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IRONY IN THE PLATONIC DIALOGUES

I

INTERPRETERS OF PLATO have arrived at a general consensus to the effect that there exists a *problem* of interpretation when we read Plato, and that the solution to the problem must in some way incorporate what has tendentiously been called the “literary” and the “philosophical” sides of Plato’s writing. The problem is created by the fact that Plato wrote in dialogue form, indeed a specific type of dialogue form. The solution must somehow combine into a coherent theory of the “meaning” of the dialogues, the ways in which these texts work (such as the use of imagery, metaphor, myth, allusion, irony, as well as argument). At the same time, there exists enormous disagreement about how one ought to move from these general observations to interpretation of a particular text.¹

The problem of interpretation lies not merely in the fact that Plato wrote dialogues. That alone would not necessarily present any hermeneutical issues of unusual difficulty. Plato’s distinctive use of the dialogue form creates the difficulties. The genre that we might call “the Platonic dialogue” is distinguished by several relevant characteristics.

First, there is no character called “Plato” who speaks in any of the dialogues; indeed, “Plato” is mentioned twice in the entire corpus, once as being absent (*Pho.* 59b10), and once as being present (*Apol.* 38b6). Authorial anonymity is thus an important feature of the dialogues.² At least *ab initio*, we are not justified in identifying Plato with any one of his characters. Indeed, there are positive reasons why he cannot be identified even with Socrates, as I will discuss below.³ Plato is absent from his own texts; no simple act of reading them will allow us to ascertain what his views are.⁴ It does not follow that Plato’s views are

entirely absent from the dialogues—say, in the form of some mysterious “esoteric teaching”—and that they cannot be elicited by a complex act of reading. Just how Plato’s views are to be extracted has been, again, the subject of a very long debate.⁵ I myself think that Plato’s views can be so elicited.⁶ But the fact of his anonymity as author means that “Plato’s meaning” is not ascertainable in the way that, say, “Kant’s meaning” may be ascertainable in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

A second feature of Plato’s dialogues contributes to the interpretive puzzle. The dialogues are clearly fictional in character. They are not—they could not be—transcriptions of conversations which took place. Some dialogues could not have taken place even when the interlocutors were historical figures (for example, at the *Phaedrus*’ ostensible dramatic date the real Phaedrus was not in Athens). Not only are many of the characters entirely fictional, there is clear evidence that even “Socrates” is very much a fictionalized version of the historical character. I am referring not just to the famous statement in the (possibly inauthentic) *Second Letter*,⁷ but to the fact that the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues is presented as being a super-human character. This is evident from Alcibiades’ description of him in the *Symposium* as well as from a number of subtle fictions. For example, Plato has Socrates narrate the entirety of the *Republic* from memory, without a single moment of hesitation or (so far as the reader can tell) any lapse of memory. This fantastic feat is complemented by Socrates’ equally fantastic stamina in conversation. The lengthy *Protagoras*, for example, is narrated in its entirety by Socrates immediately after the dialogue itself has occurred. Socrates never shows any fatigue of any sort. It is not just hyperbole to say that Plato’s Socrates is heroic; he is carefully compared, in passages I cannot examine here, to both Achilles and Odysseus. Socrates’ absolute calm and self-control before death also evidence his superhuman character. The relation between the historical Socrates and the Platonic Socrates is the source of much fruitful controversy. It suffices for the purpose of these introductory comments to note that the “Socrates” of Plato’s dialogues is from the start fictionalized, “idealized and youthful [modernized],” made to deliver speeches and arguments perfectly tied to their context and the interlocutors, speeches graced by multiple levels of complexity and meaning—as though the whole performance had been carefully scripted from the start.

