interpretation of the TMA would amount to. It could establish no more than that the argument is a *non sequitur*. The aridity of interpretation that is purely retrospective explains, no doubt, the need for both models of interpretation in accounting for the actual practice of historians of philosophy. And this need partially explains in turn why the study of the history of philosophy is such a peculiarly philosophical enterprise. To do good work in the history of philosophy, it has often been observed, one must be a good philosopher, not just a good historian. Why this should be so is not a simple question,[41] but one that is much easier to answer if philosophical interpretation has a prospective as well as a retrospective component. For while he is engaged in prospective interpretation, the historian of philosophy is augmenting the philosophical work of his subject: that is, he is doing philosophy.

If a Platonic scholar needs to employ both models of interpretation, he also needs to maintain the distinction between them. Otherwise he will end up attributing his own contribution to Plato. He will end up conflating Platonism and Plato. He will be tempted, for example, in searching for the true point, meaning, or moral of a text, to discover one bestowed on the text by his own augmentation of it. Interpreters of the TMA have often succumbed to this temptation. There is no such thing as *the* moral of the TMA if, as we contend, retrospective interpretation is unable to advance beyond the observation that the TMA is a *non sequitur*.[42]

We suggest, finally, that Plato himself might find our view of interpretation congenial. For Plato's complaint about written words—that they do not respond to questions but repeat the same thing endlessly (*Prot.* 329A, *Phaedrus* 275D)—corresponds to our complaint about the sterility of retrospective interpretation. On the other hand, since Plato devoted so much of his life to putting words on paper, he must have hoped that this defect of writing could sometimes be alleviated. He must have hoped that his words would occasionally kindle a philosophical dialogue in the mind of an attentive reader, albeit a dialogue that the reader would have to conduct on his own or with another prospective interpreter.

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[41] For a useful examination of this unjustly neglected question see David M. Rosenthal, 'Philosophy and its History', in Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal (eds.), *The Institution of Philosophy: A Discipline in Crisis?* (LaSalle, Ill., 1989).

[42] Unless, of course, as Cherniss and Allen maintain, the point is to present an invalid argument.

PLATO'S ARGUMENTS AND THE DIALOGUE FORM

MICHAEL FREDE

PLATO's dialogues are works of art. They are pieces of powerful dramatic fiction which by their art manage to give us a strong sense of what it would be like to listen to a dialectical debate or even to participate in it; they perhaps give us a stronger sense of what is involved in such a debate than we could have acquired by actually attending an ordinary dialectical discussion. For they represent paradigmatic debates between model characters in characteristic settings in a most vivid and realistic way. To this end they display an impressive mastery of a wide array of literary techniques. The dialogues put themselves into the literary tradition, by their constant allusions to earlier literature, by their constant reworking of motifs and themes of traditional literature from Homer and Hesiod down to the tragedies. Even a dialogue dealing with such abstract and prosaic material as is handled in the *Sophist* is eminently literary in this way.

At the same time, though, not only are the dialogues pieces of literary fiction, they are also, quite definitely, pieces of philosophical writing. And this raises the question of how these two aspects of Plato's writing are related. We do not want to say that they are external or accidental to each other. Obviously it is a mistake to assume that Plato wants to write literary fiction and that the philosophy contained in the dialogues just serves as a vehicle or as the raw material or, in some other way, as just the means to this end. Equally obviously it would be wrong to think that the dialogues are pieces of philosophical writing in which the literary elements just constitute a superficial adornment or embellishment which, as philosophers, we can safely disregard. For in this case it would be difficult to understand why the two elements of aspects are so firmly wedded and intertwined throughout Plato's writings. It must rather be the case that Plato

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thinks that high literature cannot achieve its traditional aims without turning philosophical, or that philosophical writing, or at least the philosophical writing he is engaged in, does not serve its philosophical purpose unless it is eminently literary. Presumably Plato thinks both.

Now to say just this is much too general and too vague to be of any help. Hence, in the following, I shall focus on one particular way in which philosophy and literary form seem to me to be inseparably joined in the dialogues. The idea, just briefly, is this: Plato has certain views about the value and status of philosophical theses and philosophical arguments, as a result of which he thinks that the only responsible way to put forth such views and arguments in writing is in the form of a fictional dialogue, more precisely the kind of dramatic dialogue he writes. The matter, no doubt, is a lot more complex, but here at least is a detailed, concrete partial account of why Plato, out of philosophical consideration, writes philosophy in the form of literature. With this as a background, let us begin with a trivial observation.

