

PLATO AND HIS PREDECESSORS

The Dramatisation of Reason

MARY MARGARET McCABE

King's College London



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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1 Introduction	1
1. Reading dialogues	1
2. Frames and reflection	8
3. Historical fictions	10
4. Mean-minded opponents	13
5. Teleology and reason	17
PART I THE OPPONENTS	23
2 Measuring sincerity	25
1. Socrates' methods	25
2. 'Each person is self-sufficient as to wisdom.'	32
3. Protagoras and Socrates	36
4. The refutation of Protagoras	40
5. Socrates revived	51
Appendix: sincerity texts	54
3 Missing persons	60
1. A murder mystery	60
2. Corpus delicti	66
3. Grinding down the giants	73
4. Parsimony	79
5. Mind over matter	85
6. Plato's history of philosophy	89
4 Can the Heraclitean live his Heracliteanism?	93
1. Heraclitus' early appearances	93
2. Measuring flux	96
3. Dealing with the men from Ephesus	104
4. Reasons, reflection and reason	117
5. Are you a man or a mollusc?	128
6. Myth and history	134

PART II TELEOLOGY	139
5 Myth and its end	141
1. The cosmos back to front: <i>Politicus</i> 268–275	141
2. Old stories, other mythologies	149
3. The judgement of lives	159
6 Outwitting the cunning man	165
1. Microcosm and macrocosm	165
2. A cunning man?	178
3. Teleology is said in many ways	185
PART III REASON AND THE PHILOSOPHER	195
7 Tracking down the philosopher	197
1. Disappearances and reappearances	197
2. Talking of wind-eggs . . .	205
3. A gift-horse or a nightmare?	208
4. Ordering parts and wholes	211
5. Collection, division and due measure	220
8 The sufficiency of reason	230
1. Reason and self-determination	230
2. On the road to the good	242
3. Living a life: rethinking completeness	249
4. Rethinking sufficiency: explaining a life	252
5. True lives	258
9 Meeting Socrates' challenge	263
1. Protarchus and Socrates	263
2. Progress and perfectibility	266
3. Meeting Socrates' challenge	273
4. Conversation and dialectic	278
5. History back to front?	281
6. The dramatisation of the principles of reason	287
<i>Bibliography</i>	291
<i>General index</i>	301
<i>Index locorum</i>	311

Preface

This book had its origins in the W. B. Stanford Memorial Lectures at Trinity College, Dublin, in February 1996; I am extremely grateful to John Dillon and Kathy Coleman both for the honour of their invitation and for the warmth of their hospitality, then and thereafter. My audiences in Dublin were very generous and their various comments and questions most illuminating. In particular, Vasilis Politis and John Cleary made me clarify a good deal that had been unclear; whatever opacity there remains – and I fear there may be far too much – is despite their best efforts.

In a form close to the present one Chapter 2 was delivered at the Southern Association for Ancient Philosophy in September 1996, and again at Queen's University, Belfast; and it is published in *Dialogos* 1998. I am grateful to the editors for permission to reprint that material here. A French version of some of Chapters 5 and 6 was delivered at the Sorbonne in 1996, and is published as 'Téléologie et Autonomie dans le *Philèbe* de Platon' in *La fêlure du plaisir et la pensée. Études sur le Philèbe de Platon* vol. 1, ed. M. Dixsaut. Some of the same material was delivered at University College Cork and at King's College London. On all these various occasions I was fortunate in my audiences, whom I should like warmly to thank. In addition John Dillon, Verity Harte, Alan Lacey and Vasilis Politis have all read and commented upon a draft of the whole book; I am extremely grateful to them, both for their patience and for their insights. As reader for the Press, John Cooper made extensive comments on the whole manuscript with his customary care and incisiveness. I am very much indebted to him both for his encouragement and his criticisms. My particular thanks also – as well as the customary exculpation – go to Tad Brennan, Luc Brisson, Myles Burnyeat, Nick Denyer, Monique Dixsaut, David Evans, Dorothea Frede, Chris Gill, Keith Hossack,

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Over the last six years there has been a long-running weekly seminar on ancient texts at Kings; the seminar is always an invigorating occasion, marked by its co-operative approach. I should like to thank all its members, especially Tad Brennan and Verity Harte who have joined me in convening it; and especially, also, those who were involved in the seminars on the *Politicus* and the *Philebus*. I have no doubt that in what follows any ideas that may have any merit will have come from someone else; I hope whoever it may be will forgive my disastrous memory and my failing to mention it in the particular case.

Pauline Hire at Cambridge University Press has been an exemplary editor; my warm thanks to her for her encouragement and help. Muriel Hall copy-edited the manuscript with the sanity of a light touch; my thanks.

In the academic year 1997–8 I was fortunate to hold a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Senior Research fellowship; I am extremely grateful to the Academy and the Leverhulme Trust for their support.

As before, I should like to acknowledge two major debts in writing this book. The first is to the Department of Philosophy at King's – it is a wonderful place to do philosophy; my deep thanks. The second is to my infinitely tolerant family: my two daughters, Kate and Poppy, my mother Sarah McCabe, and my husband Martin Beddoe. This book is dedicated to Martin, with much love.

MMM

CHAPTER I

Introduction

I. READING DIALOGUES

Plato wrote brilliant dialogues. Compare this:¹

SOCRATES: Once someone – whether a god or a godlike man – discovered that sound is unlimited. The Egyptian story says this person was Theuth, who first discovered that the vowels in the unlimited are not one but many; and that there are others that have no voice but still some kind of sound, and that these too have a number; and he separated a third kind of letter, which we now call mute. After that, he divided the soundless mutes down to each unit, and treated the vowels and the intermediates in the same fashion, until he grasped a number for each of them, and he gave all of them together the name ‘letter’. And since he saw clearly that none of us learn one of them itself by itself without understanding them all, and reasoned that this bond is a single one, and that it somehow unifies them all, he called it the art of literacy, which is one over them all.

