

Socrates in the Platonic Dialogues

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Plato wrote his philosophy in the dialogue form. In his dialogues, a character called Socrates often takes a major role, though he does not always have a clear doctrine to deliver. Where does Plato stand when his Socrates character is asserting some view or denying that someone else's view is coherent? Where does the reader stand? Does Plato have a message to convey to his reader? If so, how does that message relate to what the Socrates in the dialogue is saying to his interlocutors?

In this paper I shall explore this issue about the relation between Plato and the Socrates character in his dialogues.¹ I shall illustrate my discussion with reference to one controversial issue, namely the apparent contradiction between Socrates's views on pleasure as they appear in the last part of the *Protagoras* and in his refutation of Callicles in the third part of the *Gorgias*. In the *Protagoras* Socrates persuades Protagoras that goodness is identical with pleasure. He advocates a form of hedonism.² In the *Gorgias*, Callicles espouses hedonism and Socrates refutes him. Socrates gets Callicles to admit that, after all, some pleasures are not good.

1. I shall concentrate on the ones usually classified as early and middle period dialogues. The issue is much the same for the supposedly later dialogues, but my proposal is less controversial in that area. Most scholars concede that the Socrates figure in the later dialogues is not the historical Socrates and that he presents views that are out of keeping with those of the historical Socrates. Those who attempt to reconstruct a quasi-historical Socrates, with a philosophical position of his own, generally confine their evidence to the early dialogues. It is common to follow Gregory Vlastos in distinguishing two Socrateses in Plato's work, namely a Socratic Socrates in the early dialogues and a Platonic Socrates in the Middle dialogues. See G. Vlastos, 'Introduction: the paradox of Socrates', *The Philosophy of Socrates*, G. Vlastos (ed.) (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1971), 1–21, and H. H. Benson, 'Editor's introduction', *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*, H. H. Benson (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3–13.

2. Much has been written on exactly what form of hedonism is espoused and whether it is somehow compatible with the position in the *Gorgias*. It is not germane to my purpose to enter into those debates here.

Socrates's own arguments in the two dialogues seem to be directly opposed, and his opponents move in correspondingly opposite directions under his attack. Protagoras is not initially attracted by hedonism. Socrates proposes that he ought to hold it. Protagoras resists, but then reluctantly tags along, while the discussion is carried on for him by Socrates. Socrates pretends that the argument is directed against a notional crowd of simple-minded souls. These ordinary folk assume that pleasures can sometimes be bad and cause us to choose a worse course of action. Socrates encourages Protagoras to take sides with him, for hedonism, against the standard view.

The common view, which is *under attack* in the *Protagoras*, is the position to which Socrates forces Callicles to *assent* in the *Gorgias*. Callicles started from the claim that maximising pleasure was the way to a happy life, which is effectively the conclusion Socrates favours in the *Protagoras*. In the *Gorgias* Socrates makes fun of it.

1 Why Worry?

So Socrates holds contradictory views on pleasure in the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*. Why should that puzzle us? We can classify the possible worries under two headings: worries about what Socrates really thinks and worries about what Plato really thinks.

A. Plato's own view

One cause for worry would arise if we imagine that Plato himself had a consistent view on pleasure. Did Plato think that pleasure is the sole measure of value? If Plato's project is to provide convincing arguments in favour of a view which he himself believes is right and which he wants the reader to accept, then we might expect that the winning arguments in Plato's dialogue would be arguments for the view that Plato holds. And Socrates usually wins the argument, so we might suppose that Plato thought the arguments put into Socrates's mouth were sound arguments for the true conclusion.³ If so, we may be surprised to find that Socrates seems to change sides

3. For instance T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 85–114, argues not just that Socrates is portrayed as asserting hedonism seriously but that *Plato* must have asserted it as his own considered view in the *Protagoras* (and similarly that it is Plato who speaks in the *Gorgias*).

on such a fundamental matter as the true source of value in life. For it might seem hard to imagine that Plato himself had changed his view at this point.⁴

B. Socrates' own view

Another reason for being puzzled arises if we imagine that Plato was trying to remain true to the historical Socrates. If Socrates himself had a notorious line on pleasure, such as the extreme hedonism of the *Protagoras*, surely we should expect it to be consistently represented in both dialogues. Is it plausible to portray Socrates in another dialogue arguing for the very opposite? That too might seem puzzling.

2 Exploring the Worries

Are these good reasons for worrying about the apparent contradiction? Should either make us feel the need of an explanation? Let's think about them.

A Plato's own view

Of course, it may be true that Plato himself had a view on pleasure and how it related to goodness. Does it follow that he portrays Socrates as holding the view that he himself holds?

(i) *Plato's mouthpiece*. Some scholars do suppose that Plato puts his own views into his dialogues as if they were Socrates's views. We may call this the "Plato's mouthpiece" reading. It assumes that Plato uses Socrates as a medium for delivering his own views. Any contradictions in Socrates's teaching will therefore reflect contradictions in Plato's own teaching, or will be evidence that he changed his mind between dialogues.⁵

4. Irwin (see previous note) expresses exactly this concern, and rejects it by arguing that there is not really a change of tune between the two dialogues. He then has to address the apparent contradiction: "We have seen reasons for believing that the hedonism in the *Protagoras* expresses Plato's own view and is not simply assumed for the sake of argument. If the *Gorgias* actually rejects this same hedonist doctrine, then Plato has apparently changed his mind about hedonism, and we ought to find some reason to explain this change of mind." *Ibid.* 111.