In Plato's dialogues we always find, among many other things, lots of arguments. As will be clear from what I am going to say, these other things which we find are of crucial importance to the dialogues. But in what follows I want to focus on the arguments. And this for the following reasons. (1) In one's determination to do justice to the non-argumentative, 'literary', elements of the dialogue one should not overlook the plain fact that in sheer bulk the dialogues primarily consist of arguments. (2) As a rule it is an argument which forms the backbone of a dialogue and gives it its structure. (3) The very dialogue form seems in part to be due to the fact that Plato's favourite format for argumentation is the question-and-answer form. And this, I shall try to argue, is not a matter of superficial literary form, but part of the very nature of the arguments he is interested in: they are essentially dialectical. (4) The prominence of arguments in the dialogues presumably reflects the prominence arguments have in Plato's conception of philosophy. This is not to say that Plato thinks of philosophy as just a matter of inventing or discovering clever arguments. For he obviously does not. No amount of argument by itself will make one grasp the Form of the Good. But it is to say that philosophical vision and insight, in Plato's view, are also quite essentially a matter of argument. In any case, argument is a crucial ingredient of a dialogue, and, for the reasons given, I want to focus on this ingredient.

Now if we look at the arguments of the dialogues a curious problem arises. Sometimes we are confident that an argument we are dealing

with is Plato's argument, i.e. an argument Plato himself endorses. By this I mean an argument whose premisses and conclusion Plato accepts and whose premisses, he thinks, constitute a reason, perhaps even a conclusive reason, for accepting the conclusion. But there are other arguments where we are in doubt as to whether Plato endorses them. The arguments may be inconclusive or even fallacious, and we have reasons for thinking that Plato must have known that they are inconclusive or fallacious. Or the arguments rest on assumptions which we think Plato would reject. Thus the argument in the *Protagoras* that nobody does wrong knowingly is made to rest on the assumption that pleasure is the good, an assumption, we are inclined to think, Plato would reject. Hence we have some doubt, to say the least, whether Plato endorses this argument.

Now, if such doubts, if such questions, are at least legitimate, there is one thing we can infer immediately. Plato writes in such a way that it is not clear from the very form of his writing whether he endorses an argument or not. We have to look for clues, perhaps given by the dialogue itself, but perhaps not, to decide the question of whether Plato endorses an argument or not. To put the matter differently: the form of a Platonic dialogue is such that the mere fact that an argument is advanced in the dialogue does not yet mean that it is endorsed by Plato. To decide whether it is, we have to go by circumstantial evidence, by what we know about Plato's views, by clues offered by the dialogues. And this, notoriously, can be very difficult indeed.

What I have in mind may be clearer by contrast. If somebody writes a treatise in which he argues for a certain position, there is no doubt that he is endorsing the argument he advances. If there is a fallacy in the argument, we hold the author responsible for it. If he uses an assumption as a premiss which he elsewhere rejects, we think that he is inconsistent. If he uses a premiss which is false, we just think that it is a bad argument. With a philosophical treatise there is no room for the question of whether we should hold the author responsible for the fallacy, the inconsistency, the falsehood, let alone for the question of whether such flaws may be an indication that the author does not endorse the argument. If with a Platonic dialogue there is room for such questions, this must be due to their form: they are not treatises, but something else. But it would be a mistake to think that the difference I have in mind is merely due to Plato's choice of the dialogue form in general. Other philosophers have written dialogues, e.g. Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine. And in their case there is no

problem either in identifying the arguments they endorse; for they write dialogues in such a way as to make it clear which theses and which arguments they endorse, e.g. by introducing themselves as speakers in the dialogue. So there must be something about the specific form of the Platonic dialogue which creates the problem.

This raises a series of questions. (1) Which are the formal features of the Platonic dialogue which have the effect of leaving open whether or not Plato endorses the arguments advanced in them? (2) Is this an effect intended by Plato? (3) If it is, why does Plato choose to write this way? These are the questions I want to pursue. In doing so I hope to be able to shed some light on the question of why Plato writes the kind of philosophical dialogue he does write.

Let us begin then, by looking at the formal features of the Platonic dialogue which have the effect of leaving Plato himself formally uncommitted to the arguments advanced in them, though in particular cases we may have other reasons, perhaps provided by Plato himself, for thinking that he was committed to the argument.

The most important feature here, clearly, is that the dialogue, unlike a treatise, is a piece of fiction in which the characters in the fiction are made to advance an argument. We do not, in general, hold the author of a piece of fiction responsible for the claims and the arguments made by the characters within the fiction. We do so only if the author finds some way of indicating that he himself does want to take responsibility for the claims and arguments advanced within the fiction, or at least for some of them. In the case of a dialogue, for example, the author may himself appear as one of the speakers. Or he may make it abundantly clear in some other way that he identifies himself with one of the characters in the fiction. Now one might take the view that Plato does just this. Though he does not himself appear as a speaker in his own dialogues, it is clear that his sympathies lie with the questioner of the dialogue, usually Socrates, but sometimes an obviously fictitious figure like Timaeus, the Eleatic Stranger, or the Athenian of the *Laws*. But it is at least worth noting that however much sympathy Plato may have with these figures, it is by no means clear, so clear as not to require an argument, that he fully identifies himself with them. It is not, for example, obvious to me that Plato fully identifies himself with the Socrates of the dialogues. It rather seems that however much Plato may have admired Socrates, he also had a critical distance towards him. There is very little, if anything, that we know about the real Socrates. But if we do know anything about him, it

seems that he disapproved of natural philosophy, had no interest in metaphysics, was an extreme intellectualist; these are all rather fundamental points in which Plato came to differ from Socrates. So we should not, without further argument, exclude the possibility that the dialogues reflect some criticism of Socrates, and we should not exclude the possibility that the very arguments of the dialogues in which Socrates is made to be the main speaker also reflect some of that criticism. Thus, at least formally, if not materially, there is a difference between Plato's views and the views which can be attributed to the main speaker of the dialogue.

