Introduction

A book entitled 'How Plato writes' might seem a rash enterprise. The topic is multidimensional. Plato wrote a great amount, evidently over many years, with a great variety of subject matter and styles. There are many possible routes into the material. And the point, focus, and hermeneutic and other presuppositions of exploration would appear to be highly contestable. Neoplatonists or Straussians might be confident that they have found keys that unlock the secrets of all Plato's writing. But most readers do not share their confidence.[1] Hence my subtitle: 'Perspectives and problems'. The essays included in this volume offer in an empirical spirit *perspectives* on examples of a good number of key ingredients in Plato's writing, particularly his use of argument and of allegory, images, and myth, of intertextuality, and of paradox, but also his treatment of the interlocutors he portrays in dialogue, his adoption now of narration, now of direct dramatic presentation of the conversations he presents, and his assumed readerships.[2] Sometimes the focus is more on the overall shape of a work, or indeed of the corpus itself. All the essays were prompted by a perception of something *problematic*, either in a passage within a dialogue itself, or as often in the way scholarship had tackled or failed to tackle a topic. One presupposition of my own – not controversial for most readers, I trust – is the assumption that whatever and however he writes, Plato means primarily to be doing philosophy, conceived broadly as the search for wisdom and understanding.

---

[1] This is not to say that there is nothing to learn from Proclus or Strauss – and there are important things that I hope I have learned: see Chapters 5 and 9 below.

[2] These features do not, of course, exhaust the range of literary phenomena inviting consideration. I shall say nothing in this book about (for example) protreptic, or parody and pastiche, on which I comment briefly in discussing *Menexenus* in Schofield and Griffith 2010: xix–xxiii, and virtually nothing about genre in general, for which see the brilliant treatment by Nightingale 1995. Rhetoric (in Chapters 1 and 4) and historical narrative (in Chapter 10) do, however, receive some attention.

1

As its title indicates, the book focuses especially on *how* Plato writes. But also, not divorced from that, it asks *when* he wrote, over the course of that long life, and *why* he wrote what he did in the way he did when he wrote it. 'Why' and 'when' are harder to tackle, given that the evidence we have – whether from ancient biographical accounts or from analysis of his changing literary style – throws up much that sober scholarship must recognize as in varying degrees uncertain. But the attempt upon those questions needs to be made. My shots at doing so are included as the first two chapters here. These discuss in turn the external historical circumstances which seem likely to have been important for Plato's composing the writings he did when he did (or – to be cautious – may well have done), and the shifting literary priorities which seem likely to have prompted his composing of fictive dialogues sometimes in direct or scripted mode, sometimes as narratives. Both approaches to the writing are inimical to any suggestion that it was designed to give expression to some kind of philosophical system. My third chapter takes a step back, to look at the fierce historically grounded reaction of the two great Victorian Plato scholars George Grote and Benjamin Jowett against interpretations that made such a system out of the dialogues. Grote and Jowett are otherwise perceived as championing diametrically opposed perspectives on Plato, utilitarian versus idealist. But on a Plato systematized, they were united.

Time was (the 1950s and 1960s of my youth) when cutting-edge Plato scholarship – as practised in the English-speaking world – seemed mostly to be about his arguments: exposing their fallacies, inconsistent or hidden premises, ambiguous formulations. The need to 'reconstruct' many of the arguments was often taken for granted. Then scholars started talking about dialogue, drama, character, and genre, sometimes in what Myles Burnyeat (who memorably himself drew attention to the significance of Plato's 'first words')[3] once described as a 'curious alliance between conservative followers of Leo Strauss and radical Postmodernists'.[4] A *via media* or Hegelian-style synthesis is evidently called for. Arguments and philosophical theories advanced in Plato's pages often cannot be studied satisfactorily without consideration of the trajectory of the entire dialogue in which they appear or of its other literary dimensions.

A second group of three essays accordingly presents treatments of arguments and philosophical stances in three very different dialogues – *Gorgias*, *Parmenides*, *Cratylus* – whose import (I suggest) has eluded satisfactory interpretation, largely because their function within the overall

---

[3] Burnyeat 1997.   [4] Burnyeat 2003: 23.

trajectory of the dialogue has not hitherto been given the attention required. Other aspects of the writing naturally also receive scrutiny. The subtleties and dialectical ingenuity of the detail of a key stretch of argument between Socrates and Callicles late in the *Gorgias*, in defence of a central tenet of Socratic ethics, have seldom before now been much discussed. They become a main focus of Chapter 4. In the *Parmenides*' second Third Man argument, a crucial issue of correct Greek text gets debated. The *Cratylus* chapter makes the characterization of the elusive figure of Cratylus pivot for a reappraisal of that dialogue.

