

Plato and the Mouth-Piece Theory

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In 1988, Charles Griswold edited a collection of essays entitled *Platonic Readings Platonic Writings*. In the introduction he writes (1988, 3):

...in modern times the problem of interpreting Plato...has not received the attention it deserves. Scholars working on Plato tend to proceed in their work with insufficient reflection on their own assumptions...This is an odd situation in that the general problem of textual interpretation has been discussed intensively in recent years by literary critics and some philosophers. It has become impossible to write successfully on any period of literature without a working knowledge of the whole problem of interpretation...The time has now come for a full-fledged debate about the reading of Plato...This book represents a step in that direction.

Since Griswold's book, several scholars have published work reflecting a growing interest in clarifying and resolving the basic hermeneutic problems of Plato's writings. My own work on Plato is situated within this development. Having spent the last few years wrestling with Plato's writings, both thinking about Plato's corpus as a whole and its component texts individually, as well as the modern history of Platonic scholarship, I have found the challenge of certain hermeneutic problems unavoidable. In this paper, I would like to enter into one hermeneutic problem that is both particularly thorny and fundamental. I refer to this as the problem of authoritative voice.

The problem of authoritative voice has arisen for me particularly in connection with the so-called early or Socratic writings of Plato. The problem of authoritative voice derives from a common scholarly interest in extracting Plato's beliefs from Plato's writings. In attempting to get a handle on how a writer's beliefs and his or her text are related, I want to begin this paper by laying out elements of a conceptual framework for thinking about the problem. After this, I will move to a long-standing and widely-applied theory about the relationship of Plato's beliefs and Plato's texts. This theory is called the mouth-piece theory, and, in brief, it suggests that the persona Socrates in Plato's writings is Plato's mouth-piece. Drawing on the concepts introduced previously, I will present some criticisms of the mouth-piece theory and propose that it should be abandoned or at least substantially revamped. In doing that, I will also be suggesting directions toward an alternative approach to understanding Plato's beliefs through Plato's texts.

I should underline that, while I will mention texts from the early, middle, and late periods of Plato's literary career, my primary interest here lies in the texts of Plato's early period. As the discussion proceeds, my sights will gradually narrow to focus on the early period. On the other hand, it is my hope that this paper will be of value to those working on other areas of the Platonic corpus as well as those generally concerned with the relationship of philosophy and dramatic literature.

I will begin now to lay out elements of a conceptual framework for thinking about the problem of the relationship between a writer, a text, and that writer's beliefs. In doing this, it will be helpful to compare Plato's writings with the work of others. Let me start with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Taken individually, the words of Kant's text and their meanings are public material; they do not belong to Kant. But, as a whole, the text of the *Critique of Pure Reason* comprises Kant's personal manipulation and composition of this shared material. As such we speak of the words of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as Kant's words. When we say that Kant composed the words of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and that therefore in some sense these words belong to Kant, we are defining the relationship of belonging in terms of creative invention. Kant creatively invented the composition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this sense, Plato's writings, e.g., the *Symposium*, also belong to Plato. Plato invented the composition of words entitled the *Symposium*.

Kant's work and Plato's work are similar in this regard. But there is an important formal distinction between Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and any one of Plato's writings. Kant's text, as is the case with most philosophical texts, is monologic, whereas Plato's texts are dialogic (or, if you will, polylogic). By monologic, I mean there is one speaker throughout the given text; by dialogic or polylogic, I mean there are two or more speakers throughout the given text.

In the case of Kant's monologue, the speaker is identifiable with the author himself. When, for example, we read the sentence 'I understand by a transcendental exposition the explanation of a concept, as a principle from which the possibility of other *a priori* synthetic knowledge can be understood' (trans. Smith 1965, 302), we feel justified in inferring that the first person pronoun refers to Immanuel Kant. This is, of course, not justifiable in the case of all monologic texts. For example, Plato's first book of the *Republic* begins with this sentence: 'I went down to the Peiraeus yesterday with Glaucon the son of Ariston'.¹ Here, we are not justified in inferring that the first person pronoun refers to Plato.