But, be this as it may, there is a further feature of the Platonic dialogue which has the effect of making it quite unclear to what extent even the main speaker of the dialogue can be held responsible for the argument. Hence, even if Plato did completely identify himself with the main speaker, e.g. the Socrates of the dialogues, this feature would still have the effect of making it quite unclear to what extent Plato himself could be held to the argument advanced in the dialogue. The feature I have in mind is the question-and-answer format of the argument, to which I alluded earlier and which I now want to consider in more detail.

The arguments in the dialogue take the following basic form: there are two parties, a questioner and a respondent. The questioner asks a series of yes-and-no questions. After a number of such questions and answers, the questioner points out to the respondent, again in the form of a question, that given his previous answers he would seem to be committed to answering a certain further question in a certain way. Having answered the questions 'Are all men mortal?' and 'Is Socrates a man?' with 'Yes', clearly the respondent is also committed to answering 'Yes' when asked the further question whether Socrates is mortal.

Now if we consider this kind of argument by question-and-answer, just as described so far, it is not at all clear whose argument this kind of argument can be said to be. Obviously the questioner has a decisive influence on the course of the argument; for he asks the questions the answers to which will form the premisses. But equally obviously it is the respondent who gives the answers. And, within limits, though it may be left open for the moment what the limits are, the respondent may answer these questions by 'Yes' or 'No', as he chooses. But let us assume that the questioner asks these questions straightforwardly and the respondent answers them straightforwardly, namely by giving what he thinks is the correct answer to these questions. In this most

simple case, it is the respondent who is committed to the premisses, to the conclusion, and to the validity of the argument. So in this most simple case there is some sense in which the argument is the respondent's argument. I say 'some sense' because the respondent may have never thought of this argument, and even now that he is presented with it, he may be very hesitant to make it his own, though he does grant that his own answers seem to commit him to the conclusion.

But what are we to say about the questioner? Is it his argument? The questioner himself, it seems, may have no firm view, or no view at all, as to the truth of the premisses and hence as to the truth of the conclusion. This is why he is asking these questions straightforwardly. Or, perhaps he does have a view as to the truth of the matter, but he wants to hear what the respondent thinks, as if he were asking 'What do you think: are all men mortal?' But even in this case his own view of the matter does not enter into the argument at all. So, in the most straightforward case at least, the argument which emerges from such an interchange of questions and answers is not formally the questioner's argument, an argument he formally endorses. What he himself thinks about it is left quite open. At best the argument reflects the questioner's views as to how different propositions, quite independently of their truth, are logically related to each other and as to which propositions have a bearing on the question at issue. So, if we took the questions and answers straightforwardly, very little would follow from the argument as to the position of the questioner.

Now, one will object that I have underdescribed the question-and-answer format of the arguments in the dialogue. And this is quite true. I have deliberately failed to take into account that these are dialectical arguments, that their dialectical character imposes certain restrictions on their form, and that, at least at times, this has the effect that the questions and answers are not to be taken straightforwardly.

But I have underdescribed the format because sometimes it is overdescribed in a certain way, and I want to get these overdescriptions out of the way, because they obstruct our view of the facts of the matter. What we need to find is the right level for the precise identification of the features of this format of argumentation as such.

There are two overdescriptions which I want to reject. The first is this: the presentation of an argument in question-and-answer form is just a matter of presentation. To present each and every of the assumptions on which the argument rests, and to present each step of the argument, as clearly and vividly as possible, the author may

present an argument in dialogue form. And this, it is suggested, is what Plato is doing. There is, on this view, an argument which Plato endorses. He attributes it to the main speaker of the dialogue. But he makes the main speaker, his representative, present his argument in question-and-answer form, for the sake of clarity and vividness, for the sake of drama. The second kind of overdescription is this: at the end of the fifth century, and still when Plato began to write, a distinction was made between what one may call 'rhetorical argument', which would be advanced in a long continuous speech, and 'dialectical argument', which proceeds in the step-by-step way, by question and answer, which we find portrayed in the dialogues. A rhetorical argument tries to make a plausible, persuasive, convincing case for some assumption without attention to the precise logical relations between the evidence adduced and the conclusion suggested. The word 'rhetorical' nowadays might be somewhat misleading, because we associate it with oratory and, to be more precise, with the form and style, but not the substance or content, of speeches. But we have to remember that at the time 'rhetoric' covered educated continuous prose quite generally. It would thus cover not only Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, but also Thucydides' *History*, or the pseudo-Hippocratic *On the Art of Medicine*. In any case, what matters here is that the distinction is primarily a distinction of modes of discourse, rather than one of style; and with the distinction of modes of discourse goes a distinction of modes of argument, rhetorical argumentation on the one hand, and dialectical on the other. And the dialectical mode of argumentation is closely associated with the question-and-answer format. The suggestion, then, on this second interpretation of Plato's use of the question-and-answer format, is this: Plato endorses certain arguments and wants to present them in writing. But it matters greatly to him that these are not rhetorical arguments, but closely knit, logically stringent arguments, and since the standard form for such arguments is the question-and-answer form, this is also how he presents them, namely in dialogue form.

