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Plato's Use of the Dialogue Form: Skepticism and Insemination

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INTRODUCTION

THE DIALOGUE FORM AS PLATO PRACTICED IT SOLVES A NUMBER OF problems, some of them virtually antithetical to others. In contrast to the dialogues of Augustine, George Berkeley, and David Hume, Plato's appear as dramas of the student-teacher relationship, the auditors seeming to be stand-ins for the readers, responding in much the way we might. As the main speaker triumphs over the auditor's misgivings, our own misgivings may melt away vicariously and leave us persuaded.

No doubt Plato did hope that depicting the triumph of Socrates over all objectors would smooth the way to acceptance of his words in certain members of his own audience. Yet, some of Socrates' auditors fail to be convinced—Simmias, for example, and even more so Meno, Callicles, Polus, Gorgias, Protagoras, Philebus, and Thrasymachus, among others. If Plato intended to manipulate us into accepting his ideas by showing someone else accepting them, why does he portray many interlocutors at the end as suspicious or firmly unconvinced? He has them cast doubt not only on Socrates' conclusions, but also on the very reliability of Socrates' methods. In the *Gorgias*, Callicles says that, like most people, although he cannot out-argue Socrates, he remains unconvinced.¹ Not only Callicles, but "most people" think that Socrates' arguments only appear convincing, and ultimately lack credibility. Callicles, however, is a hostile witness, and, even if his report about what "most people" think is accurate, why should we care what *hoi polloi* think? Less easy to dismiss is Plato's own half brother, Adeimantus, especially when he is sympathetic to Socrates' views but wishes to hear convincing arguments. He says that people (not excluding himself) believe that Socrates wins arguments not because he proves his claim, but because his greater experience enables him to outmaneuver his opponents.² If

Plato wrote dialogues to convince us of his views by showing other people falling into line behind Socrates, he has gone about it in a very odd way.

Not only does Plato berate himself with criticisms of his Socratic dialectic, he has Socrates too berate him, in effect, for writing philosophy at all. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates give two reasons for his own refusal to write: (1) Written words cannot answer questions, and (2) a written text "does not know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not."³ The first problem, then, is that written words do not say enough: they cannot explain what they mean. The second problem is that they say too much: they cannot keep silent before people for whom they are not suitable.

A defense of Plato's writing must be able to answer four questions, then. (1) Why does Plato give his main speakers arguments that often appear fallacious? (2) Why does he call their fallacious appearance to the attention of his audience? (3) Can his writings answer questions? (4) Can they keep silent? Because the questions are interconnected, I will not address them individually.

RHETORICAL GROUNDS FOR THE DIALOGUE FORM

Socrates prefers oral conversation because it can implant in "a suitable soul words that contain knowledge; which are able to help themselves and the one who planted them; which are not fruitless but contain seed from which other words grow."⁴ The gardening metaphor applies to writing too: "The gardens of letters he will plant for amusement, and will write . . . to treasure up reminders to himself for when he arrives at the forgetfulness of old age." That line is widely remembered, but we tend to forget what follows: the writings are "reminders . . . also for all others who follow along the same track. And he will enjoy seeing them grow delicate shoots."⁵ So written words, like spoken ones, can put forth shoots in the souls of others. But what does it mean to "remind" someone else of our own experiences?⁶

This passage follows the myth that describes our souls beholding the forms in an intuition that becomes obscured by the embodiment of our birth. Truth is within us like a dormant memory that we can recover through the right kind of reminder. Writing cannot put this kind of intuition into words, because the intuition itself requires acquaintance rather than description. Plato makes this point in his Seventh Letter (estimates of the authenticity of the letters vary, but the passages I shall quote are authentic at least in spirit):⁷ "There's

no way of putting [the subject to which I devote myself] into words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it's generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining."⁸ Whereas the highest truth cannot be put into words, our inborn implicit acquaintance with the highest things, "forgotten" in the depths of our being, makes it possible for words to awaken the memory of it within us.

