it is held not casually, but in the face of philosophical objections, marks it as a philosophical view.

I conclude, then, that Vlastos was incorrect in his claim that the Socrates of the early dialogues was exclusively a moral philosopher. I have argued, following Allen, that the Socrates of these dialogues is a metaphysician, an ontologist, as well as a moral philosopher. The ontology of the elenctic dialogues differs from that of the middle dialogues only in a single respect: separation. This is a huge difference, and it is, strictly, an incompatibility. Thus, the ontology of the elenctic dialogues is in this one respect incompatible with the ontology of the middle dialogues. In other respects, however, it is compatible with that ontology, and should be seen as the precursor or first stage of that theory. In this regard, as, I believe, in others, Socrates$_E$ was much more closely connected to Socrates$_M$ than Vlastos's portrait allows.

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# INTERPRETING PLATO'S EARLY DIALOGUES

DAVID WOLFSDORF

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## 1. The mouthpiece principle

INTERPRETATION of philosophical texts usually proceeds on the assumption that philosophers have written in order to disseminate their beliefs. Interpreting their texts, therefore, aims to clarify their beliefs on the topics the texts engage, where the texts constitute the evidence for those beliefs. Difficulty tends to lie in determining the author's meaning or the cogency of the author's arguments rather than whether the author believes what is written.

In the case of Plato's writings—throughout, this paper's principal concern is the early writings—no straightforward identification of the texts' contents with the author's beliefs is possible. Plato wrote dialogues or narratives with abundant dialogue whose sentences express the views of dramatic characters. Some of these sentences obviously do not represent the author's beliefs, but it is not always clear which do.[1]

An ancient solution to this problem identifies Plato's beliefs with the utterances of the main character Socrates. The earliest surviving expression of this, the mouthpiece principle, occurs in Diogenes

[1] Secondary literature on this subject and interpretation of Plato's dialogues in general is vast. A good, although biased, point of departure is G. Press, 'The State of the Question in the Study of Plato's Dialogues', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 34 (1996), 507–32, which contains much essential bibliography. Some important contributions are assembled in N. Smith (ed.), *Plato: Critical Assessments* [*Plato*], vol. i (London, 1998). Another useful volume is J. Klagge and N. Smith (eds.), *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues* [*Methods*] (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol.; Oxford, 1992). A good monograph is E. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Stockholm, 1977). F. Novotny, *The Posthumous Life of Plato* (Prague, 1977), is an encyclopaedic account of Platonism from the early Academy to the twentieth century.

Laertius. Vlastos offers a modern endorsement: 'in any given dia-
logue Plato allows the persona Socrates only what he (Plato), at that
time, considers true'.[2]

But many scholars, more cautious than Vlastos, resist the mouth-
piece principle. One strategy is to restrict interpretation to Socrates'
utterances. For instance, Brickhouse and Smith:

> We do not, in this book, intend to answer the question of whose philosophy
> we are actually interpreting [Plato's or the historical Socrates'] . . . We
> claim only that a distinct philosophy can be found consistently portrayed
> as Socrates' in Plato's early dialogues, and that the philosophy so portrayed
> is itself consistent.[3]

Thus, one might say, Socrates' philosophy is rich and constitutes
the dialogues' main philosophical substance—to have clarified that
is interpretation enough.

This approach falters on several grounds. Most plainly, the richer
and more cogent the philosophy disclosed by the character Socrates,
the more reasonable it seems that Plato maintained that philosophy
himself—regardless of whether it originated with him or the his-
torical Socrates. So in this case, avoiding the bugaboo of authorial
intention appears a weak manœuvre.

There is also a problem determining the character Socrates' be-
liefs. His utterances are not entirely consistent among the early
dialogues or occasionally even within dialogues. Of course, this
is an interpretation. But assuming for the time being that it is
correct, one is compelled to question which of Socrates' beliefs
are Socrates'. Consequently, it becomes necessary to consider why
Plato composed Socrates' utterances as inconsistent.

Of all the views expressed in the early dialogues Plato clearly
is most sympathetic to the character Socrates', even though he is
not sympathetic to all of Socrates' views. However, an approach to
the dialogues that begins with the relation between Plato's beliefs
and Socrates' utterances begins improperly. It overlooks the texts'
basic dialogic nature. If Plato's aim were simply to convey his views
through Socrates, then why did he not write monologues? And if he

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[2] G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* [*Ironist*] (Ithaca, NY, 1991),
117. Cf. also Vlastos's 'grand assumption' that 'Plato makes Socrates say in any
given dialogue 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
his [i.e. Plato's] own philosophy' (*Socratic Studies* (Cambridge, 1994), 125).

[3] T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford, 1994), p. viii.

could have written monologues with Socrates as speaker, then why
did he not write monologues in his own voice? An understanding
of the relation between Plato and Socrates should emerge from
prior consideration of the texts as dramatic dialogues. One should
begin by asking not whose views are most likely to be identified with
Plato's, but what Plato is trying to advance through the engagement
of his characters and how he attempts to achieve this. Once one has a
better grasp of Plato's dramaturgy and dramaturgical objectives, it
then makes sense to assess the functions Socrates serves in relation
to these and so the relation between Plato and Socrates.

### 2. Fundamentals of Plato's dramaturgy

A dramatic theme pervades the early dialogues, the opposition and
conflict of philosophy and non-philosophy, its antithesis. The for-
mer category encompasses the love and pursuit of human excellence
principally through logical argumentation. The latter encompasses
much popular and traditional ethics as well as almost every Greek
discursive tradition, including some that we might call 'philoso-
phical', in so far as their values and methods contradict philo-
sophy: for example, sophistry, political, forensic, and epideictic
rhetoric, Athenian drama, and, in fact, most of the Greek poetic
tradition.[4]

Plato's conception of philosophy is distinct from philosophy
as this discipline is currently conceived and has otherwise been
conceived. It is one, albeit seminal, form that philosophy has as-
sumed. The distinction between Plato's conception of philosophy
and modern conceptions of philosophy is significant because the
early dialogues' critique of convention and tradition is limited to
ethics of a distinct kind and to pertinent issues in the epistemology
of ethics. In contrast, ordinary knowledge claims and the grounds of
ordinary knowledge are taken for granted. Consequently, the oppo-
sition of philosophy and non-philosophy, as Plato conceived these,

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[4] D. Wolfsdorf, 'Aporia in Plato's *Charmides, Laches,* and *Lysis*' ['Aporia'] (diss.
University of Chicago, 1997), where the opposition is characterized as between 'phi-
losophy' and 'counter-philosophy'. The word ἀφιλοσοφία does not occur in Plato's
early dialogues, but see *Def.* 415 E. The adjective ἀφιλόσοφος occurs at *Phdr.* 256 C
1 and *Tim.* 73 A 6. A. Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1995), 55, also
conceives of Plato's dialogues as involving a rivalry of this kind; I have adopted her
terms.

must be understood to revolve around a limited domain of philosophical topics, again, values of character and their justification.