But myth and allegory are elements no less significant in Plato's philosophical writing. As Burnyeat once wrote:[5]

> The dialogues record many confrontations between Opinion and Philosophy, but the refutation of Opinion is less an end in itself than a means of opening our minds to the possibility of an alternative perspective. That is why the dialogues are full of images as well as arguments. Opinion is so deeply rooted in our soul that it tends to be intransigent, blind to alternatives, resistant to argument. An image like the Ship of State in the *Republic*, or the charioteer with his two horses in the *Phaedrus*, can liberate us from the familiar chains of Opinion to the realisation that alternative perspectives are available, which provide novel starting points for argument.

Nowhere is that truer than in the *Republic*. Chapters 7 and 8 explore two celebrated imaginative fictions – the Noble Lie and the Cave – which perform key but unstraightforward roles in the strategic development of the dialogue's philosophical argument, as among other concerns these essays make it their business to show.

The final group of six chapters is devoted to the last and longest of the dialogues, the *Laws*. They widen the exploration of different philosophical dimensions of Plato's writing.[6] Chapter 9 explores the dialogue's imagined readerships. It proposes principally two types of reader as targeted: the intellectually limited (represented by interlocutors from Crete and Sparta), for whom the religious framework of the conversation is designed, constraining the range and the openness of its philosophical questioning; and the practised reader of Plato, who will register intertextual resonances with the *Republic* and the *Statesman*, and recall with understanding their more ambitious philosophical horizons. Chapters 10 and 11 discuss the *Laws*' two

---

[5] Burnyeat 2005: 167.
[6] For those readers of this book who may be relatively unfamiliar with the *Laws*, these essays might provide a further entrée into the dialogue and some of its challenges, expanding upon the introduction prefaced to the English edition of the *Laws* authored by Tom Griffith and myself: Schofield and Griffith 2016.

main projects, approaching them initially via Aristotle's puzzlement about them, and then, via study of intertextuality with Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, moving to the dialogue's advocacy of a highly disputable Spartan provenance for the kinds of values that are to be enshrined in the dialogue's programme – more palpably Sparta-inspired – for an ideal form of law-based polity.

We next return to consideration of arguments and imaginative fictions. Chapter 12 tackles the difficult argumentative excursus in Book 9 in which subtle distinctions are drawn in order to reconcile the law's distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts (crucial for penal practice) with the principle (inherited from Socrates) that nobody commits wrongdoing voluntarily. Chapter 13 re-examines Book 1's image of humans as marionettes mostly jerked about by the inflexible pulls of pleasure, pain, and emotion, and how Plato puts it to the surprising work of explaining the self-rule needed for virtue. Finally, Chapter 14 considers yet another ingredient in Platonic writing: paradox.[7] It starts with paradox in the aphorisms of Heraclitus and concludes with a complex passage of Book 7 of the *Laws*. There what is truly serious in human life is no less paradoxically identified, Heraclitus-fashion, as playful activity, conceived as participation in the ordered play of the gods.

<div align="center">*</div>

Time now for some more detail on the content of these essays, and first the three in group one. Chapter 1 presents snapshots of different dialogues (ordered in a widely accepted chronological sequence) in their likely historical compositional contexts. What and how Plato wrote evidently reflected the circumstances in which he was writing and the other writers and thinkers with whom he was engaging. For example, his momentous first visit to Italy and Sicily seems to have made a massive impact on his thinking about politics and philosophy. Having spent time in the ambience of the tyrant Dionysius I in Sicily, he now reconceptualized the power of the Athenian *demos* and its susceptibility to rhetoric as approaching a form of tyranny; and the ideas he encountered in Italy about mathematics, the soul, and the afterlife likewise seem to have exercised a permanent grip on him from then on. In the *Gorgias*, these themes are woven into Plato's writing with a fresh vigour and urgency. By contrast, the prose of the late sextet of dialogues headed by the *Sophist* and *Statesman* reflects the more artificially manicured style pioneered by his rival Isocrates. Those two

---

[7] See also Chapters 7 and 12 in particular.

highly technical dialogues, like the *Parmenides* before them, can have been intended only for a readership primarily of members of his own Academy, the philosophical circle he established perhaps partly in response to Isocrates' foundation of *his* school. Even in the *Laws*, which must have been meant for a wider readership, there are passages which could be fully appreciated only by practised readers of Platonic dialogues (see Chapter 9).

