

Trials of Reason

Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy

DAVID WOLFSDORF

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οὐ μὴν ἔστι καλλίων ὁδὸς οὐδ' ἂν γένοιτο ἧς
ἐγὼ ἔραστῆς μὲν εἰμι αἰεὶ, πολλάκις δέ με ἤδη
διαφυγούσα ἔρημον καὶ ἄπορον κατέστησεν

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I INTERPRETATION

I. Introduction

Trials of Reason is a study of Plato's *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic* 1. These texts are widely believed to constitute Plato's early writings. It is debatable whether *Hippias Major* is spurious, as well as whether *Republic* 1 was composed independently of and significantly prior to the rest of *Republic*. It is also debatable whether other texts should be included among the early works, for instance, *Alcibiades I* and *Theages*. However, it is not crucial to this study that the whole set of early dialogues be treated. In fact, it is not crucial that the set be early. I will continue to speak of the dialogues under examination as early merely for convenience.

My justification for treating the early dialogues as a unity is not chronological, but thematic. The subject that unifies these texts is philosophy itself. Philosophy, as Plato conceives it, is a kind of motivation, the desire for knowledge, specifically for ethical knowledge, knowledge of the good. This motivation gives rise to a practice, the pursuit of ethical knowledge. How ethical knowledge is pursued depends upon how this object of desire qua form of knowledge is conceived. Plato's conception of knowledge entails that one who knows understands and that understanding requires explanation.

Plato conceives of knowledge, understanding, and explanation as things that occur in and through language, in short, as discursive. Consequently, the practice of pursuing ethical knowledge assumes the form of a kind of discourse. One attempts through discourse to achieve ethical knowledge by formulating and proposing putatively true ethical propositions and then examining and testing these to determine whether and how they are true, in other words, giving reasons for and against them. Finally, the practice of pursuing ethical knowledge itself yields particular consequences. Ideally, it yields the ethical knowledge sought;

however, in the early dialogues, this ideal is never achieved. Instead, all of the pursuits end in some psychological condition weaker than knowledge: in the most successful instances, well-reasoned belief; in the least successful, perplexity.

In sum, philosophy, as Plato conceived it, can be understood in three ways: primarily, as a type of motivation; secondarily, as a practice arising from this motivation; and thirdly, as the result of the practice. One's philosophy or philosophical beliefs are those with which one is left in the wake of inquiry. A glance at the table of contents will now reveal that the study is structured according to this conception of philosophy. It begins with desire, moves to knowledge, which is the object of desire, examines method, or the practice of pursuing ethical knowledge, and concludes, as the early dialogues do, with *aporia*.

The idea that philosophy itself is the subject that unifies the early dialogues has not been adequately understood. The most striking symptom of this misunderstanding today is the divide among scholars between treatments of these texts that focus either on the philosophical and argumentative or on the literary and dramatic dimensions of the dialogues. For example, the jacket copy introducing R. M. Dancy's recent study of Plato's early theory of Forms runs: "Scholars of Plato are divided between those who emphasize the literature of the dialogues and those who emphasize the arguments of the dialogues... [this book] focuses on the arguments."¹

This divide is an artifact of misunderstanding, which can be transcended by appreciating that philosophy itself is dramatized in these texts. This means that Plato's early dialogues also encompass metaphilosophy. They do not merely express the results of the practice of philosophy, as most canonical philosophical texts do. They portray the need for philosophy as motivation and practice, the identity of philosophy as motivation and practice, and the difficulties of realizing philosophy with respect to motivation, practice, and goal. This first chapter is devoted to articulating a framework for interpreting the early dialogues that identifies the various kinds of dramatic elements within them and explains how Plato integrates these elements in his introduction, demonstration, and examination of philosophy.

2. Interpreting Plato

The history of the reception of Plato has been described as oscillating between two poles, doctrinal and skeptical.² The distinction is vague and imprecise; nonetheless, in attempting to summarize such a vast body of information, it is heuristic and convenient. Doctrinal interpretations maintain that Plato conceived of the dialogues as containing and conveying knowledge. Accordingly, such interpretations focus on the positive doctrines and conclusions that emerge from discussions in the texts. Skeptical interpretations understand Plato to be an epistemological

skeptic of some kind. Accordingly, they focus on *aporiai* and inconclusiveness in the discussions in the texts.

Aristotle treats Plato doctrinally, as apparently did Plato's immediate successors in the Old Academy, Speusippus (347–339) and Xenocrates (339–314).³ Skeptical interpretations arose with Arcesilaus (ca. 266–240)⁴ and his successors. For example, Cicero relates that "Arcesilaus was the first who from various of Plato's books and from Socratic discourses seized with the greatest force the moral that nothing which the mind or the senses can grasp is certain."⁵ Under Carneades (167–137) and his successors, the Academy maintained the impossibility of knowledge, but admitted so-called probabilism, a form of rationally justifiable positive belief. By around 90, Antiochus of Ascalon and his successors had reestablished a doctrinal interpretation against the skepticisms of the Middle Academy. Likewise, during the Roman Empire Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proclus treated Plato doctrinally.

During the Western Middle Ages the only widely circulating Platonic dialogue was *Timaeus*, a text that especially lends itself to doctrinal interpretation. During this period doctrinal neoplatonic interpretation reigned. Mere traces of skeptical Platonism survived through Cicero's *Academica* (composed in 45 BCE), itself informed by the Middle Academic tradition, and Augustine's *Contra Academicos* (composed in 386 CE), informed by the former. With the reintroduction of the rest of the corpus through Byzantine scholars into the West in the Quattrocento, Italian Renaissance Platonism remained doctrinal, specifically neoplatonic; and neoplatonic interpretation dominated through the sixteenth century.

In the early modern period, a range of alternative conceptions emerged. Skeptical interpretations of Plato in particular were compatible with several currents of thought: the rediscovery of Pyrrhonism and the rise of early modern skepticism, as well as fideism with its emphasis on the irrationality of divine truth. Additionally, independent thinkers such as Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) and Claude Fleury (1640–1723) appreciated the difficulties that the dialogues presented for establishing Platonic doctrines.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the neoplatonic interpretation of Plato was moribund. Still, doctrinal interpretation, albeit of a non-neoplatonic kind, prevailed. This period witnessed the birth of the modern historiography of philosophy with such works as Jacob Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742–44) and Dietrich Tiedemman's *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie* (1791–97), as well as the first modern monographs on Platonic philosophy. Through the influence of rationalism, the interpretation of Plato's corpus came to be governed by the view that any philosopher worthy of the name had a system, and in the nineteenth

1. Dancy (2004).

2. See Press (1996).

3. Note that these are the dates during which these philosophers occupied the scholarchy, that is, leadership of the Academy. All dates in the classical period are BCE unless otherwise noted.

4. During these dates Arcesilaus was scholarch.

5. *De orat.* 3.67, cited from Schofield in Algra et al. (1999) 327.

century there followed systematizations of the corpus, largely according to Kantian and Hegelian categories.⁶

With the rise of academic philology and historicism, evidence was increasingly generated in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries to determine a more historically accurate conception of the corpus. In the nineteenth century, Germanophone scholarship in particular was preoccupied with two interpretive problems: the authenticity of the dialogues and their chronological order. Through the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, the corpus was subjected to some extreme, highly idiosyncratic athetization.⁷ But especially with the rise of stylometry in the last quarter of the century,⁸ the authenticated set assumed more or less the shape widely accepted today.

The rise of stylometry also corroborated the growing developmentalist conception of the organization of the corpus into early, middle, and late periods. In other words, correctly organized and understood, the dialogues bear witness to a process of intellectual development over the course of Plato's philosophical career. Developmentalism, first influentially formulated in Karl Friederich Hermann's *Geschichte und System der platonischen Philosophie* (1839), became ascendant in the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century, the principal debate was between developmentalists and unitarians. Unitarianism is the view that Plato's philosophical ideas essentially remained consistent throughout his life.⁹ In the second half of the twentieth century, esotericism, a doctrinal interpretation first introduced in the late eighteenth century, reemerged with some force in continental Europe, especially in Germany. Esotericism is the view that Plato was committed to a mathematico-metaphysical system to which the contents of the dialogues merely allude. Accordingly, the dialogues are exoteric works, that is, they were intended as introductory or propaedeutic for an uninitiated public. In contrast, the esoteric system was reserved for the community of philosophers within the Academy. Anglophones, however, largely remained focused on the dialogues; their reception of esotericism was cool. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Anglophone Platonic scholarship was principally conducted within a developmentalist and relatively doctrinal framework.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, among Anglophones, unitarianism is regaining adherents. The shift away from developmentalism relates to growing emphasis on Plato's artistry. It is increasingly considered naïve to assume that the contents of a given text represent Plato's views, or at least Plato's complete views on the matters discussed there. Plato could have composed individual dialogues as well as sets of dialogues, for pedagogical or didactic purposes.

