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Chapter 6

PRINCIPLES OF DRAMATIC AND NON-DOGMATIC PLATO INTERPRETATION

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INTRODUCTION

An identifiable mode of interpretation of Plato has prevailed, with rare exceptions, since antiquity. It is determined by two mutually reinforcing assumptions that have been little discussed before our century.¹ The first is that Plato's philosophy is a matter of doctrines or dogmas that are settled, even if they change over time, transcendental, universal, rational truths, or propositions. The second is that the dramatic dialogue is merely the form in which these doctrines are presented and is therefore essential neither to Plato's philosophy nor to the right interpretation of the dialogues. On account of the first assumption, I refer to this as "dogmatic" interpretation; on account of the second, I refer to it as "non-dramatic" or "non-literary".

Since Schleiermacher,² however, a new mode of interpretation has been slowly developing, which shares, in varying degrees, three orientations: it is literarily sensitive (or dramatic), taking literary elements

¹. On the history of Plato interpretation, see E. N. Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1974) and *Interpreting Plato*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977). On Tigerstedt's view, Plato interpretation has oscillated between the dogmatic Neoplatonic view and a more skeptical view from late antiquity to the twentieth century. Although Tigerstedt's historical sketch has been criticized as structural rather than developmental by Alan C. Bowen [in Charles L. Griswold, Jr., ed., *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1989) pp. 47–65], it remains the best available history of Plato studies. From Plato's death until late antiquity, the dialogues were also interpreted doctrinally and non-dramatically under the combined influence of Neopythagorean Platonists (e.g., Speusippus and Xenocrates) within the Academy and the doxographical tradition outside the Academy. The largely speculative history of these earlier developments is sketched in F. Novotný, *The Posthumous Life of Plato* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1977), 19–25.

². Schleiermacher (*Schleiermacher's Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. William Dobson [Cambridge: Pitt Press, 1836; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1973]) was the first to observe that characters and situations are carefully drawn and that positions and arguments are to be understood in their full and precise context; that is, not as propositions asserted by Plato and supported by arguments that Plato presents as demonstrative, but rather as the propositions and arguments of precisely this character in precisely this situation. In Plato's dialogues, "no proposition is to be rightly understood, except in its own place, and with the combinations and limitations which Plato has assigned to it" (p. 14). The continuations of Schleiermacher's approach are sketched in Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, (Chapel Hill: University of North

as essential aspects of the dialogues; it is contextual, taking into consideration the ascertainable intellectual, social, and political contexts in which the dialogues were produced, rather than examining arguments extracted from their full context; and it is nondogmatic, not assuming that Plato has settled philosophic doctrines and arguments ("Platonism") that he is communicating to us through the dialogues.³

It is no longer uncommon to find scholars explicitly "taking the drama or the dialogue seriously",⁴ and recently a contributor to this volume has even published a book attempting to interpret the dialogues purely dramatically.⁵ A number of problems beset this modern movement, however. First, a lack of clarity and agreement about basic principles and methods makes internal communication and external recognition more difficult. Second, the lack of self-awareness and self-criticism to which Bowen has drawn attention⁶ has induced some scholars to suppose—wrongly, in my opinion—that the only available evidence for an interpretation of Plato's dialogues is its fruitfulness for the reader.⁷ Third, unconsciously accepting traditional definitions of basic terms, such as 'philosophy', 'philosopher', and 'argument', not only creates confusions, but ultimately is self-defeating.⁸ In the present context, I want to make some suggestions relevant only to the first of these problems. These suggestions are exploratory and provisional; they need criticism, emendation, refinement, extension, and application. There are several propositions whose truth I take for granted in what follows. They seem to me obvious and well-established despite the fact that many interpreters seem to be unaware of them. First, that Plato wrote dialogues, a particular (probably unique) literary form, which is not the same as the expository prose treatise that is more familiar in the history of philosophy;⁹ the consequence, often overlooked, is that to interpret a dialogue as if it were a treatise is simply to misinterpret it.¹⁰ Second, that he chose the dialogue form, since treatise-form was available in his

Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 3–9, and Arthur A. Krentz, "Dramatic Form and Philosophical Content in Plato's Dialogues," *Phil & Lit* 7 (1983), 32–33.

³. These terms are more fully developed in my essay, "The Dialogical Mode in Modern Plato Studies," Ch. 1 of *Plato's Dialogues: The Dialogical Mode*, ed. V. Tejera and R. E. Hart (forthcoming).

⁴. Perhaps the largest and best known single group among these are Leo Strauss, Jacob Klein, Stanley Rosen, and their students. For the argument that the "Straussians" are ultimately dramatic and doctrinal interpreters, see Harry Berger, Jr. "Levels of Discourse in Plato's Dialogues" in Anthony J. Cascardi, ed., *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 75–100.

⁵. James A. Arieti, *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama*, (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), and see my review, *JHP* 30 (1992), 290–91.

⁶. Bowen (1989), p. 49.

⁷. E.g., Stanley Rosen, *The Symposium of Plato* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. xxxiv, and Michael Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 10.

⁸. 'Philosophy' as deductive, doctrinal system; 'philosopher' as one who has doctrines and system; 'argument' as presenting propositions comprised of univocal terms as demonstrative of the conclusions.

⁹. Many scholars, beginning with Schleiermacher, have tried to articulate what makes Plato's dialogues unique, without attaining much unanimity. For an interesting recent attempt, see Mitchell H. Miller, Jr., *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), ix–xix.