How does this explain Plato's use of the dialogue form? One might think that a treatise, with systematically articulated doctrines, could trigger one's dormant intuitions as easily as a dialogue. A treatise, however, presents itself as confident instruction, as truth embodied in words. Only a work that undermines any attempt to cast its words into dogmatic doctrine can simultaneously remind us that it is only a reminder, a device for opening our eyes to something, rather than an answered question to be accepted blindly through the ears. I have shown one way in which a Platonic dialogue can undermine itself: its protagonist can be depicted as arguing in ways that are sophistical rather than cogent. Yet, in that case how can anything positive get communicated, which, as the *Phaedrus* says, by reminding the readers of their own dormant power of intuition, can nourish it into putting forth new growth?

The dialogues must be constructed on more than one level, a surface containing arguments that leave us unsatisfied, and deeper levels—the deepest of which can no longer be put into words⁹—that we may discover by finding our way through the faults in the surface argument. The most famous instance of Plato deconstructing his own doctrines is the *Parmenides*, where he shows how the theory of forms rests on a series of opaque metaphors. In view of the controversial status of the *Parmenides*, let us instead look at the way the *Republic* points to the limitations of its own doctrines.

In Book Eight Socrates shows that the good city will be destroyed when, because of the difficulty of mastering the "nuptial number," a generation of rulers is produced that lack the strength of character of their predecessors and rebel at not being allowed to indulge their appetites. As they relax their discipline, they progressively succumb to the temptations of appetite, until they gratify not only their necessary appetites but also their unnecessary ones, and eventually the tyrant rides to power on the wave of the most extreme of the unnecessary appetites. This is a typically Platonic doctrine: the good life consists in austerity, what the *Phaedo* calls the "practising of death." The collapse of the good city closely parallels the collapse

of the "healthy city" in Book Two.¹⁰ There it was Glaucon who protested against austerity. The citizens, he complains, have no more luxury than if they were pigs. In that case, says Socrates, we must go beyond the necessary gratifications to unnecessary ones, and the healthy city will become diseased. On that occasion, however, the path on which we are led by our appetites for the unnecessary leads not to tyranny but to its very opposite, philosophy—to the most just rather than to the most unjust. The unnecessary appetites metamorphose by imperceptible degrees into our spirited desires, and the spirited rulers seamlessly develop into rational philosophers. Paradoxically, the unnecessary appetites are expendable if we are satisfied to live according to our animal nature, but to rise above it we must have an appetite for more than the bare necessities of life. We see this in the *Phaedrus* as well, where the black horse that is full of unnecessary appetites is indispensable to our attempt to rise to the truth.¹¹

So what is left of Platonic asceticism, the practicing of death? Self-discipline is beneficial only if it is exercised in the right way, but the right way cannot be stated as a simple formula. By building tensions of this sort into his account, Plato forces us to look beyond the words to the underlying experience that the words can only approximate. In the *Statesman* the Eleatic stranger says that the true statesman must rule without laws because laws are too inflexible to address endlessly variable circumstances.¹² The same is true of doctrines. Ideally philosophers should teach without doctrines, as the *Phaedrus* says, by nurturing insight through close personal contact with distinct individuals. But if they write things down and formulate doctrines in order to reach a wider audience, the doctrines should be written in such a way as to dissolve under pressure.

Why, however, should the writings only speak to some people and remain silent before others? Why is elitism necessary? The Seventh Letter suggests an answer to this question, too: "I do not think the attempt to tell people of these matters a good thing, except in the case of some few who are capable of discovering the truth for themselves with a little guidance. In the case of the rest to do so would excite in some an unjustified contempt in a thoroughly offensive fashion, in others certain lofty and vain hopes as if they had acquired some awesome lore."¹³

That is in the case of the most sympathetic of readers. For the majority of readers a treatise would only inspire ridicule. In the Second Letter, Plato says that there is "no doctrine more ridiculous in the eyes of the general public than this. . . . That is the reason why I have never written anything about these things."¹⁴ More serious than ar-

rogance and ridicule is another problem that may result from saying things to the wrong people. Socrates says in the *Republic*:

We hold from childhood certain beliefs about just and beautiful things; we're brought up in these beliefs as by parents, we obey and honor them. . . . And then a questioner comes along and asks a man in those circumstances what's beautiful, and when he answers what he has heard from the lawgiver, the argument refutes him, and does this often and in many places. This reduces him to the belief that this thing is no more beautiful than it's ugly, and the same with what's just and good and the things he honored most. . . . Then when he no longer believes these principles to be his own nor to be obeyed, as he did before, and does not discover true ones, . . . from law abiding he becomes lawless. That is why . . . you must be extremely careful how you introduce [people] to dialectic.¹⁵

In other words, philosophy's challenge to the conventional basis of morality should be kept from those who cannot discover the true basis of it. How can the dialogues keep such things from these people while speaking to others?

Let us take as an example the final proof of immortality in the *Phaedo* (105b–106e). The argument takes the form:

1. Some things impart certain forms to whatever they approach (snow imparts cold, fire imparts heat).
2. These carriers can never have the opposite quality of the form they impart (snow can never be hot, or fire cold).
3. Soul imparts life to whatever it enters.
4. Therefore souls can never be qualified by death, the opposite of life, and are immortal, deathless.

Socrates concludes on a note of caution: the argument proves only that a soul cannot be dead, not that it is imperishable—presumably because it might simply cease to exist rather than exist in a state of death. Therefore, either they must agree that what cannot die also is imperishable, or else they will need an additional argument that the soul also cannot perish in some other way.¹⁶ Strangely, after introducing this difficulty, Plato has Cebes reply without explanation that no further argument is necessary—Cebes simply assumes in a subordinate clause what he needs to defend: "Hardly anything else would not admit destruction if the deathless, which is eternal, admitted destruction."¹⁷ However, that the deathless is eternal is precisely what Socrates said has not yet been shown. Why does Plato end by allowing Cebes to beg the question that Socrates had just raised?

In earlier arguments where the overt conclusion is not actually supported by the reasoning, the implications of the premises point more cogently to a different conclusion that appeals to reason rather than emotion. When Socrates says here that, if deathless does not entail imperishability, we need another argument, is there any indication of what that argument might be? Socrates responds to Cebes by saying, "The god, I believe, and the form of life itself, and anything else that may be deathless, everyone would agree that they never perish."¹⁸ Throughout the dialogue "god" has been taken to mean "good" by all three main speakers,¹⁹ and previously Socrates stated that he fell back on the Method of Hypothesis only because of his inability to discern the true cause, the good.²⁰ That method gave us the theory of forms, which is recalled here in Socrates' reference to "the form of life itself," but has not yet reached its goal of the good, which is implicit in Socrates' additional reference to "the god."²¹ Socrates' advice immediately after this argument—to "more clearly examine the first hypotheses, even if they are convincing to you"²²—can be read as an invitation to take this next step on our own. The final goal will be reached only if the additional argument is an argument from the nature of the good itself—for example, that the universe is good, and goodness requires life, and therefore life exists necessarily and soul must be eternal. In other words, the causality of the good requires the eternal presence of soul and life. This would be the demythologized meaning of "our service to the gods."²³ The efficacy of teleology is, thus, hinted at in the concluding myth's account of the rational formation of the world.²⁴

Why is this final argument left merely implicit if it fulfills Socrates' quest for an explanation in terms of the true cause, the good? One reason is that a defense of the claim that the universe is good required almost the entire *Timaeus*, and even there it was presented as a myth rather than as a demonstration.²⁵ A second reason is that the argument does not imply that the soul is imperishable as an individual person. For the sake of the "child within us,"²⁶ who is led by emotion, it may be better to allow the argument to rest on an apparently rigorous though actually fallacious connection, in which personal immortality appears to be vindicated, while pointing toward a plausible but elusive connection for those not satisfied as easily as Cebes—one that may not involve survival of the personality. At the end of the dialogue Socrates observes: "If death were a deliverance from everything, it would be a godsend to the evil when they die, to be delivered at once from the body and their evil, together with the soul. But now that it's evidently immortal, there would be no other

escape or salvation from evils for it than to become as good and wise as possible."²⁷