The basis for inferring from a monologic text that the speaker is identifiable with the author is not obvious, but certainly there are clear enough indicators so that in most cases, at least implicitly, we do not become confused. For example, genre is usually decisive. In the case of monologic fiction, the speaker is usually not identifiable with the author; but in the case of autobiography or philosophy or diary, the speaker is usually identifiable with the author. Of course, I am overlooking here how these genre distinctions get made to begin with—and this

¹ All translations are by the author of this paper unless otherwise indicated.

would be crucial, if we were to pursue the problem—but I think the point is clear enough not to detain us much longer.

We can, however, single out a common feature of fiction as well as of dramatic literature versus autobiography or philosophy, namely, the phenomenon of personification. Usually in fiction and dramatic literature, personification occurs. In picking up works of fiction and drama we expect personification; whereas in the cases of philosophy and especially autobiography we expect that personification will not occur. So then, personification may or may not occur in monologic texts: in autobiographies, personification does not occur; in novels, it does.

The subject of personification brings us to a further distinction I want to introduce in the case of monologic texts and monologues within polylogic texts, such as dramas. Monologues can address the reader either directly or indirectly. Consider examples of two monologues drawn from Shakespeare's works. Typically, in Shakespeare's works, as in most dramatic works, monologues do not address the audience directly. For example, at the end of act three, scene three in *Hamlet*, the King is praying in a confessional: 'O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, / A brother's murther... (32-34)'. Clearly, the King is not directly addressing the audience or anyone, for that matter, except perhaps God. Compare this with the monologue at the beginning of *Henry V*. A chorus-figure enters the stage and speaks directly to the audience: '...Admit me Chorus to this history; / Who, Prologue-like, your humble patience pray, / Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play'(2312-2313).

In considering personae in Shakespeare, like the chorus-figure in *Henry V* and the King in *Hamlet*, we observe the following distinction between personae: some personae are represented as conscious only of the dramatic world in which they are situated; whereas some personae are represented as conscious of the world in which the audience is situated as well. Personae who are conscious only of the dramatic world in which they are situated cannot possibly address the audience directly, whereas those that appear conscious of the world in which the audience is situated can. An extreme example of the latter phenomenon, that is, the case where the persona appears conscious of the world in which the audience is situated and can address the audience directly, is the ventriloquist and the dummy. The ventriloquist creates a persona for the dummy, and usually the ventriloquist allows the dummy to appear conscious of the audience.

In most dramas, as in Plato's works, the consciousness of personae is restricted so that the dramatic personae appear conscious only of their dramatic world. But, this general tendency is occasionally subverted, as in the case of the chorus-figure in *Henry V*. Another example is the phenomenon of the aside, in which case a dramatic persona appears conscious both of the dramatic world and the world of his audience.

If we return now to contrast Kant's and Plato's work, we can understand with greater precision the problems involved in extracting Plato's philosophical beliefs from Plato's writings. For the sake of illustration let us focus on one of Plato's writings, the *Philebus*. In the *Philebus*, three personae pursue the defini-

tion of the good; they are Socrates, Protarchus, and Philebus. Now, in one sense, the multiple colorful voices of personae in the *Philebus*, that is, Socrates' voice, Protarchus' voice, and Philebus' voice, just like the single, fastidious voice of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, belong to the author, Plato or Kant. These voices belong to Plato or Kant in the sense that Plato and Kant invented the composition of words of which these individuals' voices are either a part, in the case of Plato's polylogue, or a whole, as in the case of Kant's monologue.

However, in the case of Plato's *Philebus*, in another obvious sense these voices are Socrates', Protarchus', and Philebus', but not Plato's. The voices belong to Socrates, Protarchus, and Philebus in that they represent the consciousness of these personae within the dramatic world of the *Philebus*. By contrast, since personification does not occur in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and since the speaker of the monologue is easily identifiable with the author Immanuel Kant, we can say that the words of the *Critique of Pure Reason* are Kant's, not only in the sense that Kant invented their composition, but also in the sense that they directly reflect Kant's beliefs.

In contrast, we find that it is difficult to identify Plato's beliefs within Plato's philosophical dramas precisely because Plato dramatizes personae. All the beliefs expressed in Kant's composition of words may be identified as beliefs of the author Kant. For example, when one reads: 'Time is not something which exists of itself or which inheres in things as an objective determination...' (trans. Smith 1965, 80), one is justified in inferring that Kant believes time is not something which exists of itself or which inheres in things as an objective determination. But the same is not true of Plato's writings.

