PLATONIC WRITINGS  PLATONIC READINGS
EDITED BY CHARLES L. GRISWOLD JR.
the dialogue is a cosmos and the cosmos a dialogue

ANONYMOUS COMMENTATOR ON PLATO
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Preface

Charles L. Griswold Jr.

This volume seeks to explore two questions: “Why did Plato write dialogues?” and “How ought we to read Plato’s dialogues?” When this volume was first published, some thirteen years ago, it was possible for me to write in the Introduction (reprinted below) that “in modern times the problem of interpreting Plato—and with it, the problem as to why Plato wrote dialogues—has not received the attention it deserves. . . . The time has now come for a full-fledged debate about the reading of Plato, and so also about the reasons for which Plato wrote dialogues.”

Since those words were composed, a remarkable sea change has occurred in Platonic studies (especially on the Anglo-American side), and a significant number of writings devoted to the themes of Platonic writing and interpretation has appeared. Scarcely any interpreter of significance is ignorant of these topics or fails to take a position concerning them. As a telling example of the emerging consensus about the importance of our two leading questions, as well as about likely answers to them, consider John Cooper’s remarks in his Introduction (in sections entitled “Plato and the Dialogue Form” and “Reading Plato”) to the recent Hackett edition of Plato’s corpus.

Cooper repeatedly insists on the principle of Platonic anonymity, that is, on the fact that “whatever is stated in his works is stated by one or another of his characters, not directly by Plato the author” (xix); hence no assumption to the effect that one or another of the dramatis personae is Plato’s mouthpiece ought be accepted. Myriad articles and books have been written on the dialogues in which just such an assumption—often supported by speculations about the chronology of the composition of the dialogues—is accepted as self-evident. If Cooper is right, though, they are built on quicksand. We do not know, at least at the start, and perhaps even at the end, what Plato’s views are. The reader is required by the very nature of Plato’s use of the dialogue form to work through “what each speaker says to the others (and also, sometimes, what he does not say), notice what may need further defense than is actually given it, and attend to the author’s manner in presenting each character, and the separate speeches, for indications of points on which the author thinks some
further thought is required”; one must try to get at what “the text as a whole” is trying to communicate (xx). The only safe path to Plato’s meaning is to read each dialogue in its full literary and philosophical integrity, carefully considering the arguments in their context, interpreting as well as critically evaluating what we are being shown and told. This holds, Cooper rightly argues, even in the late dialogues, which do not wear their aporiai on their sleeves; even there, “what we have before us is partial and provisional at best” (xxii).

And even when we faithfully follow this hermeneutical strategy, and keep the importance of Platonic anonymity very much in mind, we may never be in a position fully to grasp Plato’s meaning, as though “Plato’s meaning” is like a pot of gold hidden in some underground spot, just waiting to be dug up and put on display for all time. For it seems to be a part of Plato’s conception of the written word that no text could ever claim finality, as the famous passages from the *Phaedrus* remind us. The dialogue form embodies the famously Socratic conception of philosophy as a search for the truth that each of us must—in cooperation with others, to be sure—undertake throughout life, examining and reexamining assumptions and views. And this is a conception of philosophy the reader arrives at through studying the Platonic dialogues with the above-mentioned interpretive principles in mind. The “Why did Plato write dialogues” and “How ought we to read Plato’s dialogues” questions are inseparable.

Even the familiar grouping of dialogues into the early, middle, and late is increasingly subject to critical examination. As representative of this movement, consider once again Cooper, who advances the view that the chronology of Plato’s writings (that is, the chronology of composition) is by and large unknown, and further that the chronology is not in principle a fruitful way of organizing one’s approach to the interpretation of Plato. Consequently he urges the reader “not to undertake the study of Plato’s works holding in mind the customary chronological groupings of ‘early’, ‘middle’, and ‘late’ dialogues” (xiv). As he also stresses, “so far as possible, the individual texts must be allowed to speak for themselves” (xv). Thematic grouping of the dialogues is to some extent useful, but “we know no reason to conclude that Plato wrote dialogues of this genre [the “Socratic”] during only one phase of his career as an author, whether early or late” (xvi). Plato was perfectly capable of writing a “Socratic” dialogue in, say, his “middle” period. The day may soon arrive when the “early, middle, late” interpretive grid falls well into the background. A shift in that direction would quite obviously represent a very important change in our interpretation of Plato.

The emerging consensus in Platonic scholarship should help motivate us to drop the tired contrast between “literary” and “philosophical” approaches to Plato, insofar as these terms are used to describe supposedly self-standing approaches that could represent genuine alternative interpretive stances. Although the terms might still be useful as designating types of questions that pick out different aspects of the text, a sound interpretation of a Platonic dialogue must combine both approaches. When characterizing approaches to Plato we ought also to drop two other tired, vague, and frequently polemical labels, viz. “continental” and “analytic.” This will be hard for those of us in the Anglophone context to do, of course, because the terms continue powerfully to shape the politics of the profession. But absent a precise fix on what the terms are supposed to mean in this context, we would be better off without them. We need to develop more intelligent and fine-grained characterizations of the various interpretive approaches in order to pursue the discussion thoughtfully and open-mindedly, especially at a time when basic presuppositions are being reexamined and when the field is so fragmented.

The discussion about interpreting Plato is far from concluded. A long-standing interpretive question is among those to be pursued further: Do Plato’s dialogues hang together as a corpus in any meaningful sense of the term? This question is among the most perplexing of the lot. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells us that a well-written work ought to exhibit “logographic necessity” in imitation of the organic unity of the body of an animal. Each part ought to be suited to the others, and the whole ought not to lack head or feet or anything else that is essential to its unity (264c, liberally paraphrased). A work whose lines could be transposed would not amount to much, for it would possess no necessary beginning, middle, or end. Let us assume that Plato sought to compose each dialogue according to these instructions. Are we also entitled to say that Plato’s works taken together follow a similar plan? Do they form, to borrow Socrates’ metaphor, a “body” of work possessing a high degree of organic unity (this image captures what I shall call the “proper sense” of the term “corpus”)? If so, which dialogue heads up the whole? Which dialogues center the animal, on which does it stand, and which are its concluding extremities? Can the dialogues be transposed like lines of a poor composition or do they anticipate each other, or at least hang together, in an orderly fashion?

It might strike us as incredible that Plato’s literary output should have no overarching philosophical design, that there not be somewhere in it a coherent body of views (even if evolving views) about the substantive matters that the *dramatis personae* discuss. If this were not so, and if his writings did not somehow exhibit his “philosophy,” he would have to be a “philosopher” in a rather different sense than the one with which we are now familiar. It might even seem unplatonic for the dialogues not to amount to a corpus in one way or another: the synoptic or unifying urge of the philosopher is, after all, emphasized in the *Republic* (537c7). And in any case, the urge to find unity is simply irresistible, and for a seemingly good reason: How could we really understand Plato without explaining how his thought, as manifested through the writings he so carefully composed, hangs together in an intelligible and coherent body of doctrine? No one maintains that Plato’s literary output is like a collection of pieces to quite unrelated puzzles, pieces mixed randomly together in a bin tagged “by Plato.”
It seems that if there were no corpus we would not know where we are supposed to start reading Plato's œuvre, for we would not know which dialogue provides the gateway into the system. We would not know where to stop reading; nor how many and which dialogues one needs have studied in order to lay claim to a full understanding of Plato's philosophy. If there were no corpus properly speaking, it would be difficult to determine how much the subtraction or addition of dialogues to the list of Plato's works would affect our understanding of his philosophy. If possibly inauthentic dialogues, such as the Hippasus Major and Alcibiades I, were incontrovertibly proven to be authentic, or ones taken to be authentic were proven not to be so, how much would we have lost or gained of "Plato's philosophy"? Impossible to answer, it seems, if there is no systematic body of thought relative to which the answer may be formulated.7

Yet if Plato presented a teaching—call it "a philosophy"—in the dialogues taken together, it must be admitted that he went to great lengths to keep it from his readers. For the fact of the matter is that the dialogues give us very few indications as to how they are to be taken together as a coherent body of thought. Indeed, as Diskin Clay has argued, Plato's texts contain few if any explicit references to one another as written compositions, and thus fail to build explicitly on one another.8 Perhaps there is some sort of "system" discoverable through assiduous study of the Platonic dialogues; but no such system is evident on the surface of three dozen or so dialogues. If there is a corpus, its degree of unity is certainly looser than that evinced (sometimes on the surface, sometimes after a bit of digging) by the individual dialogues. And even at that level, enigmas about the unity of the text abound, and absolutely crucial matters—such as the nature of the Good or of Dialectic in and of themselves—are explicitly and notoriously left unexplored (Rep. 506d2–e5, 533a1–10). At both levels—that of the corpus and that of individual dialogues—Plato clearly means to challenge the reader to search for completeness.

Consequently, interpreters since antiquity have struggled to answer the question about the sense in which Plato may be said to have written a "corpus." Diogenes Laertius reports several such attempts, preeminently Thrasylus's organization of the dialogues into tetralogies, and into trilogies by the grammarian Aristophanes.9 The anonymous Alexandrian Prolegomena to the dialogues also contain extensive discussions of the matter.10 Notably, these are not efforts to organize the dialogues in order of their chronology (the dates of their composition). In the nineteenth century, Schleiermacher rejected all these earlier efforts, claiming to be the first to detect the "natural order" of Plato's dialogues and so the organic unity of the corpus (an image Schleiermacher invokes at length).11 In a major paradigm shift, Karl Friedrich Hermann offered a developmental story (the early chapters of which consist of tentative formulations of problems and the later chapters of solutions) tied to notions about Plato's mental progress and the "spirit of the times." This influential view provides one way of seeing how the corpus is unified. In conjunction with the idea, encouraged by Hegel, that any philosopher worth his or her salt simply must have a system—one that evolves over time and reflects basic structures of the given historical epoch—the "developmentalist" story became attractive. That story allows us to say that Plato's works possess "unity" in the sense that a philosopher's evolving and historically contextualized search for a system possesses unity.

These nineteenth-century assumptions founded a now familiar picture. The early dialogues are taken to be heavily influenced by the historical Socrates—if not reasonably faithful reproductions of Socrates' views—with later dialogues representing Plato's gradual emancipation from Socrates and the development of Plato's own system. It is hard to resist some version or other of a developmentalist account that is parasitic upon a chronological account, since some of those dialogues appear to shed the literary features of the dialogue form, including their explicitly aporetic character, and to present us with something closer to the now more familiar treatise style of exposition; since in four later dialogues Socrates has been replaced as the leading interlocutor; since in these dialogues the topics strike us as "doing philosophy" in a sophisticated and technical sense; and since we assume that a first-rate philosopher changes and develops his views over time (the likes of Kant, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger come to mind) such that the ideal result would be a comprehensive and systematic teaching.12 If nothing else, a developmentalist account would provide us with an alternative to the disturbing possibility that there is no Platonic corpus properly speaking. However, developmentalism rests on a series of assumptions that are certainly questionable, and indeed that are increasingly questioned.13

The question of the unity of Plato's œuvre is not, of course, the sole remaining question facing readers of Plato. I would add the following to the list of questions worthy of continued investigation:

- What other forms of intertextuality are there within Platonic texts (for example, the recurrence of certain characters in various dialogues invites us to compare and contrast)? And what forms of intertextuality are there between Plato's texts and those by other authors (for example, Plato frequently incorporates other sorts of works and discourses into his dialogues, such as poetic, tragic, and comic texts)? How do we unify these different kinds of intertextuality? With respect to this second kind of intertextuality, we might ask why Plato chooses to incorporate these literary and rhetorical texts and genres into his dialogues, and how their presence affects our reading of the dialogues. Still further, to what extent is Plato's use of poetic and rhetorical subtexts reconcilable with his explicit denunciations of poetry and rhetoric?
• How ought we to understand the notion of the “author’s meaning” in the case of Plato? For example, the notion could be understood historically, as the set of thoughts going through Plato’s mind as he wrote; or it could be understood as a kind of hermeneutical construction functionally equivalent to the postulation of thoroughgoing design and unity in the text.16
• Given the principle of authorial anonymity, and its consequence that no dramatis personae can right off be identified as the author’s voice, how do we, at the end of the day, determine the author’s view of the relevant matter? Or does this question itself assume too much; might there be no determinate authorial “position” about the specific issues under discussion in the text, the point being rather (in the manner of some ancient Skeptics) to present various sides of the issues in order to indicate some larger meta-position (if one may so term it) about the possibility of having philosophically defensible positions on the given issues?
• How are we to understand the intended audience of the dialogues, and how does Plato’s choice and use of the dialogue form reflect his expectations about his readership?
• What are the defining general literary features of the Platonic dialogues? The list no doubt includes Platonic anonymity; singular patterns in the choice of interlocutors (e.g., that no dialogue is a conversation between two mature philosophers); the mix of purely fictional and historical elements; the presence of literary and rhetorical genres in the dialogues; the element of mime considered as the representation of types of characters;17 and the high degree of unity evidenced by the individual dialogues, at least in comparison with their seemingly loose relation to one another (more about that question in a moment).
• What is the proper analysis of the various literary devices used in the Platonic dialogues, such as irony, imagery, myth, and allegory? Why does Plato employ them at all? Where several are present at once, how do they work together to convey the philosophical message?
• What role if any does historical information play in a philological interpretation of a dialogue? Quite clearly, it plays some role, since (for example) Socrates was a historical figure located in a certain time and place, and so forth. To what extent must Plato’s readers be familiar with historical context beyond such elementary facts in order to grasp Plato’s meaning?
• What precisely does it mean to integrate literary form and philosophical argument? I have mentioned such points as the importance of Platonic anonymity; the fact that the arguments are presented by someone to someone in a specific context and therefore are shaped by the demands of the time and place, and the importance of various literary techniques (such as irony) to the presentation of the argument. In addition to all that, is there much more to say, in a general vein, about the “integration” question? Might there even be multiple detailed answers to the question, varying from one (kind of) Platonic text to another? If so, what are the relevant kinds of Platonic texts? 18
• What is the right understanding of Platonic esotericism, an unavoidable issue given Plato’s anonymity, his use of irony and allusion, and the various gaps or omissions of ideas, or arguments, or narrative that many dialogues present? Are there “unwritten teachings,” and if so why, and in what sense of “unwritten” (unwritable? not-yet-written? only indirectly written?) and of “teachings” (system? a set of opinions?)?
• In what ways or ways were the dialogues “published”?
• If we knew the exact dates of composition and of “publication” of every Platonic text, would that information be of importance for our understanding of Plato’s philosophy?
• Are there other senses of “chronology” that might, to one degree or another, help us to understand the unity of the “corpus”? For example, Plato orders some of the dialogues in a sort of dramatic or fictive chronology: the Apology—Euthyphro—Theaetetus—Apology—Phaedo sequence being one such. Does this “fictive chronology”—and so the idea that some dialogues are grouped in such a way as to recount a quasi-fictional narrative of Socrates’ life in chronological order, as though they were chapters in a peculiar kind of novel—help us to interpret the individual dialogues in question as well as to weave together the dialogues into a “corpus”?

Many of these issues are in fact addressed in the essays included in this volume. The recent efflorescence of scholarly attention to the two fundamental questions to which this book is devoted gives us every reason to hope for further progress in our understanding of all of the issues I have just adumbrated.

This book is an emended reprint of the original Routledge, Chapman, and Hall edition (1988). A number of typographical errors have been corrected, and the “Notes on Contributors” section has been updated. The present edition also differs from the original in its inclusion of this Preface as well as of a new bibliography containing works on or directly relevant to the volume’s two leading questions. These works are substantial in number, as the bibliography shows.

It is with pleasure that I acknowledge the assistance of Dasha Polzik in the preparation of this new edition. I also thank Luc Brissin for his help with the Supplemental Bibliography.

Boston University
August 2000
1. See the Supplementary Bibliography to this volume.

2. Plato: Complete Works. Ed. with Introduction and Notes by J. M. Cooper, associate ed. D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). All further references to Cooper advert to this edition. This enormous volume of 1,088 pages includes all of the works in Thrasyllus’s first-century A.D. edition (from which, as Cooper notes, “derive all our medieval manuscripts of Plato—and so almost all our own knowledge of his texts” (p. viii)). It includes everything that has been attributed to Plato—not only the indisputably authentic texts but also those whose authenticity is in question, as well as a number of that are clearly not authentic.

3. Or again: “Plato never speaks in his own author’s voice but puts all his words into a particular speaker’s mouth” (p. xxii); “Plato never speaks in his own person when any of his characters does; even if a man character like the Athenian in Laws or the visitor from Elia, who does not hesitate to speak dogmatically himself, as if he had full possession of the truth on the matters he discourses upon, can still be read as putting something forward that Plato the author is presenting merely for examination and criticism” (p. xxiv).


