were more than a few paragraphs long, then B would again raise problems with the new statement – and so on. This would be the basic, stripped-down version of Socratic dialectic.²⁷ But no actual Platonic dialogue is like this. For a start, A and B²⁸ will be identified as particular individuals, usually with names, and always with identifiable characteristics: A will more often than not be Socrates, and B will be a general,²⁹ a rhapsode,³⁰ a sophist,³¹ a sophist/rhetorician,³² a friend of Socrates',³³ a brother of Plato's³⁴ . . . And the nature and course of the conversation that ensues between A and B will always partly be determined by the choice of the person to play the role of B as much as by the choice of the person to play the role of A – which, if it is Socrates, will ensure that the

²⁵ I assume that we may ignore the possibility that Plato was a lazy author, who did not make the most of the opportunities available to him.

²⁶ Plato's dialogues always have a main speaker; this is no doubt itself something to be explained. (It will turn out to be significant that there is always, within a single dialogue, one perspective that is privileged – by the author – over the others.)

²⁷ The model is based on a combination of passages from the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic* with Socrates' actual practice in a range of other dialogues.

²⁸ I here for the moment leave out dialogues that lapse into monologue, i.e. where B ceases to play any audible part: *Menexenus* as well as *Timaeus* (where there is a C and a D as well as a B).

²⁹ Or generals: see *Laches*, where Socrates talks to the generals Laches and Nicias.

³⁰ I refer to Ion in *Ion*. ³¹ Say, Hippias in *Hippias Minor*, Protagoras in *Protagoras* . . .

³² Thrasymachus in *Republic* (especially Book 1). ³³ Crito in *Crito*, Phaedo in *Phaedo*.

³⁴ Or brothers: Glaucon and Adimantus in *Republic* (especially Books 11–X).