Let us take the example of another Platonic writing, the *Laches*. In Plato's *Laches*, Plato creates a character named Lysimachus. Lysimachus is an old man; and at *Laches* 189c-d1 Lysimachus says: 'I find that owing to my age I forget the questions I intend to put, and also the answers I receive; and if the discussion changes in the middle my memory goes altogether' (trans. Lamb 1924). One is not justified in inferring from these lines that Plato is or believes himself to be senile. Instead, one may only infer that Plato's persona, Lysimachus, believes himself to be senile.

The polylogicity or dramatism of Plato's writings therefore presents a serious problem in the quest for Plato's beliefs. If in fact there is such a thing as the location of Plato's beliefs within Plato's philosophical dramas, this location is by no means conspicuous. Faced with this difficulty, many scholars interested in extracting Plato's beliefs from Plato's dramas tend to proceed as though Plato's beliefs were contained only in certain parts of Plato's dramas. I would like to dwell on this proposal now, for it has been, either explicitly or tacitly, a guiding hermeneutic principle of much Platonic scholarship, both in this century and in previous centuries.

A great deal of Platonic scholarship has been governed, either tacitly or explicitly, by the hermeneutic principle that only certain parts of Plato's compositions may be identified as expressions of Plato's beliefs. To be more precise, the part

of Plato's philosophical dramas that many scholars consistently single out is the speaking part of one of Plato's dramatic personae. It is thought that Plato chose one of his dramatic personae and channeled his beliefs through the mouth of that character. At least since Diogenes Laertius, the doxographer of the second or perhaps third century AD, the view has been widely held that the persona Socrates is this chosen character. In short, many scholars believe that the persona Socrates is Plato's mouth-piece. I will refer to this view as the mouth-piece theory. By identifying the utterances of the persona Socrates with the beliefs of Plato, the mouth-piece theory resolves an apparently daunting problem in one fell swoop.

In due time I am going to suggest that, in the case of many of Plato's writings, the mouth-piece theory ought not to guide the hermeneutic process. But before advancing to that criticism, we need to look more closely at the mouth-piece theory and gain some appreciation of its appeal. According to the mouth-piece theory, Socrates is the main character in most of Plato's writings and, I would add, Socrates is also the favorite character in most of Plato's writings. In certain writings from Plato's middle and late period, Socrates is of course either absent or at least not the main character, e.g., the *Laws* and the *Statesman*. But I want now to concentrate on the majority of Plato's writings, where Socrates is the main and favorite character.

The phrases 'main character' and 'favorite character' need to be handled one at a time. By 'main character' I mean this: the character whose role is formally greater than that of any other character. In this sense, it is easy to see that Socrates is the main character in the corpus. Socrates appears in the majority of Plato's writings, whereas Socrates' interlocutors appear in only one or at most a few. Moreover, within individual works, Socrates has more lines than any other character.

The phrase 'favorite character' is more tricky. By 'favorite character' I mean this: the character with whom the author most strongly sympathizes. Now, in the present context, this definition may seem to lead to question-begging; for if we are interested in determining whether Plato's beliefs are reflected in his character Socrates, how can we determine Plato's sympathies in order to determine whether Socrates is the character with whom Plato most strongly sympathizes? I believe that the mouth-piece theory does not seriously falter at this point. Consider the following observations. The persona Socrates is a philosopher, and Socrates is, at least in the early writings, the only philosopher. Moreover, in the course of the dramatic discussions, Socrates' interlocutors are constantly refuted by Socrates; whereas Socrates' interlocutors themselves almost never refute Socrates. Socrates' interlocutors never reduce Socrates to aporia, while Socrates often reduces his interlocutors to aporia. For the most part, Socrates is portrayed as outstandingly just, sensible, humble, and concerned with his well-being and the well-being of others. Collectively, these considerations contribute to making Socrates the favorite character in the Platonic texts. Socrates' status as the main and most favored character supports the mouth-piece theory. But history further corroborates the mouth-piece theory. As we know, Plato was Socrates' pupil or

associate for many years. In Plato's *Apology*, Plato specifically names himself as one of the supporters of Socrates who offered money for Socrates' fine. In the *Phaedo*, in Socrates' prison cell, where Socrates is surrounded in his final hours by many of his closest friends, Plato mentions himself to excuse his absence. These, the only times Plato mentions himself in the Platonic corpus, are crucial moments in Socrates' life, where Socrates' closest friends attend him and show their support. Finally, in the *Seventh Letter*, Plato speaks of Socrates as a dear friend of his.