¹⁰. Exemplary recognitions of the difference in Miller (1980) and Jacob Howland, "Re-reading Plato. The Problem of Platonic Chronology," *Phoenix* 45 (1991), 243–62.

time, and he was clearly a good enough writer to have employed it had he desired.¹¹ Third, that each dialogue is thoroughly unified and essentially independent of all other dialogues; that is, each of the genuine dialogues can be read sensibly without knowing anything about the content or action of any other dialogue.¹² Fourth, that the dialogues are demonstrably among the world's most highly wrought literary works; that is, they are constructed or composed from an extensive and diverse array of materials suggestive of various aspects of literary art.¹³

Thus there are two reasons for the principles and methods that I propose: first, as an internal matter for the new movement in Plato studies, because they are appropriate for texts of the sort these are. All of the contributions to this volume accept this explicitly or implicitly. Perhaps more important, though, these principles will be useful with reference to our external relations. For we remain a minority in the learned world—although it may be true that almost everybody nowadays at least partly agrees, or that the scholarly tide has turned this way, it is still correct to speak of 'the standard view' (developmental, which implies dogmatic and inattentive to dramatics) as dominant¹⁴—in part because of lack of clarity and agreement about what our principles and methods are. This easily results, on the one hand, in lack of progress in our approach through co-operative research and, on the other hand, lack of clear canons of assessment that permit us and others to judge our interpretations. The real purpose of this essay, then, is to put a set of ideas forward for the comments, corrections, additions, and deletions of others; to begin a dialogue on our common assumptions and methods so that we can begin to overcome these external problems.

¹¹. Treatise form was already in use by Anaxagoras among others. See Harold Cherniss, "Ancient Forms of Philosophical Writing," p. 14–35 in *Harold Cherniss: Selected Papers*, ed. L. Tarán (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

¹². This is what Tejera means by saying that they have "literary closure while remaining intellectually open-ended." The open-endedness of the dialogues is also recognized by Grisowld (1988) and Howland (1991).

¹³. See, e.g., Dorothy Tarrant, "Style and Thought in Plato's Dialogues," *CQ* 42 (1948), pp. 28–34, "Colloquialisms, Semi-Proverbs, and Word-Play in Plato," *CQ* 40 (1946), pp. 109–12, "More Colloquialism, Semi-Proverbs, and Word-Play in Plato," *CQ* n.s. 8 (1958), pp. 158–60 and the essays cited in n. 28, 30, and 44 *infra*. Holger Thesleff, *Studies in the Styles of Plato* (Helsinki: Societas Philosophica Fennica, 1967 = *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 20), *Studies in Platonic Chronology* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1982 = *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum*, 70), "Scientific and Technical Style in Early Greek Prose," *Arctos* n.s. 4 (1966), pp. 89–113, "Genitive Absolute and Platonic Style," *Arctos* n.s. 6 (1969), p. 121–31, and "Colloquial Style and Its Use in Plato's Later Works," *Arctos* n.s. 7 (1972), pp. 219–27. Seth Benardete, "The Right, the True, and the Beautiful," *Glotta* 41 (1963), 54–62 and "Xp_ and δε_ in Plato and others," *Glotta* 43 (1965), 285–98 show that Plato made systematic use of seemingly identical terms.

¹⁴. As Howland (1991) observes.

PRINCIPLES

By 'principles' I mean methodological starting points, assumptions that guide the entire process of reading and interpreting the dialogues. Three principles should guide us: holism, contextualism, and organicism.

1. Holism. I derive this from the more general interpretive principle that to interpret any text or document means to explain it as the unity that it is of all of its parts, elements, and aspects, not an arbitrary selection of some to the exclusion of others. In the case of Plato's dialogues, holism means two things: first, that the unit of study is the whole dialogue, not some one or a few arguments excerpted from the rest, nor the arguments abstracted from their dramatic settings, characters, ironies, and myths.¹⁵ Instead, the meaning of any part or aspect is to be sought within that of the individual dialogue taken as a whole first.

This undercuts problems of interdialogical contradiction, the problem that scholars have long had about Socrates (or Plato) apparently saying contradictory things in different dialogues; e.g., announcing that he would disobey the city's order not to philosophize in the *Apology* but asserting the absolute obedience to the laws in the *Crito*. For there is no valid reason why Socrates' seeming beliefs or the ends to which arguments lead in one situation must or ought to be the same as in another. There are two lines of reasoning that would make this a problem. One is the conjunction of the propositions:

(a) Plato is a philosopher, and

(b) The works of every philosopher articulate a doctrinal system,¹⁶ which would justify

(c) Plato's works (must) articulate a doctrinal system.

But (b) is false as an empirical generalization about philosophers in general and about Plato's dialogues in particular. It takes a great deal of complicated argumentation or just plain 'reading in' to find a Socratic or Platonic doctrine in many of the dialogues; as, for example, has been done with the notion of piety in the *Euthyphro*.¹⁷ The other line of reasoning is to suppose that the character Socrates

(a) simply stands for Plato or is Plato's only mouthpiece,

¹⁵. The dominant mode of interpretation is still, at least among departmental philosophers, to extract from their full dialogical setting what are assumed to be Plato's (or Socrates') propositional arguments for a particular conclusion and then to assess that 'reconstructed' argument [for the 'reconstruction' debate in philosophy, see n. 23 infra], finding it ultimately invalid or defensible on some interpretation of its terms. The actual aim of this practice, however, is not to understand Plato's dialogues per se or just for the sake of understanding Plato's thought; rather, it is to bring Plato to bear on contemporary philosophic concerns (as Bambrough stated in his Preface [1965]) and to decide whether he is correct (see Enrico Berti, "Principali tendenze negli studi recenti di filosofia antica," *Filosofia Oggi* 10 [1987], 530–533).