5. See, for example, some of the contributions to Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient, ed. J. Annas and C. Rowe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming), including Charles Kahn’s “On Platonic Chronology” and my reply.

6. I would further recommend that use of the term “Straussian” be suspended from Platonic studies, on the grounds that it has come to function primarily as a distracting polemical label and that its meaning is almost always vague conceptually. For a sample of the spirit of polemic on the topic, witness R. B. Rutherford’s declaration that he wishes to dissociate himself “from the approach to Plato adopted by the late Leo Strauss and his followers”-presumably in the belief that that approach is without merit—although even then I “have read only one of Strauss’s works (The City and Man), and have been unable to finish any of the books by his epigoni.” (Rutherford, The Art of Plato: Ten Essays on Platonic Interpretation [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, p.x] The best recent attempt I know of to spell out dispassionately and in detail Strauss’s interpretation of Plato is G. R. F. Ferruari’s “Strauss’s Plato,” Arion 5 (1997): 36–65. The results of Ferruari’s analysis are unexpected and intriguing. A discussion of Strauss’s approach to Plato in the context of Strauss’s overarching philosophical motivations will also be found in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of C. Zuckert’s Postmodern Platos (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). I hasten to add that some labels for interpretive approaches are perfectly justifiable; “Tübingen School,” for example, describes a well-defined and reasonably well-understood approach to the interpretation of Plato, and indeed seems willingly embraced by its proponents.

7. Consider A. E. Taylor’s comment: “To understand a great thinker is, of course, impossible unless we know something of the relative order of his works, and of the actual period of his life to which they belong. What, for example, could we make of Kant if we did not know whether the Critique of Pure Reason was the work of ambitious youth or of ripe middle age, whether it was written before or after the discourse on the Only Possible Demonstration of the Existence of a God or the Dreams of a Ghost-seer? We cannot, then, even make a beginning with the study of Plato until we have some trustworthy indication of the order in which his works, or at least the most significant of them, were written.” Cited by J. Bowland in his “Rereading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology,” Phoenix 46 (1991): 197.

8. See Clay’s “Gaps in the ‘Universe’ of the Platonic Dialogues,” in Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, vol. 3, ed. J. J. Ciesy (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 131–57. See also M. Miller’s illuminating response in the same volume (pp. 158-64). Miller writes there that while individual dialogues may appear to lack unity, they often do not, and that the same may hold for the corpus: “The huge question at hand, however, is whether we can also find something like this pattern in the relations between dialogues. To put this in a phrase, can we recognize ways in which the corpus has the unity not of an organism and not of a cosmos but, rather, of a journey whose moments of apparent completion set the stage for dialectic and fresh departures that, in turn, make for its real continuance?” (p. 161).

9. For some brief remarks about the different kinds of disunities and gaps in individual dialogues, see Miller’s response to Clay (cited in note 8), p. 159 and note.


13. Of course, many have resisted the developmentalist line. For example, "unitarians" such as Shorey think of the system as pretty well developed from the start, while "esoterics" of the Tübingen School offer an entirely different way of understanding the unity of the corpus (they will argue, among other things, that unity is achieved by means of allusion to a system that is not present in the dialogues in its entirety). For a discussion influenced by that school, see T. Szelzik’s Platon und die Schriftschaft der Philosophie: Interpretationen zu den früheren und mittleren Dialogen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985).


15. A. Nightingale argues that Plato also incorporates the encomiastic genre, lyric love poetry, epic discourse, and the hermeneutic form, among other genres, into his writing. See her Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

16. I have set out and argued for the latter alternative in my Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus, pp. 11–12.


18. See the essays collected in Form and Argument in Late Plato, ed. C. Gill and M. M. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), for explorations of the ways in which “late” dialogues integrate argument with literary form.

19. I have explored the idea of a “fictive chronology” in my “E Pluribus Unum? On the Platonic ‘Corpus,’” Ancient Philosophy 19 (1999): 361–71. I note that substantial parts of this Preface draw upon the just-mentioned article, with the kind permission of the editor of Ancient Philosophy.
Acknowledgments

I am pleased to acknowledge the helpful criticisms of various drafts of the Introduction to this volume offered to me by Stephen Griswold, Mitchell Miller, Edward Regis, and David Roochaik. Katharine Fowle Griswold, Stephen Griswold, and Dale Sinos made some valuable suggestions about the organization of the volume, for which I am also grateful. I would also like to thank Rémi Brague and Thomas Szlezák for reviewing the bibliography and for proposing several additions. My principal debt is to David Lachterman. His recommendations concerning both the Introduction and the other contributions to the volume were outstanding, and I adopted them all. None of these friends and colleagues, of course, is to be held responsible for any shortcomings this book may have.

I am greatly indebted to my editor at Routledge, Maureen MacGrogan, who did so much to make this book possible, and to Cecile R. Watters for her skillful editing of the final version of the manuscript. Jane Ashley Barr did a fine job in preparing the Index of Proper Names. I am also grateful to Sarah Fisher (Senior Painting Conservator at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) for her help in arranging for the photographs used on the cover of this book. Finally, my thanks to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Howard University for technical assistance in the preparation of the manuscript.

The text and translation of the quotation on the epigraph page are to be found on pages 30–31 of L. G. Westerink's Anonymous Prolegomena to Plaonic Philosophy (see the bibliography below). I note that with few exceptions only the first occurrences of Latin and transliterated Greek words in the present book are italicized, and that in almost all cases accents have been omitted from transliterated words.

Washington, D. C., 1988

Abbreviations

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Titles that are not abbreviated include Crito, Ion, Laws, Letters, Meno, as well as Cleitophon, Critias, Erastai, Hipparchus, Minos, and Theaet.
Introduction

Charles L. Griswold Jr.

Plato's influence on Western thought is assessed in Alfred North Whitehead's famous remark that "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Whitehead then explains his extraordinary judgment: "I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. His personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience at a great period of civilization, his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization, have made his writings an inexhaustible mine of suggestion." The resistance of Plato's writings to systematization, their ability to keep philosophizing alive, is surely inseparable from the kind of writings they are—namely, dialogues. Thus Plato's commitment to dialogic writing calls out for explanation.

This book responds by exploring two questions about Plato's dialogues: first, "Why did Plato write dialogues?" and second, "How ought we to read Plato's dialogues?"

The focus of the first question is the rationale for Plato's exceptional rhetoric of inquiry. His dialogues stand apart from treatises on the one hand and, say, tragedies and comedies on the other. Plato is the only major philosopher in the Western tradition to have written dialogues almost exclusively (exclusively if none of the Letters is authentic). What underlies his dedication to this form of writing? The second question to be explored here is a special case of the hermeneutic problem of textual interpretation, and naturally leads to the following queries. What assumptions about the text do we make when we open a Platonic dialogue? What assumptions ought we to make? How do they illumine, and how do they conceal, the content of the dialogues? How would one go about defending them?
All the contributions to this volume deal principally with at least one of our two leading questions. Some of the essays discuss both why Plato wrote dialogues and how we ought to read Platonic writing, for the two are closely connected. Indeed, it could be argued that they are interdependent: if we are to explain on the basis of a given reading of the dialogues why Plato wrote dialogues, we would have to know how to interpret them. But to know how to interpret them is to know something about why Plato wrote as he did. For example, if we knew that Plato regarded all the “dramatic” aspects of his works (including the use of myths and imagery) as nothing more than entertaining decoration around a philosophic core of concepts best expressed in various technical arguments, then it would make sense to look through, or rather past the dramatic aspects to the dialogue’s core meaning.

The interdependence of our two themes, however, need not prevent us from focusing first on one and then on the other. The issue of interpretation is the more easily accessible of the two. The general problem of interpreting texts has, to begin with, already been intensively discussed in a variety of fields. Therefore, the “how ought we to interpret a Platonic dialogue” question will sound considerably more familiar to a broad spectrum of readers than the “why did Plato write dialogues” question (one that leads directly to central issues of Plato’s metaphysics). The intended audience of this book includes not just Plato specialists but scholars working in areas such as the history of Greek thought, hermeneutics and literary theory, rhetoric, and the philosophy of literature.

Further, the surface form of Plato’s dialogues gives us some clues as to how we might proceed in interpreting them, while providing little explanation about why Plato wrote as he did. Most obviously, these texts are not first-person monologues in which the author speaks directly to the reader; they are dialogues in which the author never speaks in propria persona. At least for the reader who begins without a clear thesis about Plato’s reasons for writing dialogues, it seems prudent, for example, to exercise caution in reading the author’s meaning from the utterances of the dramatis personae. Reasons such as these, each of the major sections of this volume (“Essays” and “Dialogues”) focuses first on the “reading” question and then on the “writing” question. Within each of the sections, the movement of thought is from specific analyses of one or more Platonic texts to more general reflections on the principles of Platonic philosophy.

The questions explored in this book are far from new. In particular, the debate about how to categorize the Platonic writings—and so about how we are to read them—goes back to antiquity. In the third book of the Republic Plato himself provides the foundational discussion of genres. In the first book of the Poetics Aristotle explicitly takes up the issue of the 

Further an art which imitates by language alone, without harmony, in prose 
or in verse, and if in verse, either in some one or in a plurality of metres. 
This form of imitation is to this day without a name. We have no common 
name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus or a Socratic Conversation.

Alexandrian lecture notes on Plato, Diogenes Laeritus’ report of conflicting 
characterizations of the Platonic dialogue: (including of Thrasyllus’ 
arrangement of the dialogues into “dramatic” tetralogies), and the recently 
found papyrus discussing both the “dramatic” dimension of the dialogues 
and the problem of determining which of Plato’s characters (if any) “speaks” for him” confirm the venerable status of the question of the Platonic writings.

Nonetheless, in modern times the problem of interpreting Plato—and with it, the problem as to why Plato wrote dialogues—has not received the attention it deserves. Scholars working on Plato tend to proceed in their work with insufficient reflection on their own assumptions concerning the two themes outlined above. They therefore tend either to ignore scholars making different assumptions or, when they do read them, to dismiss them as misguided or incompetent. This is an odd situation in that, as already indicated, the general problem of textual interpretation has been discussed intensively in recent years by literary critics and some philosophers. It has become impossible to write successfully on any period of literature without a working knowledge of the whole problem of interpretation. Indeed, the importance of reflecting on the problem has impressed itself on philosophers of law and jurisprudence, and even on economists. Of course, theologians and readers of Scripture have long since puzzled over hermeneutical issues. The time has now come for a full-fledged debate about the reading of Plato, and so also about the reasons for which Plato wrote dialogues. This book represents a step in that direction.

This volume comprises two parts, “Essays” and “Dialogues.” In each of them, the “How ought we to read Plato” question is explored first and the “Why did Plato write dialogues” question second. These dialogues set into motion, as it were, the theses argued in the first section of the book. Each of these dialogues is structured by four elements: an important and recent book about Plato, a critical reading of the book in the light of one or another of our guiding themes, a reply by the book’s author, and, of course, the reader’s response to the entire exchange. Although all the dialogues in the present volume bring out the issues in a way that is of permanent value, a further word of explanation as to their inclusion in this book is in order.

In preparing this volume I solicited contributions from established scholars representing a wide variety of approaches to Plato. Given the scarcity of published debate about the problem of reading Plato, the deep disagreements between interpreters modern as well as ancient, and the
genuine complexity of the issues involved, dialogues between the proponents of various positions seemed a particularly efficient way to bring out the essential characterics and commitments, and indeed the strengths and weaknesses of these positions. Such debates help the reader to understand where the similarities and differences between standpoints lie and to evaluate their adequacy. The dialogues bring out the difficulties and objections that proponents of the various positions must address in order to be successful, at least in the eyes of other informed scholars. Even the junctures at which the participants in the exchanges seem unable to see each other’s points are instructive for the reader, as are analogous junc-
tures in Plato’s dialogues at which dialogue falters. In all these ways, the exchanges contribute to the general discussion about Platonic writing that this volume as a whole is intended to encourage. Finally, in a book devoted to questions about dialogue, the inclusion of these debates is not inappropriate.

The guiding and unifying threads of the book are its two major ques-
tions, and the two parts of the book (“Essays” and “Dialogues”) exhibit a parallel organization of the contributions around this pair of questions. I have already explained why the focus is first on “how to read Plato” and then on “why Plato wrote dialogues.” The parallelism of the two sections goes still further. The movement of the essays as well as of the dialogues is from a focus on particular texts to a focus on broad questions about Pla-
tonic dialectic and writing. And in ways I shall adumbrate in a moment each essay leads to the next, and each dialogue to the next. It is my hope that the reader will feel encouraged by the book’s internal unity to begin this “feast of discourses” (to borrow a phrase from Plato) at its beginning.

Our reflections on the problem of reading Plato begin with two essays on specific Platonic texts, the Republic and the Gorgias. Both essays outline competing theories of interpretation and argue that one of them better explains a Platonic text. These essays thus let us see how interpretive assumptions actually work in concrete situations, and so to understand what is at stake in the debate over reading Platonic writing. The “Dialogues” sec-
tion of the book offers a similar start and a similar benefit.

The Republic has always been among the mos: widely read (perhaps simply the most widely read) and most bitterly disputed of Platonic dialogues. The history of criticism of its theses goes back to Aristotle’s Politics. The Latin translations of the Republic in the Renaissance sparked a lively debate about Plato’s political thought, a debate that explicitly touched on the problem of interpretation.9 Philosophically minded statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson thought the Republic pernicious and in general its rhetoric sophistic, a judgment also evident in Karl Popper’s famous attack on Plato during the World War II years. The controversy about the dialogue has lost none of its vigor and continues to include debate about correct interpretive assumptions.10 The Republic is thus an excellent place to raise the question as to how one ought to read Plato.

In his essay, Diskin Clay argues that we are warranted by inspection of Plato’s use of the dialogue form in assuming certain basic principles of interpretation, such as respect for authorial anonymity and allowance for the possibility that views can be revised in the course of discussion. Clay goes on to argue that objections presented by characters other than Socrates are carefully planted by Plato to lead the reader to call into question Socrates’ own theses propounded earlier in the discussion. In the light of those points Clay argues that interpretations of the Republic such as Pop-
per’s are untenable. Clay’s reflections illustrate “the difficulties of inter-
preting the Republic without coming to terms with the distinctive character of Platonic writing in the Republic.” In the course of his discussion he offers a number of valuable observations about the dialogue, as well as an inter-
pretation to the effect that the Republic’s kallipolis (“beautiful city”) is nei-
ther a blueprint for a totalitarian state (Popper) nor a utopia that we are
meant to try to institute in practice. The Republic is, Clay argues, an open dialogue” that constantly challenges its readers to reexamine its own theses. This challenge is evident, Clay maintains, in the various paradoxes and tensions Plato embedded in the Republic, such as the paradox of the philosopher king and the tension between the good of the individual’s soul and the good of the polis that supposedly represents the soul writ large.

Clay’s reading of the Republic suggests that deficiencies, paradoxes, tensions, and even fallacies in a Platonic dialogue ought to be taken not as signaling Plato’s inability to reason well but as intentionally designed invitations to the reader to sort through the topic at hand himself. The design of Plato’s rhetoric reflects both Plato’s understanding of the truth of the topic and his understanding of the pedagogical tropes best suited for conduct-
ing a reader to the truth. This line of reasoning is taken up by Richard McKim in his essay on the Gorgias. He does so in connection with the theme of the good of the individual’s soul, a theme with which the preced-
ing essay by Clay concludes and that is crucial in the Gorgias.

McKlim begins with a criticism of both the “analytically trained com-
mentators” who read the Platonic dialogues as though they were treatises and the “speculative excesses” to which writers who stress Plato’s “dramatic irony” and supposed “unwritten teaching” are prone. McKim argues that a middle way is possible and indeed that his discussion of the Gorgias illustrates it. While McKim argues for a certain way of reading Plato, his study also offers an explanation as to why the Gorgias is a dialogue and more broadly as to why Plato adhered to the dialogue form of writing.

McKlim distinguishes between the dialogue carried on “within” Plato’s text and that which Plato carries on with the reader of the text. Although the interlocutors within the text may not be able to understand the falla-
ciousness or real purpose of an argument, the reader of the text may be expected to do so. That is, the reader is a participant in a conversation with Plato (and the latter is assumed to know what he is doing). Platonist reading thus takes on a characteristic of Platonic writing. According to McKim, Plato has Socrates defend his axiom that virtue “is always supremely beneficial to the moral agent himself” not so much in a “logical” as a “psychological” way, and this for a very strong philosophical reason: at heart there is no “logical proof” of the axiom. Rather, the evidence for it depends in good part on beliefs or intuitions we all hold, however much we might wish to avoid acknowledging them (and “sophistical debaters” are precisely those who do avoid acknowledging them). In the crucial phenomenon of “shame,” McKim finds evidence that Plato believed there exists truth that is beyond the pale of argument. Nevertheless, argument can help dispose us to “face up to the moral consequences of our sense of shame.” McKim’s thesis about the philosophical status of shame and moral insight provides powerful support for his reading of a Platonic dialogue, and indeed for reading them as dialogues in their literary/philosophical integrity.