5. This view is compatible with, or implied by, most of the theories that take the Socrates of the early dialogues to be modelled on the historical Socrates (see further below on the 'Cleaned-up Socrates' interpretation). Most scholars assume that in his

(ii) *The Pedagogical reading.* On the other hand, the “Plato’s mouth-piece” view is not the only way of reading the dialogues, even if we suppose that Plato has a philosophical message of his own to convey. Surely an author such as Plato might have a more subtle relation with his chief character and with his reader?⁶ For instance, Socrates (though he eventually gets the upper hand) may not, after all, be given the best arguments on the subject. He may be given weaker arguments than he would strictly need if he were to achieve a real victory. Is the victory for hedonism, in the *Protagoras* – or against it in the *Gorgias* – a real victory? Should the opponent perhaps have retaliated with more vigour? Perhaps Plato intended the active reader of the dialogue not simply to give in and accept what Socrates says, but to challenge some of his claims.

If the reader is intended to think, and to disagree, then we need not equate the views of “Socrates” with the views of Plato. So from the point of view of keeping Plato consistent in his own views, there need be no worry about contradiction between positions advocated by characters in the dialogues. That is, we can deny that there is any character who is Plato’s “mouthpiece”, even if Plato did have a view of his own that he would like us to discover.

We may call this way of reading Plato’s work the “pedagogical reading”. It assumes that Plato has a view up his sleeve, but the dialogue conceals it and leaves the reader to work it out. This means that Plato’s own view cannot just be read off directly from any character’s beliefs, so contradictions in the views expressed by Socrates in different dialogues need not indicate contradictions in Plato’s thought.

early period Plato portrayed the historical Socrates with Socratic views because he Plato, at that time, held Socratic views, so that his Socrates was – even then – Plato’s mouthpiece. On such a view some inconsistencies in the views expressed by Plato’s Socrates might be explained as the symptoms of Plato changing his mind, i.e. becoming less Socratic (but still continuing to use Socrates as his mouthpiece). However, scholars do not usually appeal to Plato’s philosophical development to explain away the *Protagoras/Gorgias* conflict, since both those dialogues are usually quarried as evidence for the real Socrates.

6. Charles Kahn pays lip service to something of this sort (C. H. Kahn, ‘Did Plato write Socratic dialogues?’ *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*, H. H. Benson (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35–52: 35–6), but then continues with a reconstruction based on developmental chronology, which amounts to something like a revised version of the Vlastos tradition. See also the similar analysis in C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

(iii) *The exploratory reading.* Equally, it is possible that Plato did not himself have a *doctrine* to impart at all. In that case, the dialogues are neither overtly nor covertly encouraging us to any single position on pleasure. Perhaps they are “working philosophy”: not expounding or defending conclusions but exploring tempting lines of thought.

We may call this version the “exploratory reading”. It preserves Plato from being committed to the contradiction because he is not to be read as committed to anything. Nor does he have any dogmatic opinion on what position will turn out most satisfactory. Different positions are explored in different dialogues. The reader is invited to experiment with the options, and perhaps discover something, but Plato has not discovered it first.

Only if Socrates is Plato’s mouthpiece is there a serious problem for the interpretation of Plato as a philosopher. The pedagogical and exploratory readings both provide possible lines of defence against the challenge that he contradicts himself. Both these lines of defence have a distinguished past in the history of theoretical exegesis of Plato. But they are not wholly satisfying for reasons that will emerge in section five.

B Socrates’s own view

Our second source of worry was the thought that the dialogues might try to represent the historical Socrates, true to life and with purely authentic doctrines and mannerisms. There is a simple version which we shall call “The Historical Socrates reading”. On this view Plato simply tried to record as accurately as possible what Socrates really said, in his own inimitable style.

A variant on this idea is that the Socrates in Plato’s dialogues is still a quasi-historical character, but re-created and filled out by Plato. On such a view, we might say, Plato has created his Socrates as a believable ideal: it is *the* Socrates as Plato remembered him, with philosophical views that are Socratic views, tidied up and presented in the best light that Plato can provide for them and with the best support that Plato can offer for them.⁷ We shall call this variant the

7. This variant is, I think, the one held by Gregory Vlastos and it has many followers, particularly in the United States. If you hold this view it makes sense to examine the views attributed to Socrates in Plato’s (early and early middle) dialogues and claim that you are discussing Socrates’s philosophy. On this view the intervention of Plato may have improved the coherence of the philosophical position but Plato’s intervention takes historical reconstruction as one of its aims. T. Penner,

“Cleaned-up Socrates reading”. On either of these variants, the Historical Socrates or the Cleaned-up Socrates, it is uncomfortable to discover a blatant contradiction between the views espoused by Socrates in one place and those he holds dear in another.

