

A New Interpretation of Plato's Socratic Dialogues

By Charles H. Kahn

DESPITE THE FACT THAT HE PERFECTED THE FORM, PLATO did not invent the Socratic dialogue. In the years following Socrates' death, a number of his former associates wrote short dialogues in which Socrates was the principal interlocutor. Aristotle in his *Poetics* recognizes the *sokratikoi logoi*, or "Conversations with Socrates," as an established literary genre. One of the innovations in my interpretation of Plato is to attempt to situate his early work in the context of this literary genre.

In some fields, and notably in Biblical scholarship, genre studies have been dominant for a generation or two. Students of the Gospels, for example, have shed new light on their subject with interpretations that focus on the literary form of the narrative and speeches reported in each Gospel. It is a striking fact that, as far as I can see, there has never been a genre-oriented study of Plato's dialogues. There are historical reasons for this, that do not concern us here. But I do want to direct your attention to certain generic features of the Socratic literature that can be of considerable importance for the understanding of Plato's work.

It is fascinating to see how many authors dealt with the theme of Socratic *eros*, that is, the theme of love in the context of Socrates' philosophy. We know of at least five or six. Aeschines is the best preserved of these (in addition to Plato and Xenophon). So Plato's *Symposium* does not stand alone. For example, the figure of Diotima, who serves as Socrates' teacher on the subject of love in the *Symposium*, is paralleled in Aeschines' dialogue *Aspasia*, by the figure of Aspasia herself, the semi-legal wife of Pericles and the most famous (or notorious) woman in Athens in the Periclean age. Aspasia was a real historical person, but the treatment of her in Aeschines' *Aspasia* and in Plato's dialogue *Menexenus* is pure fantasy. The comic poets had represented her as a woman of low morality and the manager of a brothel; but in Aeschines' dialogue, Socrates recommends Aspasia as a teacher of virtue. In the *Menexenus* Socrates delivers a funeral oration that he claims was composed by Aspasia "from the leftovers of the Funeral

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Oration that she wrote for Pericles!”

I mention this aspect of fun-and-games in the genre of Socratic literature because it points to what I take to be the most important lesson to be learned from the study of the Socratic genre: namely, that these dialogues are essentially works of fiction, products of the author’s imagination, even though the characters in the dialogues are usually historical personalities. Hence, although the Socratic dialogues have some biographical features, they are not works of biography in our sense. As the historian Arnaldo Momigliano pointed out in his study of the *Development of Greek Biography*, “the Socratics experimented in biography, and the experiments were directed towards capturing the potentialities rather than the realities of individual lives. Socrates . . . was not so much the real Socrates as the potential Socrates . . . the guide to territories as yet unexplored” (p. 46).

It is essential to see, then, that the Socratic literature, despite its historical framework, is a literature of fiction and often of fantasy. This essential feature tends to be disguised by the

unique greatness of Plato’s achievement, in creating what we may call the “realistic” historical dialogue, designed to give the literary impression of a record of actual events, like a good historical novel. Since Plato’s art is so uncannily successful, we have the feeling that we have as it were overheard an actual conversation, in which the historical Socrates

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is actually developing his ideas in discussion with a real interlocutor. This is no less true when the interlocutor himself is a creature of Plato’s imagination (as seems to be the case with Callicles in the *Gorgias*) or someone that Plato could never have met (like Protagoras, who died when Plato was a child). The dialogue *Protagoras* is not only fictitious; its fictitious date is located in a period before Plato’s birth, when of course there were no video cameras and no tape recorders. Nevertheless, as readers of Plato’s *Protagoras*, we feel that the dialogue has the absolute ring of history about it. And professional historians have in fact reconstructed Protagoras’ theories on the basis of Plato’s text. I believe, of course, that they were simply taken in by Plato’s art.

This impression of total verisimilitude is what I call the optical illusion of the dialogues: the fact that these works of fourth-century imaginative literature can be, and often are, read as if they were documents of fifth-century intellectual history, as if they belonged to the age of Socrates rather than to the age of Plato.