6. My account of the early modern reception of Plato is heavily influenced by Tigerstedt (1974), (1977).

7. That is, rejection of texts as spurious.

8. Stylometry is the quantitative study of stylistic and linguistic features of the texts.

9. Observe that in principle both developmentalist and unitarian interpretations may be doctrinal or skeptical interpretations.

The present development of interest in the dramaturgical and literary dimensions of the dialogues is explicable as a response to a principal mode of exegesis to which the texts were subjected in the second half of the twentieth century. The spread of analytic philosophy, particularly within Anglophone universities during this period, to a significant degree repudiated or at least challenged the study of the history of philosophy. Overturning Whitehead's famous dictum that Western philosophy could most safely be read as a series of footnotes to Plato, early analytic papers endeavored to dispense with footnotes, on the grounds that the contributions of canonical predecessors were confused, insufficiently clear, logically or analytically wanting, and in short had been superseded by Frege, Russell, and their heirs. Plato scholars responded with heavy emphasis on the analysis of arguments in the dialogues, examining these according to standards of logic in its current state, as well as through the application of contemporary conceptual categories. The effect was either to expose the shortcomings of Plato's thought or to reveal greater subtlety in his arguments, however sound they were.

Positively, this exegetical tendency brought welcome rigor and clarity to the arguments in the dialogues. But the defect of this approach, especially in the hands of historically insensitive scholars, has been anachronism, in two respects. On the one hand, there has been misconception of the form and meaning of the arguments through importing into them logical and conceptual material foreign to the author and his times. On the other, there has been misconception of the function of the arguments and the dialogues more generally through treatment of them as though they were treatises or journal articles intended to be conclusive expressions of their author's settled opinions. Increasing attention to the dramaturgical or literary dimensions of the texts variously serves to check both tendencies. It encourages examination of arguments in relation to their dramatic contexts. For instance, arguments may be deployed ad hominem, instrumentally, or for any number of reasons other than to defend the author's thesis on a specific topic. More generally, appreciation of the very fact that Plato deploys arguments in such ways enhances understanding of the dialogues as sui generis philosophical works.

This is the state of contemporary Anglophone scholarship on Plato's dialogues. Argumentation is central to Plato's texts and the conception of philosophy in them. However, arguments are embedded in dramatic dialogues and developed through complex, largely informal dialogic exchanges between literary characters. Understanding the philosophical content of Plato's dialogues, therefore, requires understanding the relation between the dramatic and argumentative dimensions of the texts.

3. The Political Culture of Plato's Early Dialogues

Each of the early dialogues is a well-integrated drama whose centerpiece is a discussion, examination, or inquiry into a particular topic or set of interrelated topics. One topic central to several texts is the identity of excellence or a part of it. The discussions in dialogues that pursue this question are governed by a question of the form "What is *F*?" Hereafter, this question will be referred to as the WF question. The symbol *F* ranges over excellence or a part of it. For example, the

question "What is holiness?" governs the discussion in *Euthyphro*. There are seven such early dialogues: *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, and *Republic 1*. In these dialogues, *F* stands for sound-mindedness, holiness, fineness, courage, friendship, excellence itself, and justice, respectively.

Protagoras is also largely concerned with the identity of excellence. However, it approaches this question by considering the relation between the parts of excellence: justice, holiness, sound-mindedness, knowledge, and courage. Moreover, the examination of the relationship between the parts of excellence occurs in response to the question whether excellence is teachable, for it is assumed that determining whether excellence is teachable depends on understanding what excellence is.

The dramas of *Apology* and *Crito* more intimately depend on particular historical events than those of the other early dialogues, namely Socrates' trial and condemnation. *Apology* is concerned to defend Socrates against the accusations of impiety and corruption of the youth. In the process of making his defense, Socrates articulates his conception of the pious and socially beneficial philosophical activity that has constituted his life's work. *Crito* discusses the question whether Socrates should escape from prison before his execution and engages the broader question of the individual's relation to the state and the law.

Euthydemus contrasts the eristic style of argumentation of the brothers Dionysodorus and Euthydemus with genuinely philosophical argumentation.¹⁰ In the process, Socrates develops protreptic arguments concerning the value of philosophy.¹¹ *Gorgias*, which focuses on the subject of rhetoric, also juxtaposes two kinds of discourse. The dialogue begins with a question akin to the WF question, "What is rhetoric?" It then turns to the question of the value of rhetoric. In the process, the ethical question is examined whether it is better to suffer or to do injustice; and in the process of examining this question, goodness is distinguished from pleasure. These topics are unified by the suggestion that rhetoric, as widely practiced, involves a false commitment to ethical hedonism (the identification of goodness with pleasure).

Hippias Minor examines the relationship between honesty and dishonesty, and whether it is better voluntarily or involuntarily to do wrong. Finally, *Ion* examines whether the rhapsode Ion's ability to perform Homer's epics and comment on them is a kind of knowledge.

The early dialogues treat a range of topics, and it is an important question to what extent these topics are related, because the answer implies a certain conception of the unity of the dialogues. Here the anachronisms of certain of our predecessors are heuristic. In the previous section, it was mentioned that a number of interpreters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought to systematize the corpus according to Kantian and Hegelian categories. For instance, Gottlieb

Wilhelm Tenneman divides Plato's thought into epistemology, theoretical philosophy, and practical philosophy; Eduard Zeller into dialectics, physics, and ethics. More recently, Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith organize the philosophical content of the early dialogues according to subdisciplines of late-twentieth-century Anglophone academic philosophy: method, epistemology, ethics, psychology, political philosophy, and theology.

Division of philosophy into subdisciplines by the Greeks postdates Plato and perhaps Aristotle. In *Topics*, Aristotle distinguishes dialectical or logical, physical, and ethical propositions, but the Stoics establish these as parts of philosophy.

Granted, there may be a number of pedagogical or expository reasons for distinguishing aspects of Plato's thought according to modern philosophical categories. But it is anachronistic to suggest that Plato conceived of his various early writings as contributions to various subdisciplines of philosophy. In other words, it is anachronistic to think that from within the conceptual horizon of the early dialogues, there are grounds for divisions of the philosophical content according to modern philosophical subdisciplines.

The early writings focus on what we now call ethical problems and problems in the epistemology of ethics. More precisely, they focus on *aretê* and its acquisition. *Aretê* is typically translated as "virtue" or "excellence." The disadvantage of "virtue" is that it specifically identifies a psychological state or condition. Excellence, like *aretê*, may be a property of animals and even inanimate objects. For instance, in *Republic 1* Socrates speaks of the *aretê* of dogs and of horses.¹² Thus, the phrases *aretê andros* (the excellence of a man) and *anthrôpeia aretê* (human excellence) are not redundant.¹³ *Aretê* is often used in the texts without qualification to refer to human excellence. But it is questionable whether human excellence is to be identified with a psychological condition. Consequently, I will translate *aretê* as "excellence" throughout.¹⁴

In the fifth and fourth centuries *aretê* had particular class and status connotations. For example, in *Politics* Aristotle divides the free population in a city-state (*polis*) into the ordinary citizens and the elite.¹⁵ He distinguishes the elite according to four characteristics: wealth, nobility or good birth, education, and *aretê*.¹⁶ Of these, *aretê* is the least concrete. It refers to the paradigmatic values and conduct of the culture of the leisure class. In the fifth and fourth centuries, out of an average citizen body of twenty to thirty thousand males over the age of eighteen both of whose parents were Athenians, the leisure class consisted of approximately twelve hundred to two thousand men whose family fortune was at

12. R. 1, 335b.

13. The phrase *andros aretê* occurs at *Prt.* 325a2; the phrase *anthrôpeia aretê* occurs at R. 1, 335c4.

14. Note that throughout the study the first instance of a Greek word will be followed by a translation. A list of commonly used Greek words with translations is also provided in appendix 1.

