



BRILL

PLATO THE SOCRATIC

Author(s): CHRISTOPHER ROWE

Source: *Méthexis*, 2007, Vol. 20, VIGÉSIMO ANIVERSARIO TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY (2007), pp. 145-157

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43739187>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Brill is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Méthexis*

PLATO THE SOCRATIC*

CHRISTOPHER ROWE

I.

There are certain beliefs about Plato that are widely distributed among his modern readers, especially in the Anglophone world. One such belief is that he started by writing dialogues that reflected the life, thought, and methods¹ of his teacher Socrates; that he then broke away to write more constructive pieces, distinguished especially by a new metaphysics; but that he finally resiled into a maturer, more reflective mode, modifying or giving up on some of his middle period constructions.² Another widely-held belief is that Plato's works, especially but not exclusively the earlier ('Socratic') ones, are full of bad arguments, and that while he has his main character Socrates continually complain about others for not caring about the truth, that same character seems in practice frequently not to care too much about it himself. A third belief, perhaps less widespread but nevertheless defended by many (and often closely connected with the first and second), is that each of Plato's dialogues is a least in principle to be read separately: while there might be a certain set of ideas, at a rather general level, informing the corpus as a whole, nevertheless the real interest of the dialogues lies in the detail of their individual arguments, developed in different contexts and aimed at different philosophical targets.³ This latter sort of approach is itself

* What follows is an unusual kind of paper, in that it unashamedly sets out to introduce, and in effect to advertise, a new book: *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, published by Cambridge University Press in November 2007. (Most authors are more reticent.) However the larger purpose of the paper is to introduce and to advocate the novel approach to Plato argued for in the book – novel, that is, at least by comparison with the sorts of approach that have become standard in the English-speaking world and beyond over the last seventy years and more.

¹ Methods that in this context are typically construed as essentially designed to raise rather than resolve questions – leaving us in a state of fruitful ἀπορία, as the character Socrates supposedly leaves his interlocutors in those 'Socratic' dialogues we have come to think of as 'aporetic'. I myself believe that the ἀπορία in these dialogues result from the interlocutors' failings, and that Socrates himself always knows the way out of the impasse (see further below on this, and for the scare quotes around 'Socratic').

² See most recently Rickless 2007. By and large the picture of the Plato of the late dialogues as turning his back on his 'middle' period is now rather less favoured by Platonic interpreters, as it must be after Gill 1979 (which demonstrates how difficult it is to move the *Timaeus* – so typically 'middle', by the standard measures – out of the late group and closer to the 'middle'); there remains, however, an underlying view that the later Plato is more philosophically circumspect, more *modern* (closer to modern paradigms of philosophy), than his 'middle' self. See e.g. Sedley 2004.

³ One of the most eloquent supporters of this type of interpretation is Christopher Gill (see e.g. Gill 1996); cf. also Wolfsdorf 2007 and elsewhere.

a natural product of an age which – again, I refer mainly to English-speaking parts of the world – expects in any philosopher to find good, believable conclusions less frequently than it finds good *arguments* (though the haul from Plato on either count, for numerous readers, has been disappointingly small: see above). An easy defensive move, for those who wish still to love Plato, is then to insist that after all what most concerned him was what concerns any philosophical writer or teacher, namely to get his audience thinking (why else use dialogue form in the first place, if not to avoid the impression of speaking *ex cathedra*, and so appearing to do our thinking for us?). From such a perspective, the constructive aspects of Platonic philosophizing, whether in metaphysics or elsewhere, are likely to appear more like provisional proposals rather than firmly held ideas – suggestions, for the resolution of problems, that under the right conditions might be abandoned as soon as put forward. By contrast, and partly in reaction to such reductive views of the master, some moderns⁴ – echoing the majority of Plato's readers through the ages – have insisted that the purpose of the dialogues is to point us towards, give us a taste of, a highly specialized and abstract collection of more or less well-formed *doctrines*. In short, on this view Plato's dialogues are the gateway to something called 'Platonism', though opinions differ – and have differed – as to what exactly this is.

*Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*⁵ sets its face firmly against all of these beliefs about Plato, with the qualified exception of the last; that is, to the extent that these proponents of a doctrinal Plato (let them be 'doctrinalists' for short) argue for the ubiquitous presence, in Plato's works, of a distinctive mindset, and a particular way of seeing the world. This is the position adopted by *PAPW* too. However the conception of Plato, and of Platonism, offered in the new book is rather unlike those proposed by either ancient Platonists or their modern counterparts. The Plato of *PAPW* is not any sort of number-mystic, or mathematizing metaphysician (or however one might characterize the Plato of the 'doctrinalists'). But still less is he, ever, a mere provocative trickster, or, to take the less extreme version of what may be called the (modern) 'sceptical' reading of Plato,⁶ someone who writes merely or mainly to stir us to thought (no matter what conclusions we may reach). One of the central theses of *PAPW* is that Plato always begins from, and is always concerned to put across, a distinctive, substantive and complex view of things, which in its broad outlines remains a permanent possession – amounting not so much to a set of 'doctrines' as to a collection of starting-points that turn out to have thoroughly radical consequences in different dialectical contexts and spheres of application.

⁴ I refer here to the Tübingen-Milan 'school' whose most prominent members are currently Thomas Szlezák and Giovanni Reale.

⁵ Henceforth abbreviated as '*PAPW*', the new book which is the occasion of the present paper.

⁶ No one now, I think, would seriously propose to adopt the hard sceptical reading of Plato propounded by the New Academy (though modern 'non-doctrinal' readings have enough in common with it to justify giving them the same broad label, 'sceptical').

This understanding of Plato's thought as essentially *radical*, and of the purpose of his writing as essentially *persuasive*, is what drives the main argument of *PAPW*. Plato's stance, in fundamental respects, is quite at odds not only with what his contemporaries but also, importantly, with what most of us moderns, take for granted; but it is a stance to which he means to convert his readers (his contemporaries, in the first instance, but by implication any reader whatsoever; and so us too). But he is, I propose, himself aware of the distance that separates him from his readers (us) – so aware, indeed, that he has no option but to address them (us) indirectly. This – the book argues – is what ultimately underlies and explains Plato's use of the dialogue form. True, constructing dialogues between characters themselves suspended between the real and the fictional enables him to disappear, or appear to disappear, into the background, behind his characters; and this may well be something he intends (to avoid the appearance of speaking *ex cathedra*, instead co-opting his readers in the philosophical process). But the real point – or so I argue – is that in any case he *cannot* talk to his audience directly, most importantly because he uses the same language as they (we) do, but in quite different ways, i.e. to say quite different things.

Two examples: Plato, and/or his Socrates (I shall return later to the author's relationship to his main character), has a special view of what is to count as *good* or *beneficial*. There are of course special problems associated with the Platonic 'Form of the Good', which I leave aside for the moment; if we ask the simple question 'What sorts of things does Plato's Socrates count, or not count, as good?', the typical answer to which we are prompted by a wide range of dialogues across the corpus as a whole is that (a) excellence (*ἀρετή*) and/or wisdom are good, while (b) things like wealth, health, even life itself are only – somehow – conditionally good, if they are good at all. This, I suggest, is something we need to take into account whenever and wherever a Platonic argument makes reference to the good, or goods (good things). Or – and this is my second example, intimately connected with the first – take the notion of *πλεονεξία*, 'having more', or 'wanting to have more', than others, outdoing them. One's attitude towards *πλεονεξία* will be connected with one's ideas of what is good; what is at issue is having more good things than others, outdoing others in terms of the amount of goods one has available or in one's possession. So, again, any sentence containing the word *πλεονεξία* will be saying different things, depending on whether 'having more' is understood in the normal way (as a matter of having more of the things usually counted as good) or whether it is understood as Plato, and/or his Socrates, proposes to understand it.

Now most modern readers tend to miss this point,⁷ assuming that 'having more' is being used in the normal way. And such an assumption is at least half justified, because Plato characteristically does use terms in the way other people

⁷ My implicit reference here is to one of the arguments between Socrates and Thrasymachus in *Republic* I (349B-350C), a passage which forms the subject of an appendix to a chapter 5 of *PAPW*.