The literary and historical evidence collaborate to form a strong argument for the mouth-piece theory. And I myself am willing to endorse at least this view at once: Plato regarded the historical Socrates favorably, and therefore Plato wished in his writings to portray the persona Socrates favorably. Beyond this, however, I do not want to go, for I believe the mouth-piece theory, with its fell-swoop method, oversimplifies a remarkably complex situation.

It seems to me that there are several fundamental problems with the mouth-piece theory. In this paper I am only going to focus on one of these problems, and in order to clarify this problem, it is necessary for me to return to two concepts that we have approached, if not exactly grappled with: the concept of authorial consciousness and the concept of dramatic consciousness. By authorial consciousness, I mean the state of mind of the author. By dramatic consciousness, I mean the state of mind of a given dramatic persona. Since, in the present case, I am interested in the persona Socrates, by dramatic consciousness I am principally thinking of the state of mind of the persona Socrates, as opposed to the authorial consciousness of Socrates' author, Plato.

The phrase 'state of mind' is, of course, vague and raises many questions. However, I believe the term can be used profitably without presently going into much greater detail. One refinement I will make relates to the concept of temporality. States of mind change from one temporal stage to the next, whether this be in real time, as in the case of the historical Plato from one point in his life to another, or in dramatic time, as in the case of the persona Socrates from one point in a given drama to the next. One distinctive property of a given state of mind is a given belief held by an individual at a given time.

By considering the concepts of authorial and dramatic consciousness, we observe significant discrepancies between Plato's beliefs and the beliefs of the persona Socrates. Take an example from Plato's *Phaedrus*. Toward the end of the drama, Socrates talks to the persona Phaedrus about Isocrates. The presumed time at which Socrates and Phaedrus are having this discussion is at least before 399, when Socrates was executed; most likely it is even before 415, since Phaedrus was implicated in the mutilation of the Hermae that occurred in 415 and was subsequently banished from Athens. Moreover, Phaedrus seems to have returned to Athens only in the fourth century, after Socrates' death. Isocrates himself was born in 436, which means that, at the time of Socrates' and Phaedrus' discussion, Isocrates is a young man or even an adolescent. In contrast, Plato wrote the *Phaedrus* about fifty years later than the dramatic date he sets for the text, that is,

approximately in 370. In 370 Isocrates was, of course, quite an old man; he had developed a prominent career as a rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric.

Consider then what Socrates says to Phaedrus at 278e10-279b1:

Isocrates is still young, Phaedrus, however, I am willing to say what I prophesy for him...I think he has a nature above the speeches of Lysias and possesses a nobler character; so that I should not be surprised if, as he grows older, he should so excel in his present studies that all who have ever treated of rhetoric shall seem less than children; and I suspect that these studies will not satisfy him, but a more divine impulse will lead him to greater things; for my friend, something of philosophy is inborn in his mind. (trans. Fowler 1914)

At the dramatic date of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates could not have known that Isocrates would never seriously take up philosophy, but would remain engaged in rhetoric. At the historical date at which Plato wrote the *Phaedrus*, Plato already knew that Isocrates had never taken up philosophy, but remained committed to rhetoric. Therefore, on this subject the beliefs of the persona Socrates and the beliefs of the author Plato are distinct.

When we read Socrates' statement about Isocrates' future, our response is obviously not to devalue Socrates for possessing only limited prophetic powers. We do not say to ourselves, for example: 'Socrates was in part right, Isocrates did grow up to excel in rhetoric; however, Socrates was not wholly right, for Isocrates never abandoned rhetoric for philosophy; therefore, Socrates is a faulty prophet'. We could of course say this without being wrong. However, just to say this would be a simple-minded response to the passage. Such a response misses the author's point in crafting the passage. Plato, who wrote Socrates' statement when Isocrates was an old man, clearly wanted to take a jab at Isocrates; and Plato was not principally concerned with Socrates' prophetic powers.