In Chapter 2, by contrast, the focus is on differences in the basic literary form of a dialogue itself. Is what is written expressed as a narrative spoken by some imagined speaker? Or does Plato compose the work like a drama, with scripted parts for characters who are conceived as participating in a directly communicated conversation? This chapter asks: when and why did he adopt the narrative mode? 'When' is easy: not in what scholars take to be his earliest dialogues, focused on Socrates' characteristic stances and mode of philosophical conversation (such as *Ion* or *Crito* or *Laches*), nor in those which on stylometric grounds, above all avoidance of 'hiatus',[8] are standardly identified as his latest productions, but in an intervening period that may be seen as culminating especially in the writing of the *Republic*. 'Why' is less straightforward. One major reason was evidently Plato's desire to describe more complex interactions between his characters than was feasible in dramatically composed dialogues – and not least, to create opportunity for Socrates as narrator to convey his own often ironic reaction to a scene he describes and participates in. But sometimes characters other than Socrates himself are made to undertake the narration, as in *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Parmenides*. I suggest the importance of one feature shared by these dialogues, all of them conveying Plato's own developing ideas and concerns: in these latter three works, he puts in the narrators' mouths explicit claims of veracity and reliability, which by authorial distancing techniques are simultaneously undermined or at least put into question. The purpose? To indicate remoteness from what Socrates himself in fact taught or may have said.

Do the dialogues convey a system or systems of philosophy? Ancient Platonists thought so, and they have had their successors in modern times. Chapter 3 considers the views on the issue held by the two great Victorian Plato scholars George Grote and Benjamin Jowett. Grote and Jowett are often perceived as championing diametrically opposed perspectives on Plato: utilitarian versus idealist. And early judgements on their treatments of him found Jowett much more sensitive to the texture and many registers

---

[8] 'Hiatus' ('gap') denotes a situation where a word ending in a vowel stands before a word beginning with a vowel.

of his writing than was Grote, good at the necessary dry analysis though he was. This chapter argues that no less important is what the two of them had in common: an 'atomist' hermeneutics, in fierce reaction against attempts to make an ahistorical system out of the dialogues. They shared a conviction of the prime importance of scrupulous attention to the texts as historical documents, combined with insistence that giving Plato his place in the history of philosophy and 'in the scale of human improvement' was no less the historian's obligation. It was in the approach to that 'scale' that the utilitarianism of Grote and the idealism of Jowett might have yielded differing assessments. But in practice, their judgements on what counted as progress and what might count as further progress were remarkably similar.

The three subsequent essays included here as a second group are concerned with arguments and theories, the dominating concern of Platonic scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s into the 1970s – and an abiding preoccupation of philosophical readers of Plato. First in this second group of essays comes a chapter on the *Gorgias*, which I take to be a relatively early dialogue (see Chapter 1). Discussion of the confrontation between Socrates and Callicles in the dialogue has hitherto mostly focused on its first two phases: Callicles' statement of his views and Socrates' attempted refutations (481–500), and Socrates' subsequent attempt to substitute his own conception of the good life (501–9). Much less attention has been paid to the final phase (509–22). Yet how could a writer such as Plato not invest with importance such a substantial sequence of concluding argumentation? This is where he stages the most sustained debate in the dialogue between alternative answers – with their consequences – to what has by now proved to be its central question: is committing injustice or falling victim to it the greatest evil? Chapter 4 examines in detail the key moves in that debate, in which Callicles is again tempted by Socrates to participate, after refusing to continue midway through the second phase of the dialectic. It is argued that Plato's aim in this final section of the conversation is to show just why and how Socrates might successfully initiate and sustain intellectual engagement with an intelligent young politician hoping to rise within the Athenian democracy, such as Callicles is portrayed as being. He fails to persuade him. But this is not, as is sometimes supposed, a failure on Socrates' part to communicate the radical import of what he means. It is a matter of what Plato wants us to understand as different fundamental existential commitments.