Plato's early dialogues present philosophy as the sole legitimate mode of personal and civic life.[5] They demonstrate the practice of philosophy and attempt to persuade the reader of its superiority to non-philosophy. They convey this basic idea by various means, in various tones, often more comical than fanatical—although the final movement of *Gorgias* involves one powerful and earnest instance. Socrates' and Callicles' dispute concludes: 'Let us follow this, then, and invite everyone else to this—not that to which you trust yourself and invite me, Callicles, for it is worthless' (*Gorg.* 527 E 5–7).

In promoting philosophy, the early dialogues are propaedeutic. Simultaneously, they recommend philosophy by demonstrating its practice. They portray Socrates and his interlocutors engaged in enquiries into philosophical topics that are, to a large extent, controlled by logical argumentation. These demonstrations achieve several overlapping objectives. This style of speech was relatively new, certainly not well established. Therefore, the depiction of characters employing it serves to introduce the thing itself and to distinguish it from other forms of speech.[6] The demonstrations also orient the reader towards a philosophical life by undermining conventional and traditional ethical views and epistemological views pertaining to ethical topics, and advancing and defending alternatives. And again, the discussions demonstrate the superiority of the form of philosophical discourse to discourse ungoverned by logical argumentation.

The early dialogues' dramatization of the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy operates in three complicit dimensions: logical, through the style of speech in which the characters engage, logical argumentation; characterological, through the portrayal of character in speech and action; and historical, through reference and allusion to historical persons and events. These three dimensions also converge on the prevailing dramatic mode of the texts, realism,[7] for the three basic aspects of the dialogues' realism are

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[5] That is, at least for those few intellectually capable. On this point and Plato's target audience see sect. 4.

[6] For instance, in *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* Socrates admonishes Protagoras and Polus to refrain from making speeches and to adhere to succinct questions and answers (*Prot.* 335 B 5–C 7; *Gorg.* 461 D 2–462 A 5).

[7] Compare M. Frede's characterization in 'Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form', in Klagge and Smith, *Methods*, 201–19 at 201.

their historicity, characterology, and diction. The dramatic characters represent historical individuals, and the dramatic settings represent historical places.[8] The dramatic characters are also represented in a realistic manner as saying and doing things that real people would. In particular, they are portrayed as conversing in relatively colloquial language.[9]

Realism can be a deceptive form of dramatic presentation. Often, it is treated as a default mode. Accordingly, scholars view the dramatic style as merely instrumental to engaging the reader in the text's substance, which begins only with the philosophical enquiry proper. Passages without philosophical argumentation are treated like vehicles that convey the reader through a hermeneutically barren landscape to sites of philosophical interest. This view oversimplifies such passages and neglects whole dimensions of the dialogues, for Plato employs character and history as well as philosophical argumentation to demonstrate the value of philosophy over non-philosophy.

The characters' conduct as well as utterances reflect their psychological conditions, specifically, their ethical characters and values. Accordingly, willingness and eagerness to engage in logically governed argumentation indicate a philosophical disposition. For instance, in *Charmides* (153 A 1–D 5), upon Socrates' return from Potidaea, those present at Taureas' palaestra are eager to hear news of the battle, whereas Socrates quickly turns the conversation to the subject of philosophy and the education of youth. Similarly, in *Protagoras* (309 A 1–C 12) the anonymous companion assumes that Socrates has just come from an erotic adventure with Alcibiades, whereas Socrates explains that at Callias' he found the wisdom of Protagoras far more compelling than Alcibiades' beauty.

In contrast, some of Socrates' interlocutors are unwilling to engage in discussion. For instance, Critias initially resists joining the investigation of self-control;[10] twice Protagoras stubbornly falls into silence (*Prot.* 360 D 6–8); and Callicles ultimately will not continue

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[8] The dialogues' realism and historicity have so captivated some scholars that they misuse dramatic elements as evidence of historical facts. See D. Wolfsdorf, 'The Dramatic Date of Plato's *Protagoras*', *Rheinisches Museum*, 140 (1997), 223–30; and, on anachronism in *Charmides*, Wolfsdorf, 'Aporia', 65–9.

[9] This has been thought due to the Sicilian genre of mime. However, the evidence for this is extremely weak. See D. Wolfsdorf, 'The Historical Reader of Plato's *Protagoras*' ['Historical'], *Classical Quarterly*, NS 48 (1998), 126–35 at 126 n. 2.

[10] Cf. *Charm.* 161 B 8–C 2; 162 C 1–D 6.

the investigation (*Gorg.* 519 E 1–2). Such cases expose the interlocutors' fear of humiliation and desire to safeguard their reputations. These attitudes, moreover, suggest a distinct prioritization of personal values, precisely, one according to which truth is subordinate to common opinion.

Related is the character who is willing to engage, but for the wrong reasons; his contributions aim to outdo or defeat his interlocutor rather than foster a co-operative pursuit of truth.[11] Euthydemus and Dionysodorus' eristic sophisms are a good example. Likewise, in *Laches* once Nicias supplants Laches as Socrates' principal interlocutor, Laches becomes contentious, eager to see his military colleague refuted as he was. Similarly, Thrasymachus' violent and abusive manner shows an appalling lack of interest in his company's well-being. In short, the characters' non-philosophical as well as philosophical claims manifest their values. Generally, their motives for speech or silence as well as the content of their speech play an important role in Plato's dramaturgy.

In addition, Plato employs history to achieve his objectives. The early dialogues are set in a quasi-historical past. Precisely, historical elements populate the dialogues, but the particular configuration of the historical elements is not historically accurate. Among other things, the ubiquity of anachronism confirms this. In short, the dialogues are not intended to represent conversations that actually occurred.

Plato draws the historical elements mainly from the last thirty years of the fifth century BC. This period encompasses the first thirty years of his life, a span of Athenian history marked by the Peloponnesian war and its immediate aftermath and concluding with Socrates' execution. Much of the history to which Plato alludes surely is lost, and so the texts' historical dimension is elusive. But surviving historical sources facilitate appreciation of certain examples and so suggest a more general significance of Plato's engagement of history.[12]

Plato treats this historical period critically and ironically. *Protagoras* provides one concrete demonstration. Protagoras claims that he can teach excellence in both private and public spheres, specifically, how to manage one's household and be an effective

[11] Such instances reflect the common Greek values of φιλονικία and φιλοτιμία, on which see Wolfsdorf, 'Aporia', *passim*.

[12] D. Nails, *The People of Plato* [*People*] (Indianapolis, 2002).

citizen in speech and action (*Prot.* 318 E 5–319 A 2). The ensuing enquiry concerning the relation of the components of excellence exposes Protagoras' ignorance of excellence and undermines his claim. However, before this enquiry begins, Plato intimates, through his choice of setting and characters, that Protagoras cannot teach excellence.[13] In the dialogue, Protagoras is staying at Callias' house. Callias came from one of the wealthiest and most esteemed Athenian families. In the course of his life, he depleted his family's fortunes and disgraced their reputation. Callias was one of Protagoras' principal Athenian adherents. Therefore, the dialogue's setting at Callias' house undermines Protagoras' claim to teach excellence in a private capacity.