¹⁶. Here, for example, the problem of self-defeating traditional definitions arises. It is, in fact, an ancient and influential idea that philosophers present proofs for their settled doctrines and that these doctrines are elaborated into more or less comprehensive doctrinal systems. But from examining the various things Socrates says about philosophy and philosophers in Plato's dialogues, no such definition of philosophy can be derived, at least straightforwardly. Given that the definition is just not there *prima facie*, for an interpreter to go to the lengths to which interpreters regularly have gone in order to claim the presence of that definition indicates that it is not a discovery, but rather an assumption of the interpreter (and therefore an imposition on the text).

¹⁷. See, e.g., W. G. Rabinowitz, "Platonic Piety: An Essay Toward the Solution of an Enigma," *Phron* 2 (1958), 108–20; C. C. W. Taylor, "The End of the *Euthyphro*," *Phron* 27 (1982), p. 109–18; Mark L. McPherran, "Socratic Piety in the *Euthyphro*," *JHP* 23 (1985), p. 283–310; and Roslyn Weiss, "Euthyphro's Failure," *JHP* 24 (1986), p. 437–52.

- (b) must always both be consistent with what 'he' has said in other dialogues, and
- (c) must always mean what he says literally.

However, (a) would not correspond to the traditions of Greek dramatic art and would not fit in with a sensitive interpretation of most dialogues, as many scholars have seen;¹⁸ (b) reintroduces, through the back door, the assumption that Plato has a complete doctrinal system to present here; and (c) the idea that everything Socrates says is meant or can be construed literally contradicts both our own experience of reading the dialogues and the explicit warnings Plato has given us about Socratic irony.¹⁹

Holism also means that the dialogue is to be interpreted as the whole of language and thought that it is. Minimally this means that the actual Greek language needs to be taken seriously in trying to understand the thought being expressed; and since Plato is the most artful user of ancient Greek, this is not a small task. The "arguments" in Plato's dialogues are not the formalized abstractions of logic and philosophical treatises; and the interpreter needs to take account of both the particular words used and the drama as a whole that Plato has built of language.²⁰ In short, it is no more appropriate to interpret the arguments in abstraction from their full, actual linguistic setting than it would be to interpret Plato solely as a poet and playwright.²¹

2. Contextualism. In simple terms, this means that Plato's dialogues, like any other text, ought to be understood in their original context. But simple terms are problematic here on account of ongoing debates in philosophy and other disciplines.

Twentieth-century philosophy can be seen as a variety of reactions to the historicizing tendencies of Hegelian idealism. One manifestation of this, from an American perspective, is the split between a nonhistorically minded 'analytical' style of philosophizing that has been dominant in the English-speaking world for almost fifty years and the more historical work of the 'Continental' tradition and the pragmatic 'history of philosophy' that grew out of the work of Cassirer, Kristeller, and Randall at Columbia.²² One aspect of the split has been mutual recriminations: historians are accused of an 'historicism' and loose argument that results in no truth, knowledge or philosophical progress and, in turn, accuse analytical or systematic philosophers of 'anachronism' in reading contemporary meanings and problems into texts which do not support them.²³

¹⁸. The mouthpiece assumption is carefully criticized by Berger in Cascardi, ed. (1987).

¹⁹. On irony, see n. 49 *infra*.

²⁰. Contrary to some earlier critics who faulted Plato for every bad argument to be found in the dialogues [e.g., Robinson, "Plato's Consciousness of Fallacy," *Mind* (1942)], we have learned from Rosamond Kent Sprague [*Plato's Use of Fallacy* (London, 1962)] that at least sometimes Plato has made his characters use fallacious arguments. On the difficulties of reconstructing the arguments to make them accessible to evaluation by modern logical techniques, see Michael J. O'Brien's critique of Vlastos' practice in "The 'Fallacy' in the *Protagoras* 349d–350c," *TAPA* 92 (1961), 408–17.

²¹. For example, although the *Republic* is widely interpreted, for praise or blame, as the presentation of Plato's ideal society, looked at more holistically, it was interpreted as ironic by Woodbridge (*The Son of Apollo* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929; repr. Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1989], 89f.), as metaphorical by Hoerber [*The Theme of Plato's Republic* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing, 1944)], and recently it has been taken as satire: H. D. Rankin, "Laughter, Humour and Related Topics," *C & M* 28 (1967), 186–213 and "A Modest Proposal about the *Republic*," *Apeiron* 2 (1968), 12–22, and Tejera (1984), 93–127. For an attempt to see that dialogues as purely dramatic, see Arieti (1991), 231–46.

²². Cassirer and Kristeller were originally products of the German classical education, whereas Randall was a student of Dewey and, more significantly, of Frederick J. E. Woodbridge.

²³. The debate recently [esp. around *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, Quentin Skinner, and J. B. Schneewind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); see my review, *Journal of*

Without reopening the whole debate over historicism and anachronism, let me here follow what I consider the minimalist Skinner Maxim, according to which a text cannot be taken to have intended to communicate something that would have been incomprehensible to its original intended audience.²⁴ Briefly, it seems to me that there are three kinds of context of which we need to be aware in interpreting Plato's dialogues: language, culture, and politics.

By language I mean the actual language that Plato uses, as indicated above, in its richness, complexity, historical development, and profoundly complicated relations to the modern languages in which we think and write about the dialogues. To mention only a few examples, the differing resonances of words that plague all translation, the particles, the facts of dialect and idiom, and then, stepping back, the realization that in one sense what Plato's characters do in many dialogues is talk about their language and alter the meanings of its words.