The importance of this fact for the interpretation of Plato’s work will become

clear if I first summarize what I take to be “the state of the question.”

The interpretation of Plato’s thought poses a unique problem. There is no real parallel for any major philosopher. This is partly a function of the fact that Plato is the only philosopher of the first rank who was also a supreme literary artist. But the problem derives not simply from Plato’s artistry, but also from the specific literary form he chose (namely, the Socratic dialogue), and from the manner in which he exploited this form.

There is first of all the anonymity of the dialogue form, in which Plato’s own voice is never heard. It would have been natural for us to expect him to appear in the *Phaedo*, where the inner circle of Socrates’ followers are gathered around the master on his last day, before he drinks the hemlock. *Phaedo*, the narrator of the dialogue, begins by listing the disciples who were present that day in Socrates’ prison cell. When he comes to Plato’s name, *Phaedo* hesitates: “Plato, I believe, was sick.” Never was malady more convenient!

Since Plato himself does not appear, we fall back on Socrates. But does Socrates always speak for Plato? Or does he sometimes speak for Plato, sometimes not? Or does he never speak for Plato directly? And how are we the readers supposed to tell?

This difficulty is aggravated by the discrepancy between the views ascribed to Socrates in different dialogues. Probably the most dramatic example of such discrepancy is the contrast between the attitudes toward pleasure in the *Gorgias* and in the *Protagoras*. In the *Protagoras* Socrates defends an identity between pleasure and the good which he systematically refutes in the *Gorgias*. Has Plato changed his mind? Or consider the variation in regard to Recollection, where the differences are less dramatic but scarcely less significant. In the *Meno* we have the doctrine of Recollection without metaphysical Forms; in the *Phaedo* we have Recollection with the Forms as objects recollected; in the *Republic* we have the doctrine of Forms without Recollection; in the *Phaedrus* we have *both* doctrines again. What are we to make of such variation?

In the history of Platonic interpretation, there are three recognized possibilities:

1. *Pluralism*, the interpretation defended by George Grote, the great historian of Greece. According to Grote, Plato has no fixed or stable dogmas. He is an honest inquirer, following the argument where it leads. He can always see more problems than solutions. So contradictions between the dialogues are not to be eliminated.

2. The *developmental* view, as represented by mainstream scholarship in English. (Guthrie’s *History of Greek Philosophy* is a standard example.) Plato moves from an early Socratic period, under the predominant influence of his master’s philosophy, where the dialogues are typically aporetic or inconclusive, into the middle period where he develops his own mature philosophy. (According to this story, there is also a later, “critical” period, which does not concern us here.) The middle period, best represented by the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, is characterized by the metaphysical doctrine of Forms. (The interpretation recently given by Gregory Vlastos is an extreme example of this developmental view, since Vlastos claims that the earlier, Socratic philosophy is not only distinct from but actually opposed

to Plato's mature position.)

3. The *unitarian* interpretation, going back to Schleiermacher, which tends to see a single philosophical view underlying all or most of the dialogues. According to Schleiermacher, the order of the dialogues is the order of a philosophical education. According to the contemporary Tübingen School, the order does not matter, since the esoteric message is always the same: all or most of the dialogues allude to the "unwritten doctrines," the so-called doctrine of First Principles. The most distinguished American representative of this unifying tendency was Paul Shory, who wrote a book entitled *The Unity of Plato's Thought*.

We come now to my own view, which is "none of the above." But if I have to be classified, I am certainly more in sympathy with the unitarian tradition. There is of course an unmistakable change between the aporetic (inconclusive) dialogues, on the one hand, and the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* on the other. But I am inclined to see this as a development of Plato as a writer, as marking different stages in his literary career rather than different stages in his thinking. (There is a different kind of change in his political thinking between the *Republic* and the *Laws*. But I am not here concerned with any dialogues later than the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*.) We probably do have some dialogues written before Plato's metaphysical thought is fully formed. (My guess would be that this is true for five works: *Apology*, *Crito*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, and *Gorgias*.) But this does not correspond to the usual notion of Plato's "Socratic period." In my view, some seven (typically "Socratic") dialogues are in fact to be read *proleptically*, that is to say, as deliberately preparing the way for the middle dialogues. These proleptic dialogues include the *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, and *Meno*.