At this point the reader is likely to want to know more about the history of the competing schools of interpretation referred to by both Clay and McKim, as well as to want a more detailed exposition of a theory of interpretation. Both are provided in Alan C. Bowen’s essay, the next chapter. Bowen discusses Eugene Tigerstedt’s seminal but neglected *Interpreting Plato*, a book that traces in detail the history of Plato interpretation. Bowen believes that an examination of this history resolves the present debate about the matter. According to Bowen, the antagonists in this debate—including Tigerstedt—assume a pivotal hermeneutic principle inherited from their predecessors—namely, that the meaning of a text consists in what the author meant by it. Bowen argues that authorial intention ought not to serve as the criterion for understanding Plato, and that once it is rejected, the old debates about whether Plato was a dogmatist or a skeptic, whether his thought developed or not, or whether he was an esotericist or not, all disappear. The dialogues ought first to be understood “philologically,” with an eye to discerning what the text (not the author) means. This task would require the reader to take seriously the dramatic dimension of the text: “one cannot isolate the logical and dialectical structure of the argumentation in a dialogue without paying heed to humor and irony at the dramatic level. Nor can one simply proceed by analyzing passages culled from different dialogues, the ‘scissors and paste’ method that is so common today.” Thus prompted by the text, the reader may also, Bowen argues, reflect on the dialogues philosophically, with an eye to determining the truth of their theses. The first process is not, he says, dependent on the second. The distinction between philological and philosopical levels of the Platonic text is analogous to the distinction between the two levels of dialogue (one within the text, the other between Plato and reader) suggested by McKim.

Appraising the philological level of the dialogue involves many difficulties, of course. The status of Plato’s myths has always been among the greatest of them. These myths confront the reader with the “literary” question head on, and any theory of reading the dialogues ought to tell us something about their interpretation. It would be difficult to achieve this end without also saying something about the philosophic importance of myth—once again, reflection on the “how to read Plato” question leads to the “why did Plato write as he did?” issue. For instance, interpreters who dismiss the myths as not worth serious study assume a conception of philosophical logos Jean-François Mattéi’s essay, which succeeds Bowen’s piece, examines the role of myth in the dialogues. He offers us reason to read them as serious, indeed indispensable, elements of the dialogues, and gives examples of such readings.

Mattéi first focuses on the dialogues as drama. After pointing out how alien they are in that respect from the now traditional rhetoric of philosophical reasoning, he suggests that reflection on Plato’s use of myth both helps explain the theatrical dimension of Plato’s dialogues and serves as a radical provocation to our understanding of what it means to do philosophy. Mattéi goes on to argue that the Platonic dialogue form, and still more strikingly Platonic myth, are in fact indispensable to philosophy as Plato understands that enterprise. Both the dialogue form and myth dramatize theory; both thus suggest that in some sense imagery is the context or, better, the “theater,” that orient theorizing. As Mattéi puts one of his central points: “Logos is capable of elaborating a theory of knowledge at the conclusion of dialectical conversations only after mythos has oriented the philosopher with a knowledge of theory. The latter engenders the natural movement of the soul that enables it to see the theater of Ideas. It seems to me unfruitful to oppose in Plato’s works the mythos to the logos, as one might an unprovocable speech to a provable one, with the sole object of concluding that one is logically superior to the other. Rather, the mythical language serves another purpose: it offers from a unique standpoint a picture of the world through which dialectic must progress step by step.” In arguing for an interdependence of mythos and logos, image and insight, drama and dialectic, Mattéi can insist that the interpreter of Plato grant Platonic myth a “serious” function. Mattéi then offers a reading of a number of Plato’s myths and images (such as that of the “puppet theater” in the *Republic’s* simile of the cave). The style of his essay may reflect his subject matter and may thus offer an example of the “self-illustration” discussed in Robert Brumbaugh’s essay. The reader is again prompted to wonder what sort of writing about Plato is Platonic.
Mattéi closes his essay with a reference to the *Seventh Letter*, the text that provides the focus of Brumbaugh’s piece which follows it. The themes of insight or vision, as well as the question as to how we should read those examples of Platonic writing that seem more like monologues than like dialogues, lead naturally to the *Seventh Letter*. This document has often been offered as a counterexample to the thesis that Plato thought that philosophy cannot be expressed in nondenotational fashion or that Plato insisted on “authorial anonymity.” If, however, the *Letter* possesses the characteristics Brumbaugh attributes to it, then its literary dimension is far more important than is usually thought, and its force as a counterexample is thereby weakened. Brumbaugh argues that the *Seventh Letter* deploys the devices of “dissension” and of “self-illustration” typical of many of Plato’s dialogues (for example, the *Phaedrus*’ palinode exhibits the “art of rhetoric” outlined later in the dialogue). In order to demonstrate this (a side benefit of which would be, Brumbaugh claims, evidence of the *Seventh Letter*’s authenticity) he examines how these literary techniques operate in several of Plato’s dialogues. He thus supplies us as well with some suggestions about reading the dialogues. In examining the question as to how we are to read the *Seventh Letter*—quite possibly a genuinely Platonic text—Brumbaugh expands the scope of our reflections on Platonic writing.

Brumbaugh’s reflections lead us to a puzzle: given that the dialogues and the *Letter* exhibit similar dramatic devices, is there any real difference between reading a dialogue and reading a document written in the fashion of the *Letter*? If not, why did Plato write dialogues? This question is pressed on us by the author of the *Letter* when he writes that “no work of mine exists on such topics, and none ever will, for there is no way of putting them into words like other studies” (341c4–6), and that “no intelligent person will ever risk putting what he really understands into language, especially not in fixed form as is the lot of written characters” (343a1–4; Kenneth M. Sayre’s translation, in the essay that follows Brumbaugh’s piece). Brumbaugh closes his essay by raising the important question of the substantive ties between the *Letter*’s statements about writing and the dialogue form. Sayre makes this question his primary focus, thus bringing us squarely to the second major question this book addresses: why did Plato write dialogues?

Sayre argues that even if the *Letter* is not authentic it nevertheless yields substantial clues as to why Plato wrote dialogues and, consequently, as to how we are to interpret them. To begin with, the *Letter* does not, according to Sayre, suggest that oral discourse can articulate the truth, whereas written discourse cannot. All discourse (including names, descriptions, and scientific knowledge) suffers from the same fundamental deficiency, namely, its involvement in sense experience. Consequently, logos is incapable of fully articulating philosophical insight or vision. According to Sayre, the “nonverbal nature of philosophic understanding” that eludes speech and writing is also represented in the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*. The *Letter*’s description of the experience of coming to an insight, moreover, helps explain why, in spite of the weakness of discourse, Plato wrote dialogues. The process of question and answer, of repeated exploration of one’s opinions as well as those of others, serves to remove false views and prepare the soul for the true. Sayre argues that this notion of dialectical discourse as preparing the soul for insight is the core meaning of the *Meno*’s doctrine of “recollection” (anamnesis). It is intrinsic to anamnesis that the learner not be *told* the truth, but rather bring himself to undergo the insight into the truth. Hence the aporetic or seemingly inchoative character of so many of the early and middle dialogues exhibits the *Seventh Letter*’s teaching about the relationship between discourse and insight, a relationship that could be accounted for in terms of the notion of recollection. Although that notion does not have to persist in the later dialogues, Sayre argues that the core view of philosophy as a nondiscursive grasp of reality remains present. Just as that view explains why Socrates would have preferred dialectical exchanges to monologues, so it explains why Plato wrote dialogues. Philosophical insight cannot be expressed discursively, but dialogue—whether written or spoken—is virtually indispensable if a mind is to be recalled to insight.

Sayre’s essay naturally stimulates us to want to hear more about the all-pervasive “weakness of discourse.” In the essay following Sayre’s, Rosemary Desjardins takes up that issue. Starting once again from the *Seventh Letter*, she agrees that the deficiency of logos holds as much for oral as for written discourse. Her analysis of this deficiency leads her to the important notions of “interpretation” and “ambiguity.” For Desjardins, once we see that discourse is inherently ambiguous, we also see that to understand a logos is to interpret it. We are then in a position to appreciate three levels of the Platonic dialogue. The first concerns Socrates’ interpretation of his own tradition, a key component of which is the *elenchus*, or cross-examination. Desjardins argues that for Socrates prephilosophic opinions are rarely altogether false. Rather, they are false under a certain interpretation, and a function of Socratic elenchus is to bring out the respect in which opinions are true. Socrates’ hermeneutic investigations led to his being charged with corrupting the young, for the Athenians interpreted him as rejecting rather than as trying to understand their tradition. Acknowledging the unavoidability of interpretation in any effort to understand, Desjardins argues, is crucial to defending Socrates against such charges.

For Desjardins, the dialogue form of writing is central to Plato’s interpretation of Socrates and the Socratic tradition, and thus constitutes a second level of the issue. Socrates did not leave his tradition unchanged, and by writing—indeed, writing dialogues in which Socrates is fictional-
ized—Plato too changes the very tradition that he is appropriating. Desjardins further argues that the dramatic dimension of the dialogues—including the interplay between word and deed in them—is crucial in Plato's view to overcoming the ambiguity intrinsic to discourse and in presenting a correct interpretation of Socratic philosophizing. Plato's decision to write dialogues thus reflects his awareness of the very same weaknesses of discourse and the importance of interpretation that guided Socrates' decision to philosophize through dialectic. Plato's dialogue with the Socratic tradition is directed in part to an audience Socrates did not have, namely, the readers of Plato's texts. This audience must also engage in a process of understanding, interpretation, and dialogue—with written dialogues that now constitute the basis of their own tradition. Therein lies, for Desjardins, the third level of the matter.

The crucial role of interpretation for Plato not only sheds light on why he wrote dialogues and on how we should read his writings but also brings Plato into the current debate about hermeneutics. Desjardins argues that Plato's position on "what it means to understand" is quite close to that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, a position that she views as offering a middle way between a naïve "objectivism," which takes linguistic utterances as simply clear and certain, and "subjectivism" or "relativism," which hold that words (and texts) mean whatever an interpreter feels they mean. The middle way combines acceptance with interrogation, respect with critique. It admits both that philosophy has a nature and that philosophizing is open-ended, and so implies that philosophizing is fundamentally dialogical.

But might not the association of dialogue with philosophy be merely a part of a tradition rather than part of the "nature" of philosophy? In order to answer this question, Jürgen Mittelstrass spells out both the theoretical and the existential dimensions of dialogical knowing implicit in the preceding essay by Desjardins. Without a detailed analysis of how dialogue leads to philosophical knowledge, we would be unable to answer the above question, and would therefore be unable to refer to the nature of philosophy by way of explaining why Plato wrote dialogues. Mittelstrass develops his analysis through consideration of seven propositions about Socratic/Platonic dialogue, in the course of which he ties together the notions of dialogue, recollection, elenchus, maieutics, and philosophy understood as a "way of life" and "disposition of the soul." Mittelstrass's argument suggests that dialogue implies substantive metaphysical theses and that dialogue ought not to be understood as a method or technique that might on occasion be useful to philosophers for solving problems. Like Sayre, he argues that although Plato is not an esoterist in the sense of possessing a "secret teaching" that can be articulated in the medium of the spoken word alone, Plato does believe that insight cannot be "proven" discursively or presented the way propositions in some branches of knowledge can be.

For Mittelstrass the dialogue form of writing—thanks in part to its literary character—is perfectly suited to the demands of philosophizing so understood. The dialogue form "is capable of partially suspending its own textual character" by drawing the reader not just into a theoretical investigation but also into adopting a certain stance toward the world (for example, the reader is called upon to identify through imagination with certain of the characters in the drama, but not with others). Plato's dialogue form represents philosophy as "argumentative action" and copes effectively with our natural tendency to dogmatism. Mittelstrass's argument has important implications for our interpretation of Plato's texts, such as the requirements that we take with utmost seriousness his use of myth, irony, intentional fallacies and gaps in the argument, authorial anonymity, and the like.

In the seventh and final section of this chapter Mittelstrass argues that philosophical reason cannot be "demonstrated" to someone who does not possess it. Rather, it has to be "developed" and undergone in order to show itself as the "right" way of approaching questions. Mittelstrass contrasts the Platonic commitment to dialogical reason with the subsequent tradition of "Platonism" in the history of philosophy and science that emphasizes monological and systematic thinking. In suggesting that dialogue is not an optional characteristic of philosophizing properly understood, Mittelstrass points to a strong rationale for Plato's decision to write dialogues.

At this juncture the reader may well wonder whether a strong identification of dialogue with philosophical reason can really be sustained. Even if one grants that philosophy rests fundamentally on the individual's insight into the truth, that discourse requires interpretation in order that its intrinsic ambiguities be met, and that philosophy is a way of leading one's life, why could not a philosopher communicate effectively, and even "dramatically," in a nondialogical fashion?

In the final chapter of this section of the book, I argue that for a very good philosophical reason, philosophers cannot defend their own activity—and so their way of life—nondialogically. The reason is that any monological defense of philosophy against the radical critiques of the varied poets, skeptics, sophists, politicians, and other nonphilosophers portrayed in Plato's dialogues, would be circular and so unconvincing to the philosopher himself. Plato's decision to write dialogues stems from his deep awareness of the intrinsic difficulty of justifying philosophical reason, of showing that it is legitimate, indeed good and worthwhile, to philosophize. To be a philosopher is to make certain kinds of claims about oneself and the world—for example, the claims that one ought to know what one is talking about and that to possess knowledge is to be able to give a logos of a certain sort. I try to show why these are not claims that can be sustained.
nondialogically in the face of sufficiently clever opponents (namely, those who do not claim to have a [philosophical] position to the effect that philosophy is impossible). I also try to show that Plato's dialogues supply plenty of evidence, by virtue of both their form as dialogues and their content, that Plato understood the objections of such opponents and that he wished to meet them, that is, to make a case for the superiority of philosophy. The "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" really is a basic dispute for Plato.

As an effort to reflect philosophically on philosophy, the argument is metaphilosophical in character. Kant's "critical" project can be understood as part of a long series of efforts to reform philosophy by reflecting metaphilosophically on its "grounds" and "conditions," and so to determine "prior" to philosophizing about this or that topic what it would mean to be successful in claiming to know something. Judged by the standard of philosophical self-consciousness thus characterized, Plato's dialogues seem hopelessly naive, unsystematic, and unreflexive. But the Kantian project assumes too much, and as Hegel immediately demonstrated, reason's "critique" of itself is either question begging or leads to an infinite regress. I argue that Plato shares that Hegelian objection to any Kantian effort to secure the "foundations" of philosophy.

Can dialectical philosophy—the supposed alternative to the Kantian critique—establish its own metaphilosophy without succumbing to the same objections? That question brings us again to the fundamental dispute, which lies not between proponents of dialectic and those of nondialectical epistemology but between dialecticians and the critics of reason giving as such. I argue that those critics—including Nietzsche, Rorty, and Derrida—are justified in accusing Hegelian dialectic of begging the question. But Platonic dialogue as exhibited in his dialogues is not susceptible to that criticism, precisely by virtue of its literary character. Plato shows us, phenomenologically as it were, how critics of philosophy fail on their own grounds to sustain their critique, and how their pronouncing opinions about this or that topic commits them to giving reasons for those opinions. Plato does all this while retaining his anonymity as author, thus avoiding the accusation that he is begging the question. That is, Plato has to write the sort of dialogues he did write in order to refute successfully the critics of philosophy. Platonic dialogue is necessarily reactive, pedagogic, unstructured, crucially dependent on the philosopher's "erotic techne." It does not follow that Platonic dialogue is without ontological implications, and I try to show how reflection on the experience of philosophical dialogue leads to doctrines of a positive nature.

As is already evident, I develop my analysis of Plato's reasons for writing dialogues by means of contrasts between Plato and other figures in the recent history of philosophy. The Platonic dialogue is thus brought into the current debate about the limits of rhetoric, philosophy, and self-reflexivity.