In culture I include the arts, literature, religion, mythology, and intellectual culture of the ancient Greek world, of Athens, and of the fifth and fourth centuries. On the one hand, these are the backgrounds within or against which Plato thought and wrote; on the other hand, they are keys to specific allusions that at least provide added depth to the dialogues and may even fundamentally reorient interpretation. It is well known that the Pythagorean commitments of Simmias and Cebes are as important for understanding the *Phaedo* as is the Eleatic background of the *Parmenides*, and, perhaps, also of the *Sophist* and *Politicus*. Bruce Gottfried's essay later in this volume shows how tracking down the cicada myth can provide an essential orientation in the *Phaedrus*. The pairing of the tragic poet, Agathon, with the comic poet, Aristophanes, makes the conclusion of the *Symposium* far more interesting.²⁵ Or consider how the Theseus myth tilts one's reading of the *Phaedo* or how much deeper and funnier the opening scene at Callias' house in the *Protagoras* becomes when we recognize the Homeric references.²⁶

Chinese Philosophy 19 (1992), 227-36] has turned on criteria for the 'reconstruction' of a previous philosopher's position, it being taken as self-evident that we can only know that position by 'reconstructing' it in some sense or other. However, it might be pointed out that this position itself assumes to be false the kind of view articulated influentially by Dilthey, that humanistic understanding consists in intellectually entering into the thought-world and thought of a previous philosopher, not externally restating it in terms amenable to the present student. See, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften; Introduction to the Human Sciences*, ed. R. Makkreel and F. Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and R. A. Makkreel, *Dilthey, Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 71, on Dilthey's contrast between *Aufbau* and *Konstruktion* and between *Nacherlebnis* or *Einfühlung* and *Verstehen*.

²⁴. Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *H & Th* 8 (1969), Pp. 48-49, where the maxim is stated more positively: "The essential question which we therefore confront, in studying any given text, is what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance."

²⁵. See, e.g., Richard Patterson, "The Platonic Art of Comedy and Tragedy," *Phil & Lit* 6 (1982) 76-93 and Diskin Clay, "The Tragic and Comic Poet of the *Symposium*," *Arion* n.s. 2 (1975), 238-61.

²⁶. One need not go as far as Burger [*The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984)] to find that Plato has carefully and deliberately invoked the Theseus story and that an awareness of this deepens one's understanding of the dialogue. On the Plato's use of Homeric quotations, see Benardete, "Some Misquotations of Homer in Plato," *Phron* 8 (1963), 173-78 and Clay, "Socrates' Mulishness and Heroism," *Phron* 17 (1972), 53-60. On the *Crito* as a re-enactment of the Homeric Embassy to Achilles, see my "A Dramatic and Non-Doctrinal

By politics, similarly, I mean to include the facts of political, economic, and social history of the Greeks, the Athenians, and the fifth and fourth centuries both as backgrounds and as referents for the frequent allusions that, again, may add depth or offer a fundamental interpretive orientation. Athenian judicial procedure and recent political history are certainly important for understanding the *Apology*.²⁷ Kevin Robb argues in the previous chapter of this volume that the cultural transition from orality to literacy and from a traditional to an innovative form of education (παίδε_α) is essential for understanding the indictment of Socrates for impiety (_σεβε_α). To know about the deeds of the historical Alcibiades, Laches, Nicias, Critias, and Charmides, to name only a few, certainly makes a difference in ones understanding of dialogues such as the *Symposium*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Critias*, *Charmides*, and *Phaedo*.

3. Organicism. An organic structural unity is a whole composed of many elements, structurally related in such a way that each element's doing its own part constitutes the whole's being the unity that it is. The organic structural unity of the dialogues is observed as a literary fact about them, as it is about other successful works of literary, plastic, or visual art, which helps to explain the power and fascination the dialogues continue to exercise on readers widely different in time, place, intellectual background, and orientation. Moreover, organic unity is the standard Plato's Socrates sets for a successful speech in the *Phaedrus*.²⁸ For both of these reasons, it is sought as an interpretive goal: to see how, as in an organic body, all parts work together to a common end.

As an interpretive assumption and goal, organicism suggests a distinction between the kinds of *elements* of which we understand the dialogues to be composed and the various *interpretive frames* in which we see those elements as unified.

Interpretation of the *Crito*" (forthcoming) and Thomas Payne, "The *Crito* as a Mythological Mime," *Interpretation* 11 (1983), 1–23.

²⁷. See Brickhouse and Smith (1989), pp. 24–30 on the procedures. On the oaths of amnesty, see Paul Cloché, *La restauration démocratique à Athènes en 403 avant J.-C.* (Paris, 1915) and A. Dorjahn, *Political Forgiveness in Old Athens: The Amnesty of 403* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1946). On their role in the prosecution of Socrates, see Tejera (1984), pp. 12–13. Brickhouse and Smith (32) consider them irrelevant.

²⁸. The *Phaedrus* has precipitated two quite different scholarly literatures in the latter half of this century: that on the 'philosophical or ideal rhetoric' that Socrates allegedly propounds and that on Plato's 'esoteric doctrine', which is supposedly grounded and hinted at in the *Phaedrus*' critique of writing. We may take Socrates (or Plato) at his word about the need for a *logos* to be unified without accepting as the implication either of these overserious interpretations.

STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

If we take the dialogues to be organic structural unities, and if we say that understanding a dialogue consists in understanding the organic unity that it is, as a whole and in context, we must be able to articulate what the organs and structures are and how they fit and work together. By 'structural elements' I mean categories of elements whose presence and functioning can be clearly identified in the dialogues. As interpreters, we must note, catalogue, and integrate them in our overall interpretations of dialogues. Neither the categories nor the subcategories that I name here are in any sense new; they have been observed and used in interpretation in limited ways for a very long time. What I believe is new here is, first of all, my *stating* that these are the categories to be investigated and, second, my stating that *all* of them are to be comprehended in a satisfactory interpretation. It is undeniable that a theory or interpretation that explains more of the facts is preferable to one that explains fewer, and I believe that what I am here referring to as 'categories' are just facts about the dialogues just as they are the pieces out of which Plato has so deliberately constructed his dialogues.

1. Language, both elementally, as in vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and style²⁹ and in special usages, such as use of metaphors,³⁰ duals³¹ or of indirect discourse³² is crucial for grasping Plato's thought since Attic Greek differs in these respects from the modern vernacular languages in which we discuss the dialogues. Shifts of idiom and dialect have been noted in the *Symposium* and other dialogues as matters of style; we must wonder whether these are merely matters of style, or if they do not also, perhaps, provide clues to the interpretation of particular passages. And particles, the bane of beginning Greek students, must be taken very seriously, since a particle or collocation of particles which carry the 'tilt', flavor, gesture, or orientation of a statement may suggest just how we are to take a statement by Socrates or one of his interlocutors.

2. Language forms. What the Greeks grouped under the single term *logos* (λογος)—what occurs in the dialogues—we need to call by several names: account (in a general sense), argument, story, parable, epideixis, encomium, narrative, or even myth; being clear about what each is and what it is doing in a particular dialogical place. If we take 'argument' as the basic philosophic notion, meaning roughly a set of propositions, one of which is said to follow from the others, then some of the λόγοι presented in the dialogues are and are certainly meant to be construed as arguments. But not all, and probably far fewer than is often supposed.

"To give an account, λόγον διδόναι, for example, is a recurrent notion in the dialogues that sometimes governs the interactions between Socrates and other characters³³ and at others provides the standard by which opinion is distinguished from knowledge. The latter might be much like an 'argument', but the former little. Then there are the various stories, parables, and myths told by Socrates or another character, frequently under the rubric of λόγος, which clearly play a role in the dialogue taken as a whole, but certainly not as an 'argument'. Moreover, and despite Socrates' (or Plato's) explicitly stated dislike of sophistic practices, one can easily construe Socrates' λόγος of the Simonides poem in the *Protagoras* as a kind of epideictic display; and Plato also knows how to compose the πίτφιος λόγος of the *Menexenus* as well as the paradoxical Lysianic speech of the *Phaedrus*. The point is that we must take a more nuanced

²⁹. See Thesleff (1967) with rich bibliography.

³⁰. See P. Louis, *Les Métaphores de Platon* (Rennes: Imp. Réunies, 1944) and Dorothy Tarrant, "Imagery in Plato's *Republic*," *CQ* 40 (1946), 27–34 and "Metaphors of Death in the *Phaedo*," *CR* n.s. 2 (1952), 64–66.

³¹. As in *Euthydemus*.

³². See Dorothy Tarrant, "Plato's Use of Extended Oratio Obliqua," *CQ* n.s. 5 (1955), 222–24.

³³. As Nicias points out (*Laches* 187E), Socrates doesn't let you go 'before you have given an account of yourself'.

view of the various kinds of $\lambda_{\gamma\omicron\iota}$ in the dialogues. Instead of expecting all of them to meet our standards of 'argument', we should ask why Plato has put a $\lambda_{\gamma\omicron\varsigma}$ of a given type at the particular point at which he has done so.

3. Dialogos ($\delta\iota_{\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma}$), in the dialogues, is both a particular language form, the 'conversation' which can be developed into 'dialectic' between characters, and the overarching one that includes all of the others. This literary genre that Plato invented, in turn, has several structural elements that are significant for interpreting the dialogues.³⁴ From the dramatic point of view, we have to take account of the several aspects of each dialogue.

a. *Setting*. In many dialogues Plato gives careful indications of a time of day or of the year, a physical place with its associations, connection with an external event (e.g., a festival, banquet, a public display sophistic or soldierly), and these may be important in understanding the dialogue as a whole. The courthouse scenes of the *Euthyphro* and *Apology* like the prison scenes of the *Crito* and *Phaedo* heighten both dramatic intensity and the philosophic seriousness of the themes discussed. The *Crito* and the *Protagoras* commence at early dawn, while the *Symposium* lasts all night and only ends at dawn. The elaborate natural setting of the *Phaedrus*, the carefully crafted and choreographed framing of Socrates' encounter with Protagoras, the gymnasium settings of *Charmides* and *Lysis*, all not only frame but may also enhance or alter or add a nuance to the dialogue's total effect.

b. *Characters*. As in any literary text, who and what the characters are is crucial for interpretation. But many of Plato's characters, like Socrates, pose a special problem; for they are both fictional and historical, by which I mean that they are named after and in some identifiable ways modeled on real life figures of the recent Athenian past, but they are also changed to suit Plato's purposes and, of course, all of the words they speak are Plato's. This complicates and deepens the dialogues and needs to be fully explicated in each case.

Plato takes pains to characterize his *dramatis personae* by means of style;³⁵ and whether historical or fictional, their physical, emotional, moral, and intellectual dimensions, and life histories, all of which Plato may carefully indicate, may be significant. We need to be aware of who is historical and who fictional, and of their relations to each other outside the dialogue on either level. This provides background for the central question of their dialogical interactions. The careers of the historical Laches and Nicias, for example, as well as those of Lysimachus and Melesias give an ironic depth to the discussion of courage,³⁶ as the careers and emotional attachments of the speakers in the *Symposium* may clarify their views of $\epsilon\rho\omega\varsigma$.