PHILEBUS: I have understood the relations between these things even more clearly than I did the last example, Protarchus; but the explanation suffers from the same shortcoming now as it did a little earlier.

SOC.: You mean, Philebus, what it has to say to the matter in hand?

PHIL.: Yes – that is what Protarchus and I have been asking for some time.

SOC.: But what you have been seeking for a long time is right under your nose.

PHIL.: How so?

¹ The translations throughout are my own except where I indicate otherwise; for passages of Plato they are of the Greek text printed in the OCT except where I indicate otherwise. I have generally avoided Greek in the main text, limiting direct quotation of Greek to the notes: I hope that this will make my argument accessible to the Greekless reader. I have used transliteration only in cases where the transliterated word has become established in English (e.g. *mimesis*), or where the translation of the word is problematic (e.g. *sophrosune*) so that the transliterated expression is retained in my main text.

SOC.: Our discussion was about intelligence and pleasure from the start, wasn't it; and we wanted to know which of them was to be chosen?

PHIL.: Yes, indeed.

SOC.: And we say that each of them is one.

PHIL.: Absolutely.

SOC.: This is exactly what our preceding discussion asks: how is it that each of these is both one and many, and how instead of becoming unlimited straight away, each of them has some determinate number before it becomes unlimited?

PROTARCHUS: Socrates has thrown us into no mean puzzle, Philebus, by leading us round somehow or other in a circle. (*Philebus* 18b–19a)

with the clumping style of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*:

PHILONOUS: Again, try in your thoughts, Hylas, if you can conceive a vehement sensation to be without pain or pleasure.

HYLAS: I cannot.

PHIL.: Or can you frame to yourself an idea of sensible pain or pleasure, in general, abstracted from every particular idea of heat, cold, taste, smells etc.?

HYL.: I do not find that I can.

PHIL.: Does it not therefore follow that sensible pain is nothing distinct from those sensations or ideas – in an intense degree?

HYL.: It is undeniable; and, to speak the truth, I begin to suspect a very great heat cannot exist but in a mind perceiving it.

PHIL.: What! are you then in that *skeptical* state of suspense, between affirming and denying?

HYL.: I think I may be positive in the point. A very violent and painful heat cannot exist without the mind.²

or with the grandeurs of Cicero:

CATO: And yet there had to be something final, and – as in the case of orchard fruits and crops of grain in the process of ripening which comes from time – something shrivelled, as it were, and prone to fall. But this state the wise man should endure with resignation. For what is warring against the gods, as the giants did, other than fighting against Nature?

LAELIUS: True, Cato, but you will do a thing most agreeable to us both – assuming that I may speak for Scipio too – if, since we hope to become old (at least we wish it) you will, long in advance, teach us on what principles we may most easily support the weight of increasing years.

² *First Dialogue*, p. 15–16.

CAT.: To be sure I will, Laelius, especially if, as you say, it is going to prove agreeable to you both.

LAEL.: Unless it is too much trouble to you, Cato, since you have, as it were, travelled the long road on which we also must set out, we really do wish to see what sort of place it is at which you have arrived.³ (Cicero, *de senectute* 5–6, trs. Falconer)

Plato can write vivid and compelling accounts of the verbal engagements between Socrates (usually) and various interlocutors. And his brilliance may work, after all, to Plato's disadvantage; for the success of the dialogue form threatens the success of his arguments. Sometimes Plato's readers feel he must be cheating, just because he does it so well. The first encounter with Plato, therefore, may be the last, when the disenchanted reader feels that the swiftness of his rhetorical hand deceives the philosophical eye, or that the allure of his style covers up his real argumentative purposes. So *should* Plato have written dialogues?

Perhaps not. A different complaint against the dialogue form alleges that it is not so much devious and rhetorical, as overly particular – just because it dramatises the encounter between individual, individually characterised, people and their views. This gives no guarantee that the conclusions of the discussion apply beyond the narrow scope of this encounter here and now (or there and then). But philosophy – this complaint supposes – looks to the universal and hopes to transcend the here and now. Philosophy and drama, then, do not mix.

This objection might be a silly one. We do not suppose that *King Lear* matters only to Lear, Cordelia and Gloucester; nor that there is no more general understanding to be carried away from watching their tragedy than that they came to a sticky end. Drama does not wear its meaning on its sleeve, sure enough, but indirectly particular dramas are after all universalisable.⁴ Moral philosophers, consequently, have been more charitable towards the dialogue form than metaphysicians. For in ethics we need to see the interaction of general principle with particular situation; the ethical must be both universalisable (principled) and absolutely particular (about the individual things we do, the individual lives we

³ The echo of *Republic* 328e in this passage emphasises the point: Socrates' resonant words to Cephalus there lack the bland obsequiousness of Laelius' to Cato.

⁴ See Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b1 ff. This has become a *topos* for modern discussions of the inadequacies of philosophy; see e.g. Williams 1996, Nussbaum 1986.

lead). Here, indeed, philosophers often fall short in their portrayal of example: how dismal it is to describe an ethical problem as ‘One man meets another at a cross-roads, murders him, then unknowingly marries his own mother; on discovery she kills herself, he blinds himself – were they right?’ when we could read or watch the *Oedipus Tyrannus*; and how inadequate for the purposes of ethics, which need to consider not just what was done but why and how. Ethics wonders, therefore, what was said about what was done. So Plato’s portrayal of full character, of people leading lives and discussing the principles upon which they should do so,⁵ fits the demands of ethics very well.