(i) *The Historical Socrates reading.* However, contradiction is less uncomfortable on the Historical Socrates reading than it is on the Cleaned-up Socrates reading. For it is perfectly possible that the historical Socrates was a crazy mixed-up thinker, who did indeed passionately believe several contradictory things and change his mind three times every day before breakfast. Or he may have been deeply committed to refuting everyone on every topic, with no commitment at all to the truth of the positions he used as stalking horses in order to achieve a refutation. Maybe Plato portrayed the genuine Socrates as he really was, warts and all.

Nevertheless this view is mildly uncomfortable for a believer in the historicity of Plato’s portrait, if one is also committed to the idea that Socrates was a thinker of great stature and a martyr to the cause of rational enquiry. Was the real Socrates vague, confused, and unscrupulous in his use of sophistical techniques. Did he try to score easy points against his opponents without regard for the truth? Did he not care? He seems to be vulnerable to the very objections he brings against the Sophists.

However, there is a more charitable reading of that method, if we suppose that Socrates approached the task in the spirit of therapeutic dissolution of unfounded beliefs as, later, Sextus Empiricus was to recommend the task of Pyrrhonian Scepticism.⁸ In the search for truth the first task may be to clear away the brushwood of false dogma and conceptual confusion. Socrates often seems to express his commitment to a distinctive mission, a mission to expose the confused beliefs of his fellow Athenians.⁹ Perhaps, since he himself had no strong views about anything, he was entitled to shake the cer-

‘Socrates and the Early Dialogues’, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, R. Kraut (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 121–69, and H. Benson, ‘Socrates and the beginnings of moral philosophy’, *Routledge History of Philosophy volume 1: From the beginning to Plato*, C. C. W. Taylor (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1997), 323–55, provide two recent examples of this approach.

8. Sextus Empiricus *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3.32.

9. In the *Apology* Plato has him claim that he carried out his enquiries in order to check the truth of the Delphic oracle (*Apology* 20c–24b). But in the majority of individual dialogues, Socrates emphasises the importance of getting one’s views on how to live one’s life right. E.g. *Protagoras* 313a–c, *Meno* 86b–c, *Gorgias* 457e–458b.

tainty of others using any arguments and hypotheses that came to hand, so long as they did the job. For it was, after all, only a ground-clearing job: it did not claim to put in place any finished doctrines that could withstand scrutiny. It was a technique for which the Pyrrhonian Sceptics went on to develop rule books, with standard procedures to generate an opposing argument designed to undermine any proposal produced by an opponent. The aim was not to prove anything certain but to cure unfounded certainty. Perhaps the end justifies the means?

Yet an objection seems to loom. For Plato's Socrates often insists, in the dialogues, that his interlocutors must say what they really believe and not just put on a pose.¹⁰ How can he demand seriousness on the part of his patient, if he the doctor is playing fast and loose, advocating wild theses that he has no intention of taking to heart? Is not this a really shabby way to behave, not just an offence against logic but an offence against decency and moral fibre? The Historical Socrates reading seems to land us with a Socrates who is happy to break the rules he imposes on others. He comes out as not just a tease but a fraud.

Again a more charitable reading is possible to counter this objection. It is true that Socrates often insists that his interlocutor must say what he believes. But equally he is often prepared to investigate hypothetical positions on behalf of others, where he or one of his interlocutors agrees to answer on behalf of an absent colleague or "the many" whose views are to be examined.¹¹ So his overt methodology does not seem to preclude answering for someone else or trying out a position that is not held by anyone actually present.¹² Hypothetical examples seem to be acceptable for some purposes – though perhaps only where both parties are seriously engaged in an

10. Classic examples are at *Protagoras* 331c1; *Gorgias* 499b–c.

11. There is a clear example of this in the *Protagoras* when Protagoras is appointed to answer on behalf of the many (from whose view he has already dissociated himself) in response to Socrates-n-Protagoras putting the view that Protagoras has agreed to, 353a. Protagoras questions the value of pursuing this enquiry into a view that neither of them hold and which they think is rubbish, and Socrates suggests that it is worthwhile because it will help them to find out how courage is related to the other virtues. cf. *Protagoras* 333c.

12. Even where Socrates has been trying to impress the need for seriousness, he does not resolutely insist. In the last part of the *Gorgias* Socrates abandons the attempt to get serious responses out of Callicles and carries on the conversation under his own steam, while Callicles answers randomly just to finish the conversation.

enquiry that could affect the way they live their lives. What Socrates objects to, surely, in interlocutors who do not stand behind their words, is the idea that one might investigate issues of morality without it affecting one's own values and lifestyle.¹³ Philosophy has no cool place for a kind of contemplation that leaves everything in its place.

So if Socrates occasionally pursues a view that no one is defending, his purpose is always to test what he and his companions ought in reality to believe and to practise. What one cannot do is grant that an argument is sound, on the face of it, but not take the conclusion to heart.