Furthermore, many of the Athenians at Callias' were notorious for political and social misdeeds. The collection of characters in *Protagoras*, the largest in a Platonic dialogue, contrasts with the collection in *Phaedo*, the second largest. None of the nineteen characters at Callias' is present in Socrates' prison cell. The Phaedonic group consists of Socrates' disciples and adherents of philosophy who have come to share last moments with a dear friend and teacher. In contrast, the Protagorean group are portrayed as adherents of sophists. Plato thereby loosely correlates their scandalous histories with the sophists' corrupt activity. Accordingly, their presence undermines Protagoras' claim to teach excellence in a public capacity. Early in the text Protagoras argues that the Athenians cultivate excellence; he concludes:

the Athenians think that excellence is teachable in both private and public affairs . . . in matters where the death penalty or exile awaits their children if not instructed and cultivated in excellence—and not merely death, but the confiscation of property and practically the entire subversion of their households—do they not have them taught or take the utmost care of them? (*Prot.* 324 C 4–325 C 4)

The histories of the individuals represented in *Protagoras*, many of whom suffered death, exile, or confiscation of their property, undermine Protagoras' claim.

This example illustrates a basic ironic criticism of Athens that pervades the early writings: the Athenians lacked excellence, failed to recognize their ignorance of excellence, and failed to cultivate it. The criticism of the sophists who appear in many of these texts

[13] The argument summarized here is drawn from Wolfsdorf, 'Historical'.

correlates the corruption in Athens with sophistry. The relation is not portrayed as one of cause and effect. Rather, the Athenian upper class's reception of sophistry is characterized as symptomatic of their non-philosophical character.

Generally speaking, by setting his dialogues in this quasi-historical past, Plato engages the histories of the individuals whom the characters represent and their reputations among posterity with the portrayal of the characters in the texts' settings. The early dialogues portray Athens and a segment of Athenian society of a past generation with the hindsight of Athens' fate during this period. Plato's engagement of history dramatizes the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy because philosophy is a practical social and political enterprise. Therefore, not only the conduct of dramatic characters, but also the biographical activities of the individuals whom these characters represent serve as evidence that is evaluated in relation to the topics and problems that the texts explore.[14]

Generally speaking, Plato's realistic portrayal of character and engagement of history is remarkably compelling. But the treatment of character and history is not fundamentally psychological or historical; it is ethical, more precisely philosophical. Accordingly, the realism Plato employs to dramatize the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy and to demonstrate the value of the former over the latter is cunning. The dialogues incorporate representative elements of philosophy and non-philosophy, including representative persons, but this incorporation involves manipulation. The realism of the dialogues conveys the impression that the portrayal of persons and their utterance is accurate. But the dramatic characters are constructions and entirely subject to their author's interests. This does not preclude aspects of the dialogues from being historically accurate. Still, the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy operates through a conquest of appropriation. Within the dialogues' dramatic worlds, the values embedded in the social and political life of Athens, its inhabitants and discursive forms, are re-evaluated and recalibrated according to the authority of philosophy.

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[14] M. Gifford, 'Dramatic Dialectic in *Republic* Book 1', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 20 (2001), 35–106, develops a noteworthy recent dramatic-historical interpretation of *Republic* 1.

## 3. Aporia and authority[15]

The early dialogues' sweeping criticism of Athenian culture is a critique of established authority. This critique targets the conventional and traditional values of institutions and practices such as the Athenian democracy, the Thirty's violent regime, sophistry, and Attic drama. It also concerns the manner in which the values of these institutions and practices are imposed and adopted. The early dialogues emphasize that, whether one is persuading or being persuaded, conviction should result not from grounds such as force, threat, cajolery, habit, or rhetoric, but from understanding and rational argumentation.

Accordingly, when Socrates disagrees with Thrasymachus' conception of justice and Thrasymachus responds in exasperation, 'If you are not convinced by what I was saying, what more can I do for you? Should I take the argument and ram it into your soul?', Socrates suggests that Thrasymachus permit a reasoned discussion of his position (*Rep.* 1, 345 B 4–C 9). When Hippocrates rushes to his bed at the crack of dawn expecting Socrates to escort him to Callias' to become Protagoras' student, Socrates suggests that they discuss Hippocrates' intentions and understanding of the situation. When Critias suggests a particular conception of self-control and expects Socrates' agreement, Socrates responds:

> Critias . . . you treat me as though I professed to know the things concerning which I pose questions and needed only the will to agree with you. But the fact of the matter is that I join you in enquiry each time an assertion is made because I myself am ignorant. Therefore, I want to consider first, before telling you whether I agree. (*Charm.* 165 B 5–C 2)

When Crito, anxious and dismayed, arrives at Socrates' prison cell explaining that Socrates must allow him to bribe the guard to let Socrates escape, lest Crito himself be considered negligent of his friend's welfare, Socrates suggests that they ignore common opinion and examine the arguments for a particular course of action. As Socrates says, 'I am not only now but always a man who follows nothing but the reasoning that on consideration seems best to me' (*Crito* 46 B 3–5).

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[15] A brief account of the history of the interpretation of aporia in the early dialogues can be found in Wolfsdorf, 'Aporia', 1–41.

In short, reason should govern one's convictions and conduct—
hence, the dialogues' persistent identification of excellence and
knowledge and emphasis upon the value of knowledge for living
well. Accordingly, the texts strive to demonstrate the process of
giving reasons and justifying beliefs and courses of action. Notably,
the discussions do not always succeed in finding compelling rea-
sons or in reaching satisfactory conclusions; some dialogues end in
aporia. Yet the dramaturgical function of aporia corresponds to this
very emphasis on the rational justification of belief.

Plato's early dialogues (arguably) encompass fourteen texts: *Apo-
logy*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias
Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and
*Republic* 1.[16] The philosophical discussions in the seven non-defi-
nitional dialogues concern the following topics: whether the prose-
cution of Socrates is just (*Apology*); whether it is right for Socrates
to escape from prison (*Crito*); whether Euthydemus' and Dionyso-
dorus' eristic dialectic is valuable (*Euthydemus*); the relative value
of a life of pleasure or goodness, specifically, the identity of rhetoric,
whether orators and tyrants have power and live well, and whether
it is better to suffer injustice than to do it (*Gorgias*); whether volun-
tary wrongdoing is better than involuntary wrongdoing (*Hippias
Minor*); whether Ion has knowledge (*Ion*); whether excellence is
teachable (*Protagoras*).