use them even when his understanding of their reference is quite different. That is to say, it is his habit to begin, or to appear to begin, from perspectives other than his own. But he also – typically – employs such terms in his own way *as well, and at the same time*.⁸ This fact about Platonic usage, if it is noticed at all, is likely at once to suggest to the modern reader that Plato is playing on ambiguities: slipping from one way of taking a word to another, either through oversight, or deliberately, as a method of defeating the opposition or in general of getting where he wants to go. That, however, is not the only possible response, and readers ought to be disturbed if it were, just because of the character Socrates' insistence on the importance to him of the plain truth.⁹ What Plato does, not always but still often, is to argue on different levels simultaneously. On the one hand, if the reader, and the interlocutor, expect Socrates to be talking their language and using their assumptions, they will find an argument of sorts to carry them through to the conclusion given, sometimes using an *ad hominem* strategy of one kind or another, sometimes moving between two or more harmless-looking proposals that everyone might be expected to accept. But in the more interesting cases reader and interlocutor seem to be invited, and have every right, to be dissatisfied with this first sort of argument – call it the apparent argument. Nor, in such cases, is *this* argument of much interest to Socrates, or, one presumes, to his author Plato. It is not the argument they would choose. *Their* argument is to be found running side by side with what I have called the 'apparent' one, surfacing for just long enough, to increase the reader's – perhaps also the interlocutor's – sense of disturbance and unease (and causing those cries of 'ambiguity!'). Thus, for example,¹⁰ the Socrates of the *Gorgias* plays simultaneously with two quite distinct notions of punishment, one of which only allows Socrates a decent route to his conclusion – just as only *his* notion of *πλεονεξία* will decently get him where he wants to go in *Republic* I.¹¹ In both cases we need, and I believe are meant to be provoked, to look under the surface to see just why Socrates is saying the peculiar things he says: things that certainly provoke his interlocutors, though without leading to any noticeable enlightenment on their part.

What is at issue here, as my account has already indicated, is not merely individual lexical items. Rather it is a whole connected system of ideas, to which different dialogues, and different contexts within individual dialogues, tend to relate, and refer, at different points. (This system of ideas is the peculiar kind of 'Platonism' that *PAPW* argues for: see above.) Of this system of ideas, Plato's

⁸ As he does, I claim, in that *Republic* I passage (see previous footnote) turning on *πλεονεξία*.

⁹ The idea of Socrates as *mere* trickster, at any point whatever, seems to me entirely unpalatable: a passage like *Republic* V, 451A – where Socrates treats deceiving people about the most important things as worse even than *killing* someone (involuntarily) – shows just how important a commodity the truth is to him (and, I take it, to Plato).

¹⁰ The example is worked out in the course of chapter 4 of *PAPW*.

¹¹ See above (with nn.7 and 8).

implicit claim is that it is closer to representing the truth of things than any other rival system (or pseudo-system). But he also – I propose – makes further claims (once again implicit): that it is this truth of things that our language struggles to describe, and that it is this same truth that all of us wish to grasp – just as, he holds, we all desire what is truly good for us; indeed *because* we desire what is truly good for us, insofar as our achieving that will depend on our getting a firm hold on some truths, and getting a firm hold on some truths will mean getting a firm hold – at least – on many (because truths cannot be grasped in isolation). It is (I argue) this connected group of claims that ultimately explains the complexities of Plato's authorial strategy.

The point may be summed up by saying that he wants us to see what it is that we are really talking and thinking about as we talk and think in the often confused way we do. We may in fact get things completely wrong, but if we do, that will be contrary to what we really want. Socrates' interpretation of Simonides' poem in the *Protagoras*¹² gives us a half-playful illustration of the point. It is not that Simonides actually succeeds in saying the things Socrates claims him to be saying; yet they are the things he *ought* to be saying, especially because he's a poet, and poets are supposed to be wise, but in any case because he's human, and it's human to want to get things right. Philosophy, which is essentially a matter of conversation (dialogue), is the one method that will help us to do so (to get things right); and written dialogues, it seems, mimic the conditions of their living counterpart, as we witness Socrates' interlocutors progress or fail to progress in the face of his questioning, and – most importantly, if we do our job as readers well enough – see why they fail. Platonic dialogues are above all dialogues – as it were – between different perspectives: his own, and the ones he seeks to supplant (So to say that he 'plays on' ambiguities will be exactly wrong: there are no ambiguities, only mistakes about reference).

There are many aspects of the preceding paragraph that clearly require further clarification, and justification, for which I have no space in this short paper – beyond the broad, and itself unsupported, proposal (supported, however, in *PAPW*) that the sort of interpretation outlined can be shown to flow from a suitably careful examination of Plato's arguments.