Finally, the names themselves that Plato has chosen for the casts of his dramas, whether historical or purely fictional, may have a significant meaning. A useful reference work would be a comprehensive guide to the persons of the Platonic dialogues.

c. *Plot*. It is obvious that the plot of a story, novel, or play is an essential element for its interpretation. The plot-lines of Plato's dialogues are often ignored when scholars focus only on doctrine and argument in the technical sense. While an argument may be characterized by a line, moving from premises to conclusion,

³⁴. This is, perhaps, the right moment to remind the reader of Thesleff's (1964) theory that the dialogues are constructed from a formal point of view out of five types of exposition—question and answer, discussion or conversation, reported dialogue, dialogue approximating to monologue, and monologue or continuous exposition—and that there is a recurrent pattern or rhythm of these types in the construction of each dialogue. See esp. pp. 35–62.

³⁵. Thesleff (1967), 160–64 with notes on the literature.

³⁶. Rosamond Kent Sprague's translation of the *Laches* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) provides clear information about all the characters and also indicates a variety of moments in the dialogue when Plato has made careful allusion to their careers; cf. 4f., 9f., and n. 57 (to 195E). Similarly, see the West's note on the concluding reference in the *Charmides* to Charmides' role among the Forty Tyrants, *Plato: Charmides* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p. 56.

the plot-lines of Plato's dialogues, when we examine them as wholes, rarely coincide with the line of what is taken by scholars to be the central argument of the dialogue. In fact, the plot-line may even suggest a theme somewhat different from that of what looks like the main argument.

By 'plot' I mean the doings and sayings (including, as we would in thinking about novels and dramas, the nuances of language, gesture, emotion, etc.) of all the characters from the opening scene to the end of the dialogue. It may shed new light on the familiar to think through the *Protagoras* as Socrates' recounting to an unnamed acquaintance or 'companion' he meets in the street of how he showed young Hippocrates not merely the foolishness of the sophists and their hangers-on but, more particularly, that Protagoras himself, who professes to teach virtue and demands payment for doing so, doesn't actually know what it is. From the point of view of plot analysis, the unity of the virtues is the particular topic through discussion of which he displays this fact about Protagoras, not the general point of the entire dialogue.

We should also be attentive to recurrent plot structures. For example, the pattern often observed in many dialogues in which the interlocutor attempts several unsuccessful definitions, reaches a crisis or turning point, after which Socrates expresses the need to "begin again from the beginning."³⁷ This may suggest as an overall interpretive framework exactly what Socrates says in *Apology*: that he's been trying to be a moral teacher by first getting his interlocutors to realize that they don't know what they're talking about.³⁸

d. *Dramatic or narrated form*. There is an obvious difference between dialogues like the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*, which are directly dramatic, and those like *Republic*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*, which are narrated. Moreover, among the latter there are variations of depth, or numbers of levels between the narrated conversation and the present reader. The *Protagoras*, for example, is directly narrated by Socrates to an unnamed auditor immediately after it has taken place, whereas the *Republic* is recounted the day after the conversation is supposed to have taken place, and the *Symposium*, to take the extreme example, is narrated many years after the conversation by Apollodorus who was not himself present, but rather heard the narrative from Aristodemus, who was present, and then checked out various details with Socrates. Finally, as Andrea Tschemplik argues in a later chapter in this volume, the *Sophist* is presented as have been written down by someone other than Plato.

These variations bring in levels of situation, character, and thought that may modify or supplement the central ones in important ways, and must, therefore, be taken into consideration. The extreme possibilities, perhaps, are Burger's attempt to make a philosophical necessity out of the cases of the narrated dialogues³⁹ and Thesleff's view that this simply marks a stage in the evolution of Plato's art.⁴⁰

e. *Dramatic order*. Modern Plato studies have been obsessed with determining the chronology of Plato's dialogues, perhaps as a way to resolve the problems posed by the vague and apparently contradictory doctrinal content of the dialogues.⁴¹ Certainly, it is essential to the developmental view of Plato's thought that seems inevitable. Despite widespread opinion to the contrary, however, the results of stylometric

³⁷. E.g., *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, and esp. *Meno*.

³⁸. Mitchell H. Miller, Jr. develops this recurrent pattern into a theory of the dialogues as paideutic in the double sense that they intrinsically imitate the process of entering into philosophy at the same time that they extrinsically induce the audience or reader to do so as far as is possible. See *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), ix–xix and *Plato's Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3–12.

³⁹. "Plato's Non-Socratic Narrations of Socratic Conversations" in *Plato's Dialogues: The Dialogical Approach*, ed. Tejera and Hart (forthcoming).

⁴⁰. Thesleff (1982), 180–83.