Every definitional dialogue ends in aporia. *Hippias Minor* and
*Protagoras* end in some degree of aporia. For instance, in *Hippias
Minor* the argument compels Socrates' conclusion that the good
man voluntarily does wrong, but he finds this contrary to his intu-
itions and difficult to accept (*H. Min.* 376 B 8–C 1). The other five
non-definitional dialogues (*Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*,
and *Ion*) do not end in aporia. For example, in *Gorgias* Socrates

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[16] Issues of chronology and, to a lesser extent, authenticity persist. For example,
it is debated whether *Republic* 1 was written significantly earlier than the rest of
*Republic*. I assume that it was. It is sometimes claimed that *Meno* 80 ff. does not
reflect the philosophical content of the early period. This is irrelevant for my discus-
sion. *Hippias Major* is occasionally regarded as inauthentic. I assume it is genuine.
Some important recent contributions to these matters—with which I am not always
in agreement—include C. Kahn, 'Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?', *Classi-
cal Quarterly*, NS 31 (1981), 305–20; H. Thesleff, *Studies in Platonic Chronology*
(Helsinki, 1982); id., 'Platonic Chronology', *Phronesis*, 34 (1989), 1–26; C. Young,
'Plato and Computer Dating', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 12 (1994), 227–
50. All are reprinted in Smith, *Plato*. See also D. Nails, *Agora, Academy, and the
Conduct of Philosophy* (Dordrecht, 1995).

strongly affirms that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it,
although he disavows knowing this (*Gorg.* 508 E 7–509 B 1).

In some cases a dialogue concludes with a proposition that Plato
clearly intended to advance;[17] for instance, those in *Apology*, *Crito*,
*Gorgias*, and *Ion*.[18] However, the non-definitional dialogues' non-
aporetic conclusions do not necessarily convey positions that Plato
intended to advance. *Hippias Minor* is the obvious example. The
historical Socrates seems to have believed that nobody voluntarily
does wrong and so that the good man does not voluntarily do wrong.
At several points in the early dialogues Socrates makes this claim.[19]
It is implausible to suppose that when he composed *Hippias Minor*
Plato intended to advance the view that the good man voluntarily
does wrong. Thus, it is a question why Plato composed the enquiry
to conclude with a proposition that he did not intend to advance.

The aporetic conclusions in the definitional dialogues are simi-
larly puzzling. Throughout the early writings Socrates suggests that
excellence is a kind of knowledge. However, Plato did not conclude
the definitional dialogues by having Socrates affirm, with whatever
degree of confidence, that, whatever precisely it is, the definiendum
is a kind of knowledge.[20] How are the conclusions in *Hippias Minor*
and the definitional dialogues to be explained?

In composing the early dialogues Plato had some interest in deve-
loping and advancing arguments for (putatively) true ethical and, to
a lesser extent, epistemological propositions; for instance, the con-
clusions of non-definitional dialogues such as *Gorgias* and *Crito*.
But Plato was also concerned to convey the view that belief in a
given ethical proposition should be rationally justified. Accord-
ingly, through the dialectical enquiries that Socrates promotes,

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[17] One might worry here that I am committing the intentional fallacy. I cannot see
that the particular claims that follow are unreasonable, even though they attribute
intentional states to Plato. In sect. 5 I offer a more restricted conception of *that which
Plato intended to advance in a particular dialogue* as well as further justification for
my attribution of particular intentional states to Plato.

[18] In other words, Socrates' prosecution and conviction were unjust, Socrates was
right not to have tried to escape from prison, Ion lacks knowledge, and it is better
to suffer injustice than to do it.

[19] Admittedly, significant controversy surrounds the interpretation of this claim.
For the most important recent contribution, with bibliography, see H. Segvic, 'No
One Errs Willingly: The Meaning of Socratic Intellectualism', *Oxford Studies in
Ancient Philosophy*, 19 (2000), 1–45.

[20] Of course, *Lysis* and *Hippias Major* must be understood as exempt from this
comment because friendship is a relation and not a psychological state and beauty
is treated as a property of inanimate entities as well as human beings.

Plato demonstrates processes of and attempts at rational justifi-
cation.

In concluding *Hippias Minor* with a proposition that he probably
did not intend to advance and in concluding the definitional dia-
logues without affirming, however tentatively, that the definiendum
is a kind of knowledge, Plato drew particular attention to the char-
acter and quality of the arguments upon which the conclusions rest.
As such, the aporiai in these texts compel the reader to examine the
grounds of his beliefs rather than to adopt, even on Plato's own
authority, but with insufficient grounds or inadequate examination
or understanding, any particular ethical proposition.

These texts' emphasis on the examination of the grounds of
ethical belief is consonant with their propaedeutic character. Ten-
able conclusions require understanding, which requires rational
enquiry. Granted, Plato could have concluded the definitional dia-
logues with Socrates, however tentatively, affirming that the defi-
niendum is a kind of knowledge, on the grounds that this is the
most reasonable view developed in the discussion. Moreover, this
would not have entirely undermined his interest in demonstrating
the value of rationally justifying ethical belief. Plato's concern with
the rational justification of ethical belief clearly pervades all the
early writings. Even in *Gorgias*, whose conclusion strongly affirms
that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it, Plato is able to convey
the importance of justifying this proposition on rational grounds.
Still, the decision to conclude *Hippias Minor* and the definitional
dialogues absurdly or aporetically reflects a relative degree of em-
phasis on and preference for conveying the significance of justifying
ethical belief.

This explanation of the conclusions of the definitional dialogues
and *Hippias Minor* ironically suggests that it is the non-definitional
dialogues' non-aporetic, non-absurd conclusions that require ex-
planation. Such explanations are readily available. For example,
*Apology* and *Crito* constitute a distinct set. Were Socrates unable to
present a compelling defence of his mission or to offer a compelling
explanation of his decision to remain in prison, this would trivial-
ize his life's activity. In so far as Plato wished to examine whether
Socrates' activity was just or whether he should have escaped from
prison, there was no question of concluding consideration of these
topics in *Apology* and *Crito* aporetically.

In sum, the aporetic conclusions in some early dialogues es-

pecially demonstrate Plato's emphasis on the process of rational
enquiry and justification. In sacrificing explicit endorsement of a
particular proposition, aporia serves to endorse the authority of
reason.

### 4. Audience and a-structure

Just as distinct objectives inform individual dialogues, Plato most
likely did not compose every early dialogue with precisely the same
audience in mind. Still, generally speaking, Plato's intended au-
dience must have been mainly drawn from the Athenian leisured
class.[21] This is clear from the fact that serious pursuit of philo-
sophy would have required means for ample leisure time. Also,
many dialogues are set in locations that only the wealthy would
have frequented; for example, public and private training grounds
and wrestling schools: the Lyceum (*Euthydemus*), Mikkos' palaestra
(*Lysis*), Taureas' palaestra (*Charmides*); or the homes of the rich:
Callias' (*Protagoras*)[22] and Cephalus' (*Republic* 1).[23] Moreover, the
dramatic characters are engaged in costly or distinctly upper-class
activities: seeking a teacher of hoplite exercises (*Laches*), attending
a private epideictic demonstration (*Gorgias, Hippias Minor*).