I will illustrate what I mean by proleptic writing in a moment. But first let me make clear that the theme of my interpretation is double: both negative and positive, both deconstructive and reconstructive.

First the moment of deconstruction. This aims to undermine the "standard view" of a period in Plato's early work when the philosophy expressed was essentially the philosophy of Socrates; and I aim also to challenge the authority of Aristotle, on which this view ultimately rests. The standard result is a pseudohistorical account of the philosophy of Socrates and an interpretation of the dialogues that offers a hypothetical account of Plato's intellectual biography.

It is clear that Aristotle, for purposes of his own, identified the philosophy of Socrates with the search for definition in dialogues like the *Laches* and *Euthyphro*, and with the denial of *akrasia* (weakness of will) in the *Protagoras*. But Aristotle is not a reliable historian of philosophy. It is well known that he forces the development of Presocratic philosophy into his own conceptual scheme of the four causes. And he is even less reliable on Socrates, who left nothing in writing.

We must remember that Aristotle arrived in Athens as a youth of seventeen, more than thirty years after Socrates' death. He was separated from Socrates by a whole generation of Socratic literature, of which the dialogues of Plato were obviously the most important for their philosophical content. The oral tradition of the Academy could assure him that the doctrine of Forms belonged to Plato, not to Socrates. Beyond that, Aristotle was on his own. So he recognized the philosophy

of Socrates in the earlier dialogues of Plato, and the Stoics later did the same. Now Aristotle and the Stoics were interested in philosophy, not in history as such; for them the figure of Socrates served to define a certain position in a theoretical debate. But the modern scholars who follow in their footsteps claim to be writing history. And since they treat Plato's literary creations as if they were historical documents, the result is a pseudohistorical account of the philosophy of Socrates.

Even more unfortunate, in my opinion, are the consequences for our understanding of Plato's own work. Scholars who believe they can identify the philosophy of Socrates in Plato's earlier dialogues proceed then to interpret the various dialogues as stepping-stones along Plato's path from Socratic discipleship to his own independent position as an original philosopher. But this account of Plato's development is purely hypothetical: it is not based upon any independent documentation. In my alternative interpretation, what we trace in these so-called Socratic dialogues is not the evolution of Plato's thought but the unfolding of his pedagogical strategy, in composing a series of dialogues carefully designed to prepare the minds of his readers for a sympathetic understanding of his new and radically unfamiliar vision of reality — a vision that he was eventually, gradually, and only partially to expound in his literary work.

In order to do justice, then, to Plato's genius as a philosophical writer, we must first free him from the shadow, or rather from the phantom, of the historical Socrates. That is why the study of the Socratic genre and its fictional characters are so important. As a recent writer put it, summarizing the results of a generation of Socratic scholarship: "The historical Socrates disappears from view; in his place appears a multiformed literary creation, the Socrates of the Socratics."

Hence, in my opinion, we know very little about the philosophy of Socrates, beyond the paradox that no one voluntarily does wrong (or that no one is voluntarily bad). What little we know has to be found in Plato's *Apology*, which is not a fictional dialogue but the literary record of a public event, the trial of Socrates. This is an event at which Plato was personally present, together with hundreds of other Athenians. Consequently, there are historical constraints on Plato's presentation of Socrates in the *Apology* that do not apply to any of the dialogues. The dialogues are mostly private conversations, and Plato is free to make them up as he pleases. From the parallels in the works of Aeschines, Phaedo, and Xenophon, we can see that historical accuracy, or even chronological possibility, was not a feature of the genre.

The moral stance of Socrates and his willingness to face death rather than commit an unjust act were certainly of the greatest importance for Plato. But we know no detailed philosophy of Socrates that can provide us with a clue for understanding Plato or interpreting his early work.