But now at this point, clearly, my approach – the approach adopted by *PAPW* – comes head to head with that other (peculiarly) modern approach, the analytical, which implicitly makes the same claim as my own: to attempt to devote the same degree of care to the understanding of Plato's arguments – that is, to all the *detail* of those arguments – that the author himself lavished on constructing them. The outcomes of the analytical approach, after all, are quite different, indeed in many respects a world apart, from the outcomes of *PAPW*. Why should that be, one might ask, if both claim to be treating the same material with the same degree of precision?

¹² *Protagoras* 338E-347A.

The chief differences between my own approach and that of analytical interpreters are these. Such interpreters tend to assume (a) that Plato lives in the same conceptual world as themselves. That is, they pay him the honour, as they see it, of supposing that he is one of them. They go on to suppose (b) that in principle, and typically, any argument should therefore be intelligible from the point of view of what they understand as philosophical reasonableness; not much by way of special assumptions will be required to spell out what is going on in any particular case, just the rules of logic and a knowledge of Greek, which is taken to be fairly straightforwardly translatable into English given a little tweaking and glossing. (c) If Plato's Socrates sometimes says paradoxical things, analytical interpreters will tend either to accommodate these somehow within a standard framework, or just to record, regretfully, that there are some pretty odd things to be found in Plato.

By contrast with (a), *PAPW* insists that the proper interpretation of Plato needs to begin by acknowledging the *peculiarity* of his view; or, better, that the interpreter needs to stick with Plato's arguments long enough to ensure that our difficulty with them does not stem from our assuming that we already know what his starting-points are. In fact, the book claims, more or less the whole point of reading Plato consists in understanding those starting-points, and seeing how they affect everything else. Thus, contrary to (b), the premises of any argument will usually contain far more than is visible to the naked eye, just to the extent that they belong to, or connect with, a special belief-system (and also because, within individual dialogues, the overall argument tends to be cumulative, implicitly including gains already made). And *contra* (c), the book tends to find it difficult, in the end, to decide which is the odder – the Socratic/Platonic perspective, which Plato has Socrates' interlocutors find so paradoxical, or the positions that make that perspective paradoxical.

But, as I have said, the book treats Platonic dialogues as being, typically, exercises in *persuasion*. The point is not just to state a particular, and unusual, set of ideas (which for the most part, in any case, they do rather indirectly); rather they attempt to move the reader, as Socrates attempts to move his interlocutors, from the position or perspective they presently adopt, to another position or perspective. And in the process they use special strategies that implicitly acknowledge the distance separating author/speaker from his audience (something that in itself necessitates the indirectness of his – the author's/speaker's – statements of his own preferred views, just insofar as his purpose is to persuade). In other words, the dialogues are not just collections of arguments, or philosophical explorations, though some may be; rather they are collections of arguments of a special sort, put together for a special purpose. Platonic dialogues thus have a strongly *rhetorical* aspect: the discussion of philosophical rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, then, will have relevance to Plato's own practice. Plato's λόγοι are themselves truly 'many-coloured' or 'complex', ποικίλοι, like the kind of expert λόγοι described in that discussion that addresses the 'complex' (ποικίλος

again), or less than completely rational, souls (ordinary readers) that will make up the presumed audience of all but the most technical of the dialogues (see especially *Phaedrus* 278B-C, with the argument leading up to the conclusion stated there).¹³

II.

As this already indicates, I acknowledge that some parts of the Platonic corpus do not fit the broad pattern so far described. Much of the substance of the preceding paragraphs in fact originally derives from the study of one particular short, so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogue, the *Lysis* (the outcomes of which are collected together in Penner and Rowe 2005).¹⁴ However, concurrent and past readings of a range of other dialogues, including *Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic* and *Symposium*, have shown that the approach described has an application, and an explanatory power, far beyond one small dialogue; indeed it is not too much to say that it appears capable of delivering results more or less anywhere that it is applied. *PAPW* sets out to give substance to this claim.