15. *Polis* is standardly translated as "city-state" on the grounds that these political bodies were as small as modern cities, but politically autonomous like states. Throughout I will use both "polis" and "city-state."

16. *Pol.* 1291b14-30.

10. "Eristic" means "contentious." Euthydemus and Dionysodorus deliberately deploy sophistical arguments in an effort to refute their interlocutors.

11. "Protreptic," which means "serving to exhort or encourage," is often used in the context of Platonic scholarship to refer to dialogues that introduce and encourage the practice of philosophy.

least a talent (= 6,000 drachmas).¹⁷ The possession of such wealth enabled these citizens to preoccupy themselves with activities such as symposia (drinking parties), homoerotic affairs, hunting, horsemanship, and frequenting gymnasia (athletic campuses) and wrestling schools, and to provide their sons with the most elaborate educations available.

Prior to the emergence of its particular form of democracy, Athens was, like most Greek city-states, oligarchic. The formal and informal exercise of political power had been a distinct privilege of the upper classes. During the democracy, this changed, but the pursuit and exercise of political power remained a central ideal of the leisure class, and the most politically influential citizens of the fourth century were, to a large extent, members of this class.¹⁸

In *Protagoras* Socrates identifies *aretê* as *politikê technê* (the specialized knowledge of being a citizen). Throughout, the early dialogues focus on courage, sound-mindedness, holiness, and justice as principal constituents of *aretê*. Civic and personal excellence are largely coextensive. This is because the distinctions of private and public, and so of the personal and the political, existed to a relatively limited great degree. There are several reasons for this: the Mediterranean climate and the fact that the lives of males were for the most part conducted outdoors, the relatively small size of the citizenry, and the extent to which citizens were directly involved in formal political institutions. Josiah Ober, drawing on the work of Niklas Luhmann, describes this as a relatively small degree of role differentiation between ordinary citizens and political leaders. Accordingly, the political leader tends to be judged by ordinary social values; indeed it was believed that the condition of the city-state corresponded to the character of its citizens, including its leaders.¹⁹

The Athenian democracy had an elaborate system of political offices. But most of these were held for only a year at a time, and aside from the role of military general, political influence did not reside in the occupation of any such office. The "politicians" of Athens were rather those individuals whose talents, education, and specifically rhetorical ability enabled them to persuade the people, above all within the city-state's sovereign political body, the Assembly (*ekklêsia*). In principle, any citizen could address the Assembly on matters of policy. But in practice only a few dozen regularly did, and, as I have noted, these leaders of the people (*dêmagôges*) were largely derived from the leisure class.

Philosophy is an intellectual and discursive discipline, competence in which requires considerable effort and time. Such time is available only to the leisure

17. Davies (1971).

18. Hansen (1987); Ober (1989) 112-18.

19. "The recognition that Athenian political roles were rather less differentiated from the social role of the average citizen than has often been the case in modern societies helps to explain the relative lack of interest shown by the Athenians in separating policy proposals from the individual character and behavior of the proposer, legal culpability from immoral behavior, or abstract political principles from popular ideology" (Ober, 1989, 126; Luhmann, 1982, 139-46).

class; for example, Isocrates says that its members traditionally engaged in "athletics, hunting, and philosophy."²⁰ Alternatively, nonwealthy practitioners of philosophy, as Socrates is portrayed, must be willing to abandon their livelihoods and live in poverty or dependence on patronage. Plato and the audience to whom the early dialogues were addressed belonged to the leisure class, and the texts are conceived in terms of its culture, particularly its political activity.

Most of the early dialogues are situated in distinctly upper-class milieus. *Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, *Laches*, and *Lysis* are set at the wrestling school of Taureas, the gymnasium of the Lyceum, an unidentified gymnasium, and the wrestling school of Miccus, respectively. The leisure class could afford the time to enjoy these social and athletic arenas as well as the expenses for the military and athletic trials and competitions related to them. *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Protagoras*, and *Republic 1* are set at the homes of wealthy Athenians or metics (resident aliens); Cephalus, at whose house most of *Republic 1* is set, was one of the wealthiest metics of the fifth century, and in *Protagoras* Callias' house is described as one of the most opulent in the city. The settings of *Ion*, *Hippias Major*, and *Meno* are not precisely defined. But *Meno* is visiting Athens in the distinguished political role of an ambassador from Thessaly, and the historical *Meno* came from one of the wealthiest Thessalian families. *Hippias* is a celebrated itinerant wise man who seeks students and patrons from among wealthy Athenians. And the fact that *Ion* is a rhapsode from Ephesus who performs throughout the Greek city-states indicates that he belonged to a network of foreign relationships that imply an aristocratic milieu.²¹ Indeed, this is true of all the itinerant *sophoi* (wise men) in the texts.

In contrast, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Euthyphro* are situated in public spaces: a law court, a prison, and the Basileic Stoa in the agora. There are, of course, good historical and dramatic reasons for these settings, but it should also be noted that Socrates' presence in these democratic locations is highly unusual. This is not simply because Socrates' trial and condemnation were unique experiences in his life. It is customary to think of the historical Socrates as engaging in philosophy principally in the agora, the geographical center of the democracy, and with whoever was willing to speak with him. But, in fact, in the early dialogues philosophy is for the most part practiced among the members of the upper class, outside of demotic spaces.

Plato conceives of philosophy as a political activity, precisely in opposition to the democratic political process as that process actually operates in the city-state.²² Throughout the early dialogues it is argued that *aretê* is the knowledge

20. 7-45.

21. I am grateful to M. D. Usher for this point.

22. In principle, Socrates and Plato admire the free speech (*parhêsia*) and openness to debate of the Athenian constitution. But as Socrates emphasizes in *Apology*, there is little genuine free speech or openness to debate in the city-state's political arenas. In fact, Socrates claims that if he had attempted to enter politics in a conventional way early in his life, he would have been destroyed.

that a political leader needs. Such knowledge is conceived as a *technê* (craft or expertise), which is to say, knowledge unavailable to the many and hence unavailable to the mass of ordinary citizens that constitute the *dêmos* (populus). Accordingly, the *dêmos* should not be a politically influential body. Rather, they should follow the governance of the elite, that is, the excellent ones (*aristoi*), who possess *aretê*.

In democratic Athens most of the political leaders were members of the leisure class; however, they were beholden to the will of the people. Their prominence and influence depended upon the satisfaction of the *dêmos*. As such—and this is Plato's central criticism of democracy—political leadership was dominated by rather than in control over the people. Political leaders catered to rather than cultivated the *dêmos*. As Socrates puts it in *Gorgias*, politics as practiced in Athens is a form of flattery. In contrast, Plato envisions a political system where the leader possesses a *technê* akin to an athletic trainer or horse-breeder whose guidance and care benefit his wards.

Central to the early dialogues, then, is education (*paideia*), for philosophy, as a pursuit of knowledge that constitutes *aretê*, is a form of education or cultivation of the citizen who will become a political leader. As such, the dialogues are principally populated by three kinds of character: fathers interested in the education of their sons (Lysimachus, Melesias, and Crito), male youth interested in their education and specifically in education that will enable them to become prominent citizens (Hippocrates, Charmides, Lysis, Menexenus, Ctesippus, Hippothales), and sophists who allege that they are able to educate youth to attain *aretê* (Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Thrasymachus, Euthydemus, and Dionysodorus).

Philosophy (*philosophia*) as Plato conceives it in the early dialogues, then, emerges as the love, desire for, and pursuit of (*philia*) the particular kind of knowledge or wisdom (*sophia*) that the political leader or politically influential citizen ideally should possess. *Apology* develops this conception of philosophy and its value. *Protagoras* criticizes democracy and emphasizes the important of a specialized knowledge of politics. *Ion* clarifies the distinction between knowledge and the most salient traditionally conceived form of wisdom, that of the divinely inspired poet. The dialogue suggests that Ion does not in fact possess knowledge. Through investigation of the definition of excellence and its putative parts, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Laches*, *Meno*, and *Republic 1* pursue the knowledge that the philosopher seeks and the statesman requires. *Euthydemus* distinguishes the philosophical reasoning such investigation requires with a form of pseudophilosophy, eristic argumentation. Similarly, *Gorgias* contrasts the respective values of rhetoric and philosophy, denigrating the former and extolling the latter as a worthy political enterprise. *Hippias Minor*'s puzzle concerning voluntary wrongdoing and injustice pertains to the conceptualization of the wisdom or knowledge sought by the philosopher, specifically to the relation of this *sophia* to other forms of professional knowledge and how this relates to the psychology of action. Finally, *Crito* examines the problem of civil obedience.