Given the prevalent theme of educating the youth and the role
of youths,[24] the dialogues appear to have targeted the young adults
of this social class as well as its older members. Moreover, for-
eigners might have constituted part of the intended audience, but
abundant topical allusions suggest that familiarity with Athenian
social history was necessary for comprehending the texts' historical
dimensions.[25]

[21] J. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford, 1971), pp. xvii–xxxi, argues
that this group consisted of approximately 1,200 adult Athenian males.

[22] As Hippias notes, Callias' is 'one of the most opulent houses in the city' (*Prot.*
337 D 6–7).

[23] Cephalus was known as the wealthiest Athenian metic. See Nails, *People*.

[24] In *Apology* Socrates is on trial in part for corrupting the youth. In *Euthyphro*
Socrates announces that Meletus is prosecuting him for corrupting the youth. In
*Charmides* Socrates is concerned with the state of the Athenian youth. In *Laches*
Lysimachus and Melesias are seeking proper education for their sons. In *Protagoras*
Hippocrates is seeking education from Protagoras. In *Lysis* Socrates is focused on
the youth Lysis and Menexenus.

[25] Note that, aside from the famous itinerant teachers, the foreigners in the early
dialogues are resident aliens. Meno is an exception; Euthyphro is too, although
Naxos, his home, was under Athenian jurisdiction.

The early dialogues were not written for *philosophers*. Rather, their intended audience consisted of potential adherents. This follows from the claim that the texts are propaedeutic, but it is particularly evident from another common feature of the dialogues which I call 'α-structure'. α-structure fulfils a linear pedagogical function: to lead the intended audience from a conventional or traditional conception of a topic to a novel, unconventional, Socratic-Platonic[26] conception of that topic. In the non-aporetic dialogues the discussions conclude by affirming the Socratic-Platonic conception. In the aporetic dialogues they advance towards such a conception without confirming it.

In fact, aporia often results from a conflict of conventional and novel views. For example, at the beginning of the investigation in *Laches* it is assumed that courage is part of excellence, a conventional view. At the end of the discussion courage is defined as the knowledge of good and bad. The final definition is rejected because excellence is thought to be the knowledge of good and bad, and courage and excellence are not identical. Similarly, in *Lysis* the traditional view of friendship based on likeness is introduced and refuted early in the discussion. By the end of the investigation, Socrates has developed a novel conception of friendship based on belonging (οἰκειότης). However, in clarifying a final description of this view, Lysis and Menexenus confusedly propose that the good is friend to the good, the bad to the bad, and the neither-good-nor-bad to the neither-good-nor-bad. This suggestion, which Socrates' novel conception of friendship does not compel, conflicts with the refutation of friendship based on likeness; thus, the investigation ends.

Other examples of α-structure include the following. *Apology* begins with Socrates clarifying the popular conception of himself and his guilt for impiety and corrupting the youth. It ends with his clarification and justification of his mission and his innocence. The investigation in *Charmides* begins with Charmides' popular conceptions of self-control as quietness and modesty and concludes with a conception of self-control as a kind of epistemic state. *Crito* begins with Crito's suggestion, explicitly based on appeal to com-

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[26] By 'Socratic-Platonic' I mean a view identifiable with the historical Socrates or with one that Plato intended to advance as a compelling alternative to the related conventional or traditional view. In fact, occasionally these may be identical. In any event, the views Plato advances in these texts are clearly indebted to the historical Socrates.

mon opinion, that Socrates should escape from prison. It ends with Socrates' argument for remaining in prison. *Ion* begins with the false assumption that, as an inspired rhapsode, Ion has knowledge; it ends with the view that he lacks knowledge and that knowledge and divine inspiration are distinct. The investigation of the relation between the components of excellence in *Protagoras* begins with the conventional conception that the principal components of excellence are indeed distinct and not identical to knowledge. It concludes with the unconventional conception that the putative parts of excellence are similar, if not identical, and a kind of knowledge.

α-structure pervades the early dialogues. It operates as a broad structuring principle organizing entire discussions as well as parts of these. It also operates in relation to minor aspects of the dialogues. For example, in the early dialogues where Socrates' interlocutor is an alleged expert—*Gorgias, Protagoras, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Laches, Ion*—the text begins by conveying an impression of that figure as wise. However, through the investigation, the figure is exposed as ignorant in so far as he fails to resolve the discussion's central problem. Similarly, Thrasymachus, Meno, and Critias are unable to offer satisfactory accounts of justice, excellence, and self-control.

Some scholars have also observed the following related characteristic of the dialogues. In texts where Socrates engages multiple interlocutors, the views of successive interlocutors are increasingly more sophisticated, unconventional, or difficult.[27] For instance, Critias' views are more sophisticated than Charmides', Nicias' more unconventional than Laches', Thrasymachus' more challenging than Cephalus' or Polemarchus'. Moreover, in some cases a single interlocutor's views are more sophisticated at the end of the investigation than at the beginning. The hypothesis that the interlocutor has gained insight from the intervening discussion is not always defensible, for this condition can be extremely pronounced. For example, in *Hippias Major*,[28] even granting the intervening discussion, it seems implausible to assume that certain of Hippias' later remarks are psychologically consistent with

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[27] See H. Benson, 'The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 8 (1990), 19–65 at 25–6.

[28] Contrast Socrates' criticism, through his alter ego, of Hippias' initial definitions as simple-minded (*H.Maj.* 293 D 8) with Hippias' relatively sophisticated criticism of Socrates' method late in the investigation (*H.Maj.* 301 B 2–C 3).

his earlier ones.[29] The operation of a-structure offers a more compelling explanation.

Generally speaking, the contrast between conventional or traditional opinions and Socratic-Platonic opinions about which the dialogues are organized according to a-structure corresponds to the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy in so far as conventional or traditional opinions represent social, political, and, broadly, established authoritative positions that Plato aimed to criticize. This is as much true of the early non-aporetic dialogues as of the aporetic ones, and it occurs with regard both to the specific propositions debated in the discussions and to the grounds of those discussions. Precisely, with respect to the latter point, the value of the rational justification of ethical belief often either implicitly or explicitly contrasts with the disvalue of the following alternative grounds of ethical belief. It is unsatisfactory to maintain given ethical positions merely because they are common or held by the majority, traditional, advanced by an allegedly wise person or expert, or because the position has been expressed in a rhetorically compelling manner. In short, the early dialogues expose as inadequate conventional and traditional views as well as the traditional or conventional grounds upon which such views are maintained.