Both these views seem to me to be fundamentally wrong; but before I explain why, I want to turn to what seems to me to be an important element of truth in the second view. The second view draws our attention to the fact that Plato, in using the question-and-answer form of argumentation in his dialogues, is either imitating or representing a long-established oral form or practice of argumentation. And it is also the case that Plato is not, or at least not primarily, interested in

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rhetorical argument, but in the kind of argument in which somebody who is committed to the premisses, on pain of contradiction, also seems to be committed to the conclusion; that is, at least in most contexts, he is not content with the kind of argument to which one may respond perfectly reasonably by saying 'I grant you all this, but I am still not quite convinced.'

For the moment, though, I will pursue only the first of these two points: clearly Plato is trying to imitate or to represent an established mode of arguing by question and answer. He represents Socrates as being engaged in a kind of practice in which we know that the real Socrates and others did engage. We only have to look at the remarks the various figures in the dialogue *Protagoras* make to see that they are represented as being perfectly familiar with this kind of practice and that this practice has certain rules. It is the practice of dialectic.

We know a good amount about dialectical practice. We do not know as much as we would like about the earlier uses of this kind of argumentation in the late fifth century. But we do know a lot about dialectical practice in the first half of the fourth century BC in Plato's Academy, since most of Aristotle's *Topics* is devoted to this kind of practice. And on the basis of the *Topics*, Plato's dialogues, and a good amount of widely scattered evidence we can form a reasonably clear picture of this practice. It takes different specific forms. But common to the various forms is one general pattern. It is this: there are two parties to the debate, a questioner and a respondent. The respondent advances a claim or a thesis. It is the task of the questioner to question the respondent in such a way that the respondent by his answers commits himself to the contradictory of his original thesis. The respondent, of course, tries to avoid committing himself in his answers to any assumption which, joined with other assumptions of his, entails the contradictory of his original thesis.

This is the appropriate description of the method of argument by question and answer in general. But as we know, e.g. from Aristotle, there are various specific forms of this general pattern, various specific forms of dialectical practice. One is didactic dialectic. The respondent is ignorant of a certain truth, as he shows by making a false statement about a certain subject. The questioner, by asking him the appropriate questions, leads the respondent to see the truth concerning the matter he was initially ignorant or mistaken about.

There are some features of this kind of dialectic, i.e. didactic dialectic, which we need to dwell on for a moment. Obviously in this case the questioner comes to the situation with an argument already in hand, perhaps even a proof. And obviously an argument like this can be said to be the questioner's argument in the strong sense that it is an argument which the questioner fully endorses. The respondent has no influence on the course of the argument for the theorem. Of course, the respondent can answer each of the questions with 'Yes' or 'No'. But we also know that the questioner is not going to proceed with the argument until he has retained the right answer to each of the questions. Should he, at some point, get the wrong answer, he is just going to begin a subsidiary dialectical argument to get the right answer, the answer he needs for his main argument. In this kind of case, then, the role of the respondent is reduced to that of somebody who receives an argument which the questioner is already in possession of, and which the questioner could as well set out in continuous speech, in the form, for example, in which mathematicians present proofs. If the questioner proceeds by question and answer, it is not because the respondent has anything to contribute to the argument, but merely for didactic purposes. The questioner, with each premiss and at each step in the argument, needs to assure himself for didactic reasons that the respondent is following his reasoning, that he is learning.

Once we realize that these are the distinctive features of didactic dialectic, we also see why the two views alluded to earlier amount to overdescriptions of Plato's use of the question-and-answer format for arguments: basically they treat the arguments of the dialogues quite generally as examples of didactic dialectic. They assume that in each case Socrates, or whoever the questioner of the dialogue may be, is represented as advancing an argument he already has and espouses, because it is an argument Plato has and endorses and which Plato just puts into Socrates' mouth; an argument on the course of which the respondent has no real influence, except that, for dramatic purposes, he can be represented as stubborn or misguided and thus as making it more or less difficult for Socrates to get to the conclusion of his argument.