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates *is* always serious about his inquiries into the way one ought to live, and he does indeed think that this is a matter of the utmost importance and that one's whole life will be affected. It is the failure to take that seriously, and to have one's own views exposed to scrutiny, that he despises. When he is performing his therapy on others, he is not simply scrutinising blackboard examples, things that no one could seriously believe or live by, and he is not interested in investigating with people who just say whatever seems most convenient at the time. He wants to discover whether the things that people really do believe can stand up to scrutiny, or indeed whether it is genuinely true that they do believe them.¹⁴

So the Historical Socrates reading can make sense of the character in the dialogues and still hold him up as an ideal of the martyr in the cause of serious moral inquiry, despite his readiness to embrace a range of techniques of refutation, including appeal to blackboard positions that he is not prepared to endorse for himself and that he may have contradicted on other occasions.

13. This point, and its connection with the need to express one's views frankly, is explained by Socrates to Callicles at *Gorgias* 486e–488a.

14. While it seems that Socrates must hold that a philosophical discovery could change one's beliefs and therefore change one's life (by the discovery that one must live according to different set of values) he often seems to show that people do not really believe the false beliefs they utter (since at bottom we all have a sincere conceptual grasp of the relation between morality and the good life. Hence the belief that we think other things more valuable than moral goodness turns out to be a false belief). In that sense Socrates's findings leave everything as it is: he does not change our values but only our beliefs about what we value. But that can change lives, once we realise that our former choices were based on a mistaken idea about what our true values were.

(ii) *The Cleaned-up Socrates*. Contradictions between dialogues are much more uncomfortable for the Cleaned-up Socrates reading. Holders of this view do not envisage a Socrates who changes his mind from day to day, nor one who adopts Pyrrhonist-style pragmatic arguments designed merely to shift the interlocutor from his confidence without forming a coherent Socratic position. On this view, Plato is supposed to have developed for his character “Socrates” what he took to be a coherent set of positions, a Socratic ethics. Plato must have tried to make it compatible both with Socrates’s general disavowal of knowledge and with the kinds of revisionary account that Socrates famously gave for common-sense assumptions about moral virtue. It is supposed to generate a philosophical position of some sophistication, which Plato was happy to attribute to his great teacher.

This position, like the closely related view that Socrates is Plato’s own mouthpiece, prompts interpreters to seek a reconciliation between apparently contradictory positions attributed to Socrates in different dialogues. Leaving an acknowledged contradiction in place is not acceptable, if we suppose that Plato’s task was to make Socrates’s position defensible, and Plato was philosophically competent.

3 Must We Adopt One of These Readings?

We have mapped out five possible ways of understanding Plato’s relation to his Socrates and its historical counterpart. On two of these positions, contradictions between the positions defended by Socrates in different dialogues appear to be a problem. For readers who take Socrates to be the mouthpiece for a dogmatic Plato¹⁵, and for those who take the Cleaned-up Socrates line, Socrates ought to be as consistent and clear-headed as his author Plato. Contradictions are less worrying for the pedagogical or exploratory readings of Plato, and for the Historical Socrates reading, particularly if the historical Socrates had a therapeutic conception of his philosophical mission.

On all standard literary criteria, and given the quality of Plato’s intellect, it is clearly preferable to adopt a reading that does not gra-

15. That is one who holds some doctrines and defends them through his mouthpiece.

tuitously read confusion or unclarity into his oeuvres. This suggests that of the five approaches sketched, we should avoid the Plato's mouthpiece reading and the Cleaned-up Socrates reading, and prefer one of the others, all things considered, if there is no overriding reason to favour the problematic readings over those that defuse the worry about apparent contradictions.

But are the five approaches sketched above the only options, or are there other options? In particular, is there an approach that would not just defuse the worry, or offload it onto the Historical Socrates, but would even provide a fuller explanatory justification for why we should expect Plato to develop such contradictions between different dialogues?

In what follows I propose that one further approach merits consideration for that reason. I shall call the approach the "Tailor-made Socrateses reading".

When Plato wrote his dialogues, he was contributing to a growing body of work in what was fast becoming an established genre, the "Socratic dialogue". Plato did not invent this literary genre. Others besides Plato had been producing *Sôkratikoî logoi* from the 390s on, and we have some partial evidence for works attributed to Phaedo, Aeschines, Antisthenes, Euclides and Aristippus, many of which Plato must have known, as well as Xenophon (whose *Memorabilia*, *Symposium* and *Apology* survive).¹⁶ From Diogenes Laertius's record of debates about the likely authenticity of the works ascribed to Aeschines,¹⁷ it appears that critics judged the merit of an author writing in this genre by the extent to which his dialogues captured the character and vitality of Socrates, while still being clearly original to the author in question.¹⁸

16. For texts and evidence, see G. Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum reliquiae*, four vols. (Rome/Naples: Bibliopolis, 1990). For discussion of Plato's position in relation to these other authors, Kahn, *op.cit.*

17. Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Philosophers* 2. 60–64.