In sum, Plato composed the early dialogues according to a-structure for propaedeutic reasons, to turn his readers from the non-philosophical to the philosophical life. More precisely, he attempted to address his intended audience in the doxastic condition in which he found them, namely, committed to conventional or traditional beliefs and modes of life. Consequently, the dialogues tend to begin with the expression or affirmation of such beliefs. In the course of the discussions, these views are scrutinized, undermined, and rejected. Meanwhile, novel, Socratic-Platonic views are introduced. The latter are often introduced as a means of criticizing the former. Thus, ideally, the reader is led through a critique of his own views; he is impressed by the problems of the grounds of his belief; and he is shown, if not superior beliefs, at least an alternative and superior manner of grounding his belief and, more generally, orienting his life.

The prevalence of a-structure and the notion that the early dialogues' target audience consisted not of adherents, but *potential*

[29] In particular, I am thinking of Hippias' critique of Socrates' method at *H. Maj.* 301 B 2–C 3.

adherents of philosophy also relates to an important idea regarding the interrelation of the early dialogues. Although the topics treated among the texts are related and overlapping, no early dialogue demands another as a prerequisite for its comprehension. Every text has the same point of departure, common opinion. In this respect, the texts function as self-contained explorations. Contrast this with a textbook the understanding of whose successive chapters logically depends upon prior ones. Accordingly, it seems that Plato did not intend the early dialogues to be read in a particular order. Rather, each text serves as a fresh occasion to explore an ethical or epistemological topic, and, again, that exploration begins with conventional and traditional opinions. As will be seen, the notion that the early dialogues share a common *doxastic baseline* (as I call it) is particularly important for interpreting Socrates' utterances.

## 5. The uses of Socrates

The foregoing considerations provide more secure foundations upon which to understand the uses of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues and so to interpret Socrates' utterances and their relation to Plato. In so far as the texts dramatize the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy, Socrates is clearly the outstanding proponent of philosophy. In so far as the texts criticize established authority, Socrates serves to interrogate and undermine the claims of alleged experts and authority figures. This suggests that Socrates' beliefs should be identified with Plato's. However, this claim requires several qualifications.

First, it is necessary to distinguish Plato's beliefs from views that in a particular dialogue he intended to advance as compelling alternatives to related conventional and traditional views, particularly those scrutinized and rejected in the given dialogue.[30] In a given case, the two might be identical. But Plato's views on a particular topic were probably deeper and more elaborate than those advanced in a given dialogue. The aporiai in which more than half the early dialogues end support this view. For instance, Plato surely believed that human excellence was a kind of knowledge. But no

[30] It is also necessary to distinguish between Plato's beliefs at various times in his career and perhaps also between those he held when he first wrote the given dialogue and, if applicable, those he held when he completed revision of that dialogue.

definitional dialogue concludes with Socrates, however tentatively,
affirming that the definiendum is a kind of knowledge. A simi-
lar point pertains to *Hippias Minor*'s conclusion. Plato surely did
not endorse the view that the good person voluntarily does wrong.
Moreover, he must have had some understanding of the problems
of the argument on the basis of which Socrates and Hippias reach
this conclusion.

Furthermore, in some dialogues Plato simply withholds infor-
mation that, as other dialogues indicate, he thought necessary for
full comprehension of the subject matter treated. For example, in
*Apology* Socrates stresses the importance of pursuing ethical know-
ledge. However, in contrast to the definitional dialogues, he says
nothing about the importance of pursuing definitions. There is no
compelling reason to believe that when Plato composed *Apology* he
considered definitional knowledge unnecessary for ethical know-
ledge. It is more plausible that his objectives in *Apology* simply
did not require him to introduce that point. Likewise, in *Laches*,
*Charmides*, and *Republic* 1 Plato does not indicate that the definien-
dum is a form (εἶδος), whereas in *Meno*, *Euthyphro*, and *Hippias
Major* he does. Again, there is no compelling reason to believe that
when Plato composed the former set of texts he did not view the
definienda as forms. In the light of such considerations, it makes
more sense to examine the relation between Socrates' beliefs and
those that in a given text Plato intended to endorse as compelling
alternatives to the relevant conventional and traditional views, as
opposed to Plato's beliefs *per se*.

Granting this, not all of Socrates' utterances should be identi-
fied with those Plato intended to advance in a given text. Consider
Socrates' outlandish interpretation of Simonides' ode in *Protago-
ras*. It may be objected that in such cases one must distinguish
Socrates' utterances from his attitude towards them; like any com-
plex personality, sometimes Socrates is insincere. For various rea-
sons, sometimes he does not say what he believes; occasionally he is
portrayed as joking, deploying *ad hominem* arguments, deliberately
refuting his interlocutor, being ironic, or simply polite.

In many instances Socrates is being sincere, but still, his views
should not be identified with those Plato intended to endorse. For
example, when Plato intended to compose a dialogue to advance a
particular ethical proposition, he tended to make Socrates advance

that position (*Gorgias, Apology, Crito, Ion, Protagoras*).[31] But when
Plato intended to conclude a dialogue in aporia or with a conclusion
to which he was unsympathetic, he used Socrates to do that as
well. Specifically, he made Socrates succumb to aporia. Yet it is
doubtful that Plato was perplexed, at least not precisely as Socrates
is. Most generally, Socrates' beliefs are constrained in so far as he
is a character in a fiction. He cannot foresee how his discussion will
go, whereas Plato does.

Inconsistencies in Socrates' beliefs among texts (intertextually)
and within individual texts (intratextually) provide the most sig-
nificant and decisive evidence that these beliefs should not always
be identified with views Plato intended to advance. For example,
Socrates' view of death differs in *Apology* and *Gorgias*.[32] Socrates'
attitude towards Pericles differs between *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*.[33]
In *Protagoras* Socrates argues that holiness and justice are identical
or as similar as can be; in *Gorgias* he implies that they are distinct;
in *Euthyphro* he says that holiness is part of justice.[34] In *Protagoras*
Socrates argues that courage is the knowledge of what is to be feared
and dared; in *Laches* he argues against this view.[35] At the beginning
of *Hippias Major* Socrates concedes to Hippias that the questions
'What is the beautiful?' and 'What is beautiful?' are equivalent.
However, in *Euthyphro* and *Meno* (and later in *Hippias Major*) he
emphasizes the distinction between forms and their instances.[36] In
*Gorgias* Socrates says that like is friend to like; in *Lysis* he argues
against this view.[37] The list could be extended to include some deep
and controversial matters; for example, Socrates' views on the re-
lation of definitional knowledge to non-definitional knowledge, on
that between the components of excellence, and on that of pleasure
to goodness.[38]

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[31] Although notably in *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates does not begin the in-
vestigation believing that excellence can be taught.

[32] *Gorg.* 523 A 1–526 D 5; *Ap.* 40 C 4–41 C 7.

[33] *Prot.* 319 D 7–320 A 2; *Gorg.* 515 B 6–516 D 3.

[34] *Prot.* 330 C 1–332 A 1; *Gorg.* 507 B 1–3; *Euthph.* 12 D 5–E 2.