But the metaphysician may still have a point. It may be that ethical reflection benefits from the indirect provocation of drama or tragedy, but is the same true for the principles of logic or the assumptions we should make about ‘being qua being’? In cases such as these, if a dialogue presents an argument *indirectly*, by presenting it within some particular encounter between two individual people, would not clarity be better served by directness?⁶ If Plato’s style is designed merely to make his arguments more attractive, then to understand what he really means we need to pare away the literary skin to find the philosophical fruit within. This process has been particularly associated with the modern analytic approach to philosophy, although it has been increasingly questioned in recent years.⁷ For the contrast between the literary and the philosophical may in general be tendentious; and in particular cases it may be inaccessible – where the argument and the dialogue form are so closely interwoven that it becomes impossible to decide which is which. In this book, however, I shall argue that the attempt to make such a decision is misguided anyway. For, I shall argue, the relation between the form of the dialogues and their argument is itself a philosophical relation, whose importance is denied by the suggestion that form and argument simply belong to different genres, or different types of thinking (or whatever other

⁵ For the moral philosopher, the crucial thing about dialogue is that it represents moral agents, *persons* – and this is a central idea in Plato’s conception of *mimesis*, as Kosman has argued recently, 1992.

⁶ Plato’s complaint against the poets might bounce back on him. If he knows what he is talking about why does he not say it? If he does not know what he is talking about, why does he not stay silent? Cf. e.g. *Republic* 598d ff.

⁷ See, for example, the essays collected in Klagge and Smith, 1992, and in Gill and McCabe 1996.

difference the contrast between the literary and the philosophical is supposed to capture).

It is often supposed that the *Phaedrus* explains all this.⁸ Theuth, the inventor of writing, went with his discovery to Thamus the king of Egypt, only to be met with dismay. Writing is a drug for the memory (anyone who has worked with a computer will concur . . .) – fixed, unresponsive and inflexible:

SOCRATES: Writing has, I suppose, Phaedrus, this extraordinary feature, and it is in truth very much like painting. For its offspring stand there as if they are alive, but if they are asked a question, they preserve a haughty silence. It is the same with written words. You might think they spoke as if they were intelligent, but if you asked them a question in the hope of learning something, they always say just one thing, the same all the time. For once it is written down, any written word rolls around just as much in front of those who know as in front of those who have no business with it, and it does not know whom it should talk to and whom not. When it is wronged or abused unjustly it always needs the help of its parent; it is not able to protect itself or to come to its own aid. (*Phaedrus* 275d–e)

Socrates' remarks are thoroughly provocative.⁹ They pretend to the directness of oral discussion, but they are themselves fixed and recorded by the written word against which they inveigh. This has two immediate effects. First, it calls the reader's attention to the fact that Socrates is indeed represented here in writing. We are not hearing his words live, but merely reading an image of him, an image which cannot answer our questions back. So we notice the form of the representation, and the fictionality of its characters: the writing is self-conscious. Second, if Socrates is right, then the truth he enunciates undermines the very context in which it is said. He may mean, simply, that the reading of philosophy is second-best, compared with an actual encounter with Socrates himself on the banks of the Ilissus. Or, more radically, he may mean that written philosophy is entirely unreliable, just because it is so inflexible that it is insusceptible to scrutiny. The point of this

⁸ This has become the *locus classicus* for discussion of Plato's literary skills; cf. also *Epistulae* VII, which if it is genuine, re-emphasises the *Phaedrus*' point; even if the Letter is not genuine, it attests the importance of the puzzle about writing in the Academy.

⁹ Indeed, they have provoked a great deal of attention especially in recent years, when scholars have turned their attention to the dialogue form; see in particular, Ferrari 1987, Mackenzie 1982b, Rowe 1986, Gill 1996b.

may be the posing of the paradox itself, since paradoxes have a philosophical dynamic of their own;¹⁰ or it may be to provoke us into reflecting on the formal aspects of philosophical writing; or it may be merely to explain that what Plato does when he writes dialogue is to represent the way that real philosophy should be done – by question and answer, person to person, live and face to face.¹¹

If that is Plato's claim, we may begin to feel a deep sense of disappointment when we come to read the later dialogues. By this time, perhaps, Plato had decided that the methods of Socrates were pretty dull and unproductive after all; he replaced them first by the superb vision of the *Republic*, and then later he offers an entirely fresh and different account of dialectic to replace that. Correspondingly, the *Republic* is a great speech (interrupted by conversation), while the *Sophist* and the *Politicus* are as dramatic as collection and division is exciting. I shall wonder whether this story is true.

It is commonly thought that the late dialogues are arid and flat from a literary and dramatic point of view. To rebut that thought, I shall consider a quartet of late dialogues, which are connected both dramatically and thematically in complex ways: the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Politicus* and the *Philebus*.¹² I do not propose an exhaustive treatment of these dialogues.¹³ I start, instead, with this question about the dialogue form: how, if at all, is the dialogue form of philosophical importance in this quartet? I shall reflect upon this question in terms dictated by Socrates' story about Theuth. There it seems that Socrates wants philosophy to be done by conversation: so I shall, to begin with, focus my attention on the people who have the conversations in these dialogues.

But there are two sorts of conversation to be found in my quar-

¹⁰ See here Quine 1966, Sainsbury 1988.

¹¹ See here Gill 1996a.

¹² Why just these four? You might complain of the omission of the *Timaeus*, or of the *Laws*. I shall argue that there is a peculiarly organic connection between the dialogues of this quartet; I shall not devote a great deal of time to showing discontinuity between them and other, possibly late, works. Nor shall I return yet again to the question of dating (but see McCabe 1994, Appendix A for some of my assumptions) save to say here that I take it that these four dialogues were at least written to be read in the order I give them: *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*. I should add, however, that I find it a virtue of the late dialogues that they are able to reflect on, and revise, the assumptions of earlier ones: but for two different approaches to the issue of chronology see e.g. Kahn 1996, Rowe 1999, 12 n.1.