18. Some of Aeschines's works (known as the ἀκέφαλοι, "headless" ones, possibly meaning that they start without a preamble or frame) are judged to be overly free or worthless because they do not portray the Socratic vigour (D.L. 2.60) and this is said to be a reason for Pisistratus of Ephesus doubting whether they were Aeschines's own. On the other hand it appears that other works, which were effective at recapturing Socrates, were also under suspicion, perhaps for being too lifelike (if that is what is meant by Menedemus of Eretria's accusation, that Aeschines passed off as his own dialogues that were the work of Socrates, obtained from Socrates's widow, D.L. 2.60). Diogenes concludes that seven of the works attributed to Aeschines are closely modelled on the Socratic character (Τὸ σωκρατικὸν ἦθος ἀπομεμαγμένον), D.L.

The conventions suggest that an author writing a Socratic dialogue aims for two things: a plausible and vivid representation of a character that is convincingly Socratic, and an original engagement with the classic topics that Socrates was supposed to have discussed.¹⁹ The genre combines the characteristics of historical fiction, in its attempt to recreate a character from the past and to develop convincing dialogue such as might have taken place, together with a strong strand of fantasy and creativity in developing new situations for Socrates to face and novel interlocutors to be addressed. The author of a good Socratic dialogue invents a likely scenario, peoples it with vivid characters, introduces a vigorous and dramatically convincing Socrates who challenges his interlocutors in truly Socratic style, and thus leaves the reader with a sense of having been put through Socrates's mangle in the process. All of it must be true to life.²⁰ None of it need be historically realistic. Nor need it be pedantically consistent with the many other dialogues that draw on the same source of inspiration.

Thus we should expect a plausible Socrates character to appear in every dialogue. But this does not mean that Plato has one Socrates who appears in every dialogue (or even in every dialogue before a certain stage in his life, as though it was a while before he realised that he was writing fiction, not history). The Socrates of the *Protagoras* is one Socratic personality. The Socrates of the *Gorgias* is another. Plato created both, for different settings.

In line with this idea, it is worth noting that certain crucial Socratic theses are preserved in both of these Socrateses. In both dialogues, Plato has his Socrates character defend the idea that knowledge is a necessary and sufficient condition for the good life, that virtue and knowledge are co-extensive, and that moral virtue – radically revised from conventional models of morality – is actually an advantage and not a disadvantage to its possessor. These distinctively

2.61. I take it that this phrase captures what counts for quality of writing in this genre: the texts that deserve attention are those that successfully reproduce “the Socratic *ethos*”.

19. Plato seems to have known earlier treatments, by other authors, of some of the topics that he broaches in his dialogues. As Kahn has shown, there appears to be a dialectic going on between Plato's *Ion* and *Menexenus* and some works by Aeschines and Antisthenes (Kahn, *op.cit.* 28–9).

20. Note that it might be “true to life”, in this sense, to have Socrates argue passionately for contradictory things on different occasions: there is no clear reason why this should not be part of the vitality of the literary character.

“Socratic” theses are defended differently in the two dialogues, by invoking contrasting positions regarding the value of pleasure. If we supposed that this was a single Socrates character we might conclude that Plato portrays Socrates as someone who has no particular line on pleasure, but is able to show that whichever view you hold about pleasure, you will always find yourself concluding in favour of the great Socratic paradoxes. But that probably slightly misrepresents the situation: more radically, we should surely conclude that the historical memory in the fourth century does not commit the Socratic character exclusively to either of these two positions on pleasure, so that Plato is free to create a character who takes either position. He can fulfil the demand that the character be a life-like portrait of Socrates either way. He does so one way in one dialogue and another way in another dialogue. Some of us may find one of the ways of filling out the Socrates character more attractive than the other. Plato allows us to try both for size.

Thus on this reading, Plato has multiple Socrateses, one in every dialogue. He creates a Socrates character for the dialogue, just as he creates a dramatic setting and a set of characters for his interlocutors. The motives are philosophical and literary, and the constraints are plausibility and the quality of the philosophical fruit to be harvested that way. Each Socrates will be tailor-made for the dramatic setting that is to be depicted, and for the philosophical inquiry to be developed.

4 Plato and the Writing of Fiction

How did Plato set about writing a Socratic dialogue? If we survey the typical plots in Plato’s dialogues, it seems clear that Plato first creates a setting for his discussion to take place, by imagining Socrates in some kind of situation or encounter. This may be either a historically identifiable occasion (the day he died, the day of his trial, or whatever) or a non-specific event, encounter or visit, typical of the daily round. The dramatic occasion will be an excuse for Socrates to meet some other characters and debate some topic relevant to the situation. There seem to be two characteristic patterns: (a) Socrates meets a major figure famous at the time or later, and has an appropriate conversation with him and others who might plausibly be imagined present on the scene, or (b) on some famous occasion in

his life, Socrates either delivers a speech (the *Apology*) or has a fitting conversation with others who might conceivably have been present at the time. Both the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* fall into the former category: Plato sets up a fictional meeting between Socrates and the famous sophist Protagoras in the one, and between Socrates and the famous teacher of rhetoric Gorgias (along with two others with even bolder claims to moral scepticism) in the other. Once we have the idea for the encounter, then a philosophical position that could fittingly be attributed to the famous opponent is devised for the opponent, and he is portrayed delivering a speech or answer to that effect under questioning from Socrates. As far as possible Plato has the famous character develop and present his views in characteristic style, again adhering to the same principle of historical plausibility and life-like treatment as for the Socrates character.