So much for the deconstruction. Now for the more constructive moment. I want to sketch an interpretation in two phases: first, the philosophical approach, and second, the literary approach.

To begin with, philosophy. What is Platonism (with a capital "P")? It is not a doctrine about universals — that is Aristotle's perspective. It is not a doctrine about abstract objects (sets or numbers) — that is platonism with a small "p." It is only incidentally a distinction between properties (such as equality) and the things that have properties (such as sticks and stones). That is one of the aspects of Plato's work that may be most attractive for a contemporary philosopher. But that is not

the central issue for Plato.

Plato's philosophy is essentially an otherworldly view about the nature of reality and the place of the human psyche: a view according to which the "real world" is an invisible realm that is the source of all value and the source of all rational structure. That is why Socrates in the *Phaedo* can describe philosophy as the practice of death. For death means the escape of the soul from the body, and hence its potential return to the blessed realm of all goodness, truth, and beauty.

The *Phaedo* is Plato's strongest statement of this view. But it is echoed much later, for example in the *Theaetetus* (176A): "It is impossible for evils to disappear. There must always be something opposite to the good. But evils have no seat among the gods; of necessity they must circulate in this region and in mortal nature. Therefore we ought to try to escape from here to there as quickly as possible. To escape is to imitate the divine, to assimilate to the divine as far as possible. The assimilation is to become just and pious with wisdom."

Thus the *Theaetetus* repeats the conception of the *Phaedo*. Both moral virtue (as represented by the ethical stance of Socrates in the dialogues) and philosophic wisdom (as represented in the dialectic concerned with defining essences) are conceived as the path that leads the human soul to the supersensible realm, to the divine realm where there is no evil.

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Now this is essentially the world view of Eastern mysticism or of Plotinus and the Neoplatonic tradition. However, it is not clear that "mysticism" is the right word for Plato. The fundamental *rationality* of his conception is guaranteed by the role of mathematics, as the privileged means of access to reality. The central importance of mathematics for Plato is that it leads us away from the sensible realm, but not too far away! It does not lead to magic or to nonrational revelations, as in later Neoplatonism.

I want to suggest that this otherworldly sense for meaning and truth, this conception that everything good and real is located in the supersensible, is the core of Plato's philosophy. The doctrine of Forms and the metaphysical distinction between Being and Becoming have to be understood as the rational articulation of this otherworldly view. One misses the point if one *begins* to understand Plato as offering a solution to the problem of abstract entities, or to problems in the philosophy of language or the philosophy of mind — a theory of concepts or a theory of terms. It is even a mistake to think of him as beginning from ethics as ordinarily understood.

Of course Plato is a total philosopher, and as such he is interested in *all* of these

topics and in politics as well, in politics above all. Plato's lifelong concern with politics and with moral reform in the city (reflected in the *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Statesman*, and in his final work, the *Laws*) is perhaps the only driving motive in his philosophy that is essentially independent of the otherworldly concern. The dominating position of the *Republic* as Plato's masterpiece may be misleading for a balanced understanding of his philosophy. The *Republic* is very this-worldly, in its intense concern for the just individual and the just society. We might be tempted to think of Plato as a split personality: a metaphysical visionary alternating with a social reformer and a would-be politician and legislator. But even in the *Republic* the philosopher-king is there to establish the junction between the two realms: between the world of Forms and the world of the city.

Plato's metaphysical vision, the primacy of the supersensible, is partially expressed in a very short passage in the *Symposium*, at the end of Diotima's lesson of love (as we shall see in a moment). But it is fully expressed for the first time in the *Phaedo*, in the discussion of immortality and the afterlife. The death and sanctification

of Socrates are chosen by Plato as the occasion for revealing his deepest view. And it is no accident that the *Phaedo* also gives us the first *systematic* statement of the doctrine of Forms. Plato's metaphysics can be seen as his own understanding of the meaning of Socrates'

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life and death.