¹³ I have, I fear, already quite exhausted my reader's patience on some subjects, McCabe 1994 *passim*.

tet. One is the directly reported conversation between the protagonists who are, as it were, live to the actual encounter – Socrates, the Eleatic Stranger, Theaetetus, Theodorus, Young Socrates, Philebus and Protarchus. The other is a collection of indirectly reported conversations between Socrates or the Eleatic Stranger, on the one hand, and some imaginary interlocutors. These are many and various. At times they are personifications, such as the pleasures and the knowledges of *Philebus*. At times they are simply in dialogues embedded within the dialogue itself, such as the discussion between the Eleatic Stranger and the idealists at *Sophist* 247 ff. But there is a particular set of imaginary conversations where the interlocutor surprisingly fails to turn up; the conversation turns out lop-sided. More strikingly still, these missing persons are Plato and Socrates' own predecessors: in each case, the conversation should be between Socrates, or the Eleatic Stranger, and someone who takes up a particular philosophical position. I shall argue that in each case the interlocutor turns out to propose a philosophical position that cannot be occupied; and this is why he fails to turn up. There are four of these missing philosophers: Protagoras, Parmenides, some strict materialists, and Heraclitus. I discuss the complex arguments to refute them in Part I, The Opponents.

There are two other dramatis personae who go missing: the hedonist Philebus, and Socrates himself. In his eponymous dialogue Philebus gradually fades out of the conversation; whereas Socrates effectively disappears for the two dialogues which are conducted by the Eleatic Stranger, the *Sophist* and the *Politicus*. I shall argue that these absences are evidence of two positive theories to be advanced in the quartet. In the case of Philebus, he lacks a teleology in which to participate; by contrast Plato offers a teleology of order (I argue for this in Part II, Teleology). In the case of Socrates, he is confronted by an account of philosophy, philosophy as a holistic epistemology, which seems inimical to his method of question and answer, to the conversational way of doing philosophy. One running theme in what follows is the various ways in which the method of conversational dialectic is presented, and how this is marked off both from Socrates' earlier endeavours, and from the conversations with certain opponents which fail. Socrates' reappearance in the *Philebus*, I shall suggest, is the mark of Plato's reconciliation of his new, late epistemology with the conversational method of dialectic, where that is conceived as a positive

philosophical method, vitally person to person, and no longer negative in its outcome. I argue for this conclusion in Part III, Reason and the Philosopher.

So one theme in what follows is philosophical method, where that is understood in two rather different senses. On the one hand, we need to know what method to use for doing philosophy. In the case of Plato's late investigations, then, what is the relation between the method of question and answer represented by Socrates and the more formal epistemology proposed in the dialogues themselves? I return to this theme repeatedly, especially in Ch. 2§5 and Ch. 9. On the other hand, Plato's own representation of philosophical conversations demands a defence, in particular a defence against the complaints either that it is a mere literary flourish or that it is hopelessly specific to the encounter he describes. I shall argue that these dialogues do provide a complex and subtle defence of his method of writing philosophy, against any such dismal view of the significance of the dialogue form (this claim will appear throughout the book).

2. FRAMES AND REFLECTION

That defence, I shall suggest, begins with his missing persons. There are a lot of characters who do not turn up in Plato's dialogues. Of course, you do not, and I do not; nor does René Descartes, nor does Karl Marx. But there are some ostentatious absentees.

Two of them are famous. While – as Plato reports it – Socrates was preparing himself for death and explaining how the health of the soul is far more important than the health of the body, Plato was off sick (*Phaedo* 59b10). And as in the *Sophist* and *Politicus*, in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* the protagonist is not Socrates, but instead someone who may lay claim to the expertise relevant to the matter in hand (Timaeus and the Athenian Stranger). Why? These literary devices might make philosophical sense – they may, for example, suggest that the subject in hand is genuinely a matter of expertise or, more plausibly, they may distance Plato from the views expressed in the dialogue.¹⁴ But they do something else: they make us notice *that the dialogue is fiction*. How, we ask ourselves,

¹⁴ This interpretation has sometimes been adopted for the late dialogues: cf. M. Frede, 1996. For the *Phaedo* the disavowal this represents is less attractive – although here we may only be moved by sentiment.

could Plato have been absent from Socrates' deathbed, when it is Plato (as we know from circumstances *outside* the dialogue) who reports the whole scene to us? To this kind of emphasis on the fictional character of the dialogues I shall return, especially in discussing the use Plato makes of his predecessors, and the way in which he exploits myth (in Ch. 3§6, Ch. 4§6, Ch. 5§2). For, I shall argue, this use of self-conscious fiction both distances the reader from the dialogue (it forces us to cease suspending disbelief about what is represented to us), and makes the reader reflective on the content of the fiction itself. By provoking an attitude of disbelief, that is to say, these moments in the dialogues bring the arguments themselves under reflective scrutiny, and focus our attention on the form and principles of the arguments themselves.

Consider some earlier dialogues when characters are introduced in an imaginary dialogue within the dialogue.¹⁵ For example, in the *Crito* Socrates imagines himself having conversation with the Laws, who represent the argument that Socrates must stay in prison and abide his punishment, an argument which Socrates endorses by doing so. Here the very fictionality of the Laws makes us wonder just whose side Plato is on here; and thereafter it makes us wonder further, not so much about Socrates' individual decision to stay in prison, but about his standing relative to the Laws, and the justification for the Laws' exercise of authority over him.¹⁶ Or in the *Hippias Major*, in his discussion with Hippias Socrates imagines another discussion which Socrates *might* have with another Socrates. Once again, there is an obvious philosophical effect: it allows the Socrates figure who is present to disavow authority for his own views, while suggesting that there may be some authoritative view (on obeying the law, for example, or on defining beauty) available. Then, it forces us to inquire what it would be to have such an authoritative view anyway.¹⁷ So the effect of introducing *someone else* at a distance, embedded within the present dialogue, is to provoke the reader into reflecting on the status of the theory itself; the philosophical pay-off *of the device itself* seems to be epistemological or metaphysical, rather than ethical or political.

Compare the discussion in the *Apology* (which is not, otherwise, a

¹⁵ There is an analogy between this sort of dialogue within a dialogue and the reporting of the dialogue 'proper' by some observer or series of observers – for an extreme example of the latter compare the reporting of the meeting between Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates at the beginning of the *Parmenides*.

¹⁶ See here Harte 1999b.