⁴¹. Tigerstedt (1977), pp. 13–18, 25–52.

analysis have agreed only in extremely limited ways,⁴² and the whole developmental hypothesis has been seriously undermined.⁴³

On the other hand, Plato has provided some careful indications of the dramatic order of the dialogues; and given that, with the exception of the *Laws* (which may be spurious),⁴⁴ Socrates is a character in all of the genuine dialogues, it is worth looking at the set as having that order. The *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* will, of course, be the last in dramatic order, but interestingly, the first will be *Parmenides*.⁴⁵ This might suggest the contrary of the developmental theory, on which Plato moves from Socratic ethical interests toward epistemological and metaphysical ones later in his life. Similarly, noticing what dialogues follow or precede one another can also be significant. There is the notorious problem of the 'intended' but uncompleted trilogy, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Philosopher*, and the interesting puzzle about the intended relations among *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*.⁴⁶ Whatever they may mean, these internal indications must be taken into consideration.

f. *Quotations, References, and Allusions*. Plato has also filled the dialogues with quotations, references, and allusions to legend or myth, to poetry, and to history, including persons, places, and events as well as allusions to intellectual history.⁴⁷ These would certainly have been heard by Plato's original audience, and would have had a variety of impacts on the ways in which the dialogue taken as a whole would have been understood. References to the Theseus myth in *Phaedo*, quotations from Homer in the *Crito*, and allusions to historical events in the *Laches* have already been mentioned. Likewise references to Crete and Sparta lend a certain tone to some passages and even to whole dialogues.

g. *First and last lines* may be significant for our interpretation. For example, Euthyphro's "What's new, Socrates?" (2a), or, more literally, "What's newer?" resonates in several ways with issues of religious novelty in the dialogue. Similarly "Whither and whence?" (*Phdr* 227a) encapsulates the intellectual and moral questions of the dialogue. And "I do not know...god" (*Apol* 17a, 42a) reiterate, first and last, what Socrates repeatedly claims explicitly in the dialogue: that he has no knowledge worth speaking of and that, so far from not accepting the gods of the city, his whole life has been a service of the god.

h. *Irony and Humor*. Irony, which is, to begin with, not well understood, may be the surd of all interpretations, blurring inextricably the line we want to find dividing direct from indirect Platonic communications. In any event, we need to distinguish Socratic from Platonic, internal from external irony; that is, the ironies in the speeches of Socrates in the dialogues and the situational ironies Plato has made visible only to the audience *outside* the dialogue.⁴⁸

⁴². Thesleff (1982) is absolutely essential.

⁴³. See Tigerstedt (1977), Howland (1991), and Debra Nails, "Platonic Chronology Reconsidered," *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 3 (1992).

⁴⁴. Tejera (1984), pp. 139–52 concludes that "the *Laws* is not by Plato."

⁴⁵. For an attempt at a complete dramatic ordering, see Griswold, "Irony in Plato's Dialogues," in *Plato's Dialogues: The Dialogical Approach*, ed. Tejera and Hart (forthcoming).

⁴⁶. Thesleff (1982), p. 67 and n. 51.

⁴⁷. For references, consult Abbott, *A Subject-Index to the Dialogues of Plato*, or Brandwood, *A Word-Index to Plato*. As an example, Abbott lists more than one hundred twenty-five direct quotations or references to specific lines from Homer and more than one hundred quotations or references to other poets, playwrights, and so on. Dorothy Tarrant, "Plato's use of quotations and other illustrative material," *CQ* n.s. 1 (1951), 59–67 does not see particular philosophic relevance.

⁴⁸. The question of irony is much debated. See J. A. K. Thompson, *Irony, An Historical Introduction* (London: 1926), Rankin (1967), Gavin Ardley, "The Role of Play in the Philosophy of Plato," *Philosophy* (1967) 226–44, D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), W. Boder, *Die sokratische Ironie in den platonischen Frühdialogen* (Amsterdam: Grüner,

Other forms of humor—parody, satire, farce, slapstick, and many kinds of word-play—also should be observed and taken into consideration more than is usually done.⁴⁹ It matters not only for a just assessment of particular passages, but for interpreting the dialogues as wholes whether the overall tone is that of comedy or that of tragedy; and when one realizes just how much humor Plato has put into his dialogues, one must reassess some of the extremely "serious" interpretations made in ignorance of it.

INTERPRETIVE FRAMES OF REFERENCE

These are related but distinguishable frameworks within which to organize the sort of data collected above. Many or all of them may operate in any given dialogue, which makes the process of integrating them all the more complicated and underscores, yet again, the need for collaborative research.

1. *Doctrines and arguments.* This is the sole framework used by most interpreters from antiquity to the present: reading the dialogues to discover Platonic or Socratic doctrines and the logic of the arguments on which these doctrines are based. There *are* doctrines and arguments in the dialogues, but not *only* these; and, given the richness and complexity of the texts as we have them, the burden of proof is on those who want to take this as the only or primary interpretive framework.

2. *Redefinition of traditional moral terms,* as well as the intellectual vocabulary generally, in a rationalized and intellectualized, but not sophistic way. We cannot read the dialogues without becoming sure that among other things Plato means to criticize traditional meanings, but at the same time both to retain and to redefine traditional terms, such as *andreia* (*Laches*), *dikaiosyne* (*Republic*), *sophrosyne* (*Charmides*), *arete* (*Meno*, *Protagoras*), *hosiotes* (*Euthyphro*), *philia* (*Lysis*), *eros* (*Phaedrus*, *Symposium*), and *episteme* (*Meno*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*).

3. *Reenactment or retelling of traditional stories.* I have already mentioned that Plato very often refers explicitly or implicitly to legendary and Homeric stories. At least sometimes, these do not seem to be mere mentions. Rather, following the tradition of the playwrights and other earlier writers they may significantly be reenactments of older stories. At the same time, for example by using the names of Socrates and other historical characters and the plot of a traditional story, Plato gives the story a new meaning. Thus, for example, the *Crito* reinterprets the Embassy to Achilles, the *Phaedo* reinterprets the story of Theseus, the legendary hero of Attica, the *Protagoras* revises Odysseus' journey to Hades, and the *Apology* revises the story of Heracles' Labors.