[35] *Prot.* 360 D 4–5; *La.* 196 C 10 ff.

[36] Cf. *H. Maj.* 287 D 3–10; *Meno* 72 A 6 ff.; *Euthph.* 5 C 4–D 5; 6 D 8–E 1. Note that
I am using the word 'instance' to cover types as well as tokens. See D. Wolfsdorf,
'Understanding the "What-is-*F*?" Question', *Apeiron*, 36 (2003), 191–204.

[37] *Gorg.* 510 B 2–4; *Lys.* 213 E 3–215 A 4; 222 B 6–8.

[38] Also, on the highly controversial topic of inconsistencies among Socrates'
avowals and disavowals of knowledge, see D. Wolfsdorf, 'Socrates' Avowals of
Knowledge', forthcoming in *Phronesis*, 49 (2004).

Beyond such intertextual inconsistencies are numerous intratextual inconsistencies. For example, early in *Apology* Socrates emphasizes his ignorance of the value of death. However, at the end of *Apology*, although he continues to disavow knowledge of the value of death, the outcome of the trial persuades him that death is a good thing. Thus, his conviction regarding the positive value of death shifts.[39] At the beginning of *Protagoras* Socrates denies that excellence can be taught, but at the dialogue's conclusion he believes it can be taught.[40] In *Lysis* Socrates initially believes that the presence of badness in the neither-good-nor-bad is responsible for friendship. He then rejects this view and suggests that friendship could occur if badness did not exist because desire is responsible for friendship.[41] In *Charmides* Socrates initially thinks it would be a great good if every member of society performed only those tasks in which he is knowledgeable. Subsequently, he suggests that only the knowledge of good and bad would bring happiness to society.[42]

The pervasive theme of opposition between philosophy and non-philosophy again provides some clarification of such inconsistencies and their prevalence. In endorsing the value of philosophy over non-philosophy Plato's objective was not merely to replace established authority figures with Socrates. Given Plato's critique of authority, this would be inconsistent with the spirit of philosophy itself. In fact, Socrates is generally portrayed as paradigmatically anti-authoritarian. He often proclaims himself to be a layperson in contrast to the many alleged experts he engages. He generally describes himself as speaking with the vulgar, not in a trained or rhetorically sophisticated manner. He sometimes claims to have had no teacher, and he tends to disavow ethical knowledge. In *Apology* he characterizes himself as the wisest Greek, but only in so far as he recognizes the triviality of his knowledge. He consistently disclaims the ability to teach, and he clearly does not teach, at least not in a conventional way, let alone dogmatize. Accordingly, Socrates is often portrayed as hesitant to assert his views, open-minded, willing to hear others' opinions, and intent upon engaging his interlocutors in joint investigations. Socrates' occasional shifts of opinion in the course of investigations, his development of new views on the basis

[39] *Ap.* 29 A 4–B 1; 40 B 7–C 3.

[40] *Prot.* 319 A 9–B 1 (and 319 B 1 ff. for Socrates' justification for his belief); 361 A 6–C 2.                                              [41] *Lys.* 218 B 8–C 2; 218 C 5 ff.

[42] *Charm.* 171 B 6–172 A 3; 172 C 4–D 5.

of new arguments, and his capacity to admit mistakes are explicable, at least in part, in this light. Recognition of one's epistemic limitations, willingness to admit ignorance, to subject one's beliefs to scrutiny, and to revise these in the light of alternative explanations is consonant with and indicative of philosophy. In addition, shifts in Socrates' views in the course of some early dialogues also demonstrate how understanding develops through the process of rational enquiry.

Occasionally Plato also makes Socrates assert conventional or traditional views that Plato did not intend to advance, irrespective of the function of α-structure. The reason for these occurrences pertains to the point, introduced earlier, concerning the texts' doxastic baseline: each text serves as a fresh occasion to explore a given ethical or epistemological topic, and the point of departure for each exploration is common opinion. Accordingly, unconventional Socratic-Platonic views tend to emerge through the course of the discussion. Otherwise, if they were made without prior justification, the unconventionality of the view might provoke confusion in the interlocutor and, given the propaedeutic function of the text, the intended reader. In that case, the author would be obliged to have Socrates explain or defend that unconventional assertion. This, of course, does occur to some extent. However, Plato cannot have Socrates asserting the unconventional Socratic-Platonic view of every concept that might arise in the course of a discussion. That would result in a full-scale exposition of Plato's philosophical views and thus entirely transform the dialogues into treatises. Accordingly, Socrates' assertions occasionally conform to common opinions, especially in cases where the subjects of those opinions are not the main subject of the discussion. Such common opinions are, therefore, simply employed in passages whose objective is the investigation, problematization, or advancement of some *other* view. An indication that Plato did not intend to advance a given Socratic assertion in such cases is the conjunction of that assertion with the following features: (1) the opinion asserted is conventional or traditional; however, it is not scrutinized or contested within the passage or text in which it is employed; (2) in another text Socrates does problematize or even refute it; (3) Socrates does not repeat the assertion in several dialogues.

Whereas the operation of α-structure often explains intratextual inconsistencies among Socrates' assertions, the texts' doxastic

baseline often explains intertextual inconsistencies. For example, in *Gorgias* Socrates assumes that friendship is based on likeness. The assumption is employed, for convenience, to advance a different point, namely, that in befriending a tyrant one corrupts one's soul. The argument begins with the assumption that in order to avoid suffering harm one must either be a ruler in one's own city or else a supporter of the government (*Gorg.* 510A 6–10). Socrates then suggests that because friendship is based on likeness, to befriend a tyrant one must make oneself like a tyrant and thereby corrupt one's soul.

In *Gorgias* Socrates does not problematize the nature of friendship. In *Lysis* Socrates does; this is the central topic of the text. Furthermore, Socrates' view of friendship in *Gorgias* is traditional, based on received wisdom, whereas early in the investigation in *Lysis* he argues against the view of friendship based on likeness. In contrast, the view of friendship based on belonging—towards which the investigation develops—is unconventional. Furthermore, the argument in *Gorgias* is *ad hominem* or *ad hoc* in that Plato did not intend to endorse the view that in order to avoid suffering harm one must either be a ruler or a supporter of the government. Rather, evidence from *Gorgias* and other dialogues such as *Apology* suggests that Plato intended to advance the view that the conventional conception of harm is unsatisfactory and, accordingly, that a good person can suffer none. These considerations support the view that neither in *Lysis* nor in *Gorgias* did Plato intend to advance the view that friendship is based on likeness—even though in *Gorgias* Socrates assumes that it is.