¹⁷ M. Frede 1996.

dialogue at all) between Socrates and Meletus, one of his accusers. This contrivance (in a work which is evidently not an accurate historical record)¹⁸ has the effect of emphasising Socrates' appropriation of the terms of normal legal process to the quite different standards of the elenchus.¹⁹ Philosophy, Plato suggests, has higher conditions on truth and discovery than is demanded by the law (Plato suggests it, not Socrates – for Plato makes the suggestion by virtue of the fiction itself, by holding up the two techniques for comparison). Or at *Phaedo* 100c ff. Socrates, outlining his 'method of hypothesis', explains that once we propose a hypothesis we should base our answers on that.²⁰ He imagines an interlocutor, and then has him wait until the analysis of the hypothesis itself is complete before asking questions. And this fiction brings out clearly a point, once again, about the nature of philosophical inquiry – that we must do it in the right order, and not answer questions before they are appropriate.

This might allow us a preliminary thought. In even the earliest dialogues, arguments (arguments *pure and simple*, we might say) are *framed* in the narrative of the dialogue, in the drama of the debate. But the frame itself reflects on the argument; in particular, it reflects on the conditions under which that argument is conducted – on its assumptions and its conditions. So the frame, in these cases, investigates the methods and principles of philosophy itself. It is as such, I shall argue, that the dialogue form not only persists but gains in importance in the late period: especially in my late quartet. Central to this, I claim, is the fact that the drama of the dialogues is fiction; all of these characters, including Socrates himself, are imaginary.²¹

3. HISTORICAL FICTIONS

Yet many of these people are historical figures. Indeed, the frame often emphasises the historicity of Plato's characters at the same time as it reminds us of the artifice of drama. Socrates, of course,

¹⁸ But see Kahn 1996, 88.

¹⁹ Consider, for example, the commonplace: 'My opponent says he tells the truth, but he lies; I on the other hand, will tell you the whole truth, unvarnished'; and compare *Apology* 17a–b.

²⁰ I avoid analysing this thoroughly vexed passage in detail.

²¹ This does not imply, of course, that there may not be some connections between any particular fictional figure and its historical counterpart; but those connections should not be taken for granted.

is the obvious case: the tragi-comic figure whose death is often prefigured (e.g. *Meno*); sometimes anticipated (*Euthyphro*, *Theaetetus*) and once actually described. Even in the last case the fiction persists – death by hemlock is not the calm affair which the *Phaedo* describes, and yet Socrates is impassive, as we might expect of the philosopher with his eye on another world. Likewise, most of the other characters would be recognised by Plato's audience, at the same time as the element of caricature (Prodicus), the occasional inaccuracy (Glaucón),²² or the broad brush-strokes (Critias, Nicias) remind us that these are persons of the drama, not matters of pure historical record. (How much more striking then is the an-historical appearance of the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* and the *Politicus*; and thence – as I shall argue – the reappearance of Socrates in the *Philebus*?) Some of the interlocutors are actors in the fifth-century political scene; some are otherwise nonentities; some became famous as followers of Socrates. But others may claim some philosophical seriousness in their own right: not only Parmenides and Zeno, but Protagoras, too. Philosophical figures, moreover, turn up not only as participants in the dialogue, but also as quasi-figures: as inventions, allusions, figures presented as if they were present to the dialogue that is actually taking place. Plato's predecessors, that is, sometimes appear either directly, or else created within the dialogue as parties to another dialogue embedded within the first. I shall wonder why.

The ancients were as concerned with their past as the moderns may be. Hellenistic philosophers, for example, exhaustively catalogue their philosophical pedigree; and Aristotle is often to be found discussing the opinions of 'the many and the wise', where 'the wise' are often his pre-Socratic predecessors, or even Plato himself. Aristotle defends this on the grounds that these characters are indeed wise; and that they spent a long time worrying about these problems – so that there must be something in what they say (man, after all, is naturally inclined towards the truth, *Rhetoric* 1355a15). Aristotle's main interest, however, is not especially historical: his purpose in surveying his predecessors is to set up a good puzzle, whose solution will advance our understanding. He does not, therefore, always care for historical accuracy.²³

²² John Glucker (unpublished paper presented to the B Club, Cambridge, 1989) has argued that Glaucón could not have been in Athens at the dramatic date of the *Republic*.

²³ See Aristotle's account of how to construct a good puzzle by supplying what others have missed, *Metaphysics* 995a26.

Plato, on the other hand, seems not to share Aristotle's optimism about man's natural inclination – he is more likely to say that man is naturally inclined towards gross appetites and thoroughgoing illusion than either to report or to recommend the views of his predecessors without prejudice (with, of course, the outstanding exception of Socrates). And yet we have the reports of Aristotle that Plato was indeed influenced by his predecessors (Heraclitus in particular); and we have Plato's own dramatisations of them. Why does Plato indulge in his own brand of the history of philosophy? How faithful is Plato to his predecessors' views? And if he is faithless, are his attacks on his predecessors merely the conflagrations of straw men?

In what follows Plato's historical antecedents will figure, initially, in what I shall call 'philosophical positions' (this especially in Chs. 2–4). To occupy a philosophical position, I shall suggest, is to put forward a theory which can itself be defended in rational debate, which can, that is to say, be 'occupied'. The positions which Protagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus and the strict materialists try to occupy, however, turn out to be untenable in rational debate, just because they undermine reason itself. This, in the first place, presents their theories as dialectically refuted; in the second place, it draws out just what it is to occupy a position with reason (these two themes will be the subject of Chs. 2–4). This account of reason is connected, I shall argue, with what it is to be a person, and thereafter with what it is to be a person living a life (this will be the subject of Chs. 5, 6 and 8). As a consequence, the principles of reason and the theories they contain are interdependent: it follows from this, I argue in Ch. 7, that Plato's late epistemology is thoroughly and uniformly holistic.