This account oversimplifies the contents of the early dialogues. Nonetheless, the conception of philosophy as the desire for and pursuit of ethical knowledge,

which is conceived as political knowledge, the knowledge that befits a political leader, unifies the texts.

4. Dialogue

The preceding section explains the interrelation and unity of the various early dialogues. Yet, arguably, it does so in a way that is compatible with Plato's having written philosophical treatises criticizing democracy, explaining the value of philosophy as a political activity, defining excellence, and so on. However, Plato did not write monologic treatises, but dialogues, and the question is often put why he did. In examining this question, it is important to qualify that it should not depend upon the assumption that Plato was the first to write philosophical dialogues. There is reason to believe that he wasn't. There were a number of other Socratics, that is, immediate philosophical heirs of Socrates, who wrote what Aristotle calls *sokratikoi logoi* (Socratic discourses). Some Socratics were older than Plato, and some had schools or students of their own, including schools in Athens during the time that Plato was active in the Academy. Antisthenes is a good example. He was perhaps twenty years Plato's senior, and the list of his writings extant in Diogenes Laertius' life of him is compendious. Consequently, the question why Plato wrote dialogues should not be conceived as the question why Plato invented the form of philosophical dialogue. More appropriate is the question how Plato uses the dialogue form.

A common theme pervades the early dialogues: the conflict between philosophy, as Plato conceived this, and antiphilosophy, its antithesis. Plato's conception of philosophy was defined earlier as the love, desire for, and pursuit of the kind of knowledge that the political leader needs. Since that knowledge is *aretê*, philosophy can be redescribed as the pursuit of excellence. As such, Plato's conception of philosophy is consistent with traditional Greek aristocratic values. On the other hand, Plato's conception of excellence, as well as the means to it, is distinctive. In traditional Greek aristocratic culture, *sophia* was also prized, but as one among many constituents of excellence. The early dialogues, however, argue that the value of *sophia* is distinct from and superior to all other conventionally conceived goods such as health, wealth, physical beauty, military prowess, fame, and pleasure.

Furthermore, in traditional Greek culture wisdom was valued for its practical efficacy. In contrast, the early dialogues place strong emphasis on the theoretical dimension of wisdom. As I will discuss in chapter 4, this emphasis relates to the way ethical knowledge is conceptualized as a form of understanding. Understanding entails the ability to explain what one knows, and the relevant sort of explanatory capability, in turn, justifies claims to possess that knowledge.

In accordance with the distinct epistemic conception of excellence in the early dialogues, the pursuit of excellence involves distinct means—what may vaguely be called logical reasoning or argumentation. Compare this, for example, with training in arms, which the fathers Lysimachus and Melesias consider obtaining for their sons in order to make them *aristoi*. Such training is intended to prepare the boys for military experience so that they will achieve fame and glory on the battlefield.

Antiphilosophy encompasses all that is antithetical to philosophy and includes much that is conventionally and traditionally valued in Greek culture and specifically Greek aristocratic culture. For instance, in all the early dialogues, popular values are criticized. More precisely, in the definitional dialogues and in *Protagoras*, popular conceptions of excellence and its putative parts are criticized. In *Apology* and sections of *Euthyphro* and *Gorgias*, critical remarks are made about forensic rhetoric. *Gorgias* is, on the whole, an attack on conventional political rhetoric. Epideictic rhetoric is criticized in *Protagoras* as well as *Hippias Minor* and *Gorgias*. And in *Ion* as well as *Protagoras* the poetic tradition is criticized.

Much in the early dialogues is also devoted to criticizing sophistry or pseudo-philosophy. This critique has two principal aspects. The first is the distinction of sophistry from philosophy, which constitutes Plato's well-known attempt to distinguish and legitimate the form that his particular discipline assumes in contrast to that with which the public identified it. The distinction of eristic argumentation from philosophical argumentation in *Euthydemus* is a good example. The second aspect is the association of sophistry with certain political or popular values, in particular, the pursuit of pleasure and power as conventionally conceived. Evidence for this is found especially in *Gorgias*.

In sum, all the early dialogues, albeit in various ways and by focusing on various aspects, dramatize the conflict between philosophy and antiphilosophy. The dramatization of this conflict is fundamental to their dialogicity in the sense that the texts incorporate and engage two or more distinct perspectives, systems of value, modes of discourse, and forms of life.

Ostensibly, this dialogic engagement does not occur wholly within the sphere of philosophical discourse. Rather, the physical, psychological, and, broadly, cultural settings and contexts in which the practice of philosophical inquiry occurs are the settings and contexts of conventional aristocratic, and occasionally, more broadly, demotic Greek life. For instance, in *Lysis* Socrates arrives at Miccus' wrestling school during a festival in honor of Hermes; in *Laches* Lysimachus and Melesias are judging Stesilaus' course in training in arms; in *Apology* Socrates defends himself in court against Meletus' accusations.

Philosophy emerges out of these nonphilosophical contexts, and this is significant in two respects. The first pertains to the conflict between philosophy and antiphilosophy. The emergence of philosophy within the dialogues is coupled with critique of conventional and traditional values; and it is precisely the conditions of the settings and contexts of the dialogues in which philosophy emerges that philosophy criticizes. In *Gorgias* Socrates and Chaerephon arrive at Callicles' house immediately after *Gorgias*' rhetorical exhibition, and Socrates proceeds to criticize rhetoric. In *Protagoras* Hippocrates seeks Socrates' help in gaining access to Protagoras' instruction, and Socrates proceeds to examine Protagoras' pedagogical competence. In *Lysis*, Socrates counters Hippothales' erotic interest in Lysis with a demonstration of how to treat boys and then with an investigation into the nature of friendship.

The second respect pertains to what may loosely be described as the philosophical-pedagogical function of the dialogues. Within the conceptual horizon of the interlocutors, philosophy has not already defined, legitimated, or established

itself. The dialogues are not addressed to individuals already committed to the philosophical enterprise. Rather, a crucial part of the work of the texts is this definition, legitimization, and establishment of philosophy. Not only does the practice of philosophy within the dialogues serve to introduce this practice and to clarify its form and function, the dialogues also explicitly distinguish the discursive form of philosophical practice from others. In *Protagoras* Socrates urges Protagoras to refrain from lengthy speeches and to stick to the mode of succinct question and answer. In *Gorgias*, Socrates repeatedly distinguishes Polus' rhetorical competence from his dialectical incompetence.

The dialogues' embedding of philosophy within a more conventional cultural framework serves precisely to engage the intended audience in a familiar condition and to guide them from there into philosophy. As such, all the early dialogues are propaedeutic and protreptic. This particular pedagogical function of the dialogues is manifest in a dramaturgical feature that I call *a*-structure, a dramatic or discursive structure constituted by a linear sequence or progression of beliefs and values, at one pole of which lie conventional and traditional (antiphilosophical) views and values and at the other pole of which lie Platonic (philosophical) views and values. *a*-structures in the dialogues serve to engage the intended audience at points of conventional belief and, through critique of this, to lead the audience to novel Platonic beliefs, regardless of whether the discussions and examinations in the dialogues conclude aporetically. For instance, the investigation of courage in *Laches* begins with a conventional conception of courage as paradigmatic hoplite conduct; it advances toward an unconventional Platonic conception of courage as a state of knowledge. Similarly, the investigation of the parts of excellence in *Protagoras* begins with a conventional conception of the partition of excellence and gradually leads to the position that these putative parts are identical. More generally, *Protagoras* begins with a view of Protagoras as wise and gradually undermines this view. Likewise, *Euthydemus* and *Hippias Major* begin with views of the brothers and Hippias as wise and then undermine these. Indeed, many of the dialogues introduce authoritative figures only to undermine their authority in the course of the dialogue. In such cases, *a*-structures order the dramatic sequence of whole dialogues. But *a*-structures of more limited extent operate within the texts as well. For instance, in *Gorgias* Polus begins with the view that effective orators have great power, but as a result of his argument with Socrates it is concluded that the orators may have no power at all. *Laches* and *Meno* begin with the view that they know what courage and excellence is and that this is easy to say, but they soon realize the contrary.