It is clear, nevertheless, that the art of Platonic writing is itself a multi-faceted affair. Whatever patterns one identifies in Plato’s strategies, he is capable of changing and varying them. This is not least, it seems, because he writes with different audiences in mind (‘simple’ as well as ‘complex’, in the terms of the *Phaedrus*: see above). Some dialogues are aimed at a more general audience, some at a more specialized one. The more specialized examples tend to dominate in what on the standard reconstruction of the chronology of the corpus – see above – is the later period (*Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*), but there are plenty of earlier dialogues that are scarcely intended for any sort of popular audience: *Charmides* and *Lysis*, for example, continue to baffle readers, and *Cratylus* is as specialized as anything else in Plato’s *oeuvre*. So there is no simple trajectory from engagement with a wider public to more private, professional or specialized, reflection, and there is certainly in the later dialogues the same preoccupation with changing the way that other people think, even if this is now more a matter of discussing the ways, political and rhetorical, that this is to be done than

¹³ In principle all aspects of the dialogues contribute to this rhetorical purpose. *PAPW* accordingly treats all such aspects as relevant to a proper interpretation. The dramatic action, and the interplay between the characters, are organic parts of Plato’s argument in the widest sense – just because that argument, as he presents it, is so much a matter of confronting other, and more embedded, perspectives.

¹⁴ This large volume provides a much clearer idea of those peculiarities of Plato’s philosophical positions that I have referred to above (while also providing an extended justification for attributing such positions to Plato).

of actually setting out directly to do it, i.e. by writing dialogues for consumption by – that could conceivably be consumed by – the educated Athenian at large.

It is the question of the overall direction of Plato's thinking that provides another of the core themes of *PAPW*. I referred earlier in this paper to the presence of a *core system of ideas* underlying Plato's persuasive strategies. The book proposes that this system – though 'system' here should not be taken in too strict a way – remains for the most part unchanged throughout the corpus. The standard (Anglophone) view is partly turned on its head: instead of seeing Plato's work as divided into Socratic / aporetic / sceptical (early), constructive / metaphysical / optimistic (middle), and reflective / sober / pessimistic (late), *PAPW* proposes that the constructions of the 'middle' period (itself something of a modern, and shaky, invention) are properly intelligible only in light of the sorts of ideas that – as I claim above – already motivate the early dialogues (or the dialogues of Plato's first period: a category which properly includes some allegedly 'middle-period' items, namely *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*).

The book proposes furthermore that the same ideas are also central to the indubitably late dialogues. The charge, against many modern interpretations, is that they take what are actually changes of authorial strategy for changes of substance. In metaphysics as much as in ethics, if not in politics (I here list the three central Platonic preoccupations: on politics, see below), the same fundamental thrust is already present in Plato's earliest productions. Not only that, but – so claims *PAPW* – we can only understand what that thrust amounts to in his *latest* productions when we have understood where it originally came from. Once again, there are big claims here. It will be quite radical, for example, to suggest that the Platonic 'Theory of Forms' is already somehow present in the earliest dialogues, when it is the very presence or absence of that theory that is typically – but, I claim, erroneously – used to mark these dialogues off from 'middle' ones. But the issue turns on what a 'Form' actually is. The book claims that thinking about Forms is essentially linked to thinking about *reference* (on which Plato has revolutionary views: see Penner & Rowe 2005), and that thinking about Forms as 'separate' – Aristotle's term – has everything to do with a desire to get clear about *what things are in themselves*: something that Plato thinks of as essential for any philosopher (even, perhaps, as definitive of the activity of philosophy itself). Thus, e.g. what medicine, the medical art, *is*, is knowledge of how and when to heal a patient; it thus becomes a paradigmatic, complete, flawless expertise, independent of any motive except the health of the patient, and probably – if it includes knowledge of *when* to heal – dependent on a still higher kind of expertise. This way of thinking is habitual in Plato.

Now to this picture of continuity through the dialogues there appears to be one crucial exception. This is in the sphere of moral theory, or more specifically the theory of action. Here the *Lysis* is centre-stage. For it ultimately provides – in its own special way – Plato's most extensive justification, or exploration/exposition, of a particular theory of motivation that in one way or another

determines the shape of a striking range of dialogues, from the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues to the *Euthydemus* and even the *Symposium*.¹⁵ The theory in question is revolutionary, in brief making all human desire be – always and on every occasion – for the *real* good, actions therefore being determined by the state of our beliefs about what our real good actually is.¹⁶ How revolutionary this is hardly needs saying, whether to an Athenian of the fifth or fourth century BCE or to his or her modern counterpart. Yet Plato takes it extremely seriously (it seems to have started life with the historical Socrates); and – as *PAPW* claims, in common with Penner and Rowe 2005 – for good philosophical reasons. Not only does the theory figure prominently in what he writes; it helps to explain the manner of that writing. For if the quality of our actions hangs on our beliefs, writing – and the talking that it mimics – will be key for anyone who wants (like Plato) to change us. Indeed writing and talking will be the *only* way of changing us.