The classic paradigm and perhaps original example of the argument-focused approach to Plato post-1945 was Gregory Vlastos's famous 1954

article on the Third Man argument in the *Parmenides*.[9] From that article, the debate it triggered, and the further literature it seeded, much was learned about the logic and metaphysics of the theory of Forms. For much of that debate, scholars paid little attention, however, to the positioning of the Third Man and its possible significance within the sequence of difficulties for the theory that Parmenides is made to develop in the first part of the dialogue. A little later in the sequence, a second version of the Third Man regress is presented. It was often read as essentially identical with the original version in its critical thrust. Chapter 5 of this volume, which deals with this second version, was the earliest of the essays that are included here to be written and originally published. It dates to the mid-1990s (all the others were composed in the present millennium) and appeared as a contribution to a collective volume designed to explore philosophical argumentation in Plato's later dialogues within its literary context – *Form and Argument in Late Plato* – and to make the case for the philosophical importance of such an approach.[10]

As Chapter 5 suggests, the prevalent interpretation of the second version of the Third Man was in danger of making that version effectively redundant and failed to do sufficient justice to its regress's focus specifically on the Form of Likeness. Nor was attention given to any relationship with the elaborate dialectical exercise undertaken in Part II of the dialogue. *Like* figures in many of the arguments of Part II, where it is often construed as equivalent to *being qualified in the same way*. What readers of Part II in effect come to recognize is that *like* is a second-order predicate: 'is like' means 'share the same first-order predicate', not 'participates in the Form Likeness'. Part II of the *Parmenides* thereby supplies materials for resisting the regress; and the presentation of likeness as a theme which we are invited to pursue through both parts alerts us to the fact that such materials are available and are pertinent to the business of evaluating Parmenides' critique of Socrates. A general moral: arguments need to be studied within the context and structure of the whole dialogue to which they belong.

The next chapter is likewise focused on how a dialogue as a whole works argumentatively. Chapter 6 considers the puzzling character of Cratylus in the *Cratylus*, Plato's dialogue on the notion of a correct language. At the beginning of the dialogue, he is portrayed as a teasingly mysterious figure, who is then silent for most of its duration. But he adopts a quite different demeanour when he finally joins the conversation towards the end. Now he functions as a mostly reasonable and altogether cooperative respondent,

---

[9] Vlastos 1954. [10] Gill and McCabe 1996.

even if the positions he takes are rigid and extreme. The chapter tackles the interpretative challenge that this puzzle poses for the reader (placed after the *Parmenides* chapter, because the *Cratylus* ends by addressing issues characteristically taken up in later dialogues – wherever its latest version might have fitted in the dialogues' chronological order of composition).[11] Plato uses Cratylus initially to sketch linguistic naturalism in the dogmatic and dialectically unelaborated form in which (I conjecture) it was presented by its original author. Then, after Socrates has made of it a full-scale philosophical theory on his own account, the figure of Cratylus is put to another use. Cratylus now proposes a version of that original naturalist position which is developed as the germ of a full-scale theory in miniature, rival to Socrates' own, incorporating semantic, epistemological, and onto-logical components and constructed from paradoxical stances generated by a range of previous and contemporary philosophers, including notably the Socratic Antisthenes, a construction of Plato's own. In the end, Cratylus' strange dogmatically expressed doctrine is presented as forcing engagement with an interconnected set of major philosophical issues that came to grip Plato in his later period. That for him seems to be what made Cratylus and his enigmatic persona someone of compelling intellectual interest.

My third grouping is made up of just two essays, which both address Plato's use of myth and allegory at crucial points in the developing argu-ment of the *Republic*. Chapter 7 engages with the Noble Lie of Book 3.[12] 'Noble lie': a paradox, if not quite a contradiction in terms, and emblem-atic of the focus of this collection as a whole in the multiplicity of the challenges with which Plato's writing here confronts the reader. The paradox comes the more startlingly from an author who writes, in the same dialogue, that a philosopher devoted to knowledge will 'not willingly accept falsehood in any form – hating it, but loving truth'. A distinction had earlier been made between the lie in words and the 'true' lie in the soul. Yet that might not seem to do enough to mitigate the paradox or muffle the shock it administers. Lies are told to be believed – in the soul. Perhaps a further distinction might help: we may suppose that a noble lie is one that, while literally speaking a falsehood, albeit in the occurrence in Book 3 of the *Republic* a socially and politically 'useful' myth, is designed to communicate a deeper *truth*, in this particular case, a useful truth about those 'more important things' that Socrates is made to speak of. As such it is presumably 'not deserving of hatred'. On that basis, there does seem to

---

[11] On revisions apparently made to an original version, see Sedley 2003: 6–16.
[12] Part of the material in this chapter coincides with Chapter 7 (sections 2.3–5) of Schofield 2006.

be room for a lie that is 'noble'. But still, does the philosopher not recoil from accepting falsehood *in any way at all*?