Plato's use of these historical figures exploits, as I shall argue (especially in Chs. 3§6, 4§6, 5§2, 6§2), the fact that they did in fact hold the theories under scrutiny. Consequently Plato uses both quotation and allusion – especially from Heraclitus and Parmenides – to locate his arguments in their historical contexts. This has two additional consequences. The first is that by this kind of allusion Plato establishes that the theory in question is indeed intended to be a coherent *philosophical* position (rather than merely an opinion held by someone or other), held in a systematic way along with various other views. These putative positions, that is to say, already make their appearance as developed and principled

views, held as a collection by someone in particular. However, and secondly, the effect of an argument to show that these positions cannot after all be occupied is one which distances the reader from the views in question. In particular, the argumentative strategy (which, I shall suggest, Plato repeats) to show that these theorists cannot turn up for the philosophical conversations in which they are supposed to figure itself allows their status as historical figures to become blurred. After all, if these people cannot really talk, or turn up, or appear live in a conversation, they may be mere figments of Plato's imagination. To their historical status, then, is added a fictional dimension; and the use of these historical fictions has a distancing effect.

Finally, of course, the interconnections between different arguments are often marked by the historical figures against whom the arguments are directed. Thus, for example, in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* Parmenides and Heraclitus are treated as a pair, as representing a pair of theories which cannot be supported. In the first dialogue Parmenides is mentioned, while Heraclitus is refuted; in the second the reverse occurs. Consequently, this kind of historical allusion, based as it is on Plato's use of his predecessor's texts and his assumption that his readers will pick up the references, enriches and elaborates the connections between arguments and theories, allowing us to see where Plato takes different approaches to a philosophical problem to be complementary (see here Ch. 3§5, Ch. 4§4).

4. MEAN-MINDED OPPONENTS

If you thought philosophy to be like science, you might suppose that the history of philosophy, like the history of science, marches in a straight line. You would be wrong, on both counts: science walks crabwise, stands still and retreats (consider the history of atomism) no less than it progresses directly; and philosophy surely does the same. But you might still think that philosophy is like science in that it depends on revolutions, moments of new understanding which completely transform what comes after, and make it discontinuous with what went before. One such moment in the history of philosophy, for example, might be the first one – when thinkers abandoned the prolific story-telling of myth and tried instead for systematic and simple understanding of the world

around them. Another such moment, many suppose, was the arrival of Cartesian scepticism, after which no philosopher could ignore the possibility that he might be systematically deluded about both the nature and the very existence of the external world. Scepticism like this shapes modern philosophical thinking just because it challenges every assumption the philosopher may make. The problem about scepticism is, one might say, its thoroughgoingness – the question it asks can be applied to any riposte, and any riposte may seem sensible only by already assuming that scepticism is false. The strength of scepticism, that is, is the way that it undermines anything the opposition might say – to any display of conviction, of certainty, of passionate faith on the part of another the sceptic always responds with the deflationary ‘How do you know that?’ (and of course philosophers, who think that knowing things matters, are here especially deflated). Scepticism is thus what I call a ‘mean-minded theory’.²⁴

But then ancient philosophical thinking, which antedated the Cartesian revolution, may be unrecognisable to us as philosophy at all. Perhaps all we can do with it is treat it as an antique, suitable for admiration or ridicule, but hardly likely to illuminate our own philosophical understanding. For – the post-Cartesian would argue – no theory that does not face the challenge of doubt is well founded, no theory that does not either embrace or rebut scepticism has principles that are genuinely first. And it is true, certainly, that the ancient philosophers did not confront the problem of doubt or not, at least, in the same way;²⁵ so perhaps they should not be the object of our philosophical study at all? In this book I shall suppose that this view is wrong.

This is partly because of how, as it seems to me, the history of philosophy works. The imagined attack on the ancients has, you may notice, two prongs. The first supposes that philosophy is only about being *right*; so that any theory that (by predating some philosophical revolution) must be wrong is therefore a mere curiosity. The second prong supposes that philosophy needs to be based on

²⁴ Egoism is another such – ‘What makes you so damn sure that we are nice enough to care about other people for their own sake?’ Egoism seems to be an assumption about psychology; but in fact it has affinities to parsimony (see Ch. 3§4): the burden of proof is on someone who would insist that there is real altruism. I return to this in Ch. 9§3.

²⁵ See here, Burnyeat 1982, Denyer 1991, ch. 1.

radical assumptions, and it assumes that those radical assumptions must include some account of the problem of scepticism.

The first prong can readily be blunted, I submit, by reflecting on just how much richer philosophy is than merely a catalogue of (or an attempt at) right answers. Philosophy is peculiarly interested in understanding *why* any particular answer might be right; and, by the same token, it is also deeply interested in why some answer might be wrong. This, I suggest, is because ideas with reasons are the province of philosophy, or thinking about thinking. In this (as I suppose it to be) uniquely reflective stance, philosophy need make no crude assumptions about what counts as progress.²⁶

But then if philosophy is interested in *why* someone thought this or that, then the second prong of the anti-historical argument is sharpened. For (as the demon's advocate may suggest again) if the reasons for thinking this or that are not adequately investigated, or founded, then those reasons will be less and less interesting. If the ancients are convicted of being insufficiently radical, they may turn out to be excessively dull. But, I shall claim, Plato treats his predecessors as having views which we should concede to be as radical as Cartesian scepticism in the threat they pose to the possibility of rational investigation. Plato's refutations of Protagoras, of Parmenides, of strict materialism and of Heracliteanism are attacks on mean-minded theories, no less than would be a rejection of the possibility of the evil demon. These too are mean-minded opponents, whose theories threaten the very business of philosophy. Their refutation, I shall argue, is itself a means of establishing the principles of reason.