On its surface the argument suggests that souls exist as personal individuals after death, so it encourages morality among people who need to be motivated by reward and punishment. An argument that pointed to an impersonal immortality would give them no obvious incentive to respect morality, however much it might give philosophers more subtle reasons for pursuing virtue. At the end of the argument Cebes is satisfied, but Simmias says that he still has doubts about their conclusions. Socrates replies, "Not only that, Simmias, but you should more clearly examine both those things which you rightly mentioned and the first hypotheses, even if they are convincing to you. And if you analyze them sufficiently, I think, you will be following the argument as far as it's possible for a person to follow it."²⁸ The implication is that we are right to question Socrates' arguments from the ground up, and when we do so we will be following a line of argument that will lead us as far as possible.

The flawed surface of Platonic dialogues accomplishes several goals:

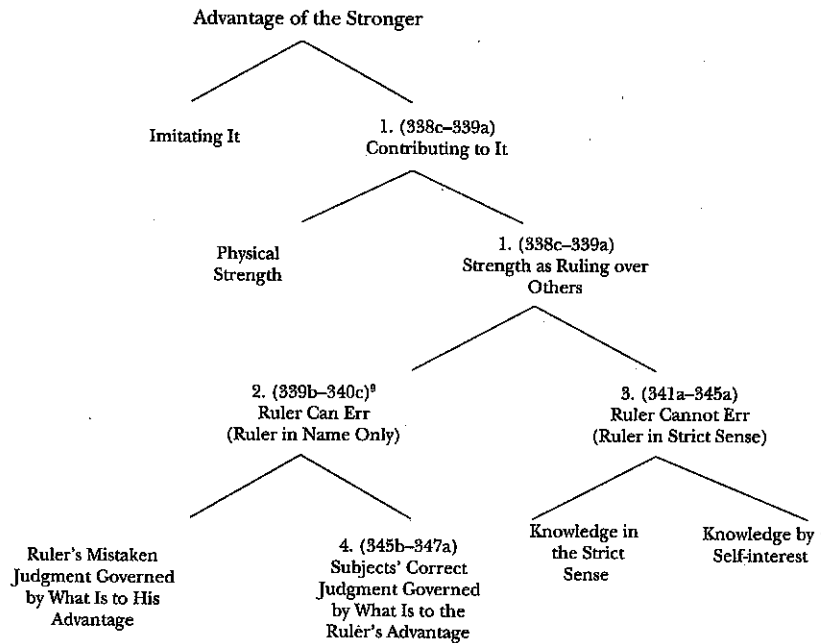
1. It prevents thoughtful readers from mistaking the words for the truth.
2. It encourages us to pursue the arguments themselves in a way that may awaken our own intrinsic but dormant understanding.
3. It withholds its deeper meaning from readers who are likely to be contemptuous or docile.

The contemptuous would either ridicule the conventional view on the basis of the philosophical claims, or ridicule the philosophical claims on the basis of conventional views (perhaps in the deadly way they did with Socrates), whereas the docile might have their traditional morality undermined by the iconoclastic nature of philosophy. In response to these concerns, the dialogues seek out those who stand at the mean between these extremes.

METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDS FOR THE DIALOGUE FORM

If the previous elements of Plato's choice of genre can be called rhetorical, there are other elements that can be called methodological, because they follow in a purely dramatic way the Methods of Hypothesis or Division. The Method of Division is sometimes the structural principle behind an apparently casual exchange between two speakers, as, for example, in the first part of the dispute between Socrates and Thrasymachus (another example may be found in Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*). Thrasymachus had offered a system-

atically ambiguous definition of *justice* as “the advantage of the stronger,” and Socrates forces him to disambiguate it by a series of bifurcations: justice is the advantage of the stronger in the sense of contributing to rather than imitating the stronger; stronger *qua* ruler rather than muscular; a ruler in the strict sense as infallible, rather than in name only and fallible (Thrasymachus at first defended the latter alternative, but neither subdivision was acceptable); and an infallible ruler in the impure sense of combining the knowledge of ruling with self-interest, rather than the strict sense of the disinterested guidance by knowledge. In the following diagram the ordinal numbers show the sequence of Thrasymachus’s positions (two steps are numbered “1” because both distinctions are made together).