But this is clearly false as a general characterization of the arguments of the dialogues. It does not take into account that didactic dialectic is just one form of dialectic in general, and that, moreover, it is a form of dialectic which is scarcely, if at all, represented in the dialogues. There is at least one whole important class of dialogues which seem to represent a rather different kind of dialectical practice,

namely the aporetic dialogues. They form an important class of dialogues for several reasons. Not only are a substantial number of Plato's dialogues aporetic, so that any general account of Plato's works should fit these dialogues. It is also the case that Plato's earliest dialogues are almost invariably aporetic. Hence it seems that Plato starts out by writing dialogues of this particular kind. And this in turn suggests that at least initially his conception of writing a dialogue is very much coloured by his conception of what it is to write this particular kind of dialogue. And, finally, there is an obvious connection between this kind of dialogue and Socratic practice, the kind of dialectic the real Socrates seems to have engaged in: the aporetic dialogues clearly represent Socrates as being engaged in elenctic, rather that didactic, dialectic. They do not represent him as leading a respondent by an argument in didactic fashion to come to see the truth on some matter. They rather lead the respondent by an argument to come to see the ignorance out of which he made some claim.

Now there is a way of misunderstanding or misconstruing the Socratic elenchus, Socratic elenctic arguments, which we need to get out of the way if we want to properly understand the logical structure underlying the argument of the aporetic dialogues. Not surprisingly, Socratic elenctic dialectic has often been assimilated to didactic dialectic. This has been encouraged by the very term 'elenchus', which is generally rendered by 'refutation'. It tends to be assumed that the basic pattern of an elenchus is this: the respondent makes a claim; the questioner's task is then to refute this claim by producing an argument for, or a proof of, the truth of the contradictory of this claim, thus showing the original claim of the respondent to have been false and the respondent to have been ignorant.

But this does not accord with what we otherwise know about elenctic dialectic, and it makes nonsense of the aporetic dialogues. Obviously the aporetic dialogues are called 'aporetic' because they end in an *aporia*, in a situation in which we no longer know what to say about the question at issue, how to get out of the difficulty presented by the contradiction between the original claim and the conclusion of the ensuing argument. To be more precise, it is the respondent in the dialogue who is reduced to *aporia*. But clearly this does not make any sense if we assume that the questioner provides a proof for the contradictory claim which the respondent accepts. For in this case it is difficult to see why the respondent should be at a loss as to what to say. He may be embarrassed by the fact that he has to admit that he made a

mistake in the first place. But to be embarrassed in this way is something altogether different from being at a genuine loss as to what to say. And it is clearly the latter which the discussion in the aporetic dialogues aims at.

We can easily see how this result, this sense of being at a loss, is achieved if we properly identify the salient features of Socratic elenctic dialectic. They are the following: Socratic elenctic dialectic is supposed to test whether the respondent on a given subject-matter has any claim to authority, to knowledge, to expertise. It proceeds on the assumption that somebody who is in a privileged position to speak on a certain subject will not contradict himself on the very subject of his expertise. Surely the least we can, and need to, expect from an expert is that when we turn to him to find out the correct answer to some question we have, he does not give us an answer only to contradict it a few minutes later. A second salient feature of Socratic elenctic dialectic seems to be that the respondent has to answer the questions truthfully, i.e. according to what he actually believes to be the case. This is not to say that the respondent always obliges, or to deny that Socrates at times seems to be willing to get the respondent to contradict himself, no matter what he, the respondent, really believes. But often Socrates urges the respondent to answer what he thinks, and this seems to be the standard form, against the background of which we have to understand and explain deviations. Now in this form of dialectic, in elenctic dialectic, the questioner, to test the respondent's expertise, elicits a claim from the respondent on the subject of his supposed expertise. He does not then proceed to refute this claim, i.e. to prove this claim to be false by showing the contradictory to be true. He rather refutes the respondent, or more precisely his implicit or explicit claim to authority. And he does this in the following way. By asking the right questions, he shows that the respondent, given his own beliefs, has reason to claim exactly the opposite of what he had claimed at the outset, i.e. he shows that the respondent, given his own assumptions, is committed to the contradictory of his original thesis, and hence cannot be an expert. This does reduce the respondent to a state of *aporia* in the following way: we may assume that he had some reason, perhaps a very bad one, but a reason nevertheless, to say what he had said originally. But he has now also been shown to have reason to say exactly the opposite; hence he has reason both to affirm and to deny a certain claim; hence he does not know what to say any more. For to get out of this impasse he would have to sort out his beliefs,

both those which led to his original assertion and those which led to the contradiction. Clearly some belief needs to be discarded. But at the moment he is in no position to identify the belief, or the beliefs, which are the cause of the problem. This is what causes the *aporia*.