This position, once it has been drawn for the opponent, is then subjected to the best available Socratic treatment, whereupon it falls down and is reduced to absurdity by means of the Elenchus. In some cases the result might be impasse (*aporia*) but in our two cases the opponents' views are reduced in such a way as to emerge as support for the famous Socratic paradoxes about knowledge, virtue and the impossibility of weakness of will.

On this account, much of the motivation of a Platonic dialogue such as the *Protagoras* will lie in the rich characterisation of the opponent against whom Socrates is matched, and in the precision with which a characteristic philosophical position is mapped out for that opponent (together with a plausible historical opportunity for the conversation to have taken this line). In our case, Plato sets up a situation in which Protagoras can be permitted to develop his views on education, on political *arete* and on the nature/nurture debate. Some of these are doubtless historically accurate, perhaps based on works by Protagoras known to Plato when he wrote the script. It is doubtless this technique, of setting up realistic encounters with real people, who are portrayed as holding real and promising – if under-examined – views about issues of major importance, that makes the Platonic dialogue so effective and unrivalled as a genre in philosophy, before or since.

If this is right, then a dialogue such as the *Protagoras* was set up to reconstruct Protagoras's likely behaviour and responses, had he met a Socrates and faced this kind of challenge. The Socratic half of the conversation would then be designed primarily as a foil to the

position that Plato has convincingly outlined for Protagoras. In this way, by setting up such fictional encounters in his various dialogues, Plato the artist succeeds in mapping out a stunning range of the topics that have since come to define the entire philosophical agenda. In the process, he effectively traces the range of positions that can plausibly be held on them. In addition each position is then addressed, examined and deconstructed by Socrates, usually in an attempt (more or less successful, but often including bad arguments as well as good ones) to reduce everything to the Socratic paradoxes.

Thus, Plato need not believe that the refutations he puts into Socrates's mouth are perfect. But once he has invented a situation in which Socrates meets Protagoras and talks about virtue, he will presumably want to build into the conversation some typically Socratic ingredients, to create a Socratic ethos for the character. Indeed it may be that one of the crucial ingredients is to include some quite dodgy arguments in defence of the Socratic paradoxes.

Once we have reconstructed Plato's project in this way, we should expect that his starting point for planning the *Protagoras* was this question: "What would a 'Protagoras' be expected to say if he had to defend his teaching practice in discussion with Socrates?" Elsewhere, in the *Theaetetus* Plato sets up the famous Protagorean relativism about knowledge, developing it on the basis of the famous opening words of Protagoras's book, and deploys it as a target for Socrates, to allow him to explore the truth-criterion in the definition of knowledge. Similarly, here in the *Protagoras*, Plato's chosen topic of discussion (the teaching of virtue) is clearly designed to engage with doctrines standardly associated with Protagoras, probably positions that were preserved in written works by Protagoras or in the oral tradition of Plato's day.

The clearest candidate for being a piece of authentic reconstruction on the part of Plato is the section known as Protagoras's Great Speech,²¹ in which scholars have often sought traces of the real Protagoras. The whole speech may derive more or less entire from a genuine work of Protagoras.²² So let us imagine that Plato picks up

21. *Protagoras* 320c to 328c.

22. Perhaps one of the works listed for Protagoras by Diogenes Laertius, if the titles he gives at 9.55 are genuine; but cf. 9.51 and 9.54 for references to the opening words of the two most famous books, both apparently absent from Diogenes's list of

on what is indeed a genuinely interesting Protagorean thesis about the teaching of the virtues, for which the Great Speech provides an aetiological myth in place of an argument.²³ Plato decides to have Socrates respond to that account and deconstruct it, so as to validate his own more radical claims on the subject.

So Plato devises a structure for his dialogue and peoples it with characters: we have the authentic Protagoras, defending his brilliant thesis that accommodates elitist professional training for political power within an egalitarian democratic ideology. We have the crack-pot Socrates, who, in characteristic Socratic style, is obsessed with showing that success involves knowing what is worth having. Plato prepares a suitable dramatic setting, so that Socrates has a chance to quiz Protagoras about education for success. It involves imagining a young man seeking an introduction to Protagoras, with a view to enrolling to study with him, and taking Socrates with him to the interview. Then, instead of Protagoras interviewing his potential pupil, Plato makes Socrates, characteristically, insist on interviewing Protagoras. This provides the opportunity for Socrates to press Protagoras on what kind of “improvement” he has in mind for Hippocrates and thence to lead into an analysis of the notion of “excellence”.

Of course Plato knows what points his Protagoras will need to make in his Great Speech. So he knows before he makes Socrates ask the question about Hippocrates’s education that it will lead into a discussion of virtue. Plato’s philosophical interest lies in providing

11 titles (12 books) surviving at the time of writing. Among these, the two most promising as possible sources of the material in the Great Speech are (a) *περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως* and (b) *περὶ πολιτείας*.