Now Plato's view of the primacy of the unseen world is the metaphysical counterpart to the Orphic-Pythagorean doctrine of the soul, with its promise to the initiate of escape from the cycle of rebirth. These "weirdos" would be Plato's only spiritual allies in the very materialistic, competitive world of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. It was not a hospitable social environment for such an otherworldly view. It is in this perspective that we have to understand Plato's caution as an author. This awareness of a potentially hostile or unreceptive audience helps us to understand the strategic-rhetorical motivation for his use of indirect statement and the device of myth-making, his holding back and then his gradual, ingressive exposition of the otherworldly metaphysics.

This brings us to the second constructive aspect of my interpretation: the literary approach.

I do not have space here to study in any detail the seven proleptic dialogues in which Plato makes use of the aporetic form to prepare his audience for a more sympathetic response to his central metaphysical vision. From this group I can refer only to the *Meno*. But first I want to look briefly at the two dialogues which Plato has composed for the introductory exposition of his core doctrine: the otherworldly vision and the theory of Forms.

These doctrines are presented to the world for the first time in two of the most dramatic and powerfully written of all the dialogues: the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*. Together they form a pair, or a diptych. The scene of the *Symposium* is a drinking party, celebrating Agathon's victory in the Dionysiac festival: here we meet Socrates in the midst of life. In the *Phaedo* we find him in prison, in the shadow of death, in the final conversation on immortality, just before his own life comes to an end.

At Agathon's party there are a series of speeches on love. Socrates' speech consists of the lessons on *eros* that he heard from an unknown priestess named Diotima. In the last few paragraphs of this speech, Diotima reveals the final mysteries of love, into which Socrates himself is perhaps not ready to be initiated. This final revelation is presented as a ladder of love, at the climax of which comes the beatific vision of Beauty itself. "There, if anywhere, is life worth living for a human being, beholding Beauty itself." Here we have not the doctrine of Forms (in the plural) but the magnificent vision of a single metaphysical object, the Beautiful as such. A moment afterwards, the drunken Alcibiades enters the party, and we hear no more of metaphysics. (There was only a brief glimpse of the vision.) Furthermore, there is not a word spoken about an immortal psyche. Talk of transmigration would not be taken seriously in this worldly company of high society. Plato's exposition is carefully adapted to his fictive audience.

In the *Phaedo*, on the other hand, the atmosphere is completely different. Here we have an intimate circle of Socrates' closest associates. The entire dialogue is a philosophical discussion of the destiny of the soul, and the full doctrine of Forms is systematically presented. It is here that philosophy is described as training for death, that is, for the future state of the disembodied psyche, in contact with transcendent reality represented by the metaphysical Forms.

I submit that this carefully crafted staging for Plato's introduction of his core philosophy, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, must be viewed as the product of a deliberate artistic plan. There is no reason to suppose that these two dialogues directly reflect a recent experience of conversion on Plato's part. He has been preparing this for a long time!

In fact there are many hints of what I am calling the core philosophy in earlier works. For example, in the *Gorgias* Socrates quotes from Euripides: "Who knows if life is really death, and death is recognized as life in the world below?" This is a clear allusion to the otherworldly view of the soul. But there is no trace of Forms or of the metaphysics of Being in the *Gorgias*.

The most important example of proleptic writing and doctrinal anticipation is in the *Meno*. In the *Meno* we clearly have a partial revelation of the core position in the doctrine of learning as Recollection. The doctrine of Recollection presupposes immortality for the soul (which is not at all a traditional Greek idea), and it attributes a priori knowledge to the transmigrating soul. But there is no reference to Forms in the *Meno*. We have to wait for the *Phaedo* to tell us that the metaphysical Forms are what is recollected.

On the developmental view, Plato would have worked out the doctrine of Forms *after* he wrote the *Meno* and before he wrote the *Phaedo*. But this assumption would be quite arbitrary. If we look closely at the argument of the *Meno*, we will see that the Forms, though not mentioned, are definitely entailed.