4. *Replacement of traditional or contemporary cultural heroes.* At the same time that a traditional story is being retold, of course, since Socrates is the usual main character, the dialogues implicitly replace traditional cultural heroes with "Socrates," i.e., The Philosopher. He is the hero of mind rather than body,

1973), Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), E. L. Burge, "The Irony of Socrates," *Antichthon* 3 (1969), 6ff., C. L. Miller, "Ironical or Not?," *APQ* 13 (1976), 309–13, Paul Plass, "Philosophic Anonymity and Irony in the Platonic Dialogues," *Am J Philol.* 85 (1964), 254–78, C. Rowe, "Platonic Irony," *Noua Tellus: Anuario del Centro de Estudios Clasicos* 5 (1987), 83–101. The over-simplified contrast between irony and seriousness used by Brickhouse and Smith (1989), pp. vii–viii, 2–10 misses the essential point about ironic statements, that they are neither simply true nor simply false, and misses altogether the situational ironies with which Plato's dialogues abound. The most comprehensive work on Platonic irony is G. J. de Vries, *Spel bij Plato* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1949), unfortunately written in Dutch.

⁴⁹. See Tarrant (1946) and (1958) for examples of word-play; Rankin (1967) for many examples of various kinds of humor; and Ardley (1967) for the claim that play and humor are essential to Plato's enterprise. Among recent commentators, humor has been most carefully observed by Tejera (1984) and Arieti (1991).

but he is also physically heroic in war, drinking, and sex, we are given to believe, because of his mental power. He is historical rather than mythic or legendary, though Plato mythologizes him, and he is the hero of prose rather than poetry, at which he often sneers.⁵⁰

5. *Reinterpretation of traditional arts and practices* as philosophy, both within and as exemplified by the dialogues. Instead of the poets, the *sophoi*, the statesman, and the sophist, Socrates is presented as the true poet, the truly wise man, the only one who practices the true art of politics, the "heart of the city," and the only one whose speeches are able to make an Alcibiades ashamed.

6. *Replacement of both traditional and sophistic education* (παιδε_α) with an education that is, like the sophistic, rational, intellectual, universalistic, and operating through highly crafted words, but, like the traditional παιδε_α and unlike the sophists, local, personal, and supportive of traditional values.⁵¹

7. *Invention of a new intellectual medium*. In the simplest sense, Plato is inventing dialogue, with debts to epic, lyric, drama, mime, and history. More deeply, I think that the dialogue actually constitutes the invention of philosophy as a discrete form of intellectual activity. I cannot argue the case fully here, but the main evidence is: (1) to engage in conversation or dialogue (διαλ_γεσθαι), for Plato, is to philosophize and (2) the language of philosophizing (φιλοσοφε_ν, φιλ_σοφος, and φιλοσοφ_α) originates in the dialogues.

8. *The Platonic Corpus as a whole* needs to be looked at, not just to excavate some Platonic doctrines whose origin and development we are to trace through an order of composition about which we cannot be certain, but as a literary whole. If we exclude the *Laws*, as Tejera and others are now suggesting, then the corpus can be seen as unified by the single character who appears in all the dialogues. Then the dramatic order commences with the *Parmenides* and ends with the *Phaedo*, and we might construe the whole as Plato's new, prose epic of the life of mind, called "Socrates."

All of the frameworks sketched above apply to the dialogues conceived simply as literary documents that function to embody or express Plato's philosophy in a way unspecified other than negatively, that it is other than the literal and dogmatic one. One of the most important questions facing Plato scholarship now, however, is to determine insofar as possible the actual function(s) of the dialogues in their original milieu. It has been suggested⁵² that the dialogues functioned as dialectical or philosophical exercise books for students in the Academy. It is an essential element in the Tübingen theory that the dialogues do not serve to communicate Plato's true philosophy directly, but rather only esoterically and that, therefore, we need to be guided in our interpretations by reports of Plato's oral teachings in the secondary tradition.⁵³ It has also been suggested⁵⁴ that the dialogues functioned as advertisements for the Academy, in a way perhaps analogous to the _πιδειτικο_ λ_γοι of the sophists. It has been suggested that the dialogues cryptically express the positions of Plato and the Academy in contemporary Athenian political matters.⁵⁵

Needless to say, to collect and catalogue all the elements and to think them through in all the interpretive frameworks I have mentioned—apart from the additions I hope will be made to the lists—calls for a great deal of work. A good deal has already been done by scholars from Schleiermacher on, but needs

⁵⁰. See, in general, Robert Eisner, "Socrates as Hero," *Philos & Lit* 6 (1982), 106–18. On the *Apology* in particular, see Clay (1972).

⁵¹. Here again, see Robb 77–106 *infra*.

⁵². By Allen (1970) and Thesleff (1982) among others.

⁵³. See references for the Tübingen school in ch. 1, n. 8 *supra*.

⁵⁴. By Arieti (1991) among others.

⁵⁵. Slobodan Du_ani_, "Plato's Academy, Elis, and Arcadia after Leuctra: Some Observations," *Akten des 1 Int. Symposiums über Achaia und Elis in der Antike* (Athens 1989), "The Theages and the Liberation of Thebes in 379 B.C.," pp. 65–70 in *Essays in the Topography, History, and Culture of Boiotia*, ed. A. Schachter (Montreal 1990), and *History and Politics in Plato's Laws* (Belgrade 1990; in Serbian with English summary).

to be collated and organized. But much more needs to be done if we are to bring to our approach the clarity, self-awareness, and self-criticism that will enable us to bring about much needed change in the ways that people customarily interpret the dialogues of Plato. It is a task for the collaboration of many.