Yet at a certain point Plato seems – at least at first sight – to have lost some of his faith in the theory. The moment is marked by Book IV of the *Republic*, when the character Socrates mounts a series of arguments that appear designed to demonstrate that we have such things as *irrational* desires that can, after all, not only conflict with but overturn the decisions (and desires) of reason. It is no accident that this moment occurs in a political dialogue, for one of its consequences is that merely talking to people will not be enough; to deal with irrational desires we shall need irrational means – conditioning and punishment, which in turn entails the institutions of the city or the state. Equally, merely writing for people will be insufficient: hence that subtle change, referred to above, in the direction of Plato’s writing, which adds to that familiar intellectual give-and-take between Socrates and his interlocutors (and so between Plato’s text and his audience) a significant element of discussion about how to deal with people who lack proper insight into the truth and their own good.

At the end of the *Republic*, however (Book X, 611A-612A), Plato’s Socrates indicates that the picture he gave in Book IV of the soul as a locus of conflict fails to represent her in her truest nature. Rather, that picture represents what the soul *becomes*, or all too readily becomes, as a result of her association with the body. The voice of reason, I suppose Socrates to be saying here, becomes weak, allowing other siren voices to be heard, and ultimately to lure the whole soul into the wrong moves. The scenario now is one in which it *seems* as if the sources of action in the soul are more than one (i.e., as if there are others besides that universal desire for the real good). That is, it comes to *seem* to us as if the desires

¹⁵ One of those usually treated as a ‘middle’ dialogue, because it speaks directly about Forms (see above), but actually, by the best tests available, a member of the earliest group of dialogues.

¹⁶ For a full working-out of the theory in question, see Penner and Rowe 2005. Our reconstruction of what may, I think, reasonably be called *Socratic* moral theory (because it genuinely did start with Socrates himself) differs considerably from standard modern reconstructions, especially in stressing that, according to the theory, desire itself can do no wrong – it is always reason that leads us astray.

of appetite, as we think of them,¹⁷ and of ‘spirit’, are irreducible, and irreducibly opposed to the desires of reason. But for Plato, in the end – so *PAPW* proposes – this is a situation that our souls create for themselves, by giving space for the development of non-rational tastes and habits that serve to weaken reason still further, to the point that they acquire a force of their own which, for any individual soul, may in practical terms – or without special measures, imposed from without – be irresistible. Such, indeed, in the view of the Plato of the *Republic* (or of the *Laws*), may be the state of the majority of mankind. But it needn’t have been like that (I take him to want to say), and still need not be; for that is not what the soul really is, in her essential nature. Here as in other contexts the essence of a thing is identified with what it will, or would, ideally be; what it is, really, is what it should be, not what we perceive it as being under most actual, non-ideal conditions.

In this way, I argue in *PAPW*, Plato remains true to his Socratic roots even in his account of desire and action: that is, even in the very area where he appears most clearly to diverge from him. The real difference between the *Republic* and the dialogues that precede it is that the *Republic* acknowledges how far most people are from achieving the kind of life embodied in Plato’s Socrates (a life in which reason – so nearly?¹⁸ – exercises that complete domination to which it is born); and that it then tries to answer the question how people in such a condition might be changed to a better one. (Clearly, they are beyond the reach of philosophy herself; and in any case Socratic dialectic could never operate with a mass audience.)

Thus while the *Republic* does indeed mark a shift, it is a shift in strategy, and in the scale of Plato’s project, rather than in philosophical substance. Moving beyond the limited context of the Socratic conversation, he now addresses whole cities, if not humanity in general. But this does not in the least imply any abandonment of Socrates or of Socrates’ vision of the possibilities of human nature. Rather it marks an attempt to apply Socrates’ insights on a more ambitious scale, and to show how they might transform society itself for the better. That Plato never leaves behind the core Socratic theory of action is in fact plainly demonstrable: even in his last work, *Laws*, Plato – or rather, his spokesman, a visitor to Crete from Athens – is still to be found introducing, as a basis for legislation, the old Socratic view that *no one goes wrong willingly*. If we do what is against our best interests, even if it appears that we want it ever so passionately, our action will still be *involuntary*; we don’t, and didn’t, want to do it. For an Aristotle, this is not just a strange but a silly way to talk, but the plain fact is that Plato, writing

¹⁷ Strictly speaking, they will not be (true) desires at all – because their objects are not things that we *truly* desire. (Who wants what is bad for himself or herself, knowing it to be bad? For the Socrates of the so-called ‘Socratic’ dialogues, or of the *Symposium* [see above], the answer is a resounding ‘Nobody’; and so, I claim, it remains for Plato, despite the arguments of *Republic IV*.)