I begin with Protagoras and Socrates (Ch. 2). The notorious argument against Protagoras' relativism in the *Theaetetus* is, I suggest, presented in the context of Socrates' methods of philosophical inquiry. In particular, Protagoras and Socrates both have

²⁶ Some have argued that philosophy should be characterised in a more determinate way; see here Williams 1985, Rorty 1980. Their objections to the practices of philosophy depend on their taking a stricter view of what philosophy is. If, as I believe, philosophy is exactly thinking about thinking, then it is marked by what I shall describe as its order: the way in which it reflects at a higher order of discourse on what is delivered by lower-order thinking. I take this to be the reflective stance cultivated by philosophy; on such a view of what philosophy is, it is perhaps easy to see why I think that the study of the history of philosophy is itself a philosophical activity. For discussion and differing views, see here M. Frede 1987, introduction, Striker 1996, Charles 1997.

reason to suppose that the parties to an argument are, or should be, sincere in what they say – that is, they should say what they believe. This requirement on argument turns, I argue, not on an ethical claim about good argumentative manners, but rather on Protagoras' and Socrates' opposed claims about the nature of belief. Where Protagoras deals with belief in terms of extreme relativism, Socrates supposes that any one belief I hold must be capable of logical relations with other beliefs I hold; and that these logical relations between my beliefs reflect my ownership of the beliefs I hold. So the holding of beliefs – I suggest – is tied up with what account we give of who I am; and the refutation of Protagoras turns on there being no such account of who the extreme relativist can be at all.

This account of belief is connected with a Socratic account of argument: where argument proceeds by examining the coherence of someone's beliefs; by question and answer; and often with the conclusion that some belief set is simply inconsistent. This method is vulnerable to three objections (Ch. 2§1): the *analytic complaint*, that what individual people believe has nothing to do with the generality or abstractness of philosophical inquiry; the *foundationalist objection*, that the investigation of the coherence of some belief set is no way to arrive at either a positive conclusion, or at general principles for how philosophy is to be done, or why; and the *Socratic challenge*, which asks why there should be anything significant about the person to person encounters, the conversational philosophy advocated by the ugliest man in Athens. In the rest of the book I examine the way in which this late quartet deals with these objections to philosophy done in the image of Socrates: I conclude that now Plato offers both a metaphysical and an epistemological account of how philosophy should be done; and that he complements this with a teleology which has an answer to the Socratic challenge.

The next stage in this defence of philosophy comes in the arguments mounted by the Eleatic Stranger (the ES) against Parmenides and against the strict materialists (in the *Sophist*; Ch. 3). Both these opponents are construed as mean-minded, because they both espouse an extreme kind of reductionism – what I call parsimony. The arguments against them are, in each case, oddly framed: the attack on Parmenides is imagined as a murder, while the strict materialists vanish before they appear, and are replaced by more

tractable opponents. I suggest that these features of the drama are themselves argumentative, for they present these parsimonist positions as unable to be occupied by persons who might appear at the debate. In the course of this discussion, the ES uncovers a series of positive theses, theses which themselves support the possibility of argument. One set of claims concerns the nature of speech and naming; the other concerns the metaphysical status of minds. I argue (in Ch. 3§5) that the discussion of the ontological status of mind and reason at the centre of the *Sophist*, set as it is in the context of a puzzle about the possibility of argument, defends the rationalist claim that giving a rational account is itself giving it to someone else; defending it is defending it for oneself. Dialectic, construed in this fashion, requires other minds; without other minds, dialectic vanishes altogether.

These considerations about minds and reason, however, are not the direct topics of the arguments; instead, they are clarified by the context in which the direct arguments occur. They occur in the frame, as a consequence of reflection on the arguments in question. This makes clear, that is to say, that the relation between argument and frame is itself argumentative. I draw the same conclusion in my discussion of the refutation of Heraclitus in the *Theaetetus* (Ch. 4). Here the frame discussion of the nature of the men from Ephesus anticipates and controls the conclusion of the direct arguments against them – once again, these are people with whom we cannot carry on a philosophical conversation, just because they are not themselves continuant, reasoning persons. The nature of their failure, however, is made specific by the detail of the argument that follows. For the argument employs an indifference strategy; and that strategy shows how for someone who tries to occupy a Heraclitean position reflection is impossible, just as the giving and taking of reasons is ruled out. The relation between reflection and its objects then turns into a significant theme in Plato's late epistemology, as I shall argue in Ch. 9.

5. TELEOLOGY AND REASON

The conversations with the mean-minded opponents provide an account of the necessary conditions for engaging in philosophical conversation. But they do not show why engaging in philosophical conversation should be necessary. In the second half of the book I

turn to some more positive aspects of Plato's treatment of his predecessors, in his discussions of teleology and the best life. Once again, I argue, his position is articulated against the background of what his predecessors say. In particular, the elaboration of a teleological account of the world, one which he offers in the *Politicus* and the *Philebus*, must be made against the background of other accounts of causation and explanation. The issue then is to show why those who have a non-teleological account of the world and its workings should give in to a more elaborate teleological view. Once again, I suggest, Plato's defence against mean-minded views rests on his account of persons,²⁷ of reason and the life lived by man.

In the *Politicus* the ES offers a myth of the reversal of the cosmos, resonant with the cosmological claims of early philosophy and poetry. In Ch. 5 I offer an interpretation of this myth and its setting, and I argue that its primary purpose is to focus our attention on the judgement of lives. How, the ES asks, should we evaluate the lives of the lotus-eaters in a divinely ordered universe relative to the lives we live now, barely surviving in a hard and grim world? The reply, I argue, comes in terms of philosophy (I return to this point in Ch. 8§1 in suggesting that reason provides us with self-determination). But the significance of the myth lies also in its argumentative function: by offering us a comparison between our own lives and the mythical lives of the lotus-eaters, Plato invites us to detach ourselves from the here and now, and