The contrast between conventional or traditional opinions and unconventional Platonic views about which the dialogues are organized according to *a*-structure may concern specific propositions debated in the course of the investigation, but, importantly, it may also concern the grounds of or justifications for belief of those propositions. That is to say, the value of the rational justification of beliefs about excellence and its means of acquisition are often implicitly or explicitly contrasted with the following alternative grounds of belief. It is not epistemologically adequate to maintain a belief merely because the belief is common, held by the majority, traditional, or advanced by an allegedly wise

person, or because it has been expressed in a rhetorically compelling manner. In other words, the early dialogues criticize conventional and traditional beliefs, but also the conventional and traditional grounds upon which beliefs are held.

In sum, Plato composed the early dialogues according to *a*-structure for protreptic reasons, to encourage his readers to abandon the antiphilosophical life for the philosophical life. He addressed his intended audience in the doxastic position in which they stood,²³ committed to conventional and traditional beliefs and values and modes of life. In the course of the discussions, these views are scrutinized, undermined, and rejected. Meanwhile, novel, unconventional Platonic views are introduced and developed—the latter often in the process 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 superior beliefs or a superior manner of grounding his beliefs and, more generally, of orienting his life.

5. Character and History

This description of the conflict of philosophy and antiphilosophy as the early dialogues' pervasive theme and of *a*-structure as their pervasive pedagogical structure to a large extent explains the form of the texts. More specifically, it explains the relationship between the argumentative content and the literary form. This point is also relevant to the characterology and historicity of the texts.

Both the characterology and historicity of the texts contribute to the texts' realism. The characters represent historical individuals, the dramatic settings represent historical places, and the characters are represented as saying and doing things that real people would. In fact, Plato's dialogues are more realistic than any other Athenian literature of the fourth century. Yet realism has been a deceptive form of literary presentation, for scholars have often viewed the dramatic aspects of the dialogues merely as instrumental to engaging the reader in the texts' philosophical substance. Such a conception oversimplifies and neglects large dimensions of the texts, for Plato employs character and history, as well as philosophical inquiry and argumentation, in dramatizing the conflict of philosophy and antiphilosophy and in advocating the value of the former over the latter.

The characters' conduct as well as their utterances reflects the conditions of their souls, specifically their beliefs and values. Lysimachus and Melesias are concerned with the well-being of their sons; they want their sons to become excellent, but they believe that training in arms may be the right course of training to this end. Hippocrates would like to become an outstanding citizen, but he believes that association with Protagoras is the right means to this end. Protagoras has the company at Callias' house discuss Simonides' ode because he believes that the study of poetry is the most important part of a man's education.

23. "Doxastic" means "relating to belief."

Euthyphro prosecutes his father for murder because he believes that doing so is holy and that he knows what holiness is.

The characters' values and beliefs are revealed not merely in the theses and premises they contribute in the philosophical discussions, but also in their attitudes toward the discussions. Critias initially resists joining the investigation of sound-mindedness; Protagoras twice stubbornly falls into silence; and Callicles is ultimately unwilling to continue the investigation. Such instances expose the characters' fear of humiliation and desire to safeguard their reputations. Such attitudes suggest a distinct prioritization of values.

Related is the character who is willing to engage in discussion, but for antiphilosophical reasons. His contributions aim to outdo or defeat his interlocutor rather than to foster a cooperative pursuit of truth. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus' sophisms are a good example. In *Laches*, once Nicias supplants Laches as Socrates' principal interlocutor, Laches becomes contentious, eager to see his colleague refuted as he was. Thrasymachus' violent and abusive manner shows flagrant disregard for his company's well-being. In short, the characters' topically nonphilosophical as well as philosophical claims manifest their values. Generally, their motives for speech or for silence as well as the content of their speech play an important role in Plato's dramaturgy.

In crafting the conflict of philosophy and antiphilosophy Plato also employs history. The historical elements are mainly drawn from the last thirty years of the fifth century BCE. This period encompasses the first thirty years of Plato's life, a span of Athenian history marked by the Peloponnesian War and its immediate aftermath and concluding with Socrates' execution. More precisely, the early dialogues are set in a quasi-historical past; historical elements populate the dialogues, but the particular configuration of the historical elements is not historically accurate. The prevalence of anachronism confirms this—and the sort of anachronism to which I am referring is not unconscious.

Plato's interest was to create a pastiche of elements representative of the period. His concern with history is philosophical, as he conceived philosophy. In other words, it is ethical and political. Plato is not interested in the particularities of individuals or the contingent social and environmental conditions that shape their personalities. He is interested in character, its formation, and its influence on the city-state. His interest in history is not chronological; he is not concerned with how sociopolitical conditions came about. Indeed, he does present an analysis of sociopolitical conditions, but not in terms of antecedent events.

Much of the history to which Plato alludes surely is lost, and so the texts' historical dimensions are elusive. But surviving historical sources facilitate appreciation of certain examples and so suggest a more general significance for Plato's engagement with history. The setting and characters of *Protagoras* provide a 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 citizen in speech and action. The ensuing inquiry concerning the relation of the parts of excellence exposes Protagoras' ignorance of excellence and undermines his claim. But before this inquiry begins, Plato intimates, through his choice of setting and characters, that Protagoras cannot teach excellence.

In the dialogue, Protagoras is staying at Callias' house. The historical 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.

Many of the Athenians at Callias' house 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' house is present in Socrates' prison cell. The group in *Phaedo* consists of Socrates' disciples and adherents of philosophy who have come to share last moments with a dear friend and teacher. In contrast, the group in *Protagoras* 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 utmost care of them?²⁴

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 criticism of Athens that pervades the early writings: The upper class lacks excellence, fails to recognize their ignorance of excellence, and fails to cultivate it. The criticism of the sophists who appear in many of these texts 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 antiphilosophical character and values. The members of the upper class employ sophists above all for rhetorical training in order to win the approval of the *dêmos*. Insofar as they seek political power through the approval of the *dêmos*, they ignore the proper role of leadership. In his most explicit attack on Athenian political leaders of the past, Plato has Socrates in *Gorgias* criticize Pericles for having made the *dêmos* idle, cowardly, gossiping, and avaricious.²⁵

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

24. *Prt.* 325b–c.

25. *Grg.* 515e.

of a past generation with the hindsight of Athens' fate during this period. Plato's engagement of history dramatizes the opposition of philosophy and antiphilosophy 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.

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 and thus philosophical. Accordingly, the realism Plato employs to dramatize the opposition of philosophy and antiphilosophy and to demonstrate the value of the former over the latter is cunning. The dialogues incorporate representative elements of philosophy and antiphilosophy, including representative persons, but this incorporation involves manipulation. The realism of the dialogues conveys the impression that the portrayal of persons and their utterances 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 antiphilosophy 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 reevaluated and recalibrated according to the authority of philosophy. In this respect, although philosophy emerges from within antiphilosophical contexts in the dramas, the antiphilosophical contexts are themselves framed and defined by the author's philosophical interests.

The role of characterology and history in the dialogues indicates that most every element and aspect of the dialogues is hermeneutically significant. And yet to avoid anachronism, the significance assigned to particular elements and dimensions of the texts must be historically warranted. Insofar as this is the case, it is also worth emphasizing the magnitude of the gap between the rich texts that we have and the vast and intricate background that we struggle to reconstruct.

6. The Mouthpiece Principle

The character Socrates is central to Plato's early dialogues, and he appears in all of them. The other characters appear in only one or two; and even when they appear in more than one, their role in the other is small; for example, Crito in *Crito* and *Euthydemus*, and Critias in *Charmides* and *Protagoras*. Hippias is a slight exception; he is Socrates' principal interlocutor in *Hippias Major* and *Hippias Minor*, and he has a small role in *Protagoras*. But Socrates not only appears in all the early dialogues, his role in all of them is central. All of the early dialogues, save *Laches*, begin with Socrates as a principal speaker. Furthermore, unlike some of Plato's middle and late dialogues, Socrates is the only figure in these texts who fits the description of a philosopher. Even Crito, a close friend of Socrates and among the Socratic and Pythagorean philosophers in Socrates' prison cell in *Phaedo*, advocates a conventional belief on conventional, antiphilosophical grounds when he appears in *Crito*. Socrates is, then, the main and, as far as Plato is concerned, most sympathetic character in these texts; he is Plato's favored character.