This example from the *Phaedrus* shows us how different authorial and dramatic consciousness can be. The example is particularly useful, because as interpreters we cannot resort to claims of Socratic irony in order to, as it were, diminish the gap between Socratic and Platonic consciousness. We cannot say that Socrates is simply in jest, that Socrates knows Isocrates never went on to study philosophy; for, to say that would be to impute profound prophetic powers to Socrates. Instead, precisely because the persona Socrates is speaking at a dramatic date in the fifth century and Plato the author is writing at a date in the fourth century, we must acknowledge the wide gap between dramatic and authorial consciousness.

The *Phaedrus* example shows that we cannot simply identify the beliefs of Socrates with the beliefs of Plato. Furthermore, in exposing the cleft between the persona Socrates and Plato, this example gestures at the wide range of issues that may complicate the relationship between Plato and his personae and suggests that, in any given instance, the interpreter will need to evaluate a great deal of information in order to understand the nature of the relationship of author and

text. In the conclusion of this paper I will consider the type of information that it may be pertinent to evaluate in the case of Plato's writings. But presently I would like to address a possible objection to my use of the *Phaedrus* example.

Even if one accepts the *Phaedrus* example as a criticism of the mouth-piece theory, perhaps there will be doubt that this example significantly undermines the mouth-piece theory. Platonic scholars, and philosophers in particular, may feel that the mouth-piece theory is principally intended to function as a means of gaining access to Plato's philosophical beliefs, not just any beliefs Plato held. Although the *Phaedrus* example may be effective in demonstrating that Plato and the persona Socrates cannot hold all the same beliefs, the discordant beliefs it exposes are hardly the sorts of beliefs with which philosophically-minded interpreters are principally concerned. Rather, as I said, such interpreters want access to Plato's philosophical beliefs. Therefore, it may be argued, the *Phaedrus* example is a special case from which we cannot radically generalize. Of course, when the persona Socrates is speaking of subjects that are temporally contingent in the way Socrates' comments on Isocrates are, Socrates' beliefs must differ from those of his author. But when Socrates speaks about matters more universally, that is, the sorts of matters we would call philosophical, perhaps then his beliefs may and should be identified with those of Plato.

There must be some truth to these claims, especially, I think, in the case of certain Platonic writings of the middle and late period. However, I am disinclined to accept these claims as a general principle, and especially when considering Plato's early writings. What I aim to show here, as in the *Phaedrus* example, is that in confronting Plato's philosophical dramas, an interpreter can rarely avoid wrestling with the literary and dramatic elements of the text. I would like to emphasize just what is at stake in the distinction of authorial and dramatic consciousness. The distinction does not simply involve occasional differences of perspective on certain historical facts. Rather, from the outset of the drama the author knows what direction the course of dramatic events will take, whereas the personae obviously know nothing of this. Plato knows how Socrates' interlocutors will respond to Socrates' questions, while Socrates knows nothing of this. Broadly speaking, Plato has a plan for the drama from its beginning to its end, whereas Socrates simply plays a role in this narrative and can see no more than the dramatic world before his fictional eyes.

If we observe the course of some of the early dramas, we find that occasionally in the same drama the persona Socrates does not maintain the same philosophical belief. For example, in Plato's *Lysis* Socrates first proposes that desire for the good owes to the presence of the bad in humans, that is, humans desire the good in order to purify themselves of the bad elements. Later, however, Socrates rejects this idea and proposes that even if the bad elements did not exist, humans would nonetheless desire the good. In such cases where, at two different places in the same drama, Socrates endorses contradictory philosophical beliefs, the mouth-piece theory becomes a useless hermeneutic instrument.

What then are we to say in the face of such instances? Perhaps one may want to

suggest that Plato did not have secure beliefs about certain philosophical issues. Let us assume, for argument's sake, that this is the case. But if we retain the instrument of the mouth-piece theory, it becomes puzzling that Plato did not make Socrates say that he, Socrates, does not have secure beliefs about these particular philosophical issues at the beginning of the drama. In the *Lysis*, on the contrary, Plato makes Socrates give the impression that he does have secure beliefs.