But if this is the correct way to look at the argument of the aporetic dialogues it is clear that, in their case at least, the question-and-answer format is not just a way of presenting an argument clearly and vividly, or didactically, an argument which could as well be presented in continuous oration. It is rather a format which is required by the elenchus, a format which reflects that the respondent significantly contributes to the argument. For, though again the questioner poses the questions and thus shapes the course of the argument, it is crucial for our evaluation of the argument not only that the premisses reflect the respondent's beliefs, but that for the purposes of the elenchus it does not matter in the least what the questioner himself knows or believes to be the truth about the subject in question. The questioner has to show that the respondent, given his own beliefs, is committed to the contradictory of his original claim. And for this purpose it does not matter at all whether the questioner believes the premisses or, for that matter, the conclusion to be true. It is not his beliefs and his authority which are under test, but the respondent's. It follows from this that, given the elenctic character of the aporetic dialogues, their argument is not the argument of the questioner, an argument which the questioner is portrayed as endorsing. Hence it follows that, however much and however clearly Plato may identify himself with Socrates, the questioner in these dialogues, he does not thereby commit himself in any way to the argument of these dialogues.

At least for the aporetic dialogues, then, we can say that they have certain formal features such that *formally* their argument can neither be attributed to the Socrates of the fiction, nor, *a fortiori*, to Plato himself. This is not to deny that often there are enough material clues to allow us to make some inference as to what the position of the fictitious Socrates may be, or even as to Plato's position. But the point is that such inferences have to be highly indirect, because the formal status of the arguments of these dialogues does not allow us to take these arguments directly to be Plato's arguments.

Now, there are not just aporetic dialogues with their elenctic dialectic. Does this mean that all the non-aporetic dialogues present us with cases of didactic dialectic? Obviously this does not follow. For it is easy to see, and we know anyway, that there are other forms of

dialectic. There are, for example, the dialectical exercises which seem to have played a major role in Plato's Academy and on which Aristotle focuses in his *Topics*. Let us call this kind of dialectic 'gymnastic dialectic'. Its basic features are these: again there is a questioner and a respondent. The respondent gets to choose a thesis from a pair of contradictory claims. With this kind of dialectic he does not have to choose the claim which he takes to be true. He might choose the one he thinks is most easy to defend, or the one he thinks it might be most interesting to try to defend. The questioner then, again, tries to elicit answers from the respondent which would commit the respondent to the contradictory of the original thesis. But with this kind of dialectic the respondent not only does not have to choose a thesis he believes in, he also does not have to answer the subsequent questions in accordance with his beliefs. He is free, within limits, to answer as he pleases. The limits are roughly these: the respondent should not give answers which have nothing to recommend them except that they will make life difficult for the questioner. Thus the respondent could not well answer the question 'Is the number three odd?' with 'No', since he would have no way to defend this answer, not even at least for a while. But he might answer the question 'Is the number one odd?' with 'No', pointing out that on some Pythagorean theory the number one is neither odd nor even. The point of this exercise is clear: over the course of time one learns how propositions are logically related to each other, which follow from which, and which are incompatible with which. One acquires an enormous store of arguments for and against any position.

But, whatever the merits of this kind of dialectical practice may be, it does not seem to be the one which we find in the dialogues. In the dialogues the respondents are at least *supposed* to speak their mind, though they do not always do so. This suggests that the non-aporetic dialogues do not just present us with examples of gymnastic dialectic. For in gymnastic dialectic the respondent is not supposed to be really committed to his answers. The non-aporetic dialogues rather seem to represent a spectrum of forms of dialectic falling between purely gymnastic dialectic, on the one hand, and didactic dialectic, on the other. It would be worth while to distinguish the various forms and their formal characteristics, and to see which consequences they have for the status of the arguments in these dialogues. Obviously the arguments of the *Phaedo* are quite different in status from the arguments of the *Timaeus* or the arguments of the second part of the

Parmenides. But whichever distinctions one makes, it seems sufficiently clear that the commitment of the questioner to the arguments is often rather qualified, as, for example, in the case of *Phaedo* or the *Timaeus*. Moreover, it is clear that it is always difficult to tell how committed the questioner is to the arguments. And finally we have to keep in mind that however committed the fictional questioner or respondent of the dialogue may be, nothing follows from this about the commitment of the author of the dialogue; Plato even in the least aporetic and most dogmatic dialogues remains at a radical distance from the views and arguments of the fictional character of the dialogue.

So there are a number of formal features of the Platonic dialogue which have the effect of leaving it unclear whether Plato endorses the arguments advanced in them. There is first of all the feature that a dialogue is a piece of fiction, which puts a distance between the author and the arguments and theses of the dialogue. And secondly, there is the feature of the question-and-answer format of the argument, which, except in the case of didactic dialectic, makes it impossible, or at least very difficult, to tell whether even the fictitious questioner of the dialogue is committed to the argument. This is most definitely so in the case of the aporetic dialogues, but to a greater or lesser degree it is also true of the non-aporetic dialogues. And this, for the most part, formally puts Plato at least two removes from the argument of the dialogue.

The next question, then, is whether this effect is intended. I think the answer is 'Yes'. But perhaps the best way to justify this answer is by trying to answer the third question we raised in the beginning: Why would Plato want to write in such a way as to avoid being committed to the arguments of the dialogues?