In view of the dichotomy of philosophy and antiphilosophy, in the early dialogues Socrates would seem to be philosophy incarnate. In that case, the conflict between philosophy and antiphilosophy in these texts might be divisible by character. Accordingly, the dialogues would constitute contests (*agōnes*) between Socrates and Protagoras, Socrates and Gorgias, Socrates and Hippias, and so on. Some such conception has governed a good deal of interpretation of the early dialogues. Indeed, the idea goes back as far as Diogenes Laertius—and surely he inherited it from earlier commentators—that Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece and the site of the philosophy that Plato intended to endorse in the dialogues. More recently, the mouthpiece principle has been advocated by some of the most prominent Plato scholars. Consider the claim by Gregory Vlastos, the most influential scholar of Plato's early dialogues in the last half century, that "in any given dialogue Plato allows the persona Socrates only what he (Plato), at that time, considers true."²⁶

Some scholars, more wary of leaping from the character to the author, restrict their interpretations to Socrates' utterances, but still find in Socrates the philosophical substance of the dialogues. In the introduction to their book *Plato's Socrates* Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith explain, "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."²⁷ Although this view is in one important respect different from the view expressed in Vlastos's statement, both views imply that the interpretation of the dialogues involves the following hermeneutic procedure: assembly from all of the early dialogues all of Socrates' topically philosophical utterances and derivation from these, so far as possible, consistent and coherent propositions. This set then constitutes the philosophy of the early dialogues.

Such an approach to the dialogues distorts their content and, among other things, leads to the questions why Plato wrote dialogues and how the literary and dramatic dimensions relate to the philosophical, questions that, given the commitments of the interpreters, cannot be satisfactorily answered.

An interpreter may grant this, but object that his aim is merely to interpret one dimension of the dialogues. Moreover, this dimension, the philosophical—according to some conception of philosophy—is the one that, as a philosopher or historian of philosophy, matters to him. Such a reply might carry the day. Consequently, the interpreter will leave nonphilosophical dimensions of the texts to the ancient historian, the scholar of Greek literature, and the philologist.

But this maneuver fails. Several factors undermine the attempt to distill philosophical principles from the assembly of all of Socrates' topic-relevant utterances. The most significant of these are intratextual and intertextual inconsistencies among Socrates' philosophical utterances. By intratextual inconsistencies, I mean

inconsistencies among Socrates' utterances within a given dialogue; by intertextual inconsistencies, I mean inconsistencies among Socrates' utterances through two or more dialogues. Both types of inconsistency occur frequently. Among Anglophone scholars over the last half-century there have been three prevalent responses to these inconsistencies: argument for developmentalism within the set of the early dialogues; pursuit of subtle unifying principles; and interpretation some of Socrates' utterances as "ironic" (meaning "disingenuous").

Ultimately, problems of inconsistency have to be treated on a case-by-case basis because the informational content of each context is unique. Which set of inconsistent utterances? How inconsistent? What proposed solution? Some important cases will be discussed in the ensuing chapters. Still, the following two principles serve as rules of thumb. Intratextual inconsistencies tend to be the effects of *a*-structure, and intertextual inconsistencies tend to be the effects of the common doxastic base of the early dialogues.

As I noted above, in accordance with the operation of *a*-structure, the given dialogue or some portion of it begins with a conventional or traditional belief; in the course of discussion, this is criticized, rejected, and supplanted by some unconventional Platonic view. The concept of a *Platonic* view requires a precise formulation; by it I mean a view that Plato intended to advance as compelling within the discursive framework of the dialogue in contrast to a related conventional view. Hereafter, I will use the adjective "Platonic" in this specific sense. When I intend to attribute a belief or some other item to Plato otherwise and in a more conventional sense, I will use the possessive "Plato's."

The operation of *a*-structure conforms to the Platonic view that prereflective conventional beliefs ought to be scrutinized, that it is unwise to hold a belief merely because it is commonly held. Moreover, the process of rationally justifying belief is difficult. The character Socrates, who, as philosophical, is highly sensitive to these points, is sometimes shown in the course of an investigation to alter his own beliefs precisely because he finds substantive reasons to do so. For example, at the beginning of *Protagoras* Socrates suggests that excellence cannot be taught. He bases this belief on the argument that the Athenians are sensible people; in the Assembly they allow any citizen who wishes to contribute opinions to political debate; this is interpreted as evidence that effective contribution to political debate does not require special training, but that all citizens possess the ability; therefore, such excellence cannot be taught. By the end of the dialogue, Socrates' view has changed. It has been argued that excellence is a kind of knowledge; and since knowledge is teachable, excellence is teachable. Similarly, in *Lysis* Socrates generates the following conception of *philia* (friendship). *Philia* occurs between something that is neither-good-nor-bad and something that is good, on account of the presence of something bad in that which is neither-good-nor-bad. For example, a man (neither-good-nor-bad) pursues health (good) because he suffers from sickness (bad). Almost immediately after concluding this account, it occurs to Socrates that he is wrong and that a satisfactory account of *philia* must include desire and deficiency as its cause. Socrates then reforms his conception of *philia*. Similarly, in *Charmides*, in an attempt to define the kind of specialized knowledge that constitutes sound-mindedness, Socrates suggests, by

26. (1991) 17; see also Vlastos (1994) 125.

27. (1994) viii.

analogy with other forms of productive expertise, that sound-mindedness must have a product. To this Critias objects that some forms of expertise do not have products. Socrates concedes the objection, and, instead of insisting that sound-mindedness differs from other forms of expertise in this sense, proposes that sound-mindedness may be akin to forms of nonproductive expertise that are distinguishable according to the objects with which they are preoccupied. In the case of *Charmides*, Socrates may or may not have changed his mind. Still, he has demonstrated open-mindedness, willingness to admit error, and appreciation that there may be more compelling conceptions than his immediate one. This is particularly noteworthy in contrast to the character of Critias, who enters the investigation with acute anxiety over admitting ignorance and error. In the case of *Lysis*, Socrates' revised conception of *philia* demonstrates the danger of complacency, the difficulty of the process of philosophical inquiry, the importance of reconsideration, and also the possibility of developing understanding. These are philosophical values themselves. Furthermore, they conform with the fact that throughout the early dialogues Socrates is, to a large extent, not portrayed as a doctrinaire or dogmatic thinker, in sharp contrast to the many alleged and self-professed experts and authorities whom he engages. Attempts to explain away intratextual inconsistencies undermine this aspect of the character Socrates as well as the broader operation of α -structure in conformity with which such inconsistencies occur.

Intertextual inconsistencies typically occur for quite a different, although related, reason. This has to do with what I call the common doxastic base of the texts. In discussing α -structure, it was emphasized that the early dialogues share a common cognitive point of departure, conventional or traditional belief. Accordingly, comprehension of any given early dialogue does not appear to require comprehension of any other. So, for instance, the concept of Form (*eidos*) is introduced in *Euthyphro*. It also occurs in *Meno* and *Hippias Major*, but in both cases, understanding of this unconventional, Platonic concept only requires the given text itself. Accordingly, the early dialogues are not arranged like a textbook in which the understanding of successive chapters depends upon the understanding of preceding ones. Rather, each dialogue serves as a fresh occasion to explore a given topic or problem.