Whether, and if so how, the conundrum can be satisfactorily resolved is a matter for debate, discussed with related issues in this chapter. What is not in doubt is the immediate disconcerting effect upon the reader of that paradox of a 'noble lie' itself. Writing disconcertingly is nothing unusual for Plato. Many of the essays in this book grapple with its philosophical import. For example, following the essay on the *Republic*'s Noble Lie, a treatment is included of the same dialogue's discombobulating Cave allegory (Chapter 8). At the point in the *Republic* at which Socrates launches into his cave narrative, readers are expecting further illumination of the education beyond the first studies outlined in Books 2 and 3 that the trainee philosophers being imagined are to receive. Yet initially a picture is painted of humanity at large, as we are at present, imprisoned in benighted illusion and delusion about our common uneducated condition, as symbolized by our inability to see directly simulacra of real things in the dark of the cave. We are represented as in need of radical intellectual conversion. But no indication of how that might come about is forthcoming. Or not at first. When Plato's Socrates does offer subsequent commentary, it becomes apparent that doing mathematics is his recipe – but by then Plato is apparently assuming that readers are now to think again of the smaller and less blinkered class of trainee philosophers with whose earlier education he has been concerned as the primary subjects of the narrative. By distinguishing these two quite different constructions of the denizens of the cave, Chapter 8 aims not to make the narrative or its import internally consistent, but to make sense of a good deal of its clearly deliberate mysteriousness.[13]

The final group of essays (Chapters 9 to 14) are all concerned with the *Laws*, a dialogue which as an example of philosophical writing presents readers with its own special challenges. Indeed, it has sometimes been suggested that the *Laws* is not truly philosophical or dialogical at all, a view of which I hope this sequence of chapters will play their part in disabusing anyone who might be tempted to think it. The issue is taken up at the start of Chapter 9, which (like Chapter 10, too) discusses the strategies Plato adopts in writing the dialogue and the chief projects he undertakes in it. Chapter 9 proposes that Plato directs the *Laws* to two key readerships. One is the reader inexperienced in philosophy, symbolized in the dialogue in the persons of its elderly Cretan and Spartan speakers in their conversation

---

[13] Schofield 2006: 87, 158–9 did not engage with this problem.

with an Athenian visitor to Crete where (exceptionally) that discussion takes place: a visitor who has some Socratic characteristics, but others which might remind one of the great legislator Solon. The other – in the end, it is suggested, the target chiefly in Plato's sights – is the practised reader of Platonic dialogues, who will register the echoes of the *Republic* and *Statesman* in the *Laws* (and indeed of others among Plato's writings), and who will be capable of more challenging philosophical reflection than is required within the religious framework generally presented as authoritative in the dialogue.

Chapter 10 identifies two distinct theoretical projects undertaken in the *Laws*, one idealizing, the other more pragmatic. The main enterprise is clearly construction of a social and political system that will best enable citizens to achieve virtue and happiness. But a subordinate project, less prominently announced, takes on the task of sketching a formal system of laws invested with coercive force as well as educative import, which will serve to deal with the recalcitrant human nature of those who are resistant to education. Chapter 11 then turns to the key opening passage of Book 1, where the primary job of law making (as explained in Chapter 10) is construed as that of fostering the proper development, conduct, and treatment of human beings at every stage of the life cycle, above all by provision for sound customary practices and the like (with attainment of virtue and happiness the ultimate object). It argues something not well appreciated in previous scholarship: that Plato sees this legislative project as a version of the ideal of the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus that is recognizable in the pages of Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, as contrasted with the militaristic ideology often attributed to the Spartans (an ideology here represented in the views initially expressed by Cleinias the Cretan and endorsed by Megillus the Spartan).

In Chapters 12 and 13, the focus shifts to two particular and memorable passages of the *Laws* in which Plato turns to problems about how the human self is to be conceived, and to associated questions about virtue and humans' responsibility for one's own behaviour – since a law-governed society has to assume that responsibility for action is indeed our own. But as Chapter 12 indicates, it becomes evident in later books of the *Laws* that the dialogue remains committed to a version of Socratic paradox. Book 5 insists that no one who is unjust is so voluntarily. Book 9 then tackles what is presented as a serious threat posed by the paradox to any viable theory of criminal behaviour and its punishment; or as the Athenian puts it, to the distinction drawn 'in every city and by every legislator there has ever been between two sorts of wrongdoing (*adikêmata*), voluntary and involuntary'.