The second part of this book consists of dialogues about the issues raised in the first part. Some of the dialogues illustrate vividly and concretely what several of the authors in the "Essays" section discuss in a theoretical way. Indeed, the reader will find a number of the observations offered in Bowen's essay relevant in evaluating the debate. All the dialogues under "Readings" bring out explicitly and in detail various theories about interpretation and their application to Plato. Just as the first part began with an analysis of the much disputed Republic, the second part begins with a discussion of one of Plato's best known "political" writings, namely, the Crito. Are the reasons Socrates gives there for refusing to flee prison sound? Is the implied theory of political obligation reconcilable with Socrates' own statements in the Apology? The exchange between Clifford Orwin and Richard Kraut illuminates clearly the ways in which one's answer to such questions is connected to one's assumptions about interpretation. For example, Kraut denies that just because a philosophical work is presented as a dialogue that it is not also a treatise. One Platonic text may be importantly dialogical, whereas another—such as the Crito—may perhaps be profitably read as though it were a monologue and so without complicating considerations of its dramatic or rhetorical structure.

McKim's contrast between analytical and contextual approaches to interpretation is strikingly exhibited by the next dialogue, that between Terence Irwin and David Roocknich. Irwin is author of one of the most widely read and discussed books on Plato published in English in recent years. His lively exchange with Roocknich spells out in detail—for the first time so far as I know—the basic interpretive assumptions underlying his approach to Plato. As was the case in the exchange between Orwin and Kraut, Roocknich and Irwin disagree at a fundamental level about what it means to read Plato.

In contrast, the succeeding dialogues between Ronald Polansky and Paul Woodruff, and between Joachim Dahlen and Kenneth Dorfer, illustrate with reference to specific Platonic texts how readers who claim to agree about the basics of interpretation can nevertheless disagree deeply about how a specific text should be read. These exchanges are particularly useful in helping us to flesh out what "taking the drama seriously" might mean. A key problem is distinguishing between reading what the text says and reading into the text what we think it should say. The problem is especially acute when the interpreter claims the text doesn't mean what it says—that it is ironic. The Phaedo's famous "proofs" for the immortality of the soul present a crucial test case in this regard, as the disagreement between Dorfer and Dahlen shows. I note that their debate
as to how best to read the *Phaedo* exemplifies some of the conflicts discussed in Mattéi’s essay.

The book concludes with two exchanges focusing on why Plato wrote dialogues. Kenneth M. Sayre’s explanation of the connection between the theory of recollection and the dialogue form is examined critically in his debate with Jon Moline. A key issue in their dialogue is whether the rationale for Plato’s decision to write dialogues depends on Plato’s continued acceptance of the “theory of recollection,” and whether that theory is present in, or at least is compatible with, his later dialogues. Several of Moline’s comments about the meaning of “recollection” echo Mittelstrass’s interpretation of the same notion.

The final dialogue in this book presents us with the first published response by Hans-Georg Gadamer to an evaluation of his approach to Plato by an interpreter influenced by what we might loosely call (following several contributors to the present book) “analytical” philosophy. Nicholas P. White and Gadamer take us through several issues that lie at the heart of Platonic philosophy, issues that were discussed in various ways by Sayre, Desjardins, Mittelstrass, and myself earlier in the book. In particular, White and Gadamer discuss the sense in which Plato was committed to the view that our knowledge of things is imperfect and fallible, and the sense in which Plato felt that dialogue is the appropriate response to the human condition. Since, as Gadamer points out, he and White seem at times to be addressing different questions to Plato, we are led to wonder which readings are and which are not truly measured by Plato’s writings. Reflection on the problem of Platonic writing has here brought us full circle to the problem of reading Plato.

The efforts of the interlocutors in part II to respond to each others’ writings and readings seem to bear out Desjardins’s observations about the inseparability of understanding and interpretation and about the ambiguity intrinsic to discourse. I leave it to the reader to ponder the self-reflexive questions playfully implied by the title of this book.

Although the contributors to this volume represent a broad spectrum of approaches to the issue of the Platonic dialogue, the further discussion the book is intended to provoke might profitably include two approaches to Plato interpretation that were repeatedly discussed in passing in the essays and exchanges. One is that of the “Tübingen school” represented by K. Gaisser and H. J. Krämer. In its extreme form this view holds that no serious Platonic teaching is to be found in the dialogues except in the mode of allusion to the “unwritten teachings.” John Findlay has argued along similar lines. The other approach is that inaugurated by Jacques Derrida. Both are readily available in print and have been extensively discussed in the secondary literature.

To the best of my knowledge, a volume such as this one is unprecedented in the area of Plato studies. The presupposition of this book is that serious consideration of the twin problems of interpretation and of Plato’s reasons for writing dialogues is essential to a successful understanding of his work. Of course, the issues are also philosophically worthwhile in their own right. The presupposition of the dialogues included in this volume is a Platonic one: a philosopher cannot be confident of the truth of his own views until he has subjected himself to the objections of his rivals. This volume represents an initial effort to stimulate, as well as to exhibit, the dialogical thinking Socrates and Plato made fundamental to philosophy.

Although this is a book on Plato, the quandaries it evinces haunt the history of philosophical composition and interpretation after Plato as well. Even in the era of “deconstruction,” surprisingly little has been done in the way of detailed readings of the texts of, among many others, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, and Hegel in their literary integrity. A good deal of work about the connection between the philosophical and literary dimension of works such as these remains to be done. Both of the themes guiding the present book could be usefully pursued in the study of other philosophers. In deciding how best to read, say, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, we ought to ask why Spinoza cast his thoughts in the form that he did. And we are entitled to wonder not just whether dialogues by authors other than Plato are dramas in an important sense but whether ironies, silences, misdirections, metaphors—in short, the rhetorical devices frequently deprecated by philosophers—are inseparable from even the most systematic or archetypal works. How authoritative or final is the apparent divorce of philosophy from rhetoric and poetry? Are philosophical texts really autonomous in the way that many philosophers suppose, or do they retain traces of dialogue (in particular, dialogue between the author and his readers, the author and the “secondary literature”)? If they are not autonomous, might the tension between exotericism and esotericism, traditionally associated with the problem of reading Plato, represent a deeply philosophical phenomenon? Questions of this sort, so insistently raised by the genre defined by Plato’s dialogues, cut to the core of the meaning of *philosophy* itself.
Notes

Introduction


3. See Anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, ed. and trans. L. G. Westerink (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1962). The topics discussed in that text include the dramatic chronology and setting, the style, and the characters, and Plato's reasons for choosing them in each case; the reasons for his choice of various titles; the question as to how to divide up individual dialogues as well as the corpus (and in particular the question as to the ways in which the dialogues can be ordered); the distinction between narrated and performed dialogues; and Plato's reasons for writing dialogues.


6. I do not mean to imply that no work has been done on the problem of interpreting Plato. For example, see the works by T. A. Szleczak cited in the Bibliography to this book, as well as *Philologie und Hermeneutik im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. H. Flashar, K. Gründer, A. Horstmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), particularly the papers by R. Wiehl ("Schleiermachers Hermeneutik—ihre Bedeutung für die Philologie in Theorie und Praxis") and G. Scholtz ("Zur Darstellung der griechischen Philosophie bei den Schülern Hegels und Schleiermachers"). Not just Schleiermacher's *Introductions* (1804) but also Hegel's lectures on Plato (as well as Hegel's review of Solger's posthumous works) would also be apposite to subsequent discussions of the issue (for the complete references see the Bibliography). *Das Platonbild: Zehn Beiträge zum Platonverständnis*, ed. K. Gaizer (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969), contains some overlapping material of an older date (including essays by Natorp,
8. For the work on economic literature, see N. McCloskey's The Rhetoric of Economics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Among recent debates concerning the interpretation of the law are works by proponents and opponents of the Critical Legal Studies school. The difficulties of interpreting documents such as the American Constitution have a long history. For a remarkable statement of the problem of interpretation in the context of law, consider James Madison's remark in Federalist no. 37 about the inherent equivocality of words: "But no language is so copious as to supply words and phrases for every complex idea, or so correct as not to include many equivalently denoting different ideas. Hence it happens that however accurately objects may be discriminated in themselves, and however accurately the discrimination may be considered, the definition of them may be rendered inaccurate by the inaccuracy of the terms in which it is delivered. And this unavoidable inaccuracy must be greater or less, according to the complexity and novelty of the objects defined. When the Almighty himself condescends to address mankind in their own language, his meaning, luminous as it must be, is rendered dim and doubtful by the cloudy medium through which it is communicated" (The Federalist Papers, ed. C. Rensselaer [New York: New American Library, 1961], p. 229).

9. All the exchanges, and almost all the essays, were written especially for this volume. With two exceptions, none of the contributions to the collection has been published elsewhere. The exceptions are my "Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," first published in marginally different form in Platonics Investigations, ed. D. O'Meara (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), and Mittelstraß's essay, which originally formed chapter 7 of Wissenschaft als Lebensform (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982). The translation was prepared especially for this volume and has not appeared elsewhere.

10. See F. E. Manuel and F. P. Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1979), pp. 104-12. The authors note that in an important fifteenth-century defense by Bessarion of Plato's political ideas, Bessarion insisted that "it was an error to accept the opinions of various participants in the dialogues as Plato's own. Socrates alone was his true mouthpiece" (p. 107).


12. For an example, see the exchanges between M. F. Burney and students of L. Strauss cited in the Bibliography to this book.

13. I. Findlay, Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974). On p. ix, Findlay says that publication of the work was encouraged in part by the appearance of works by Krämer and Gaiser. Findlay goes on to state that "my first and most fundamental conviction is that the Platonic Dialogues are not, taken by themselves, the sort of works in which anyone's views on any matter could be clearly set forth: they point beyond themselves, and without going beyond them they are not to be understood." On p. xii, he remarks that "there are many requirements for a good interpreter of Plato: the ability to follow intricate arguments and fill in their gaps, the ability to feel the drift of speculative passages and see where they tend without going off into speculative excursions of one's own, the deep feeling for an ultimate mysticism which is not incompatible with clearness and commonsense."

14. For relevant works by Derrida, Gaiser, and Krämer, see the Bibliography. The work by Lacoue-Labarthe cited there is also helpful in assessing the Derridean and Heideggerian approach to Plato. The Epilogue to my Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus offers further discussion of Derrida's interpretation of Plato.


1. Reading the Republic


2. I anticipate a theme I treat in what follows and document in n. 25 below.

3. The very title of More's Utopia reflects an appreciation of the reaction of most readers to HYDLOIDES' description of the society of Utopia which is Platonic. Such a society can exist "nowhere," just as the proposals of the Republic can be described as "nothing" (Legend õvéd: Rep. 7.527E; cf. 9.592A). Another feature of More's Utopia that reflects his reading of the Republic is his decision to adopt Plato's indirect approach to the questions of social reform: "What you cannot turn to good you must make as little bad as you can" (Utopia, ed. Edward Surtz [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964], p. 50). The dialogue form of the Utopia is another sign of More's appreciation of Plato's "indirect approach."

4. All this and more can be gotten from the indictment of Karl Popper's The Open Society and Its Enemies, vol. 1, The Spell of Plato, 5th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), by a simple reference to his generous index under the headings totalitarianism, Lordly he, lying, infanticide, and individuals and society. It is not my purpose here to enter into the controversies the book has generated. For the purposes of this essay, the most noteworthy thing about Popper's attack on Plato's political philosophy is the lack of preliminary reflection on the nature of Platonic writing. One of the difficulties in Popper's characterization of Plato's thought is that it is global and embraces the Republic and the Laws without distinction. His contrasting theory of the "Socratic" Apology and Critic and the "Platonic" Republic and Laws: the differences between the Republic and the Statesman as well as the Laws are very slight indeed" (p. 306). The same lack of awareness of the fundamental problems of Platonic interpretation is one of the many failures of the apology for Plato of R. B. Silverman, in his In Defense of Plato (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933). The closest Levinson comes to the issues raised in this essay is in a paragraph of his treatment of Plato, "The Literary Artist," where he observes that "Simian and Cebes, in the Phaedo, might reasonably be called the reader disguised as participant" (p. 29).
Plato’s Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues

Charles L. Griswold Jr.

Why did Plato write dialogues? To oversimplify somewhat, at least three types of answers seem possible. The first focuses on the demands of pedagogy. Plato wrote dialogues, we are told, because he thought them effective in getting potential philosophers engaged in the search for truth. If he were writing for fellow philosophers already well on their way to the truth, the dialogue form would be optional, if it were not actually an obstacle to a precise articulation of the subject matter.

The second type of answer would have us focus on political considerations. Plato wrote in a way that allowed him both to present unorthodox points of view and to escape the fate of Socrates. Authorial anonymity, esotericism, and irony would be heavily stressed in such an account.

The third type of answer focuses on various philosophical reasons for Plato’s exceptional adherence to the dialogue form. In this chapter I shall argue for a version of this type of answer. My line of reasoning attributes philosophical significance to the oddly occasional and provisional character that Plato gave to his written dialogues; to Plato’s anonymity vis-à-vis the dramatis personae in his compositions; to the role of irony; to his obsession with refuting sophists, poets, popular rhetoricians, and other critics of philosophy; and finally to his decision to make the origination of philosophy an omnipresent theme. I shall argue that Plato must write dialogues, and indeed dialogues possessing characteristics such as those just mentioned.

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if he is to avoid begging the question when maintaining that the philosophically unexamined life is not worth living for a human being. In a moment I shall explain the connection between that argument and the issue of “metaphilosophy.”

The whole issue of the role of “dialogue” or “dialectic” (for now I will not distinguish between them) in philosophy has recently come to the fore once again thanks to the criticisms of nondaetical, systematic rationality put forward by (if I may vastly oversimplify the genealogy) descendants of both Nietzsche (such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty) and Hegel (such as Rescher and Habermas), as well as by philosophers of science such as Kuhn and Feyerabend. These critics themselves fall into at least two major camps, the one (to which Rorty and Derrida belong) hostile to philosophy as such, the other critical of nondaetical philosophy but partisan to dialectical philosophy (Hegel, Rescher). Thus, in spite of their common opposition to nondaetical philosophizing, these two camps have a debate of their own. This second debate is more radical than the debate between dialectical and nondaetical philosophers because it concerns the viability of philosophy simpliciter. I believe that an understanding of these two levels of debate can be of considerable assistance in clarifying why Plato wrote dialogues. Since the philosophical issue at stake concerns the nature of philosophy itself, the debates are metaphilosophical in character.

I will begin by establishing a working definition of “metaphilosophy,” Having then discussed the two metalevel debates, I shall try to show how sound metaphilosophical considerations make Plato’s choice of the dialogue form and the associated phenomena intelligible. This demonstration will require a fairly detailed discussion of several other figures in the history of philosophy. After arguing that dialogue carries with it important ontological commitments, in the final section of this chapter I discuss the Platonic response to Richard Rorty’s notion of “conversation.” The general form of my argument looks like an example of “rational reconstruction.” I do believe, however, that there is sufficient evidence in Plato’s dialogues to indicate that the argument I will be presenting was, in general outline, understood and endorsed by Plato.

I

The term metaphilosophy is a recent invention. It seems to have been coined by, not surprisingly, a follower of the later Wittgenstein, in order to refer to the “investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments.” The prefix meta had, of course, long since been put to work by philosophers intent on carving out a discipline that is one step above, or prior to, its object. The term metacritique, for example, was used by Herder in this sense. Even the term metaphysics is used by Kant in the distinctly non-Aristotelian and by now familiar sense of “the study of the conditions for the possibility of” a given science. Indeed, Kant repeatedly remarks that the Kritik der reinen Vernunft (KRV) is itself an example of the new “metaphysics” (for example, B22–24, A841 = B869 ff.; see also Axx–xxi). Kant also characterizes the Critique as a “treatise on the method” (Bxii) whose purpose is to determine the limits of reason in advance of particular attempts to reason. Since reason itself undertakes this task, Kant holds that in the Critique reason is “occupied only with itself” (A680). Since reason alone can judge of itself, all claims to knowledge are brought before it as before a “tribunal” (Axi, A751 = B779). Knowledge of “transcendental” rules or concepts will thus perform a veridical function (B26).

The second level, or transcendental, focus of “criticism” requires a concentration on form. The KRV studies our (formal) knowledge of objects, not objects themselves, a knowledge that is not itself an “object” in the same sense (A402). This metalevel project thus consists, as Kant repeatedly says with respect to reason’s “critique” of itself, in self-knowledge (Axi, A735 = B763, A849 = B877). The project thus seems fully in keeping with the goal of philosophy as traditionally understood.

In the simplest terms, metaphilosophy is the effort to philosophize about how we reason about things and so to understand, “before” we reason about them, what we can and cannot know. Thus metaphilosophy in the primary sense of the term is naturally understood within the Kantian framework just adumbrated. This framework, anticipated by Descartes (and still more clearly by Locke), is definitive of a great deal of modern philosophy, according to modern philosophers themselves. The rise of the notion of subjectivity, the emphasis on certainty as a criterion of knowing, the description of knowledge in terms of formal rules and concepts, the thesis that knowledge is an instrument or techne, as well as the concern for method, system, scientific procedure—all characterize the tradition derived from the Cartesian-Kantian “turn” to a metaphorical interpretation of the Delphic “know thyself.” Although Kant in particular denies that this amounts to a metaphysics of the self in the classical sense (the Paralogisms is an attack on the possibility of such a project), he admits that the “transcendental conditions” of knowledge are, in some difficult to define sense, “in us.”