Another example is Socrates' claim in *Euthyphro* that holiness is part of justice. In *Euthyphro* Socrates problematizes the nature of holiness. However, he does not problematize the relation of the putative components of excellence. He does not argue that holiness is part of justice, but simply asserts it. In *Protagoras* Socrates does problematize the relation of the putative components of excellence; this topic is central to the discussion. Moreover, he argues for the unconventional view that holiness and justice are identical or at least as similar as can be. Furthermore, evidence from other early dialogues such as *Charmides* and *Laches* suggests that Plato intended to advance the view that the components of excellence are identical or at least more closely related than in the conventional conception Protagoras expresses. In *Euthyphro* Socrates' view of the

relation of holiness and justice is commonsensical, at least within the legalistic context of the dialogue. Socrates and Euthyphro are engaged in cases concerning impiety. In so far as matters of justice are conceived as coextensive with matters of positive law, matters of holiness clearly do form a subset of judicial matters. In short, there is good reason to believe that Plato did not intend to endorse the view that holiness is part of justice, even though in *Euthyphro* Socrates says it is.

In sum, Plato sometimes conveniently put conventional, traditional, or commonsensical views into Socrates' mouth, but without intending to advance those views. Of course, Socrates occasionally also asserts conventional or traditional views that Plato did intend to advance, e.g. the view that the components of excellence are good and beautiful. But in this case it is clear for the following reasons that Plato intended to advance that view. First, Socrates never objects to it. Second, Socrates repeats the view in several dialogues. Third, in *Republic* 1, when Thrasymachus suggests that justice is not a component of excellence and so neither good nor beautiful, Socrates is shocked and forcefully argues against him. In short, it is necessary to evaluate Socrates' conventional or traditional assertions in the light of their functions within the dialogues in which they occur. In particular, this involves the recognition that the early dialogues share a particular doxastic baseline.

The foregoing considerations about Plato's uses of Socrates, and the general conclusion that Plato uses Socrates in various ways to achieve various objectives and that these uses can result in inconsistencies and even psychological implausibilities, provoke a deeper question about the character Socrates in the early dialogues. To what extent should interpreters treat the main characters in the early dialogues as a single character with a transtextual identity?

Consider Socrates' intertextual and intratextual inconsistencies. One may be inclined to wonder why—despite a long history of experience in philosophical discussions—Socrates has not come to stable, if not certain, views on the ethical topics he examines; or, why Socrates continues to express some naive conventional or traditional beliefs; or again, why, if in one dialogue Socrates advances a given proposition, in another dialogue he asserts a contrary or adjusted view.

The basic and general solution to such particular difficulties requires relinquishing the view that the Socrates of a given early

dialogue is in a strong sense identical to the Socrates of another early dialogue. Instead, it is more reasonable to adopt the following weaker view. Plato had his reasons for creating a main character named 'Socrates' to serve as the philosophical protagonist in his early dialogues. These reasons clearly include debt and tribute to the historical Socrates. Still, Plato did not feel so bound to the historical Socrates that the Socrates in any one dialogue had to be strictly identifiable with the historical Socrates, and that, as a result, Socrates in one early dialogue had to be strictly identifiable with Socrates in another early dialogue.

Clearly, a general body of commitments governs Plato's depiction of Socrates in every early dialogue. Socrates is not merely a vague stock character, the philosophical type. But again, Plato felt free to manipulate Socrates in various ways to achieve various ends.[43] Any interpretative project that aims to determine what Plato intended to advance in his early dialogues or in any given early dialogue must acknowledge and respect this fact. The attempt to assemble all of Socrates' utterances on a given topic and to distil from these a consistent conception of that topic may succeed in certain cases, but as a general interpretative principle it is naive. It ignores the dramaturgy and dramatic dimensions that distinguish Plato's literary-philosophical texts.

In place of the mouthpiece principle I offer the qualified conception of Socrates as Plato's favoured character.[44] Socrates is the character to whom, of all dramatic characters, Plato is most sympathetic. Accordingly, Socrates often expresses or develops views Plato intended to advance. Socrates is the philosopher in texts that dramatize the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy and argue for the superiority of the former to the latter. Yet Plato did not intend to endorse all the views Socrates asserts. The central reasons for this qualification have been described above. Moreover, I regard them as quite comprehensive. Granted, it would be naive to assume that one could specify an exhaustive set of criteria for determining whether or not, in each case, Plato intended to advance a given Socratic assertion. The interpreter is bound to consider cases on an individual basis. Yet, as a general principle,

[43] The use of Socrates and his alter ego in *Hippias Major* is perhaps the outstanding example.

[44] This concept is first introduced in D. Wolfsdorf, 'Plato and the Mouthpiece Theory', *Ancient Philosophy*, 19 (1999), 13–24.

all such considerations should entail examination of the utterance's context and its function within the passage, within the economy of the text as a whole, and in relation to the contents and functions of the other dialogues as well. In the process, one of course enters the hermeneutic circle, and in the case of Plato's early dialogues this involves some remarkable difficulties. But it need not be vicious; the foregoing considerations and recommendations provide the requisite bearings.

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# KNOWLEDGE AND TRUE BELIEF IN THE *MENO*

## GAIL FINE

### I

IN *Meno* 97 A ff. Plato, for the first time, explains how, in his view, knowledge differs from true belief;[1] he also notes some similarities between them. This is often thought to be the first passage in Western philosophy to say that knowledge is true belief plus something. Some commentators think it is also the first passage to say that knowledge is justified true belief: that is, that justification is what must be added to true belief so as to yield knowledge.[2] However, both the view that the *Meno* says that knowledge is justified

[1] The (probably earlier) *Gorgias* explicitly distinguishes knowledge (both ἐπιστήμη and εἰδέναι are used) from belief (πίστις), but not from true belief; see 454 C 7–E 9. Cf. *Chrm.* 168 A. *Meno* 85 B–D (which I discuss below) makes it clear *that* he thinks knowledge differs from true belief. But it is not until 97 A ff. that he says *how* they differ. Plato speaks interchangeably of true (ἀληθής) and of correct (ὀρθή) δόξα; contrast e.g. 97 B 1 with 97 B 9. I use 'belief' to translate δόξα; others sometimes use 'opinion' or 'judgement'. 96 E–100 C uses various forms of γιγνώσκειν, ἐπίστασθαι, εἰδέναι, φρονεῖν, νοεῖν, and σοφία. So far as I can see, Plato uses them all interchangeably here (though he does not always do so elsewhere). I render them all by 'know'.

[2] D. Armstrong, for example, says that this is the 'first recorded occurrence' of the claim that knowledge is justified true belief (*Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1973), 137; I assume he has 97–8 in mind, but it is miscited as 87–8). E. Gettier says that 'Plato seems to consider some such definition at *Theaetetus* 201 and perhaps accepts one at *Meno* 98' ('Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis*, 23 (1963), 121–3 at 121). Cf. D. Bostock, *Plato's* Theaetetus (Oxford, 1988), 203; M. Williams, *Problems of Knowledge* (Oxford, 2001), 21; P. Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence* (Cambridge, 1989), 232; J. Rosenberg, *Thinking about Knowing* (Oxford, 2002), 132.