In the face of this particular problem, most scholars, irrespective of the mouth-piece theory, will, I think, want to make the following suggestion: in such a drama Plato wanted to demonstrate to his readers certain difficulties involved in maintaining certain philosophical beliefs. Such a response seems plausible. However, again—it should be stressed—maintenance of a position of this sort indicates abandonment of the mouth-piece theory. For, in the *Lysis*, Plato does not make Socrates say that he, Socrates, is unsure about these philosophical problems but would like to discuss different possibilities or show his interlocutors the difficulties of certain philosophical positions, which is what, under our present assumption, Plato believes. Instead, as I have stated, Socrates first affirms *P* and later rejects *P*. Consequently, in such a case as this, Socrates cannot be Plato's mouth-piece; and so again I would suggest that the relationship between Plato and the persona Socrates must be considered as more complex.

I would like now to begin drawing this discussion toward a conclusion. Admittedly, any present conclusions must be provisional and artificial, because, as I said earlier, I have not engaged in all the criticisms I believe should be made of the mouth-piece theory. Still, in developing the preceding criticisms, I have at least repeatedly said that the relationship between author and text and specifically between the beliefs of this author, Plato, and the beliefs of this persona, Socrates, must be more complex than the mouth-piece theory admits. Given this complexity, a good deal of information will have to be evaluated in order to appreciate how the relationship of author and persona operates in any given case. The question may arise: What information is pertinent when examining passages? Or what sorts of difficulties may be involved in categorizing case-types and specifying pertinent bodies of information? To respond effectively to those questions is the task of a more exhaustive and detailed study of Platonic hermeneutics. But for now, I can suggest that, if we look back on the *Phaedrus* example, we observe the importance of applying social and intellectual history to the interpretation of Plato's dramas.

Plato's writings conspicuously engage in the social and intellectual history of Plato's time. All of the Platonic dramas in which Socrates is featured as the main character are set in a quasi-historical past. And insofar as he sets his dramas in the past Plato creates a dialogue between the histories of the individuals whom the personae represent, their reputations among posterity, and the portrayal of these personae within the quasi-historical settings of the drama. The same can be said of Plato's use of other historical elements such as the dramatic locations and perhaps most importantly the concepts and ideas circulating within the dramas.

Many of the concepts and ideas Plato introduces already had a certain currency and significance among his contemporaries. This history is assumed, not explicitly articulated in the texts. Therefore, in order to appreciate why and how Plato uses certain concepts and ideas, it is necessary to investigate the social and intellectual history of the period. Here the historian of philosophy substantially depends on the social and intellectual historian. In fact, I prefer to think that the list of responsibilities that come with the job of the historian of philosophy involves social and intellectual history.

So then, we have said that in order to sort out the complexities of the relationship between Plato and his personae social and intellectual history are essential. Given this, one may still be wondering whether, once one has examined the social and intellectual history of the period, something more concrete emerges that can be set up in place of the crest-fallen mouth-piece theory. I believe that something more concrete does emerge and I will try in this last section to sketch some of its basic outlines.²

While the mouth-piece theory proposes a relationship between Plato's beliefs and Socrates' beliefs as identical, I suggest that one rather think of the relationship of Plato and the persona Socrates in terms of a spectrum of varying degrees of proximity and distance between Plato's beliefs and Socrates' beliefs. At one end lies the mouth-piece theory in its strong form, according to which all beliefs of Socrates are held by Plato. At this end the proximity of Plato's and Socrates' beliefs is extreme. On the other end lies the idea that none of Socrates' beliefs reflect Plato's beliefs. At this end, the distance of Plato's and Socrates' beliefs is extreme.

I believe that neither end of the spectrum ever occurs throughout a given drama. But I do think that in the course of Plato's literary career, from the early to the middle writings, there is a tendency to move from less to greater proximity. In other words, I think that as his literary career progressed Plato increasingly tended to place his beliefs in the mouth of the persona Socrates—and for that matter, the mouths of individual personae in general, such as the Athenian stranger in the *Laws*. If my suggestion holds water, there is something funny and paradoxical about it; for many scholars believe that in the course of his career, Plato began with a stock of philosophical beliefs inherited from Socrates and gradually moved away from these as he developed his own beliefs. According to my suggestion then, the more Plato expressed beliefs of his own invention, the more he placed those beliefs in the mouth of the persona Socrates. An interesting example of this phenomenon occurs in a drama of the middle period, the *Parmenides*. In the *Parmenides*, Plato makes Socrates tell Parmenides and Zeno that he, Socrates, invented the theory of the Forms; whereas it is generally believed that Plato himself invented the theory of the Forms and that the historical

² I wish to stress the provisional nature of the following hypotheses and to acknowledge that they require substantial elaboration. Constraints on the length of this paper have compelled me to present only the basic outlines of the ideas.