The answer to this, I think, is given indirectly by the dialogues Plato starts out writing, the aporetic dialogues. One point which these dialogues are obviously meant to impress on us is this: it is exceedingly difficult, if possible at all, to get oneself into a position in which one can speak with authority, with some kind of justified confidence, out of expertise and knowledge, about a certain subject-matter. Everybody whom Socrates actually subjects to the test fails. And we are given the impression that no matter who the respondent would be and what he would initially claim, Socrates would still manage to make him contradict himself. Why is it so difficult to pass the Socratic test? It is so difficult because for any given proposition concerning a certain

subject-matter one must know all the other propositions which, however indirectly, are logically related to it, one must know, or at least be able to tell immediately, what the logical relation is, and on the basis of this knowledge restrict oneself to exactly those beliefs within the domain of the subject-matter in question which are compatible with each other.

This would be difficult enough for any subject-matter, but, given the subject-matters Socrates and Plato are particularly interested in, a special difficulty arises. Beliefs about these subject-matters, like virtue, reality, justice, evil, do not form relatively small, isolated clusters; they form sheer endless chains which, and this is of equal importance, determine, or help to determine, our whole life and the life of the society we live in. We are brought up with them, they help to form our character and our general outlook and attitude. They help to determine where we see our interests, they shape our ambitions. To revise beliefs which are so deeply interwoven with the fabric of our life in such a way as to achieve and maintain consistency is extremely difficult, in part because it means, or at least might mean, a basic change of life.

Given that it is so difficult to pass the Socratic test, it is not surprising that Socrates himself is characterized in the dialogues as somebody who thinks that he himself is in no position to pronounce on the questions he is enquiring about. Presumably it is not too speculative to assume that the actual Socrates himself went out of his way to disclaim knowledge or expertise on these questions. And presumably it is also not too speculative to see a connection between this and the fact that Socrates is the first major philosopher in our tradition who does not write philosophical treatises. In fact, Socrates does not write at all.

But what about Plato? Did Plato think he would pass the test? I find it difficult to believe that he did. Otherwise his praise of Socratic ignorance, for example, would be difficult to understand. But Plato clearly did have views about the matters under discussion, and he had arguments for his views. Nothing prevented him from presenting these arguments, as long as the form of presentation did not make a misleading implicit claim as to their status. Writing a treatise would have amounted to such a claim, namely to the claim to speak from a position of authority. The specifically Platonic form of the dialogue, though, for the reasons given, offered Plato a way out. It allowed him to present views and arguments which in his opinion deserved closer

scrutiny and further reflection of a kind needed if one wanted to arrive at a clearer understanding of the matter at issue. Obviously one can think that certain views and arguments deserve reflection even if one does not endorse them. But the dialogue form even allowed Plato to present his own views and his own arguments without endorsing them in a way which, he thought, would not be justified. This, of course, is not to say that Plato just wrote dialogues in order to be able to present his views indirectly. It is merely to say that this is one thing their form allowed him to do, an opportunity he increasingly availed himself of.

But there is another aspect to this. We not only learn indirectly from the early dialogues what position one would have to be in to write a philosophical treatise, we also indirectly learn from them how little good a treatise, even if written from a position of knowledge, would do. To know, we learn from the early dialogues, is not just a matter of having an argument, however good it may be, for a thesis. Knowledge also involves that the rest of one's beliefs, and hence, at least in some cases, one's whole life, be in line with one's argument. For otherwise a dialectically skilled questioner will manage to reason one out of one or more of the premisses, and force one to contradict oneself. In this way knowledge, or at least a certain kind of knowledge Plato is particularly interested in, is a highly personal kind of achievement. To gain this kind of knowledge one has to sort out one's own, often rather idiosyncratic, beliefs, which are tied to one's own experience, way of life, interests, status, and the like.

I think that it is this assumption about knowledge which goes a long way to explain another formal feature of the Platonic dialogue. The Platonic dialogue quite conspicuously does not just present us with fictitious arguments in question-and-answer form. It also goes to great lengths to specify a fictitious context out of which the argument arises: it is individuals with a certain character, general outlook, a certain social position, certain interests, ambitions, and concerns, individuals in a certain situation, who enter the debate, and this background noticeably colours their views. By their artful characterization of the dramatic context of the arguments the dialogues show in an unsurpassable way how philosophy is tied to real life, to forms of life, to character and behaviour.

That knowledge is not just a matter of having the right view and the right argument for it, that it certainly is not a matter of being told what the right view and the right argument for it are, is reflected in the

dialogues by the ambiguity of the questioner's attitude towards the arguments.