23. Protagoras suggests in Plato’s dialogue (320c) that he can present either a *muthos* or a *logos* to demonstrate that virtue is something that can be taught. He goes on to deliver first a *muthos* and then a *logos*. It is tempting to speculate that Plato knew (and expected his reader to know) two works by Protagoras, one cast in the form of myth and the other as a treatise. Might we guess that *περὶ τῆς ἐν ἀρχῇ καταστάσεως* was perhaps cast as a myth and *περὶ πολιτείας* as a treatise, both working towards the same conclusion? If so, Plato’s dialogue, in which Protagoras tells a myth, would serve as an aetiological myth for why Protagoras had written political theory in that form. Plato has his Protagoras say that story telling is characteristic of an old man (320c). This may indicate that the relevant work was published late in Protagoras’s career (Plato may even mean to suggest that Protagoras wrote it after the conversation that Plato has imagined took place, in which Protagoras tells it for the first time, orally).

just such an opportunity to explore the differences between a Socratic account of virtue and a Protagorean one.

5 Reviewing the Options

The procedure that I have just sketched, whereby Plato's work as an author takes its starting point from the fictional setting, is closely related to several of the options that we started with. But it is not quite the same.

It has much in common with the Historical Socrates view, since it assumes that Plato has among his primary motives the creation of a plausibly lifelike portrait of the Socratic character for each dialogue. But it differs in supposing that there is a concern only for verisimilitude within one dialogue, to try to capture the "Socratic ethos". It does not have any view on whether the historical Socrates was consistent from day to day, since each dialogue portrays him only on one day. For each dialogue, Plato tries to capture a lifelike Socrates. But being lifelike is not the same as being a holder of the authentic doctrines. At most we have to suppose that Plato tries, where possible, to include the famous paradoxical positions that Socrates is known to have defended, and to portray the deep but unconventional moral convictions of his character.

Our view has something in common with the Cleaned-up Socrates view, since we can allow that Plato has intervened to improve upon Socrates's own arguments and that he has developed the Socratic positions beyond what the historical Socrates might have thought of. But we do not have to suppose that he does so in order to give Socrates an authentic and consistent set of teachings. He may do so in order to develop the philosophical interest of the argument. This allows us to account for the evident hand of Plato in developing a philosophical discussion, without worrying about consistency between dialogues.

Our view has a great deal in common with the exploratory reading of Plato's own input to the dialogues, since it suggests that his primary motive in setting up the dialogue was not to deliver his own final teaching on some matter, but to explore the strengths of Socrates's case versus the case of his historically recreated opponent, in a dramatic setting that permits both sides their best arguments. But we need not suppose that Plato is genuinely undecided, or that

he is open minded about which side his reader should favour by the end of the dialogue. He may have a strong affinity with Socrates's view, and he may hope to inspire the reader to take his side. But the genre of historical fiction requires that he portray a Socrates who denies knowledge, generates a sense of *aporia*, and prefers the method of *elenchus* over positive teaching.²⁴

This means that we have something between the exploratory reading (in which Plato is genuinely undecided on what one should conclude) and the pedagogical reading (in which Plato has a clear answer that he is trying to get across obliquely, without saying what it is). On our view he creates a situation primarily for the sake of its potential for discussion, and the scope it offers for developing the strengths of a range of different positions on a particular philosophical issue. He does not devise the scenario merely for the sake of allowing one of those lines to triumph, so he is motivated to give space both to the inherent plausibility – indeed temptation – of the opposing line, and also to such real or imaginary difficulties as might be faced by someone who tries to challenge that line and to refute it convincingly. But he may devise such an even-handed scenario, in which Socrates is up against huge odds and is hard pressed to make progress without falling into a mire of confusion or succumbing to ridicule and ignominious defeat, while yet holding a view of his (Plato's) own on which of the lines is more promising, to his mind. And he may hope that his reader too will recognise the strengths and weaknesses in all the positions, including the weaknesses in those given to Socrates.

It therefore seems that the Tailor-made Socrateses Reading can retain the strengths of the exploratory and pedagogical readings of Plato, without the niggling worries as to why a seriously good

24. Some of the dialogues typically classified as belonging to Plato's Middle period (especially the *Republic*) seem to sacrifice this commitment to the Socratic ethos and present a Socrates who develops a theoretical proposal at some length (compare also the *Symposium*, where, however, the theoretical work is offloaded onto a woman Socrates once met, and the *Phaedrus* where the theoretical work is put into a speech that Socrates "makes up for fun"). I think it would be fair to say that regardless of any chronological or developmental hypotheses about Plato's order of composition, the *Republic* is de facto not a work in the Socratic genre, and the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* show strained attempts to adhere to the Socratic model while branching out into positive theory. These dialogues meet Menedemus's criterion of originality but at the expense of sacrificing Pisistratus's criterion of the quality of the Socrates character (for these criteria see above note 18).

philosopher should have included less than perfect arguments on the side that has the major strengths. It retains the sense that Plato is one of the world's greatest literary authors, and now we can see why. For Plato knows where he is going: he is not just doing exploratory philosophy on the hoof; nor is he simply telling us what to believe, by a strangely contorted manoeuvre. But he is genuinely interested in creating a lifelike portrait of the challenge faced by a philosopher in action: someone who (like the real Socrates) wants to undermine some position that has deep and insistent attractions for many people; someone who (like Socrates) wants to do that without importing a heavy baggage of theoretical doctrine to prop up his own defence.