²⁷ Here a disavowal. I shall conclude that Plato's account of philosophical principles in these late dialogues revolves around his view of persons living lives susceptible to reason. It follows from a great deal of what he says that 'person' turns out to be an honorific title, and his notion of personhood turns out to be normative. I had claimed this before, 1994, ch. 9, and that persons in Plato should be understood as pretenders to the unity of consciousness, to active minds and to systematic understanding. I now hope to modify that claim, and to rescue it both from anachronism and mistake. The anachronism is to treat a Lockean account of the unity of consciousness as central (I still insist, however, that this notion of consciousness is not foreign to, e.g., the arguments of the *Theaetetus*; cf. here Burnyeat 1976b). Although Plato uses arguments like Locke's (e.g. at *Theaetetus* 163d ff.) I now think that it is not consciousness he is so much interested in (whatever we might think consciousness is – the mechanism for the convergence of perceptions?) as the nature and control of reason; see M. Frede and Striker eds. 1996. Reason, he supposes, is to be explicated carefully in terms of a life lived in such a way that it can be organised, explained and defended by argument. 'Person' is still honorific, of course, since full rationality is the expression of perfection, not of the actual state of us, arguing, here and now. But as a consequence, Plato's account of who we are is not meant to be inclusive of all the features which might go to make us up. Instead reason gives us the focal point, or the ideal, of the order of a life. To see Plato's project otherwise is to make a mistake.

take a distant perspective: he invites us to reflect. At the same time, he invites us to reflect on the judgement of lives from our own point of view: the reflection is located within our own ownership of our beliefs. Once again, the process of reflection (which Plato had begun to analyse in the encounters with the mean-minded opponents) is explained in terms of the ownership of belief, in each person's understanding of who they are. Once again, therefore, the philosophical justification of reflection is connected to a metaphysical account, the account of persons.

This theme is carried through in the cosmology of *Philebus* 28–30. In Ch. 6 I argue that this should be interpreted as a teleology of order (not one which is externally explained, as the gift of god); and that the clues to understanding it this way are given by the opponent against whom it is elaborated – the advocate of disorder, Heraclitus, a cunning man. But a teleology of order is adaptable in ways that a theistic teleology is not; in particular, a teleology of order may describe the structure of reason, no less than the structure of the universe.

Pursuing that thought, Ch. 7 investigates Plato's late epistemology. The epistemology of the *Republic* is unashamedly foundationalist: it proposes that knowledge (understanding) is heavily structured, but that the structure is based on some basic principles to which we have access by a different means than the means that gives us access to what is derived from them. This foundationalism, however, comes under attack as Socrates' dream in the *Theaetetus*. Subsequently, as the discussions of collection and division in the *Sophist*, the *Politicus* and the *Philebus* and, especially, the account of dialectic at *Sophist* 253 show, foundationalism is replaced by a thoroughgoing holistic epistemology. Now – to return to the problems confronted by the Socratic method – does this mean that any system of knowledge is only relatively adequate, good enough to defeat some competitors, but not necessarily uniquely true, or harnessed to reality? In Ch. 7§5 and thereafter in Ch. 8, I argue that the holistic epistemology, tied as it is to the ordered teleology of the *Philebus*, does suppose that the knowledge of the dialectician is unique, uniquely representing the truth. This, in turn, generates the *Philebus*' account of the best life in which order and reason coincide.

If this account is correct, then Plato's late epistemology, enmeshed as it is with the teleology of reason, supplies a final answer

to the objections I imagined to the Socratic enterprise (Ch. 9). First, the foundationalist objection maintained that the investigation of the coherence of belief sets is indecisive, cannot reveal the truth. The holistic epistemology supposes that, on the contrary, it can reveal the truth, just because the whole system of understanding is both unique and true. Second, the analytic complaint supposed that the relation between who believes what and the detachedness of argument is contingent; the holistic epistemology, connected as it is to the reason of persons and the living of a life, supposes that arguments are made, and reason is developed, by persons. There is, then, a response to be given to the Socratic challenge. For this conception of personhood, as I suggest in Ch. 8 and Ch. 9§2, is a surprising view of what it is to be a person: where personhood is normative, not merely a matter of biological fact; and universal, across all persons (not, for example, determined by historical fact). So it treats persons, firstly, as *indifferent*; in the giving and taking of reasons, therefore, we have no reason to prefer our own perspective to that of anyone else. Secondly, it supposes that becoming a person is a desirable – the only desirable – end for our rational activity. Conversational dialectic, then, which establishes that the interlocutors have rational claims to personhood, is itself worth pursuing. This normativity once again gives testimony to the teleological dimension of Plato's theory; and it makes clear the close fit there is between metaphysical principles and ethical demands in Plato's theorising: there are no different compartments of philosophy here.

But this very seamlessness of philosophy explains how thoroughgoing the holistic epistemology turns out to be (Ch. 9§4–6). The dialectician (I argue in Ch. 7) is not merely in possession of scientific systems, he is especially able to reflect on them: the business of dialectic involves, crucially involves, second-order reflection on the nature and shape of first-order systems. Indeed, it is this kind of reflection which is the product of the encounters I outline between Plato's protagonists and their predecessors: reflection which produces, as I argue, the higher-order principles of philosophy itself. But then are those second-order principles only to be examined foundationally, so that holism is itself only piecemeal (or first-order)? Not so, I argue. The relation between the higher-order principles, the reflections on what it is to do philosophy, and the direct, first-order arguments is itself holistic: these

two orders of reason are mutually reinforcing, each supplying the rationale and the justification for the other. And this, in turn, justifies the reflective way in which the dialogues themselves are composed: I suggest throughout that the embedding of Plato's conversations with his predecessors in the dialogues both provokes reflection on the principles of philosophy itself, and relies on that reflection for the arguments to occur at all.

Finally, a brief disavowal – or, perhaps, a confession. In this book I have not discussed each of the dialogues with which I am concerned sequentially, or always as a whole; and I have failed to do this despite the fact that I am convinced that studying individual dialogues as a whole is the best way to understand Plato. Instead, taking as my brief a view of Plato's view of his predecessors, each chapter discusses individual passages in detail from my quartet of dialogues, and not always in what seems to be the right chronological order. My failure to give a constructed view of each dialogue one after the other is in part a consequence of the inspection of precisely those passages which give a view of Plato on his predecessors, and part a matter of necessity. I hope here to outline a thread in Plato's late thought; and I could not have done so in anything like a reasonable way had the project been more ambitious.