¹⁸ Does Socrates really ‘lose control’ in a context like *Charmides* 155D-E (when he claims to be inflamed by the physical attractions of the boy Charmides)?

at the end of his life, takes it for granted. The pre-*Republic* theory, despite the *Republic's* apparent concessions to more ordinary views about human behaviour, retains its hold on Plato.

Implied in the above is another central claim of *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*: that Plato also remains a Socratic insofar as he maintains his commitment to philosophy – and to philosophy on a strictly Socratic model. This has frequently been denied, on a variety of grounds, and especially because of what has been seen as his commitment to political authoritarianism. Such charges have a grain of truth in them, but miss the main point. Plato is no democrat; but that is for a simple reason. No one would choose to decide what methods the doctor, or the ship's navigator, will use on the basis of a popular vote; why on earth should anyone propose deciding the most important issues – those to do with people's psychic health and happiness – on that basis? (Socrates – anyone's Socrates, including the Socrates of the 'Socratic' dialogues – would be in perfect agreement about that.) At the same time, Plato never shows any great optimism about the possibility of finding anyone at all with the necessary expertise; an attitude that not only mirrors but recreates the typical Socratic disavowal of knowledge.¹⁹ What in practice, or by implication, he opposes to the principle of democracy (the point of which he simply fails to understand – and necessarily, given his starting-points: what does it matter what people think, if they are all equally ignorant?) is not so much a tyranny of philosophy as government by expert committee, with the committees manned so far as possible with Socrates, doing philosophy in the Socratic, dialectical, way. There is, after all, no source of knowledge and authority available to mere humanity, and authority *without* knowledge is something against which Plato consistently sets his face. So there is a role still for dialectic;²⁰ indeed we cannot do without it. An unexamined life, as Plato's Socrates says as he sets out his stall in the *Apology*,²¹ is unliveable for a human being. And that is as true for Plato at the end of his writing career as it was at the beginning – even if the examination can, in his view, only be carried out by a few specialists. With Plato, philosophy moves from the *agora* to the Academy. But the Academy itself began life as one of those gymnasia that the historical Socrates liked to frequent, and where²² he found the young men he

¹⁹ *PAPW* strongly argues over several chapters for the conclusion that Plato consistently thought full knowledge beyond the reach of human beings. Wisdom is for gods, and neither are human beings gods, nor can we become divine (only *like* them).

²⁰ As there is for the written dialogue that mimics it; dialogue form even in the later period is no mere ossified relic.

²¹ *PAPW* treats the *Apology* as Plato's manifesto, announcing the themes that will populate the dialogues that follow.

²² That is, if we give any credence at all to Plato's depiction of Socrates, which gives special emphasis to his eroticism – if only to transform it into eroticism of a special kind.

preferred as his philosophical partners. Superficially available to all, Socratic dialectic – at any rate as Plato portrays it – is in fact already specialized, an activity for the elite.

Durham University
(United Kingdom)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Christopher Gill, "Plato and politics: the *Critias* and the *Politicus*" in *Phronesis* 24 (pp. 148-67), 1979.
- Christopher Gill, "Afterword", in (Christopher Gill and Mary Margaret McCabe eds.), *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (pp. 283-311), Oxford 1996.
- Terry Penner and Christopher Rowe, *Plato's Lysis*, (*Cambridge Studies in the Dialogues of Plato*), Cambridge 2005.
- Samuel Rickless, *Plato's Forms in Transition: a reading of the Parmenides*, Cambridge 2007.
- Christopher Rowe, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, Cambridge 2007.
- David Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism: text and subtext in Plato's Theaetetus*, Oxford 2004.
- David Wolfsdorf, "The irony of Socrates", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65.2 (Spring) (pp. 175-87), 2007.