From the common doxastic base of conventional or traditional belief in the dialogues, unconventional, Platonic views are developed. But at the same time, the development of these Platonic views depends upon conventional or traditional premises. Thus, the discussion proceeds throughout the dialogue. In any given instance, then, Socrates may introduce a conventional or traditional claim *whose content is not the focus of the present discussion*, but which is needed to advance the issue that is the focus of the discussion. Such premises might be conceived as lemmas that will require a more adequate justification at some later point or simply as convenient and provisional structures that must ultimately be replaced by more adequate ones. Likewise, the conclusions of Socrates' arguments that depend upon such premises might be conceived as tentative precisely according to the tentative status of these lemmas or provisional structures. The main point is that given the doxastic base of conventional or traditional belief of the dialogues,

Socrates himself inevitably introduces such premises. Plato simply cannot have Socrates asserting the unconventional, Platonic view of every concept that arises within the course of a discussion. This would result in a full-scale exposition of Platonic views and thus entirely transform the dialogues into treatises. Consequently, Socrates' assertions occasionally conform to conventional opinions, especially in cases where the subjects of those opinions are not the main subjects of the discussion. Such conventional opinions are, therefore, simply employed in passages whose objective is the investigation, problematization, or advancement of some *other* view. Indication that such a given Socratic assertion is not Platonic is the conjunction of that assertion with certain features: the opinion asserted is conventional or traditional; in another text Socrates does problematize or even refute it; Socrates does not repeat the assertion in several dialogues.

Consider two examples of intertextual inconsistencies explicable in this way. 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. Socrates then suggests that because friendship is based on likeness, to befriend a tyrant one must make oneself like a tyrant and thereby corrupt oneself. In *Gorgias* Socrates does not explicitly problematize the nature of friendship. In contrast, in *Lysis* Socrates does; this is a 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*, Socrates argues against the view of friendship based on likeness and instead develops a view based on belonging (*oikeiotês*). Furthermore, the argument in *Gorgias* is dialectical; the view that in order to avoid suffering harm one must either be a ruler or supporter of the government is not Platonic. Rather, evidence from *Gorgias* and other dialogues such as *Apology* suggests that the Platonic view is that the conventional conception of harm is unsatisfactory and accordingly that a good person cannot suffer harm. These considerations support the view that neither in *Lysis* nor in *Gorgias* is the conception of friendship based on likeness Platonic—even though in *Gorgias* Socrates assumes that it is.

The second example is derived from *Euthyphro*. There, Socrates claims that holiness is a part of justice. In *Euthyphro* Socrates problematizes the nature of holiness. However, he does not problematize the relation of the parts of excellence. He does not argue that holiness is a part of justice; he merely asserts it. In *Protagoras* Socrates does problematize the relation of the putative parts 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 the view that the parts of excellence are identical or at least more closely related than according to the conventional conception Protagoras expresses is Platonic. In *Euthyphro*, Socrates' view of the relation between holiness and justice is conventional, at least within the legalistic context of the dialogue. Socrates and Euthyphro are engaged in cases concerning impiety. Insofar as matters of justice are conceived as coextensive with matters of positive law,

matters of holiness do form a subset of judicial matters. In short, there is good reason to believe that the view that holiness is part of justice is not Platonic, 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 are Platonic, for example, the view that the putative parts of excellence are good and fine. But in this case it is clear for a number of reasons that such views are Platonic. 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 an excellence and so neither good nor fine, Socrates is shocked and argues against him. In short, it is necessary to evaluate Socrates' conventional or traditional assertions in light of their functions within the dialogues. In particular, this involves the recognition that the early dialogues share a particular doxastic base.

It must be emphasized that these explanations of Socrates' intratextual and intertextual inconsistencies do not involve denying attribution to Socrates of sincere commitment to any particular claims. The explanations admit that at one point in a given dialogue Socrates is sincerely committed to a given position to which at another point in that dialogue he is not committed. Likewise, the explanations admit that in one dialogue Socrates is sincerely committed to a given position to which in another dialogue he is not committed. Consequently, Socrates' utterances are not entirely consistent among the early dialogues. Moreover, this inconsistency is not due to Plato's intellectual development or to Socrates' so-called irony, nor are such inconsistencies resolvable by subtle unifying principles. Rather, the interpretive approach to the dialogues that attempts to assemble all of Socrates' topic-relevant utterances and to distill from these unifying principles is naïve. It fails to recognize the complexity of Plato's dramaturgy, specifically the various ways in which Plato uses the character Socrates to achieve his philosophical-pedagogical objectives.

These criticisms of the mouthpiece principle have still further implications for the conception of the character Socrates in the early dialogues. It is necessary to relinquish 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 a 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 was not so bound to the historical Socrates that the character Socrates in any one of his dialogues had to be strictly identifiable with the historical Socrates, and that, as a result, the character Socrates in any one dialogue had to be strictly identifiable with the character 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 Plato employs and manipulates Socrates in various ways to achieve various ends. Any interpretive project that aims to determine Platonic views in the early dialogues or in any given early dialogue must acknowledge and respect this fact.

In place of the mouthpiece theory it is more reasonable to regard Socrates as Plato's favored character. Socrates is the character to whom, of all dramatic characters, Plato is most sympathetic. Accordingly, Socrates often expresses or develops Platonic views. Socrates is the philosopher in texts that dramatize the opposition of philosophy and antiphilosophy and that argue for the superiority of the former over the latter. Yet not all the views that Socrates asserts are Platonic. And not all the views that are Platonic are captured in Socrates' utterances.

The mouthpiece principle is the central tenet of a theory of interpretation of Plato's early dialogues. In light of the preceding discussion, that theory must now appear to be a caricature of the truth. The theory depends upon the fundamental fallacious assumption that the dialogues belong to the genre of the philosophical treatise. Accordingly, dialogue is misguidedly reduced to monologue and the character Socrates to the authoritative voice. The concept of Plato's favored character reestablishes Socrates in his proper place; and the notion that the texts dramatize philosophy, more precisely, the conflict of philosophy and antiphilosophy and thus that they are as much metaphilosophical as philosophical restores their dialogicity.

7. Forms of Evidence

The words that constitute the early dialogues are embodied in the form of realistic and quasi-historical characters and sometimes also a quasi-historical narrator.²⁸ Thus, the words are composed as verbal activity. Characters speak to one another, or a narrator relates to an audience events of characters speaking to one another. The verbal activity may be distinguished according to three categories: Characters speak about the nonverbal activities of characters; characters speak about verbal activities of characters; and characters speak on topics.

Nonverbal activity is described in narrative passages. Such passages occur in all the early dialogues, even though only a few (for example, *Republic 1* and *Charmides*) are framed as narratives.²⁹ The reason is that in many dialogues narration is embedded in dialogue; for example, in *Protagoras* Socrates describes to the anonymous associate the manner of Hippocrates' arrival at his house.

There are many kinds of nonverbal activity in the dialogues. For example, characters arrive at the scene of the dialogue (Critias and Alcibiades in *Protagoras*) and depart (Euthyphro in *Euthyphro*), temporarily fall silent (Lysis in *Lysis*) or shift roles from discussants to spectators (Melesias and Lysimachus in *Laches*), blush (Thrasymachus in *Republic 1*), applaud (the crowd at the Lyceum in *Euthydemus*), ogle (at Charmides in *Charmides*), fall down (off the bench in *Charmides*), and leap up (as Thrasymachus is described as doing in a predatory manner when he begins to rebuke Socrates).

Speech about the nonverbal activity of characters may itself be divided into two kinds insofar as the nonverbal activity may be one's own or another's. For example, at

28. This always happens to be the character Socrates.

29. *Apology* is peculiar in largely being a speech.

the beginning of *Republic* 1, Socrates says he went down to the Piraeus to watch the festival of Bendis, and in that case he speaks of a nonverbal action that he himself performed. In contrast, in *Protagoras* Socrates says that Hippocrates blushed.

The second category, speech about verbal activity, is similarly divisible according to whether a character speaks about what he himself has said or what another has said. In the former case, for example, Socrates sometimes reminds his interlocutor of something he, Socrates, has said. In the latter case, for example, an interlocutor says that he disagrees with something Socrates has said. Generally speaking, throughout passages of argumentation and inquiry, speakers refer to, reiterate, summarize, and comment upon points made previously.

Speech about topics includes verbal activity whose content is not about the verbal or nonverbal activities of characters. This category might be divisible into speech on philosophical topics and speech on nonphilosophical (including anti-philosophical) topics. However, this division cannot be sustained, above all since most of the speech on nonphilosophical topics is, dramaturgically, deliberately related to philosophical topics. Generally speaking, this conforms to the pervasive dramatization of the conflict of philosophy and its antithesis. Examples are ubiquitous and obvious. For example, I have mentioned that *Gorgias* begins with Gorgias' completion of a rhetorical performance. But the identity of rhetoric, its political function and value are immediately the focus of philosophical inquiry.