Something of the kind can occur whenever Socrates forces his interlocutors to clarify their position. This methodological enactment is only minimally dramatic, however, insofar as Socrates could have made all the distinctions himself, as the Eleatic visitor does in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.

More interesting from a dramatic point of view is the way the dialogue form can use the Method of Hypothesis as a principle of development from less adequate to more adequate accounts. Socrates

states in the *Phaedo* that one component of the Method of Hypothesis is to examine the consequences of a given hypothesis to see whether anything discordant follows from it.²⁹ Discordant with what, Socrates does not specify, and it has been taken to mean either discordant with our standing beliefs or discordant with the original hypothesis itself. The first case, where the consequences are discordant with our standing beliefs, is familiar from the Socratic elenchus or refutation of his opponents' hypotheses. The second case, where a hypothesis leads to something that is discordant with the hypothesis itself, is “dialectical” in the contemporary sense. It is not the kind of process that Plato could have readily accomplished in a monologue or quasi-monologue (unless he made Socrates sound like Hegel), as he could have done with the passages that follow the Method of Division.

One example is at the beginning of the *Phaedo* (61e–63e). Socrates says that death is the fulfillment of the philosopher's goal of liberating the soul from the body, and therefore a good thing, but he adds that we cannot bestow this good upon ourselves because we are possessions of the gods who would punish us for depriving them of our service. Yet, Cebes notices that something follows from this which is discordant with Socrates' original claim that death is good: if our lives are in service to gods, who are good, how could anything be better than service to goodness? So Socrates' original position leads to its own denial. Socrates' rejoinder is that in the state of death too, when the soul is liberated from the body, it is subject to gods who are no less good than the ones who reign over its imprisonment in the body. Thus Cebes' counterthesis, taken a step further, reverses itself back to Socrates' original thesis of the superiority of death, but now the original thesis is at a higher level, because it adds the positive value of the divine to the earlier merely negative value of liberation from confinement.

A more complex example, which combines both the elenctic and the dialectical features of the Method of Hypothesis, can be found in Book One of the *Republic*.³⁰ Cephalus puts forward the claim that (1) being just is beneficial to the just person, because it leads to rewards instead of punishment in the afterlife, and (2) justice consists in telling the truth and paying what we owe.³¹ Socrates makes short work of the second claim by pointing out that there are times when telling the truth and paying what we owe seem to be unjust rather than just—for example, if someone who has lent a weapon wants it back when he is raving mad.³² Hence, some of the things that follow from the hypothesis that underlies Cephalus' understanding of jus-

tice fail to harmonize with some of our standing beliefs or intuitions about justice, and the hypothesis must be replaced.

At that point Cephalus's son Polemarchus steps in and defends his father's hypothesis.³³ As Socrates leads Polemarchus to draw out what follows from his position, they agree that paying "what we owe" means not repaying whatever someone happens to have lent, but something more general: what we owe to our friends is benefit and what we owe to enemies is harm. This definition turns out to be easy to apply in wartime but hard to apply in peacetime, and Socrates has no trouble in showing that its apparent uselessness in peacetime conflicts with our standing belief that justice is something valuable.³⁴ Moreover, the hypothesis also leads to the view that justice can be injurious, which conflicts with our normal beliefs.³⁵