The metalevel study of the conditions of our knowledge of objects cannot, as I have already suggested, list these same objects as conditions, unless it is to move in a circle. Hence the turn to metaphilosophy results in something like the substitution of “epistemology” for “ontology,” or at
least the view that the former is logically prior to the latter (KRV, A247–B303). This is why metaphilosophy has an endlessly "preparatory" or "anticipatory" nature (KRV, B26). Of course, even this tradition of modern philosophy is full of revolutions and counterrevolutions. But there is a family resemblance between them; the quarrel is an intramural one. Each new claim to legitimate rule rests on an intensification of the "critical" turn: new, more rigorously drawn limits (whether "transcendental," "logical," "categorial," or "linguistic") of reason are constantly touted, and the work of one's predecessors rejected as sloppy, speculative, unscientific, guilty of transgressing the bounds of what is knowable, and so forth. Even the history of German idealism, I think, should be read in this way. 

In my opinion, the logic behind this turn to "critical" philosophizing—that is, to metaphilosophy—is very persuasive. There really is a problem concerning beginnings in philosophy, and metaphilosophy concentrates on this problem directly. Moreover, there would simply seem to be a difference between knowledge claims that are made and those that are used in the claims themselves, between claims made on the "object level" and evidence used to support the claims, or between what Hegel calls the "truth" and "knowledge" of claims. Still further, there would seem to be a difference between, on the one hand, the metalevel rules that allow one to define the problem or area one wishes to investigate, the rules for investigation, as well as the rules that determine when the investigation is complete, and, on the other hand, the investigation itself. Just as (to use one of Kant's own analogies) a language possesses a grammar containing its rules, so knowledge claims possess a metaphilosophy (a "transcendental grammar") containing the rules for making knowledge claims. This argument looks like a distant epigone of the Platonic demand for an "ascent" to the forms.

In sum, before we make a claim to know an object, we must know our knowledge of this object (KRV, A11 = B25). Arguments ad rem, that is, prove little in philosophy; they do not answer the quid juris question. Philosophers must first locate the arche, and this arche (starting point) seems necessarily to be a "concept" of knowledge, not of being. For, to repeat, every statement about "what is" is an implicit knowledge claim, which therefore reflects assumptions we are making in formulating the claim. Moreover, it does seem to be a distinguishing mark of philosophy to be self-reflexive; while other branches of knowledge cannot serve as the instruments for self-reflection (there is no biology of biology, only a philosophy of biology), philosophy alone possesses this capacity. So persuasive is this formulation of the self-knowledge issue that most modern interpreters of ancient philosophy assume without further ado that Plato too must have had an "epistemology," in however primitive a form. It is thus typical to find modern philosophers construing the history of philosophy as a continuous development toward the goal they believe themselves to have reached: namely, that of specifying the "architectonic" (for example, KRV, A856 = B884 and context), the "logic," "syntax," or the "grammar" of reason. Critical metaphilosophy, in short, seems to be an intensification (and inevitably also a correction) of philosophy as traditionally understood. 

Our metaphilosophically oriented philosophers also claim that there is no way of ending the proverbial disputes of the philosophers, of distinguishing between defensible and indefensible philosophies, of answering skepticism convincingly, unless some new, more self-conscious "method" is brought to light (KRV, A751 = B779 ff.). The reasoning here is, again, persuasive.

II

I would like to bring this discussion to bear on Plato. We should admit from the start, I think, that judged by the standards of metaphilosophy, Plato seems hopelessly naive and clumsy. His dialogues contain no systematic doctrine of logic or of the a priori principles of knowledge. Plato does not even furnish us, as Aristotle does in Book VIII of the Topics, with a systematic analysis of dialectical reasoning. Most of Plato's discussions about the nature of philosophy are framed against a moral or political canvas, and so avoid the purely theoretical discussions we would expect from a self-conscious thinker. The Platonic discussions of the matter tend also to be stated in a literary or poetic form (philosophy is "midwifery," and so forth), and so fail to measure up, as Hegel and countless others have said, to the demands of "scientific" thinking. That is, there is a close connection between Plato's dialogue form of writing and his seeming inarticulateness in metaphilosophical matters. The one dialogue that would have dealt directly with metaphilosophical problems, namely the Philosopher, was never written, although it is promised in the Sophist and Statesman. And on the occasion when Plato brings the mature Socrates together with the one person competent to enter into a good metaphilosophical discussion with him, namely the Eleatic Stranger, Plato has Socrates sit in virtual silence. Yet this is the only time in the Platonic dialogues in which two mature philosophers are brought together. 

To be sure, there are indications in the dialogues that Plato understood, in principle, what a Kantian "critique" would be like. The discussion in the Charmides about an "episteme of episteme," and the various descriptions in the later dialogues about the "method of division and collection," constitute some evidence of that. But the Charmides ends in aporia, self-reflexive episteme ist dismissed as an impossibility, and the method of division and collection never replaces for long the haphazard movement.
of dialogue. In the *Theaetetus* Plato seems to be groping for an epistemology, but of course that dialogue also ends in aporia. There are some statements in the dialogues that look like fragments of an epistemology, such as the occasional talk about “άνάμνησις” (recollection), about the difference between knowledge and belief (δόξα), and so on. But such talk is often cast in the form of a myth (as in the *Phaedrus*) and is never presented systematically and in a manner that is unencumbered by digressions, rhetorical pronouncements, or in short by the whole “dramatic” dimension. The incomplete epistemological doctrines even seem to change throughout Plato’s career. None of this constitutes a reason for dismissing the epistemological (or metaphysical) passages in the dialogues as unimportant. But these passages are radically unsatisfactory from a metaphilosophical point of view.

Still more important, we repeatedly find that in his discussions about knowledge Plato just assumes or asserts that the Ideas exist, and then explains what “knowledge” is (for example, *Rep.* 476a ff., 507a–b ff., 596a and context; *Pha.* 100b ff.). We do not seem to get an account of how we know these ontological assumptions to be true. Indeed, one is justified in wondering whether Plato has a “theory” of Ideas at all. Thus in the *Phaedrus,* for example, Episteme is listed as one of the Ideas, the knowledge of which is the province of godly souls especially (247c–e and context) But in the *Phaedrus* little thought seems given to working out how we could claim to “know” even an Idea of Knowledge, or rather, how we could know we know it. Simililey, the sun/Good analogy in the *Republic,* and the image of the Divided Line, do explain something about our knowledge, but without explaining how we know this very analogy to be true. In any case, the “ontological” principles of the *Phaedrus* and *Republic* seem to be beyond the grasp of merely mortal intellects. Correspondingly, the Platonic dialogues never supply us with a thorough discussion of the nature of “dialectic” (cf. *Rep.* 532e–533c; *Pha.* 266b8–9 and context). To these points we must add that Plato’s dialogues evidence a studied and frustrating avoidance of “technical” terminology. There is no Platonic analogue to book Delta of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics.*

In sum, Plato’s dialogues seem both fantastically naive—because of the absence of systematic reflection on the conditions for the possibility of knowing, as well as the ubiquity of unproven assumptions about the existence and nature of essences—and utterly incoincisive—because the assumptions always seem vitiated by the paucity, and poor logical structure, of arguments in favor of them as well as by the fact that they are presented in a rhetorical and dramatic context. The result would seem to be, depending which of these aspects one stresses, either dogmatism (supported, perhaps, by theories about Plato’s “secret teaching”) or skepticism (knowledge of ignorance, and nothing more). This is precisely the dilemma from which Kant seeks to extricate both himself and philosophy. The dilemma seems to arise from the fact that Plato has no “critical” metaphilosophy, even though he understood, in broad outlines, the notion itself. When everything is said and done, we seem drawn to the conclusion that Plato philosophizes unconsciously.

Having sketched out (in properly dialectical fashion) a negative construal of the failure in Plato’s dialogues to pursue systematic and metaphilosophically oriented self-knowledge, I would like now to argue for a positive, and I believe far more persuasive, analysis of the same phenomena. Plato’s decision to write dialogues can and should be explained as part of a deliberate and plausible philosophical position. In order to present this interpretation, I would like to return to the two debates referred to at the start of this chapter.

In the history of philosophy a movement critical of the very idea that philosophers should, or can, possess a metaphilosophy seems to dog every attempt to formulate one. The “constructive” efforts of the history of philosophy seem always shadowed by ever-present criticisms of “positive” or “systematic” philosophy. In recent years the criticisms have been developed, in a variety of ways and with a variety of intentions, by writers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Goodman, Gadamer, Derrida, and Rorty. One perfectly obvious, but very powerful criticism of metaphilosophy may be roughly stated as follows. Metaphilosophy either leads to an infinite regress or begs the question. If a metaphilosophy can itself be reasoned about, then we will require a meta-metaphilosophy, and so on ad infinitum, there being no Archimedean point in philosophy. If we hold at the outset that the principles about which we wish to reason are the only principles for reasoning, or if we simply stipulate or believe in our metaphilosophical principles, then we are assuming what we want to prove, namely, that our claims to knowledge on the object level are reasonable. Metaphilosophy, after all, is a form of philosophy. That is, we are simply assuming, in advance of metaphilosophical analysis, the very principles that the analysis is supposed to uncover.

That the objection can be made with a variety of intentions is evident from the fact that Hegel—and not just some of the simply antiphilosophical thinkers mentioned above—also made this criticism of Kant. Since I regard Hegel’s formulation of the criticism as unanswerable by the nondialectical advocates of metaphilosophy (such as Kant) who wish to avoid the criticism, and since the criticism will shed light on Plato’s preference for dialectic, I would like to quote Hegel’s own words:
A main line of argument in the Critical Philosophy bids us pause before proceeding to inquire into God or into the true being of things, and tells us first of all to examine the faculty of cognition and see whether it is equal to such an effort. We ought, says Kant, to become acquainted with the instrument, before we undertake the work for which it is to be employed; for if the instrument be insufficient, all our trouble will be spent in vain. The plausibility of this suggestion has won for it general assent and admiration; the result of which has been to withdraw cognition from an interest in its objects and absorption in the study of them, and to direct it back upon itself, and so turn it to a question of form. Unless we wish to be deceived by words, it is easy to see what this amounts to. In the case of other instruments, we can try to criticize them in other ways than by setting about the special work for which they are destined. But the examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge. To examine this so-called instrument is the same thing as to know it. But to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim.  

Hegel does not deny the need for metaphysics; on the contrary. But he insists that the project can be completed only dialectically, and correspondingly that the effort to set limits compels us to make increasingly comprehensive claims. Dialectic and the search for wholeness seem closely connected, at least for both Hegel and Plato (see below). Kant’s effort to assign dialectical reason a noncognitive status is thus self-defeating. As is clear from Kant’s own words, reason’s (Vernunft) knowledge of the a priori conditions for the understanding (Verstand) cannot be obtained within those conditions. Verstand is modeled on techné (art, skill); but the knowledge of techné cannot be an example of it. Techné made reflexive negates itself. Hegel’s criticism of Kant, and of nondialectical philosophy in general, has this ad hominem structure.

The Hegelian point is, in my opinion, shared by Plato. The least controversial evidence for this claim is the Charmides’ criticism of an “episteme of episteme” (episteme is said to be analogous here to the techné of mathematics). Socrates seems here to initially equate “episteme of itself, of all other epistemes, and of the lack of episteme” (166e) with self-knowledge and “knowing what you know and do not know,” that is, with his regular knowledge of ignorance (for example, 167a—b). However, the two are not the same. Ironically, the very refutation of the “episteme of episteme” formulation contributes to the “knowledge of ignorance,” and so to the self-knowledge, of those present.  

As in Hegel’s Phenomenology, a claim is allowed to “negate” itself and find its “truth” in a larger “whole.” The negation is dialectical, and a moment in the larger dialogue. Our efforts to philosophize presuppose an ideal of “wisdom.” Further evidence for the thesis that for Plato techné, episteme, or method cannot “ground” itself without integrating itself into a broader conception of knowledge may be found in the Phaedrus; as well as in the distinction in the Republic between “ascending” dialectic and “descending” techné (511b-c and context). In sum: the criticism of nondialectical philosophy, which has been undertaken with such devastating effects by figures such as Hegel, seems conclusive. This brings us, then, to a more fundamental issue, namely that of the ability of dialectical philosophy to establish its own “metaphysics” without opening itself to the objections just directed toward the Kantian sort of metaphysics.

Hegel agrees that we must appeal to some standard in order to be able to say that we know even the conditions of knowledge; he holds, like Kant, that this standard is reason itself. Hegel argues that the efforts of Kant, Fichte, and others to “know” the limits of reason nondialectically, must terminate in a faith (or in some undefinable “intuition”) which just stipulates that it “thinks” (perhaps with the putative guarantee of a benevolent God) the conditions of knowledge truly. Stated broadly, Hegel argues that Kant and Fichte share the Enlightenment’s characteristic faith in reason. This result, Hegel thinks, can be avoided if we understand that the relationship between object- and metalevels of reasoning is itself dialectical. Dialectic is thus the solution to the seemingly impossible effort of philosophers to, as Rescher puts it, “pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.”

As the discussion thus far suggests, the really fundamental dispute is not between Hegel and Kant, between proponents of dialectic and those of nondialectical epistemology, but between the dialecticians and the critics of philosophizing or “reason giving” as such. This latter debate is the second, and deeper, of the two debates I mentioned at the start. As a rule, these critics do not share in the philosopher’s faith in reason. Nietzsche and his descendants, for example, fully agree with Hegel’s criticisms of Kant and, more broadly, of nondialectical rationality. But they deny that the putative “circularity” or “completeness” of Hegel’s system escapes a petio principii. In a by now familiar move, they focus on the supposed Aufhebung, in the Phenomenology of Spirit and Encyclopaedia, of art and religion into “absolute knowledge.” They assert that Hegel is simply showing that art and religion contain the “conceptual truth” that he has already read into them. In fact, so the objection runs, art and religion are not really assertions about “conceptual truth” at all. They are simply not continuous with philosophy. It is not the case, they claim, that (to take one example) poems secretly harbor philosophical questions. The questions exist only in the minds of philosophers, and all the grandiose claims made by philosophers on behalf of the supremacy of their questions are self-serv- ing myths.

From this radical standpoint, Hegel’s error is the same as that of all
philosophers, indeed, of philosophy per se. The error derives from the philosophical effort to impose (and then to pretend to discover) a structure on all spiritual activity, a structure in terms of which philosophy inevitably emerges as dominant. A presupposition of the demand that one give a logos for one’s opinions is that there is Truth, and correspondingly that there is a “whole” in terms of which opinions somehow reflect what really is. The effort to make the philosopher ruler of the life of the soul begins, so the objection continues, with Plato. Plato’s harsh polemics against the poets, the sophists, and those who just do not care about giving reasons for their views—in short, his effort to legitimize the philosopher’s quid turis question—simply sets the agenda for all philosophers.” The thesis that all significant forms of spiritual activity are incipient forms of philosophy is, we might say, Plato’s legacy. Indeed, Nietzsche and Rorty do say just this. Socrates too, so Nietzsche argues, has an indefensible, indeed absurd, faith in reason. From the standpoint of the critics of reason, philosophical questions are pseudoquestions not worth asking, questions that carry no weight. Nietzsche argues that we should substitute the “‘aesthetic’ justification of life for the philosophical effort to ‘justify’ by appeals to ‘grounds’ and ‘conditions.”’ The resolve to live well need not be supported by moralizing or metaphysical and theological considerations. At the very least, then, we seem left with an irreducible pluralism; philosophy is just one form of spiritual activity among others—one form of creativity, perhaps.

That is—to restate the main point of the previous paragraph—the really fundamental debate is the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry,” as Socrates puts it in the Republic (607b). This remark in the Republic (along with its context), as well as many other passages, indicate that Plato understands that his fundamental argument is not with other philosophers, let alone with epistemologists, but with the hordes of antiphilosophers. This argument cannot be settled nondialectically (and, for reasons I will examine in a moment, it is also very difficult to settle dialectically). I have tried to suggest thus far that the decision to consider the “quarrel” between poets and philosophers as the fundamental dispute makes sense in the light of the general problem of metaphilosophy. From this vantage point, two features of the Platonic dialogues are quite natural.