In the *Meno* Recollection is introduced as a response to Meno's paradox. And Meno's paradox is provoked by the principle of priority of definition. The priority of definition is the principle that you must first know *what-X-is*, in order to know anything about X. But how are you going to get started? At this point we get Meno's paradox of inquiry: you can't even begin to inquire, because you don't know what to look for; and furthermore, you won't know how to recognize it even if you find it.

Socrates' solution is Recollection: you already know *what-X-is*, because you have already learned everything in a previous existence. Hence you only need to be reminded. But just how does that help? How is Recollection supposed to be a solution to the paradox of inquiry? How did you learn anything in a previous life? If the previous life was like this one, the paradox simply recurs.

If Recollection is to provide a solution, then the previous existence was not an ordinary human life, but the experience of a disembodied psyche in direct cognitive contact with a priori essences. So the objects of Recollection, to avoid Meno's paradox, must themselves be transcendental, incorporeal essences: in other words, Platonic Forms. Hence Plato's metaphysics and epistemology are entailed by, but not directly expressed in, the argument of the *Meno*.

If we were inclined to doubt that Plato could write in such an indirect way — that he could intend in the *Meno* this conclusion that he will formulate only in the *Phaedo*, we can be reassured by a suggestive parallel in the *Meno* itself. Recollection is illustrated by a geometry lesson, in which an untutored slave boy learns (or "recollects") how to double the area of a square. Socrates shows him that you can double any given square by constructing the square on the diagonal. Now this construction also illustrates two important mathematical results: (1) the Pythagorean theorem (that the area of the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares on the other two sides), and (2) the existence of incommensurable magnitudes, or what we call irrational numbers, since the length of the diagonal of a unit square is the square root of two.

Why does Plato make no mention of these important mathematical truths? Clearly, he is writing for a double audience: he expects his more intelligent and better informed readers to do some thinking on their own. The case is similar for the link between Recollection and the Forms. Just as anyone trained in geometry will see what is involved in doubling the square, so anyone familiar with Plato's metaphysics will see what the objects of Recollection must be.

The incomplete discussion of Recollection in the *Meno* may serve as one example of what I call proleptic writing in the pre-middle, or threshold dialogues.

Let me conclude by summarizing the advantages of my approach over the traditional, developmental view of the early dialogues.

1. The negative advance is to get rid of some unsubstantiated history: the pseudohistorical account of the philosophy of Socrates and the undocumented account of Plato's intellectual development.
2. The positive contribution is twofold. First, we get a more unified view of Plato's philosophy. Despite some readjustment and refinement in the theory of Forms, the metaphysical-otherworldly vision remains central in Plato's later work as well. (I have quoted the passage from the *Theaetetus*

on escaping from evils by assimilation to the divine. The otherworldly view is even more prominent in the *Timaeus*, with echoes in the *Sophist* and *Philebus*.)

Secondly, we achieve a much more subtle understanding of his artistry in composing dialogues. After all, Plato had a problem. On the one hand he was a gifted dramatist, one of the greatest writers the world has ever seen. On the other hand he was a follower of Socrates, who wrote nothing but philosophized with every word and every breath.

Plato was himself acutely aware of the difficulties and disadvantages of communicating philosophical thought in written form. In the *Phaedrus* he compares the book to a statue, which looks alive but always gives the same answer if you ask it a question. And so he insists that the serious philosopher will never take his written work seriously.

So this is Plato's problem. How could he use his literary gifts and change the world by communicating with a larger audience — and carrying his message into the future — while at the same time remaining loyal to his sense of philosophy as the living exchange of ideas in conversation, with questions and answers, arguments and objections? Providentially, he had available to him the Socratic dialogue form as a popular genre. Plato — and Plato alone — transformed this minor genre (“conversations with Socrates”) into a major art form and the expression of major philosophical thought. But Plato remained loyal to his Socratic heritage by writing *only* dialogues, and by designating the highest form of philosophy by a term that he invented: *dialektike*, “dialectic”, which means literally “the art of conversation”. φ