6 Developmentalism

How does this account of Plato's treatment of Socrates relate to the current debate regarding developmental interpretations of Plato? Outside the world of specialist Platonic scholarship, many still take it for granted that Plato went through an early period in which he portrayed his mentor Socrates and adhered to Socratic ethics, that he then developed a metaphysical two world view, which he expressed in his middle dialogues (deploying it through the medium of the Socrates character in those dialogues), and that in his later period he became dissatisfied with those doctrines, even to the extent of exposing them to blistering criticism, or ignoring them altogether in some dialogues of the critical period. Within the ranks of professional academic scholars working on Plato that story can no longer be taken for granted, and recent published work suggests that more scholars are prepared to challenge it than defend it.

It will be apparent from this discussion of Plato's procedure, that if Plato presents a tailor-made Socrates, peculiarly designed for each dialogue's topic and dramatic setting, it would be unnecessary, or indeed unwise, to try to use the variation in the style and interests of the Socrates character to reconstruct a development for Plato the author. For Plato does not present his own views through Socrates, according to this model – except in so far as his changing interests might be reflected in the various topics he chooses to develop, and the lines of potentially fruitful investigation that he chooses to explore. These in turn might affect his choice of interlocutors and

the occasion chosen for the setting of a dialogue, and those things will then provide the impetus for his fleshing out of a suitable Socrates character.

It follows, then, that a simple-minded developmentalist approach to Plato cannot be applied. That is, we cannot assume that the doctrines (if any) attributed to Socrates are doctrines to which Plato was committed, and we cannot assume that a change in the views expressed by Socrates represents a change in the views held by Plato. We cannot read off from a naïve Socrates to a naïve Plato, for Plato might have presented a naïve Socrates at any stage in his life, and he might have presented Socrates as naïve for very sophisticated reasons. Plato's philosophical intuitions need not appear straight in the Socrates that he sketches for us at any point.

Similarly, just as we cannot derive a story of Plato's development by devising a narrative for the views of different Socrateses, as one might if one read Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece, so too we cannot derive a story of his development by devising a narrative of Plato's own unspoken doctrines, the concealed answers such as we should be looking for if we believed in the pedagogical reading of the dialogues. Both those sources of a developmental story have been shown to the door.

At this stage, little remains for developmental readings to get their teeth into, and if our task is philosophy rather than biography it seems best to rest content with considering each dialogue as an independent contribution to our own understanding of the philosophical issues that it addresses, rather than trying to use it as evidence for what Plato thought on that issue at the time that he wrote it. It is unsafe even to suppose that we can place the dialogues in order on the basis of style and complexity, since an author might write simple dialogues for beginners at any stage in his career.

Yet there is still space for supposing that Plato's philosophical interests may have changed over time, and that he might have turned his attention to different kinds of philosophical issues at different stages of his life, even if those changes are not transparently recorded in the speeches of his character Socrates. The fact that he tailored his Socrates to the chosen subject of each dialogue need not prevent us from wondering whether the chosen subject itself struck Plato as worthy of investigation at that time, because he was himself wrestling with problems in that area at the time, in his own mind. Such a

model would leave it open to us to ask whether Plato's concerns moved from one area of the discipline to another over time, and whether in that process his Socrates characters were successively equipped with different kinds of solution to similar problems.

If there is such a story to tell, doubtless some historians of fourth century philosophy might think it necessary to try to tell it, but there is no reason why philosophers whose interest is in the answers to philosophical problems should be any the wiser for such chronological narratives. It seems sufficient to say that chronology becomes philosophically irrelevant, once one has recognised what role the Socrates character plays in each of Plato's philosophical fictions.

7 Conclusion

I have argued for the view that the dramatic settings in Plato's dialogues are chosen for literary and historical reasons, and also for their philosophical potential. But Plato then creates a Socrates character, freshly devised for each dialogue. Socrates appears in a dialogue, not as a trite substitute for the tedious first person prose that has become the norm in philosophy, but as a fictional character. That character is developed deliberately to meet the needs of the occasion, to recreate the vigour and unpredictability of its unforgettable namesake.

In writing like this, Plato not only permitted live philosophical enquiry to take place in the course of every reader's every reading of the dialogue, by putting tempting and plausible views on trial, in a situation as near as possible to the open-minded exploratory give and take of dialectical debate with a real interlocutor. He also created a most fitting memorial to the real Socrates – the man himself, who lived and died for the idea that philosophy is best done in open-ended dialogue, and with your whole way of life at stake should you be refuted.²⁵

25. I have presented versions of this paper at a number of gatherings, and I am particularly grateful for the insights offered by my respondent Eric Brown at the Arizona Colloquium in February 2003. I am also grateful to the audience at the Welsh Philosophical Society, May 2004 – and to Michael McGhee for laughing at some unconscious double entendres in a previous version. I also owe a great debt to William Prior, who generously shared his thoughts on topics related to this one during his time in Cambridge in the academic year 2003/4.

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