The first feature is simply the ubiquity of the effort to refute the poets, sophists, and popular rhetoricians in such a way as to justify the activity of philosophy. Both sophists and rhetoricians resemble the philosopher in their love of discourse and in their willingness to talk and dispute about all things (consider Phil. 58a–59a, Rep. 596c–e, Grg. 452e–453a, Soph. 232c–233c). Characteristically, however, they care not about the truth but about persuasion. Hence, they are concerned not with giving reasons for insights with the aim of restoring to the soul forgotten knowledge and lost wholeness, but in controversy and refutation for the sake of “goods,” such as reputation, wealth, power, and the like. The self-conscious critics of philosophy, to be sure, recognize that no one can escape making assumptions. They offer a variety of reflections on their own assumptions which seem to philosophers to lead to relativism, historicism, or nihilism. As Nelson Goodman puts it, philosophy is just one “way of world-making.” Philosophy, we might say, has its own language game and its own history. The “ground” of a philosopher’s assumptions then seems to consist in little more than the fact that he has faith in them, or believes in them, wills them, or finds them interesting and useful.

Thus, given that a basic and unavoidable “quarrel” concerns the viability of the philosophical enterprise, the constant (some have said wearisome) demonstration in Plato’s dialogues that there are philosophical questions makes perfect sense. Plato’s dialogues are full of characters who are, in one way or another, either hostile or indifferent to philosophy. The origination of philosophy itself out of the medium of opinion is the most comprehensive theme in Plato’s dialogues. This point is so preliminary that most philosophers have thought it absurd to make much of it. Most philosophers follow Hegel’s lead here; his polemics against the critics of reason tend to be confined to the prefaces and introductions to his works—outside of his main argument, as it were. Yet it is precisely these polemics that are rejected by many proponents of popular rhetoric, sophistry, poetry, religion, and common sense. I suggest that Plato understood this and was eager to show us the philosopher’s response to his critics. The prefaces of other philosophers constitute the bulk of Plato’s dialogues. Perhaps this is an indication that Plato would agree with Hegel’s critics that Hegelian dialectic begs the really fundamental question. However that may be, it is a fact that dialogue after dialogue raises, at one point or another, the question “why philosophize?” Does not this question go right to the root of the dispute between philosophers and nonphilosophers? Would not an answer to this question require a comprehensive justification of the whole project of “giving reasons,” and so an account of a universe in which it makes sense to want to give reasons? With the madness attributed in the Phaedrus to philosophy itself, Plato’s dialogues seem obsessed with the fundamental questions concerning the justification of philosophy.

Moreover, the experience of controversy, which is tirelessly depicted by Plato, shows (as does our own experience in the matter) that fundamental disagreements can be extremely difficult to resolve. Refutations of philosophical positions are rarely, if ever, conclusive. A clever interlocutor can always find an answer somewhere in the vast sea of discourse. Every proposition and argument seems to depend on and lead to myriad others. A discussion limits itself to this or that topic and leaves the rest undefined,
But a clever arguer can always build a bridge to a related topic or to related aspects of the present topic under discussion.

And if it is the case, as I have been suggesting, that the defense of philosophy is a prime theme of Plato's dialogues, and that this defense is best accomplished in the medium of a dialogue with the critics of philosophy, then we have the basis for an explanation of another very odd feature of the Platonic texts—namely, that they do not contain a discussion between two mature philosophers. As I said above, the occasion for such a dialogue exists in the Sophist and Statesman; Socrates' silence there is dramatic. But a dialogue between him and the Eleatic Stranger would be a departure from Plato's overriding concern with the problem of the genesis of philosophy—a genesis that is no longer a live issue in a conversation between mature philosophers.

However, understanding what kind of debate Plato wants to carry on does not fully explain why he wrote dialogues. I would like to turn next to this issue.

IV

I begin by noting that, as the debate between dialecticians and their critics suggests, it is not possible to successfully attack or defend philosophy directly, a fact that sheds light on the form of Plato's texts. I would like to discuss this point by reverting to the just mentioned debate.

The cleverest of those who reject the rationality of the love of wisdom understand that to argue against philosophy is to engage in it and so, it seems, to fall prey to the same dialectic of reason they turned on those who argued for philosophy. The notion of a "limit" to reason, as Hegel insists, is a dialectical one. Consider the self-refutation of those who argue that, say, reason is (unlike faith) powerless to grasp "objective truth"; in arguing this they are claiming that something is objectively true. It is as though someone were to write a weighty book in which it is claimed that writing books is something a serious philosopher should never do. The inconsistency here is of the "pragmatic" sort, as it is called today; it turns on conflict between logos (word) and ergon (deed) (on the Phaedrus and Seventh Letter, see below).

The self-refutation seems to point to Hegel's famous view that "the truth is the whole." However, our clever critics of dialectical philosophy have a way of arguing that there is no "whole" in the sense required. They practice a form of elenchus and criticism called "deconstruction" (a term derived from Heidegger). The critique proceeds on purely ad hominem grounds; one shows one's opponent that within his own framework the argument is either question-begging or incomplete, or leads to an infinite regress. The success of the critique depends on the critic not making any claims to knowledge not also made by his opponent (except, perhaps, a sly claim to "knowledge of ignorance"). Thus Rorty characterizes his approach as "reactive" and "parasitic." Only the critic's intention should distinguish him from his opponent. The strategy of these critics necessarily involves an element of ruse, dissemblance, and irony. This strategy is familiar to us, of course, from Plato's Socrates, as well as from the "classical skeptics." Thus there is a significant resemblance between the procedure of the critics of reason and that of its Socratic defenders.

The critic will try to show, then, that the defense of dialectical reason is necessarily question-begging, and therefore that it too cannot be argued directly. He will then try to suggest that the defense of reason is also interminable (Kant's "tribunal" of reason to one side). Since the hope of the closure of philosophical discourse animates philosophers, the critic of reason may thus succeed in persuading the philosopher that philosophy is a hopeless, Sisyphean task. This persuasion is not, in the final analysis, an argument. It is a rhetorical effort to shake the philosopher's faith in reason by raising ever more difficult metaphilosophical questions that the philosopher cannot yet answer and soon despair of ever answering. Elenchic deconstruction is dialectic unaccompanied by the insight that there is a Whole—hence the great emphasis placed by the critics of reason on fragmentation, partiality, dissolution, difference, otherness, nonbeing. It is Socraticism without the Good.

In this way a philosopher is prepared to receive that insight that comes in the dead of night as the soul silently looks into itself, the insight that extinguishes the desire for reason giving and kindles the poet's desire for "creativity," the intellectual's interest in cultured "conversation," the believer's resolve to trumpet his faith regardless of what is said or done, the skeptic's desire to free himself from the illusions of the love of wisdom, the orator's desire for power through the art of persuasion. In one way or another, the philosopher is prepared to imitate the self-negation of Wittgenstein's Tractatus and to leap into a more profitable, or at least satisfying, way of life. Neither the self-negation nor its result are supposed to constitute "a philosophy." In the final analysis, none of the skeptics or critics of reason has a "position." To even announce that he has a position, let alone that there are arguments in favor of it, is already to concede the game to the philosophers. As Rorty puts it, "edifying philosophers [such as Rorty] have to decry the very notion of having a view, while avoiding having a view about having views. This is an awkward, but not impossible, position." It may be replied that Rorty is advancing a "view" at least while he is engaging in debate with his opponents; but there is no reason for Rorty to deny it. Derrida too freely confesses that the terminology used in his own deconstructionist program must itself be deconstructed,
put “sous nature.” An unending series of polemics that undermine themselves even as they undermine others is the deconstructionist’s way of avoiding being either reduced to silence or being forced to appeal in pro-pria persona to a priori standards.

In sum, if reason cannot be either defended or attacked directly, then both the defense of and attack on reason must be dialectical. Not only are there (if one accepts the just mentioned proposition) no irreproachable systems or doctrines, and no unquestionable metaphysics, the defense of philosophy cannot be successfully generated in the absence of fundamental objections to philosophy. Like Hegel, Socrates reduces nonreflexive objections to absurdity by asking for their grounds (as in his critique of Protagoras in the Theaetetus). However, the debate between critics and defenders of reason more closely resembles Platonic dialogue than Hegelian dialectic, and it is here that a preliminary distinction between dialogue and dialectic should be drawn. The debate cannot fairly be seen as the dialectical self-explanation of Reason. That is, it does seem that Hegel’s decision to confine this dispute to prefaces and introductions, and to reconstitute it in terms of abstractly formulated “positions,” is open to the criticism that he is begging the question. If one wishes to avoid this criticism, the dispute would have to be seen as taking place not between positions, but between the persons who hold them. In a dispute as radical as the one I have been discussing, the philosopher is compelled to question not just this or that doctrine but also why anyone should be persuaded by the metaphilosophical view that philosophy as such is possible. In this sort of dispute, there are no “commensurating” principles (to borrow Rorty’s terminology); hence a regression to the level of individual agreement is inevitable. As Socrates claims at the end of the Phaedrus, this dispute is best undertaken in the responsive medium of the “living” word. And, of course, this is precisely what all of Plato’s “published” (if one may use the word) works depict.

Thus Platonic dialectic is crucially dependent on someone’s asserting or denying something, agreeing to defend what he says, agreeing to say what he means, and acknowledging consequences of his position when they are pointed out to him (all of which is regularly insisted upon by Socrates). The Platonic dialogue with the critics of philosophy is inescapably “empirical,” unscientific, a posteriori, occasional, and rhetorical. Another reason that the debate between defenders and critics of philosophy must take the form of a dialogue (Plato) and not of a dialectic of positions (Hegel) is that, as noted above, the critics of philosophy deny that they have a “position” in the first place.

If the present line of reasoning is accepted, then we can see that, and why, Socrates cannot “justify” or “demonstrate” his own activity except by coming across or finding someone who is not already persuaded by its possibility and worth. Socrates cannot ever allow himself to claim that the critics of reason have been permanently refuted. He can claim to have refuted an antiphilosophical position only to the extent that he has refuted the person who holds it. And this limits him to a finite number of demonstrations, whose occurrence is contingent on a number of factors. Thus he must, as he explains in the Phaedrus, spend his time inside the walls of the city, rarely wandering out to peaceful nature: for the “open country and the trees do not wish to teach me anything, whereas men in the town do” (Phr. 230d4–5). Unless Socrates can persuade his interlocutors to agree that there are philosophical questions, he cannot allow himself to persuade himself of it.

Correspondingly, philosophical rhetoric is unavoidably pedagogic. As Socrates puts it in the Phaedrus, rhetoric is “psychagogia,” the leading of the soul. Socrates accomplishes this “leading” by getting his interlocutors to desire philosophy—hence the unendingly proreptic character of the Platonic dialogues. This is one reason Socrates claims that the only thing he understands is erotic matters (“ερωτική”, Symp. 177d7–8), and that he possesses an “ερωτική τέχνη” (erotic art; Phr. 257a7–8). It is as though eros is the basis of Socrates’ defense against skepticism. The philosopher is characterized by the fact that he cannot be satisfied with himself unless he knows why he is satisfied; that is, he remains unsatisfied until he can know himself discursively. Obviously, Socrates’ erotic art is meant to destroy the self-satisfaction of his interlocutors, a turn of events that is essential to Socrates’ demonstration of the view that philosophy is not optional. The “post metaphysical conversation” advocated by Derrida and Rorty would amount, from Socrates’ perspective, to talk unanimated by the desire for truth. It would amount to uncritical rhetoric, in short. Socrates cannot refute his adversaries directly, or simply announce some metaphilosophical program of his own. He can refute them indirectly if he can change their intentions—hence the crucial role of rhetoric for Socrates, and specifically of dialogical rhetoric. Socrates’ erotic art is the art of questioning and answering, and so of coming on a conversation; it is the work of phronesis (thoughtfulness, prudence). These strange claims make sense if we understand Socrates to be concerned above all with the defense of philosophy in the sense that I have outlined.

To sum up: if reflection on the “beginnings” of philosophy is unavoidable, if the fundamental question of metaphilosophy concerns the “quarrel” between the proponents of philosophy and its various critics, if philosophy cannot be attacked or defended directly, and finally if the defense of philosophy requires a conversation with the critics of philosophy (and not just with abstract formulations of their “positions”), then it makes sense for a philosopher who agrees to all this to write dialogues.

Nevertheless, one might object, my comments about Socrates’ rhetoric
and erotic art seem to reduce philosophy to the art of persuasion. The indirectness of the Socratic defense of philosophy seems to sabotage it. How will the dialogical defense of philosophy establish anything of a "positive" nature? I would like now to make some comments about this question.

V

In the *Meno*, Meno offers his famous "paradox," the conclusion of which is that learning is impossible. If we do not at all know what we are looking for, we cannot seek it. There are many things we do not know, and we would be unable to select one of them as that which is to be investigated. Even if we hit upon what we do not know, we would not know that it is the thing we were seeking (*Meno* 80d). Socrates immediately restates the puzzle in the form of a dilemma and omits the last of these points.

It is striking that in the *Meno* Socrates twice inveighs against the laziness and intellectual cowardice to which Meno’s paradox would lead (81d, 86b). “Trustings” (*pistemon*; 81e1) in the view that it is necessary to inquire, we are braver and less idle. Socrates here uses the language of war, thus trumpeting his courage; on behalf of the worth of inquiry “I am determined to do battle, so far as I am able, both in word and deed” (86c1–2; Lamb trans.). Similarly, at a difficult juncture in the *Laches* Socrates urges his interlocutors on with the remark that they must endure further conversation, lest courage laugh at them for their cowardice in the search for courage (194a1–5; cf. *Euthyd.* 306d1, 307c3). Although Socrates is never, in the Platonic dialogues, explicitly referred to as courageous (with the ambiguous exception of *Syp. 219d*5), courage is the one virtue he attributes in his *Symposium* speech to eros (203d5). The erotic Socrates certainly exhibits the sort of courage in question. He also says in the *Symposium* that eros is a “philosopher through all of life, a clever sorcerer and enchanter and sophist” (203d7–8). Socrates concludes his encomium of eros by saying that now as before he worships “eros’ power and courage” (212b7–8). The fainthearted misologist is, it seems, unerotic.

But the skeptic might argue that the emphasis on courage is a sign that Socrates’ “knowledge of ignorance” is “justified” only by an individual’s desire for it, and so only for that individual. The exhortations to have courage may be necessary precisely because there is no rational justification for the philosophical enterprise. Courage seems to be a substitute for the possession of wisdom. It is striking, in fact, that philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, who reject the Platonic ideal of wisdom, emphasize heavily the importance of courage, resoluteness (Heidegger’s *Entschlossenheit*), and the will. In still another tradition of thought, Socratic courage would be replaced with faith. I am far from suggesting that Socratic courage and Heideggerian “Entschlossenheit” are the same. But on many occasions Socrates seems to argue that we ought to philosophize even though we cannot really prove that it makes sense to do so. A function of many of the myths in Plato’s dialogues seems to be to reassure us that there are grounds for the hope that philosophy is a worthwhile enterprise; but myths are not proofs.

Without commenting on Meno’s (nontrivial) puzzle in detail, I would like to point out Socrates’ answer to the sort of objection just adumbrated. The refutation has two parts. The first is a short myth about the soul, and its affinity with the natural whole. The second is a demonstration (*epideixis*) of somebody “learning,” or rather, “recollecting,” something. That is, Socrates does not provide a direct rebuttal of Meno’s radically skeptical position. Instead he tries to show Meno a deed from which Meno is himself compelled to draw the conclusion that his own puzzle can be answered. This demonstration of an absolutely fundamental point (namely, that there is, loosely speaking, “learning”) illustrates a crucial feature of Socrates’ indirect refutation of the critics of philosophy, namely the reliance on the *deed* of learning which is itself generated through questions and answers. Meno is supposed to learn not the solution of the geometrical problem but the solution to a “meta” problem about learning. The slave boy is said to “recollect” the solution to the former; but in spite of Socrates’ remark at 82a, it cannot be said that Meno “recollects” that the boy is recollecting. There is no meta-recollection. Nevertheless, Socrates’ indirect demonstration to Meno confirms his view that philosophical knowledge cannot be taught in the way that other kinds of knowledge can be.

Socrates concedes that he is not confident of every point in his demonstration in the *Meno*—indeed, how could he be certain of the myth that preceded it, or the thesis that learning is recollection of previously known truths?—but he affirms in the strongest possible terms that we should inquire into what we do not know. As I have already noted, he is willing to do battle, both in word and deed, for the proposition that we should seek the truth. As Socrates says, Meno’s paradox reduces dialogue to eristics—to disputation devoid of the *desire* for the truth. This is the bottom line of the battle with the critics of reason. It is not, as I have argued, a line that Socrates can draw nondialectically. Socrates’ ad hominem argument against those who reject the possibility or worth of philosophical inquiry uses not just their words but also the evidence of deeds to persuade them otherwise. That is, a crucial refutation of the skeptic is simply the deed that there is *learning* (in a sense other than memorization). The refutation works only when the skeptic has either learned or acknowledges that someone has just done so—hence, once again, the necessarily occasional, empirical, and contingent character of Socratic dialogue about these
fundamental issues. As Gadamer remarks, “There is no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what needs to be questioned.” Philosophy certifies itself in the perfect tense. Differently put, Socrates “erotic art” submits his interlocutor to the power of the question and the corresponding insight that the way one is leading one’s life is not satisfactory. Our lives are not linguistic constructions, and Socrates’ ability to arouse us to understand our lives better than we think we already do shows us that the questions are real and worth pondering.