Verbal activity about topics may be divisible into claims about universals and claims about particulars. For example, in *Gorgias* Callicles asserts that goodness and pleasure are the same thing (a claim about universals), but elsewhere in the dialogue Socrates argues that Pericles was not a good statesman (a claim about a particular). As we will see in chapter 3, the distinction is methodologically and epistemologically significant, for the interpretation of claims about particulars depends upon the interpretation of claims about universals—for example, whether Pericles was a good statesman depends upon a theory or definition of statesmanship.³⁰

I have said that within the early dialogues philosophy is conceived primarily as a kind of motivation, secondarily as an activity driven by that motivation, and finally

30. A general problem facing the interpretation of verbal activity is determining the speaker's attitude toward his utterance. Speakers are usually, but not always sincere. In the history of Platonic scholarship the most important species of such insincerity is Socratic irony. In this context, the word "irony" is used in various and sometimes unconventional ways. But, as I have noted, it is most commonly misused is to mean "disingenuousness." Observe that if Socrates were portrayed as characteristically disingenuous, this would seriously complicate the interpretation of the dialogues, for then the texts' central character's attitude toward his utterances would occasionally or persistently be unclear. My view of Socratic irony is unconventional. I refer the reader to appendix 2, where I discuss the subject. Presently, suffice it to say that Socratic irony is not an interpretive problem that troubles this study. In any event, the general point is that interpretation of verbal activity also requires interpretation of the attitude that the speaker adopts toward his utterance. In determining characters' attitudes toward their utterances, interpreters can appeal to two sources of information: the content of a character's utterance and other characters' responses to that utterance. In the first case, an utterance may be conventional for a person of that age, status, or situation. In that case, there is reason to treat the utterance as sincere. Similarly, an utterance may

as a condition resulting from that activity. The aim of this study is to clarify these claims. The discussion in the previous sections has articulated a framework according to which this can be done. The immediately preceding categorical distinctions in verbal activity suggest that the early dialogues inform our understanding of a given element or aspect of philosophy in various ways.

First, the verbal and nonverbal activity of the characters reveals their desires, values, and attitudes as well as their practices. As I have said, the conditions of the characters' souls are revealed through the conduct of their lives and thus their conduct in the dramas. Second, the characters explicitly state their desires and beliefs about what they think they know and do not know. In addition, they state what they value; and these values suggest motivations and practices. Third, within discussion participants make claims about elements and aspects of philosophy such as desire, knowledge, goodness, and the practice of philosophy itself. Fourth, participants engage in arguments about elements and aspects of philosophy, for example, about desire.

Among these sources of information about philosophy, the last is of paramount importance for understanding the Platonic conception of philosophy among the early dialogues. This is because the early dialogues convey that what we should believe on a given topic is what is most well reasoned, and the function of arguments is to provide reasons. This does not, however, imply that we should focus on passages of argumentation to the exclusion of nonargumentative passages or nonargumentative dimensions of passages of argumentation. That would be misguided for two reasons. First, most elements and aspects of philosophy are not treated as subjects of argumentation in the dialogues. Second, some arguments are not Platonic; and this is revealed by attention to pragmatic and dramatic aspects of an argument—as opposed to their relatively bare logical form. Accordingly, in attending to argument, we must ask ourselves how the argument functions within the dialogue and whether it is Platonic. The following considerations support the view that an argument is Platonic: The context of the argument indicates that the characters are making a sincere alethic effort; conclusions of such arguments are more worthy of belief than unreasoned views; the argument involves the rejection of conventional views; the conclusion of the argument itself is unconventional.

be consistent with the personality of the character, where personality is determined by consideration of a character's utterances and nonverbal activity in general. One character's response to the utterance of another character provides an implicit or explicit interpretation of the attitude toward the original utterance. For example, if an interlocutor agrees to a Socratic statement, then it may be assumed that the interlocutor interprets Socrates' attitude as sincere. Granted, the interpretation may be incorrect. But characters also explicitly remark on their attitudes toward their own utterances as well as the attitudes toward utterances of other characters. For example, in *Euthydemus* Socrates suggests that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are joking with Clinias; in *Charmides* Critias accuses Socrates of deliberately trying to refute him, and Socrates responds that this is false. Here, again, one character may misinterpret the attitude of another. Similarly, a character may deliberately misrepresent his own attitude. Thus, when problems of interpretation arise in considering this second source of information regarding characters' attitudes toward their utterances, the interpreter is bound to depend on the primary source.

Among the early dialogues Plato does not compose any arguments between Socrates and his interlocutors concerning the identity of knowledge or ethical knowledge specifically. Rather, the Platonic conception of ethical knowledge in these texts must be determined from the following aspects of the texts: concepts that Socrates and his interlocutors repeatedly employ in connection with epistemic concepts, for example, *technê*, as well as claims or arguments concerning or employing such concepts; unconventional claims that Socrates makes about knowledge or ethical knowledge, for example, that he has none or that definitional knowledge is epistemologically prior to relevant nondefinitional knowledge; the practice of philosophy itself since, as I have suggested, the form of the practice is related to its objective and the way its objective is conceived; the results of the practice, and comments that Socrates and his interlocutors make about the practice and its results.

Method or the practice of philosophy is, for the most part, not a subject of theorizing in the texts. In this case, my account is largely derived from the portrayal of the practice itself. However, in one importance case, which I will discuss at length in section 3 of chapter 4, Socrates explicitly introduces a method of reasoning that he derives from geometry.

Aporia is partially explicable in light of my conclusions concerning the treatment of knowledge; however, it is not wholly so explicable. Instead, aporia will be explained in view of the forms it assumes, that is, the forms of perplexity to which the dramatic characters fall victim in their investigations.

Finally, let me once again emphasize that my goal is not to determine the character Socrates' views about philosophy and its constituents. I seek Platonic views. I will have much to say about the claims and contributions of the character Socrates, for Socrates' utterances provide central evidence for Platonic views. But I will not be assembling all of Socrates' topic-relevant utterances and from these attempting to distill unifying principles. In emphasizing this fundamental point and in applying my critique of the mouthpiece principle, I will have occasion in the discussions of desire, knowledge, method, and aporia to introduce and discuss Socratic conduct, claims, and practices *inconsistent* with my conclusions and to provide explanations for why such conduct, claims, and practices do not jeopardize those conclusions. For example, I will consider passages in *Charmides* and *Gorgias* where Socrates makes claims about desire inconsistent with arguments and conclusions concerning desire in *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Lysis*. I will consider passages in *Laches* and *Apology* where Socrates makes ethical knowledge claims inconsistent with the epistemological views I characterize as Platonic. And I will argue that the aporiai in which many of the early dialogues end, aporiai to which Socrates himself in varying ways is subject, do not precisely correspond to Platonic perplexity. The cognitive disparity between Plato and his favored character is not radical, but satisfactory interpretation of the dialogues requires appreciation that to some degree disparity exists.

2

DESIRE

1. Socrates and Eros

It is often said that Socrates is an erotic figure. For example, in a fragment from the dialogue *Alcibiades* by Aeschines the Socratic, Socrates claims, "I knew no course of study (*mathêma*) by which I could teach and benefit him [Alcibiades], but I thought that by being with him I could make him a better person through love (*dia eran*)."¹ Among Plato's early dialogues, one interpretation of Socratic love occurs at the beginning of *Protagoras* in the brief exchange between Socrates and the anonymous aristocrat. The dialogue opens with the aristocrat: "Where are you coming from Socrates? But of course, from hunting the youthful beauty of Alcibiades."² He assumes that Socrates' interests are sexual.

Plato plays up this interpretation of Socratic eros in the introductory scene in *Charmides*. Socrates describes his first moments with Charmides:

He arrived and caused much laughter, for each of us who were seated made room for him by pushing hard at the person seated beside us, until at one end one person had to stand up and at the other he tumbled off sideways. Charmides then came and sat down between Critias and me. But here . . . I began to fall into a state of perplexity, and my former confidence in expecting quite an easy time in talking with him was knocked out of me. And when Critias told him that it was I who knew the cure [for the headaches he had been suffering of late], he gave me such a look with his eyes as passes description. And he was just about to plunge into a question when all the people in the wrestling-school surged round us on every side. And

1. Ael. Aristid. Orat. 45, II 23-4D; cited from Giannantoni (1990) 610.

2. *Prt.* 309a1-2.