Thus far I have shown only the elenctic aspect of this exchange, but the dialectical aspect takes place alongside the elenctic one. Socrates refuted Cephalus by showing that Cephalus's hypothesis may work in peaceful situations but not in violent ones, and he then refuted Polemarchus's defense of Cephalus by showing that Polemarchus's defense may work in violent situations but not in peaceful ones. So part 2 of the original hypothesis (justice consists in telling the truth and paying what we owe) has led not only to a conclusion that conflicts with our standing beliefs, but to a conclusion that conflicts with the original hypothesis itself; the thesis has led to a kind of antithesis. In addition, the consequences have pointed the way to the antithesis of part 1 as well (being just is beneficial to the just person), because what follows from the discussion now is that justice is beneficial to others, but not that it is beneficial to just people themselves. In this way Plato prepares us for Thrasymachus, who now states the antithesis of part 1 as starkly as possible: justice benefits only the recipient and is harmful to the practitioner, whereas injustice alone benefits the practitioner—precisely the reverse of what Cephalus had originally claimed.³⁶

The dialogue form thus enables Plato to develop his position by means of a systematic meander toward ever more adequate (although never definitive) formulations, which uses as moments in that development positions that he regards as only partially successful. It is that aspect of the dialogue form that enabled his work to have the comprehensive scope that earned it Alfred North Whitehead's famous description as the text to which the subsequent history of Western philosophy is footnotes.

NOTES

1. Plato, *Gorgias*, 513c.
2. Plato, *Republic*, 487b–c.
3. Plato, *Phaedrus* (Porter), 275d–e. (Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.)
4. *Ibid.*, 276e–277a.
5. Plato, *Phaedrus* (Porter), 276d.
6. The "others who follow along the same track" are sometimes taken to be Plato's students, in which case the reminders would be of what they learned in the Academy. Yet, the reference to growing "delicate shoots" suggests that something new is happening, not just that something old is being recalled.
7. For an excellent discussion of the "Seventh Letter," see James Rhodes, chapter 3.
8. Plato, "Seventh Letter" (Dorter), 341c–d.
9. In the *Republic* the discussion takes place sequentially at all four levels of the Divided Line, the last of which can only be referred to but not presented in words (533a). See Kenneth Dorter, "The Divided Line and the Structure of Plato's *Republic*."
10. Plato, *Republic*, 372c.
11. For a fuller discussion of these and related issues, see Kenneth Dorter, "Three Disappearing Ladders in Plato."
12. Plato, *Statesman*, 293b–294e.
13. Plato, "Seventh Letter" (Dorter), 341e.
14. *Ibid.*, 314a–c.
15. Plato, *Republic* (Dorter), 538c–539a.
16. Plato, *Phaedo*, 105e–106d.
17. Plato, *Phaedo* (Dorter), 105d, emphasis added.
18. *Ibid.*, 106d.
19. Plato, *Phaedo* 62–63b, 80d.
20. *Ibid.*, 97c–100a.
21. Also see David Gallop's translation of Plato, *Phaedo*, pp. 220–21.
22. Plato, *Phaedo* (Dorter), 107a–b.
23. Plato, *Phaedo*, 62d.
24. David Sedley. "Teleology and Myth in the *Phaedo*." Sedley (1989) argues that the myth anticipates the teleological project of Plato's *Timaeus*. Cf. Dorothea Frede, *Plato's "Phaidon"*, 156–57.
25. See, Plato, *Timaeus*, 29a–30b.
26. Plato, *Phaedo*, 77e.
27. Plato, *Phaedo* (Dorter), 107c5–d2.
28. *Ibid.*, 107a–b.
29. Plato, *Phaedo*, 101d3–5.
30. For the *Republic's* account of the Method of Hypothesis, see Plato, *Republic*, 437a, 510c–d.
31. Plato, *Republic*, 330d–331b.
32. *Ibid.*, 331c.
33. *Ibid.*, 331d.
34. *Ibid.*, 332e–333e.
35. *Ibid.*, 335b–d.
36. David Gallop (in a reply to the conference paper on which this is based)

believes that this passage does not exemplify the Method of Hypothesis, because the term used is *logos* rather than *hypothesis*. Yet, when the Method of Hypothesis is described in Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates refers to the hypothesis as a *logos* (100a3). In any case, Plato was never one to confine himself to a technical vocabulary, and in places he explicitly rejects that kind of limitation (e.g., Plato, *Phaedo*, 100d).