Until Socrates can yoke his critic into the activity of philosophizing, then, he lacks his most potent weapon against him, namely, the deed of philosophizing itself. The inference from this experience is the proposition that there are philosophical questions, an understanding of which brings one closer to what is. This inference from the deed, however, cannot itself be presented separately as a doctrine or teaching, at least not successfully. This is why the Meno’s “slave boy passage” contains two conversations: one between Socrates and the boy and another between Socrates and Meno about the conversation between Socrates and the boy.

VI

If showing (rather than merely saying or asserting) the viability of philosophizing is a necessary component in the dialogical refutation of the critics of philosophy, then Plato’s decision to write dialogues (indeed, “dramatic” dialogues) once again makes sense. In a way that is strikingly similar to Hegel’s view that the demonstration of a philosophical standpoint is just the history of the experience of “consciousness” coming to know itself, Plato’s dialogues contain no assertions by Plato, only depictions of people becoming and failing to become philosophers. Just as Hegel offers, not a treatise in which he “criticizes” various positions, but rather a “phenomenology” in which various nonreflexive positions show their defects and rewrite themselves in a more satisfactory way, so Plato presents us with dramatic imitations of the practice of philosophizing. Indeed, by withholding his own answers from his texts Plato seduces the reader into finding an answer for himself (just as Socrates did with respect to his interlocutors). The point of this maneuver is not simply a subjective or pedagogic one. On the contrary, given that the fundamental debate concerns the defense of philosophy, and given that this defense is necessarily dialectical, it is of the utmost importance that Plato draw the reader into philosophizing and only then allow him to reflect on the extraordinarily difficult problem of “justifying” this activity. Thus poetry and mimesis are indispensable to Plato’s presentation of the nature of philosophy.

We now have, moreover, a further explanation of Plato’s distance from his own texts. Simply put, the fact that Plato nowhere contributes to the discussions he portrays allows him to convey something about the nature of philosophy without asserting it in his own name to be so. If he did assert it, he would be open to the kind of criticism Hegel leveled against Kant, and which the critics of philosophy have frequently leveled against philosophers. An extradialogical postscript or preface by Plato would amount to a short treatise by him about philosophy; it is easy to see, from what I have said above, that this move would immediately fall prey to the difficulties already mentioned. Plato cannot stand outside his thought and set limits to it from some supradialectical standpoint. But, we now want to ask, is there any way for Plato to supply us indirectly with a commentary on what he is trying to accomplish without falling into self-contradiction?

In order to see that the answer to this question is affirmative, it is necessary to compare something that is said in one of the dialogues with the deed of the dialogue itself. I am thinking of Socrates’ criticisms of writing presented at the end of the Phaedrus. Plato wrote the criticisms, a fact that shows—to make a long interpretation short—that he both rejects the criticisms (since, unlike Socrates, he wrote) and that he accepts them (since he wrote dialogues). Plato accepts Socrates’ arguments in favor of dialectical discourse, but he thinks that he has found a form of writing that blunts Socrates’ criticisms of writing. On the essential points about the nature of philosophy, that is, Plato and the Platonic Socrates are in agreement. By recording all this, Plato allows us to understand his philosophical reasons for writing dialogues. He also allows us to see the limitations of writing and the need for our engaging in spoken philosophical dialogue. This is Plato’s silent postscript to his texts. Just as Socrates “answers” Meno’s skeptical paradox with an exhibition of somebody learning, so Plato “answers” the critics of philosophy with a similar depiction. In each case, the onlooker is and must be left to draw his own conclusions. Plato’s deed of writing dialogues supplies a basis for an indirect self-commentary.

The relationship between Plato and Socrates in this matter of writing looks rather like one of Hegel’s “determinate negations.” Or, to put it in more Platonic terms, Plato’s qualified acceptance of Socrates’ conception of philosophy is indicated ironically by Plato. Irony is the medium in which Plato can express his “philosophy of philosophy” without compromising his own view on the matter. Hence there is a good philosophical rationale for Platonic irony.

I note that to the extent to which the articulation of Plato’s self-commentary depends on his “negation” of Socrates in the manner just referred to, Plato’s defense of philosophy must be conveyed through the artifice of the written word. The written word is at once remove from the “ensouled” activity of dialectic (Phr. 276a8 and context) which itself is at
one remove from the Ideas. The written word affords Plato an indirect commentary about the nature of philosophy, but the dialogue form of writing releases him from the ensuing consequences that plague metaphilosophical self-reflection. Contrary to Socrates remarks at the end of the Phaedrus about the inability of the written word (unlike the spoken) to defend itself, the present argument suggests that it is by virtue of being written that Platonic philosophizing can defend itself.

A final aspect of Plato's dialogues that makes some philosophical sense if we keep in mind the roots of dialectic as I have specified them is the lack of closure in the Platonic corpus as a whole. It seems that if Plato had written one more or one less dialogue, the unity of the corpus would suffer little, precisely because its unity derives from a common goal, not the systematization of the means. Moreover, it is difficult to see how any one dialogue could explicitly claim to "close" or "complete" Platonic philosophy without falling prey, once again, to the usual objections against "metaphilosophy" (in the primary sense of the term). Perhaps that is why the Philosopher—a dialogue that might have been the "definitive" statement of Platonic philosophy—was never written.

If one goes along with my general argument concerning Plato's use of the dialogue form, his choice of the positions he wants to argue with, his distance from his own texts, his irony, and the lack of closure in the corpus, then it would seem that Plato does not so much have "a philosophy" as a philosophy about the making of philosophical claims. But this cannot be said to amount to a "metaphilosophy" in the primary sense of the term. However, to restate an objection already discussed above, all this still doesn't seem to allay the old suspicion that Socratic and Platonic philosophizing is essentially "negative," elenchic, parasitic on the claims of others, and without any "positive" content of its own—as barren as the "midwife" Socrates claims to be. Are there, however, "ontological" consequences of Socratic and Platonic philosophizing (as I have adumbrated it) that mitigate the just mentioned criticism?

VII

The answer to this question is, I think, affirmative. In keeping with what I have said above, I suggest that we understand these consequences not so much as "theories" posited to round out an epistemology but its reflections on the implications of the fact that there is philosophical learning and inquiry (in a sense other than memorization). As Gadamer puts this point: "The assumption that there are ideas remains for Plato an inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the nature of discussion and the process of reaching an understanding of something." And "the purpose of the Socratic art of conversing was to avoid being talked out of the fact that there is such a thing as the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good." That is, inquiry, or philosophical questioning, or simply understanding something, have implications concerning the presence of intelligibility. In the Republic, Socrates explains this in terms of the sun-like Good. In the Philebus, he asserts that the Good shows itself as measure, symmetry, appropriateness, truth, and beauty (64e–65a, 66a–b). In the Phaedrus, Beauty is cited as the principle underlying the presence of intelligibility. In the myth of the Meno, Socrates speaks of "all nature being akin" (81d). In the Gorgias he says that "heaven and earth, gods and men, are held together by the principles of sharing, by friendship and order, by self-control and justice; that, my friend, is the reason they call this whole 'cosmos,' and not disorder or licentiousness." There is a Whole ordered according to the principles of geometrical equality (Gorg. 508a). This is an implication of the "aporetic" as much as the "nonaporetic" dialogues.

Plato would want to argue for all this indirectly and in an ad hominem way. He might say (and does say in the criticism of Protagoras in the Theaetetus) that to that which we implicitly appeal in defending or attacking reason is the truth of our own thoughts and assertions—even if these be directed against the very notion of truth." Even the antiphilosopher's inner dialogue with himself assumes, Plato wants to argue, the presence of the very intelligibility and wholeness that he thinks is the fabrication of the philosophers.

Deconstructionists who truly understand deconstruction do indeed truly understand something; they see their own point, as well as their opponent's point, and they do so in the light of intelligibility. The true "forms" and "looks" (εἶδος, ἱδέα) of things cannot be entirely inaccessible; for even the efforts to deny their accessibility or existence assume them. Or at least, this is the sort of deeply reflexive strategy Plato uses at this level of the argument. He then wants, of course, to introduce other notions to draw out his point. That of ἀνάμνησις (recollection), for example, expresses (among other things) the thought that the soul by nature knows something of what is (Phr. 249e4–250a1). Plato's language in these matters necessarily becomes imprecise, metaphorical, or analogical; poetry is not dispensable for the Platonist. But there is also a good deal to be said about the "logic" of these forms and about their instantiation in language, as well as about the nature of the soul. I am not arguing that the sorts of metaphilosophical issues considered here somehow exhaust Platonic philosophy or the actual discussions Plato presents in his dialogues. In fact, my explanation of Plato's choice of the dialogue form of writing requires the philosopher to philosophize about the many issues that are discussed in Plato's dialogues, as well as in the history of philosophy. For progress in these object-level
discussions is the evidence for the metalevel inferences concerning the efôn (forms).

Now, there are responses to this Platonic ad hominem attack on the critic of philosophy that need to be considered. The critic can simply ignore it, reject it, or simultaneously both deny and affirm it. In each case dialogue seems to grind to a halt; and insofar as the success of the attack depends on the opponent’s admission that he is wrong, the attack fails. The imposibility of dialogue with the Homericists-Heraditeans (and implicitly the Protagoreans as well) is vividly described by Theodorus (Theae, 179e–180b). As a matter of fact, the anti-philosophers reject the very idea of a “dialogue” in the philosophical sense (along with the idea, discussed above with reference to the Meno, that there is “learning” in any philosophically suggestive sense), as Socrates explicitly notes in his attack on Protagoras. Thus Socrates’ dialogues with such persons are, one might argue, protodialogues, for they are not animated by a mutual search for the truth (hence they border on the eristic). But in the face of a sufficiently tough or clever opponent, it would seem that even this protodialogue must falter and, as in the Gorgias, that the philosopher must end up conversing with himself. The antiphilosopher in question professes no care for the truth and therefore does not mind being labeled “irrational” in the philosopher’s sense; all that is just an expression, for him, of the very framework that he has rejected. That is, having argued that, for Plato, dialogue with the critics of philosophy is necessary, we now begin to wonder whether it is possible even in the “indirect” sense I have discussed. Do we have, in effect, a paradoxical necessity for an impossibility?” In the last section of this chapter I would like to take a brief look at this issue.

VIII

The idea that a very intelligent person (such as Protagoras or Derrida) could profess no interest in the love of wisdom is, we must admit, profoundly disturbing. One might wish to dismiss their failure to give in to Plato’s “deeply reflexive strategy” mentioned above as a sign of an obstinate streak, a character defect, or some such. That is, it would be easy to dismiss their disagreement as a sign of their deficiency, not as a sign that there is something wrong with the sort of ad hominem argument sketched above. Thus Aristotle terms a “vegetable” the man who resolutely rejects the principle of noncontradiction (Met. IV, 4, 1006a15, 1008b13). Plato also sees, as Aristotle does, that the debate is so deep that everything is at stake, and that nothing of “philosophy” will survive if the other side wins (we cannot proceed with our metaphysics until we have settled this debate in our favor); and Plato certainly thinks that philosophy is the superior of the two. But Plato rightly seems unwilling to let the insult be the last word, and this because he seems especially aware of just how difficult it is to “win” the quarrel between philosophy and its critics without begging the question. I have argued that the dialogue form, and everything associated with the genre as it is molded by Plato, can be understood as consequences of these observations.

Thus, to repeat, a true mediation between philosophy and its critics may well seem impossible. However, the rhetorical, dramatic, or mimetic dimension of Plato’s dialogues may serve as a partial response to this point. This pervasive and sustaining dimension represents what might be called the world of ordinary experience, the “life-world,” or to use a more Platonic expression, the “political.” Even the debates with the anti- or nonphilosophers emerge, in Plato, from this context, and they never lose touch with it. These debates could have been structured by Plato “academically,” without this elaborately crafted context, but they are not. That is, it seems that when faced with the ultimate challenge or “quarrel,” Plato thinks he can draw on prephilosophical experience. At least two reasons for this suggest themselves.

First, the prephilosophical is not already a construction of the philosopher, and so provides a common starting point for philosophy as well as its critics, thus eliminating one basis for accusing the philosopher of begging the question. The framework that contains distinctions such as those between truth and judgments about the truth is not, on this account, a philosophical construction but a fact of life. In Plato’s dialogues even the fundamental philosophical problems are depicted as arising out of the rich tapestry of ordinary experience and not (as is so often the case today) from an “academic” tradition. Moreover, if agreement is the “starting point” of philosophizing, then the starting point is unsystematic. This starting point is opinion, the multihued, receptaclelike medium in which the “Whole” is reflected. That opinion is the context of philosophizing in Plato has frequently been thought, particularly by metaphysically oriented philosophers, to constitute its weakness. But given the problems I have discussed concerning the beginnings of metaphysics itself, Plato’s doxastic starting point is a virtue, not a vice. Opinion is not an axiom or theoretical construction; it gives us an already intelligible, but nonmethodological, “beginning” for our philosophizing. Thus, for Plato, opinion is not a starting point that can ever be left behind. These points help explain Plato’s decision to write dialogues.

Moreover, the “political” does already contain and exhibit the threads of the great issues: those of life and death, self-interest and justice, freedom and slavery, war and peace, desire, power, and so on. It also exhibits,
unavoidably, moral judgments and moral sense, along with their naive realism (see below). It seems to me that, in the final analysis, it is only by returning to this level—the level that defines what our concerns should be and defines the issues as real, the level in which our basic moral intuitions (such as “the courageous man is better than the coward”) are grounded—that Socrates can draw his opponent into a context from which the origination of philosophy can command assent. Moral judgments in this sphere are not viewed by people in a relativistic or historicist way. Allegiances to family and country are deeply felt. The force of moral opinion is enormous. And the stakes in both war and peace are of universal import. In his debates with nonphilosophers, Socrates appeals regularly to all this; for example, he frequently tries to shame his interlocutors into changing their outlook. Correspondingly, Plato’s phenomenology of human life is not value neutral, in the way that Heidegger’s phenomenology of Dasein is. For Plato, philosophical rhetoric is always tied to the political (in the broadest sense of the term); this cannot be said of the comparatively apolitical thought of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Rorty, and Derrida. Plato’s wager is, I think, that the “political” dimension of human experience is more or less stable throughout history. Hence his portrayals of it can function as mirrors in which we can recognize, and be reminded of, our own moral intuitions—above all, the intuition that the great issues of life are great because they are somehow tied to the truth and the good in nonrelativistic senses of the terms.

Socrates is known for his criticisms of δόξα (opinion); but these do not amount to anything like a complete negation of it. His ability to drive home the power of the question brings him into conflict with the polis. But in his view that these “moral” issues are to be understood as “real” (and not just as social or linguistic conventions) he is at one with the polis, even though he wants to show that ordinary moral intuitions, when thought through, “really” depend on things like “recolletion” and “Ideas.” Rorty’s postmetaphysical culture, by contrast, is considerably more alien to common sense than Socrates’ analyses of true virtue. His deconstruction of philosophy seems to me also to entail a deconstruction of the political. Rorty does, to be sure, talk about moral commitment; indeed, he does so in the last sentence of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. One wonders what he could possibly mean by such talk. Indeed, one wonders what it would mean to say, on Rortean grounds (if that is the right word), that one should have a moral commitment to keep a “conversation” going.

But what if, to borrow the terminology of a recent reviewer of Rorty’s Philosophy, our antiphilosopher is a “cheerful nihilist”? What if he “deconstructs” political life? At this point (given that all our other strategies have been exhausted) the limits of dialogue really are reached, and such a person is dialogically irrefutable. Plato certainly does not mask this fact. But his depiction of it actually leaves the reader with more than this breakdown would suggest. Understanding the limits self-consciously and dialectically, with full awareness of all the pitfalls, and with the deeds and words of both philosopher and his opponent in front of us, we are justified in drawing the conclusion that the unexamined life is not worth living.