From the respondent's point of view it is his own beliefs which matter. It should not matter to him what the questioner believes, if he is concerned to attain knowledge. So there is no reason why the questioner should commit himself to any beliefs, if he is solely concerned with the knowledge of the respondent. In fact, there is reason why the questioner should hide his own commitment. The respondent may adopt a belief for the wrong reason, namely on the authority of the questioner. This point, I think, deserves more elaboration than I am in a position to give it here. Socrates is represented in the dialogues as questioning false authority, the authority of tradition, the authority of the many, the authority of self-styled experts. But the point of this questioning is not just to expose the ignorance of so-called authorities. If somebody, having watched Socrates, drew the inference that he had been following the wrong authorities and needed to look for the right ones who would be in a position to tell him what to believe, he would draw the wrong inference. Socrates, clearly, at least as he is represented in Plato, would not assume this position of authority, even if he did know the answers to his questions. For, at least on these questions which matter, it is crucial that one arrive at the right view by one's own thought, rather than on the authority of somebody else, e.g. the questioner.

Now what is true of the questioner and the respondent in this regard is also true of the author and the reader. If the author's concern is for the reader's knowledge he should thwart the reader's temptation to adopt the author's views for the wrong reasons, e.g. because they are Plato's, or because Plato offers an excellent argument for them. Rather he should make sure that the reader is forced to sort out his own beliefs by pursuing the different kinds of argumentative lines which connect these beliefs in all directions, e.g. by considering the arguments of the dialogues, by trying to figure out which premiss of the elenchus the respondent should have abandoned, by working out how an appealing argument in the dialogue might be made consistent with his own beliefs, or the other way round. But precisely because Plato thinks that on these crucial questions each of us has to sort out his own beliefs to come to the correct view, and because he thinks that sorting out one's beliefs is, first of all, a matter of argument, of reasoning, more specifically of dialectical argument of its various kinds, dialectical argument plays a central role in Plato's conception of philosophy,

and this is reflected by the prominent role dialectical arguments of various kinds play in the dialogues.

There is a further dimension to all this, which I can only note in passing, though it too would deserve to be developed in detail. Notoriously Plato believes that thinking, that arriving at some view concerning some question at issue, is a matter of an internal dialogue one's reason engages in with itself (cf. *Theaet.* 189E, *Soph.* 263E). Thus, one might think, the dialectical discussion and hence the written dialogue are supposed to reflect, to be some kind of materialization of, the internal dialogue of the soul, of reason, with itself. And it is no doubt in these terms that Plato himself also thinks of dialectical argument, e.g. when he makes Socrates say that we should follow the *logos* (i.e. reason or the argument) wherever it leads. There seems to be the assumption that the questioner and the respondent share in a common rationality which itself proceeds dialectically. There is perhaps the assumption that the external dialectical debate between questioner and respondent has the following advantage over the internal dialogue of reason with itself in each of us, namely that it is more likely to be guided by rationality, in fact serves as a test of one's rationality. For though dialectical arguments by their very nature often depend on the idiosyncratic and distorted views of the participants in the debate, the form of the argument and its public character ensure an amount of rationality which is not guaranteed when the soul is left to discourse with itself. Left to itself, the soul is not only hampered by its idiosyncratic views, it is also too easily derailed in its reasoning so as to accept views which, for idiosyncratic reasons, it finds convenient to have, but which do not follow from the assumptions and in a dialectical argument would turn out to be indefensible. In fact, I suspect that it is assumed that, at least on the questions which matter, we all naturally have the right answers, but are just very confused because of all the false, mostly idiosyncratic, beliefs, incompatible with the truth, which we have also acquired. On such an assumption it is easy to see how the Socratic elenchus cannot fail to succeed in defeating the respondent as long as we are confused and have false beliefs, but also how it is supposed to lead to knowledge in the long run, if ultimately the only way to be consistent is to retain the true beliefs one has and to jettison the false beliefs one has acquired, because, for some reason or other, one cannot but have certain true beliefs, however confused one may be about them and however ready one may be also to espouse contradictory or at least incompatible beliefs.

All this is just to indicate that a complete discussion of Plato's attitude towards arguments, of his interest in dialectical argument, and of the dialogue form would also have to take into account his particular conception of reason and rationality. But to get into this is to already get into highly controversial matters of interpretation, whereas I have been trying, as far as possible, to focus on some simple, formal features of the Platonic dialogue. On these some agreement should be possible prior to, and independently of, any particular interpretation of any particular doctrinal details of Plato's dialogues.

To conclude, then: it turns out that there are a large number of reasons why Plato may have chosen to write in such a way as to leave open, or to make it very difficult to determine, whether or not he endorses a particular argument. It seems that these reasons are at the same time reasons against writing philosophical treatises, and hence offer an explanation as to why instead Plato wrote the kind of dialogue he did.

If something along these lines is true, it is clear that the dialogues are not philosophical treatises in disguise, that the dialogue form is not just a literary means to present a philosophical position and the argument for it in a clear, vivid, dramatic way. It would seem rather that the very dialogue form and the dramatic setting of the dialogue are due to philosophical, rather than superficial literary or expository considerations. The dialogues are supposed to teach us a philosophical lesson. But they are not pieces of didactic dialectic with Plato appearing in the guise of the questioner. A good part of their lesson does not consist in what gets said or argued, but in what they show, and the best part perhaps consists in the fact that they make us think about the arguments they present. For nothing but our own thought gains us knowledge.

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