Socrates hardly engaged in metaphysical speculation at all.

In suggesting that the proximity of belief between Plato and the persona Socrates diminishes from the early to the middle period, I do not want to give the impression that the distance of belief in the early writings is so great. In the early writings, the proximity of belief between Plato and the persona Socrates is greater than that between Plato and any other persona and in general the proximity of belief throughout the early and middle periods is high. However, I believe that many of Plato's early writings, as opposed to many of the middle writings, possess a particular didactic function that operates in such a way as to create distance between the beliefs of Plato and Socrates.

Basically, the didactic function I am speaking of operates in this way. Many of Plato's early writings are composed as investigations of the definition of a single moral term, such as holiness (ἁγιότης) in the *Euthyphro*. Socrates and his interlocutors propose a definition of this moral term, they scrutinize and reject the definition, then they propose a second definition, scrutinize and reject this, and so on. I believe that from its inception to its conclusion the investigations in these dramas make progress. I define progress here as a movement from conventional understanding toward philosophical understanding. By philosophical understanding I simply mean understanding resulting from reasoned discussion of a given subject. It also happens to be the case that reasoned discussion of the subjects in these dramas leads the definitions from conventional views to increasingly unconventional views.

The *Laches* is, I believe, the best text with which to illustrate this idea, since the progress in definition occurring in the *Laches* is particularly consistent, conspicuous, and otherwise uncomplicated. In the *Laches*, Socrates, Laches, and Nicias investigate the definition of manliness (ἀνδρεία). The investigation begins with a definition of manliness as holding one's position in a hoplite phalanx, not running away in flight, but defending oneself against the enemy. This description defines a type of action, an act-type. The definition of manliness as an act-type is rejected, and the definition of manliness as a psychic state is introduced. This definition is increasingly refined, first to a general epistemic state and finally to the knowledge of good and evil. While the first definition was conventional in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the last was highly unconventional, but follows from the reasoned discussion throughout the drama.

I believe that in crafting the *Laches*, as well as many of his early philosophical dramas, Plato wished to lead his intended audience from a position of conventional understanding toward a position of philosophical understanding. That is the didactic function of many of the early writings; and this is of course a particular sort of didacticism for a philosophical text. Some texts may begin with first principles and move on to a complex theory dependent on those first principles; other texts may begin with a historical review of secondary literature. One does not need to begin from a position of conventional understanding.

In any case, as I see it, it is one of Plato's primary goals in crafting these dra-

mas that they function in this didactic way, and there is a tendency for the persona Socrates to be manipulated in accordance with this didactic function. So, if Plato believes that the definition of a given moral term *X* is *G*, and if Plato intends to lead his audience gradually from conventional to philosophical understanding, Plato cannot have Socrates—or anyone else, for that matter—introduce *G* as the first definition of *X*.

Given this, Plato tends to manipulate Socrates principally in two ways. First, Plato makes Socrates play a more passive role toward the beginning of the investigation and a more active role toward the end of the investigation. Toward the beginning of the investigation Socrates tends to criticize definitions presented by others rather than propose his own; whereas toward the end of the investigation Socrates tends to take increasing command of the investigation and propose his own definitions. Now, this alone, Socrates' predominantly critical role at the beginning of investigations, need not mean that Plato's and Socrates' philosophical beliefs on the given topics are inconsistent, only that Plato initially compels Socrates to hedge. However, this is not all that occurs, for Plato also manipulates Socrates in a second way. Plato often, in accordance with the didactic function, makes Socrates himself endorse conventional beliefs at the beginnings of the dramas and only as the dramas progress do we see Socrates' conventional beliefs, like other conventional beliefs, being eroded or refuted.

In sum then, the particular didactic function I have described as operating in Plato's early writings creates a distance of belief between Plato and the persona Socrates. I offer this theory of the didactic function in Plato's early writings as one piece of a complex structure that, I believe, must be constructed to replace the long-standing, more simple, but less adequate mouth-piece theory.³

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