1. The quotation is from Morris Lazerowitz's "A Note on 'Metaphilosophy,'" *Metaphilosophy* 1 (1970): 91. It seems, according to this definition, that "metaphilosophy" is to analyze the causes of philosophical disagreement, with the aim of discrediting those causes and showing that the entire disagreement is a mistake. This strategy obviously has a precedent in Kant's treatment of the "dialectic" of reason. For this and other reasons I will propose that "metaphilosophy" should be understood, in its primary sense, in terms of the Kantian framework. This is the sense in which I will be using the term in the body of this chapter. However, I have no objection to a looser, secondary, sense of the term, such that any reaction from any standpoint about the nature of philosophy can be called "metaphilosophy." In this secondary sense one might speak of "metaphilosophical" objections to the Kantian framework. For a helpful discussion of the whole issue of metaphilosophy, see R. Pippin's "Critical Methodology and Comprehensiveness in Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 9 (1978): 197-211.


3. I do not want to claim that every modern philosophy fits this description. Heidegger, for example, would seem to represent an exception. But even the "fundamental ontology" of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* has a strongly Kantian bent, a fact that has been noted often enough.


5. As Beck notes, Kant "compares his procedure to that of the grammarian 'who studies a language in order to dictate the rules for the actual use of words and to collect elements for a grammar.'" What Kant calls "transcendental grammar" is the doctrine of the elements of this grammar, elements thanks to which we can "spell" knowledge and experience ("Toward a Meta-Critique," p. 26). A letter/figure metaphor is used in several of Plato's dialogues, but with the intent of illustrating the necessity of knowing the "forms" or "elements" in an ontological, not an epistemological sense. See *Pol.* 277c ff.; *Phil.,* 17b, 18b-19d and context; consider also *Soph.,* 253a ff. and *Theaet.,* 201e ff. Whether or not knowledge of Plato's letterlike forms yields a grammar (the rules) for the correct "spelling" of appearances is a matter of some controversy. Still, both Plato and Kant seem to demand some sort of ascent from the "book" of nature to its more intelligible and "prior" founding principles.

6. This "intensification" would also have to be interpreted as a narrowing of the notion of "philosophy" to "theory of knowledge," that is, to a *foundation* specifying science. For a good account of this narrowing as well as of the rise of "histories of philosophy" which proceeds along the lines just adumbrated (the ancients-as-primitive-epistemologists story), see Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 131ff. As Rorty points out, the terms "theory of knowledge" and "epistemology" (*Erkenntnis Theorie, Erkenntnistheorie*) were invented in the early nineteenth century, along with the whole notion of philosophy as a professional academic discipline.

7. Philosophical disputes (such as those portrayed in Plato's dialogues) do frequently seem to assume too much, and do seem fruitless because the disputants have not clearly seen their own, and each other's assumptions and because they have not agreed on a decision procedure to settle their disputes. Earlier philosophers (so the charge goes) just did philosophy naively, without sufficient self-reflection; they philosophized dogmatically, and were therefore unable to locate the common a priori structure of reason that could serve as a "tribunal" (see KRV, Axi). They disputed about topics whose solution transcends the power of reason, and thus "wrestle with their own shadows," as Kant puts it (KRV, A756 = B784). Hume presents a similar argument in the Introduction to the *Treatise*.

8. That, it seems, is what an object level knowledge claim cannot serve as a basis for ranking claims, since it itself has to be evaluated in the manner described above. The alternative to such evaluation would seem to just be dogmatism. For example, someone who claims that his conception of God is the only true one cannot dismiss other claims merely by asserting that his conception is the true one; for that just amounts to asserting that it is true because he says it is. Since the reasons he offers in favor of his conception are not accepted by his opponents, the dispute is undecidable unless we ascend to a higher plateau on which references to God are replaced by discussion of the possibility of referring meaningfully to the divine. This is precisely what Kant, for example, does in the *Transcendental Dialectic* of the *KRV.*

9. The epistemological formulation of the self-knowledge issue by some modern philosophers is thought to answer dogmatic skepticism (the view that nothing can be known) by clearly delineating what can and cannot be known. The answer, that is, is twofold: our metaphilosophers grant the skeptic that certain things cannot be demonstrated satisfactorily (in Kant's case, this would be the "transcendental ideas," such as those of the existence of God, Freedom, Immortality); but they insist that within well-defined boundaries scientific knowledge does exist. So long as we are unclear about our metaphilosophy they argue, a convincing response to the skeptic is impossible. The skeptic may question the very framework within which we adjudicate claims to know, and this a priori framework must first be established. For an excellent discussion of Kant's reply along these lines to Hume, see Beck's "Kant's Strategy," in Essays, pp. 3-19.


11. While Socrates' conversation with Protagoras looks like a conversation between mature philosophers, I do not count it as such since everyone in the dialogue, including Socrates and Protagoras, classifies the one as a philosopher and the other as a sophist.

12. For an extended argument for the view that Plato does not offer a "theory" of
explicitly criticizes the philosopher’s “quæstiones juris.” Nietzsche’s debt to Heraclitus, moreover, is well known. Much more can and should, of course, be said about these connections.

18. See “The Problem of Socrates,” in Twilight of the Idols; also the Birth of Tragedy, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), sections 14 and 15. On p. 106 of Birth Nietzsche writes: “In this contrast [between the theoretic and tragic world view] I understand by the spirit of science the faith that first came to light in the person of Socrates—the faith in the explicable nature and in knowledge as a panacea.” On p. 377 of Philosophy, Rorty declares that for the edifying philosophy “the Platonian notion of Truth itself is absurd.”

19. Birth of Tragedy, pp. 22, 52, 141. Of course, I am quoting here from Nietzsche’s first publication, one which he himself criticized subsequently. Though I cannot prove it here, the critical importance of art understood as an “esthetic justification” is developed but not abandoned in Nietzsche’s later thought. “Justification” does not, in any event, here mean what philosophers mean by it—else the phrase would express the very opposite of Nietzsche’s thought on the matter (and does express with less ambiguity in later writings). Cf. The Gay Science, trans. W. Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1974), bk. II, section 107: “As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon.”


I do not wish to minimize the heterogeneity of the interlocutors in the Platonic dialogues. Some are outright antiphilosophers (Callicles); others are untried in philosophy but prominent in another field of intellectual activity (Theaetetus) or in political matters (Laches, Nicias). Still others are too young to have been tried in any field (Lysis). But the fact remains that those with whom the mature Socrates talks philosophically is a philosopher. I am far from denying that there is constructive philosophizing in the dialogues, or that the epistemological and metaphysical discussions (though fragmentary) are important and interesting. I shall in fact argue below (section VII) that when properly understood the dialogue form leads to, indeed requires, consideration of several metaphysical themes.

22. For an interesting discussion, with reference to Hegel, of the issue of prefaces, see J. Derrida “Hors Livre,” in La Dissémination (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 9–67. The problem of the status of the introductions to Hegel’s works has, of course, been extensively discussed in the literature.


24. Philosophy, pp. 366, 369, 377. On p. 317 Rorty compares his position to that of “the informed dilettante, the polygrammatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses.”

25. For an excellent discussion of Derrida and dissemblance, see V. Descombes, Modern French Philosophy, trans. Scott-Fox and Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), chap. 5. Similarly, N. Garver concludes his “Derrida on Rousseau on Writing” by remarking that “In the end, when we survey the ground that Derrida would have cleared by his call for us to recognize the full honor and priority of writing, we find no metaphysics, no logic, no linguistics, no semantics, and no grammatical left to carry on, but only the
brilliant scholarly mischiefness" (Journal of Philosophy 74 [1977]: 673). Cf. the strikingly similar terms with which Feyerabend characterizes his own rhetoric: "Always remember that the demonstrations and the rhetoric used in this book do not express any 'deep convictions' of mine. They merely show how easy it is to lead people by the nose in a rational way. An anarchist (Feyerabend) is like an undercover agent who plays the game of Reason in order to undercut the authority of Reason (Truth, Honesty, Justice, and so on)." (Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge [London: New Left Books, 1975], pp. 32-33). In the footnote to this passage, Feyerabend suggests a comparison between his strategy and Dadaism (see also p. 21, n. 12).

26. On the point in the context of the classical skeptics, see M. Frede's "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge," a paper delivered to the Princeton colloquium on ancient Greek philosophy (Dec. 1982). Frede distinguishes between two kinds of skeptical assent, that of the dogmatic skeptic and that of the classical skeptic. The former defends the view that nothing is or can be known, thereby making an implicit knowledge claim and contradicting himself. The latter (Arcesilaus and followers, Sextus Empiricus) does not make this claim, so avoiding the reflexive problem and limits himself to showing on his opponent's ground that his opponent's claims fail. This precisely the strategy of Rorty and Derrida. Frede also argues that the classical skeptics believed themselves to be following in Socrates' footsteps here. The "assent" given by the classical skeptic to the view that nothing is or cannot be known, according to Frede, can be accepted by an "impression," an "acquiescence." It is just this sort of feeling that Rortean and Derrideans want to generate in dogmatic philosophers so as to turn them away from the search for "Truth." Rortean and Derrideans want to do this in such a way as to escape the "having a view about not having views" paradox.

27. Rorty, Philosophy, p. 371. Rorty continues a few lines later: "Perhaps saying things is not always saying how things are. Perhaps saying that is itself not a case of saying how things are." The "perhaps" is the rub of the matter. Rorty wants to affirm these propositions, and Plato and Hegel to deny them.


29. It is true that Socrates sometimes remarks that what counts is the logos, not who holds it, and that what is important is the truth regardless of whether anyone else cares about it. And the Phil. presents us with a rather formalized-looking debate in which "positions" confront each other (see the very start of the Phil.). Nevertheless, Socrates always investigates a position dialogically.

30. For a fascinating discussion of this point, see A. Kojève's "Philosophie et Sagece" (pt. 1) in Introduction à la lecture de Hegel (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 271-82.

31. I am not arguing that I have specified the only reasons Plato wrote dialogues. A fuller treatment of the matter would have to consider, among other things, Socrates' criticisms of writing at the end of the Phil. For some discussion of these criticisms, see my Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), chap. 6.


33. Indeed, thanks to its nontechnical nature, Plato's dialectical poetry may escape the charge frequently brought against Hegel's ostensibly "descriptive" phenomenology, namely, that it is structured in such a way as to prejudice the process in favor of the author's opinion. Plato does not construct dōxa (opinion), he "imitates" it; although, admittedly, this is not the same as just copying or mirroring it. For further discussion of the Hegel-Plato relationship, see R. Buhner, "Dialog and Dialektik oder Plato und Hegel," in Zur Sache der Dialektik (Ditzingen: Reclam, 1980), pp. 124-60.


35. For further discussion, see my Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus, chap. 6.


38. The translation is W. C. Helmholdt's, slightly amended (Plato's Gorgias [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952], p. 83).

39. That is however "subjective" or "relativist" a position may be, Socrates seeks to show that it ultimately must know itself as "true" in a sense that is not just subjective or relativist. For an excellent discussion of Socrates' criticism in the These. Of Protagoras along these lines, see M. F. Burney's "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's Theaetetus," Philosophical Review 85 (1976): 172-95. Burney's concludes that "no amount of maneuvering with his relativizing arguments will extricate Protagoras from the commitment to truth absolute which is bound up with the very act of assertion. To assert is to assert that p as Passmore puts it, that something is the case—and if p, indeed, if only if p, then p is true (period). This principle, which relativism attempts to circumvent, must be acknowledged by any speaker." (p. 195).

40. These. 161e; if Protagoras' position is right, then Socrates' "maieutic art" is "laughable," as is "the whole business of dialectic (dialogešeis)."

41. It is fairly clear, for example, that Rortean "conversation" between an advocate of normal discourse (discourse governed by an agreed upon set of neutral commensurating principles which tell us how to settle a debate; examples of such discussion being systematic philosophy and epistemology) and an advocate of a certain species of abnormal discourse (the "edifying" philosopher who violates the metanale that all changes in normal discourse should be warranted by the discovery of a new set of commensurating rules) is impossible. Rorty initially sets up "harmeneutics" as "the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse" (Philosophy, p. 320) in the hope of generating a "con-
version” between the two (p. 318). But hermeneutics soon collapses into editing philosophy, the point of which is to keep the conversation going (p. 372, 77; cf. p. 366). The reason for this collapse is surely that Rorty understands hermeneutics from the start as generating a conversation that does not reach for Truth or Agreement in the sense assumed by the advocates of normal discourse (pp. 315, 318, 372). When he says that this conversation is “hermeneutics with polemical intent” (p. 365) he is simply conceding what he says throughout there is no argument or genuine exchange possible between normal and editing philosophers (pp. 181, 364–65). Consequences, pp. xiii–xv, 98). The two sides are not playing by the same rules or even the same metarule (the one that stipulates that we both want to learn the Truth). Since the conversation between normal philosophers is of no interest (for it would not be sufficiently radical), Rorty is presumably promising us conversation between editing philosophers. But such a conversation seems impossible, since editing philosophers are “reactive” and “parasitic,” and so “having sense only as a protest against attempts to close off conversation by proposals for universal commensuration” (p. 377, emphasis added). Edificationists cannot react to each other. Indeed Rorty warns that to introduce “abnormal discourse de novo, without being able to recognize our own abnormality, is madness in the most literal and terrible sense” (p. 366). Moreover, the normal/abnormal dualism is permanent; though the future of philosophy cannot be predicted, this dualism will necessarily be present.

42. I do not mean to imply, of course, that Aristotle uses the insult without argumentation. It is worth noting that even Rorty wants to distinguish between the same, on the one hand, and the “stupid,” “psychotic,” and “moronic,” on the other. Conversation is worthwhile only with the same (Philosophy, pp. 190, 349; cf. the reference on p. 366 to “madness in the most literal and terrible sense.”) Presumably Rorty does not think that the same/insane distinction boils down to the normal/abnormal discourse distinction. But then how does he account for it?

43. On shame, see Symp. 216b, Phr. 243c, Gr. 461b, 482d, Prot. 248c; and R. McKim’s “Shame and Truth in Plato’s Gorgias” in this volume.

44. Rorty says that there are human rights “worth dying for” (Philosophy, p. 177); but do people die white self-consciously holding that these rights “have been granted or denied, in the way in which social and intellectual historians understand this” (p. 178)? Not even intellectualists would die for rights so understood; even they revert to the naive realism of common sense, a realism with which Plato is much more sympathetic. That is, there is something terribly “theoretical” about the sort of position Rorty wants to advocate. Just as Rorty does not want to either affirm or deny the existence of God, and hopes to just set aside the “vocabulary of theology” since he does not see the point in using it (Consequences, p. xiv), so too he would presumably want to set aside the political rhetoric (which is usually contaminated by religious rhetoric) with which nations everywhere define themselves. But then Rorty is fairly clear in his view that the whole “mirror of nature” image, along with the notion that our ideas correspond to some reality out there, does not express a “pre-analytic intuition” (Philosophy, pp. 34, 158–59; yet see pp. 22, 286). I find this very doubtful. On “intuitive realism,” see Rorty’s response in the Introduction to Consequences.

45. Rorty’s quasi-Sartrean talk about the “burden of choice” (Philosophy, p. 376) imposed on us by the absence of commensurating discourse is presumably the basis for his criticisms of “totalitarianism” and “the secret police” (pp. 333, 351, 389), for the latter tend to extricate conversation. To make sure that the conversation continues and the burden is not lifted is the “moral concern” of the philosopher (pp. 383, 394). Presumably giving up the burden of choice is bad because it leads to “dehumanization” (p. 377), “bad faith” (p. 383), “self-objectification” (pp. 378, 389; cf. 349). But why is all that so bad? What if dehumanization becomes, at some point, a self-description which people find “interesting and “new” (pp. 321, 359)? And if their “present moral intuitions” (p. 306) were totalitarian, Rorty must say that there would be something wrong with this. But here Rorty reaches a point words. Rorty must have some description of human nature, and of its debasement, which is not just true for his “linguistic conventions” or “social practices.” As always in coherent statements of liberalism, there is a hidden metarule that all views must be tolerated except the view that tolerance cannot be tolerated. Otherwise we fall prey to what K. Popper calls the “paradox of tolerance”—the fact that “unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance” (The Open Society and its Enemies, 5th ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966], 1:265).

46. The remark is S. Rosen’s, in his review in Review of Metaphysics 33 (1980): 801. Rosen also takes note of other important defects in Rorty’s interpretation of Plato.

10. Liberalizing the Critic


11. Terence Irwin’s Reading of Plato


4. Ibid.; Miles Burnyeat, review of PMT, New York Review of Books, September 27, 1979, pp. 50–60. Of course, the TLS often reviews philosophical works.

5. This may seem unfair to Burnyeat. After stating that “the dialogues are a miraculous blend of philosophical imagination and logic” he does criticize Irwin for being two-sided, for “being all argument with no vision” (p. 56). However, the only alternative Burnyeat offers to PMT is the work of John Findlay, also the subject of his review. Findlay gets lambasted for being too visionary, whereas PMT is praised for its “skilful marshalling of evidence” and for being “a tour de force of philosophical scholarship” (p. 57). This review