More broadly, the intricacy of argument, the extreme precision with which argument, dramatic setting, the unfolding of the conversation,

and the choice of interlocutors are interwoven, remind us that these dialogues exist only as written—as artifacts under the control of a great literary and philosophical genius. The dialogues are in that sense more perfect than any real conversation. The conversations portrayed by Plato in fact contain no element of chance. That is, they exhibit what Socrates in the *Phaedrus* calls “logographic necessity” (264b7); every word and every action is planned in advance by the author. The appearance of spontaneity is only an illusion.⁸

I do not mean to deny that Plato frequently incorporates historical material into his dialogues. On some occasions, the reader must know relevant historical data not mentioned in the dialogue in order to catch part of the meaning (as in the *Charmides*; see below). Yet on the whole, it seems to me that in interpreting Plato the historical background is of quite limited help. And while many of the dialogues can be placed in a certain time period (for example, the *Laches* would have had to take place between 424 and 418, and the *Apology* in 399), their dramatic dates have little to do with the dates they were actually composed. The *Parmenides*, for example, may be one of Plato’s latest compositions, but it seems to be the “earliest” dialogue in dramatic time, while the *Phaedo* is the last of them in dramatic time (with the possible exception of the *Laws*). A good number of the other dialogues can be—if very tentatively—arranged consecutively in dramatic time.⁹ Furthermore, a number of the dialogues seem tied to each other by internal references (such as the *Apology–Crito–Phaedo*, and *Theaetetus–Euthyphro–Sophist–Statesman* sequences). Plato thus creates an extended fictional history of the life of Socrates and to that extent lends the corpus a sense of fictional wholeness. And this means, again, that the reader is faced with some interesting problems in interpreting not just a single dialogue but the unity of the dialogues taken together as a *corpus*, problems that no amount of historical knowledge will solve.¹⁰

The genre to which the Platonic dialogue form belongs is distinguished by several other characteristics as well. For example, I think it arguable that Plato’s dialogues are constructed so as to reflect the natures of his readers in a very peculiar way. These texts “mirror” not just what we are but what we ought to become.¹¹ I shall return in part III below to this issue of the “mimetic” character of the dialogues. Let me turn now to the problem of irony; for not only does that problem lead us to the issue of Platonic mimesis, it also constitutes one of the most important and well-known challenges in getting at “Plato’s meaning.” On just about any account, irony is a non-trivial feature of Plato’s

dialogues. Any solution to the problem of interpreting Plato's dialogues must confront the problem of irony. The recognition of the interpretive importance of irony, however, seems to open the doors to unverifiable speculation and undisciplined interpretation. The acknowledgment that irony may be present could be taken as a license to read one's own message into the text.

My tack in section II of this paper is to sort out various kinds of Socratic and Platonic irony, in the hope that this will contribute to smoother sailing when we embark on the tumultuous sea of Plato interpretation. In section III, I shall frame the results of the discussion in terms of some broader issues affecting our understanding of the Platonic dialogue form.

II

Since antiquity Plato has been regarded as a master of irony. The "Socrates" of Plato's dialogues (for reasons mentioned above, I will ignore the historical Socrates) possesses a similar reputation.¹² I shall begin with the explicit references in the dialogues to Socrates' irony, and then turn to a general classification of various types of Socratic irony. I shall then proceed to the various types of what is normally called "dramatic irony," or what I shall also call "Platonic" irony. A work exhibits dramatic irony (an irony which may be tragic or comic) if the meaning of the speeches and/or deeds of one or more of its characters is primarily visible to the reader (or audience) of the drama rather than to the characters in it. Through dramatic irony the author communicates to his or her audience over the heads, as it were, of the characters in the drama. Platonic anonymity is thus crucial to understanding, among other things, the workings of Platonic irony. Especially in the case of philosophical works, such as the Platonic dialogues, the reader expects the author to have some sort of position or detailed conception about the matters under discussion—some dogma (even if a dogma about the aporetic character of our knowledge) to communicate. Now, Platonic irony is easily effected when drama is a written work, when the audience consists of readers, and when the interlocutors believe themselves to be engaging in a "live" conversation. Since the latter are unaware that their conversation is written, they are unaware that they are also addressing the reader. A design of which they are ignorant (personified in the Greek tragedies by god or fate) guides their conversation. Within the Platonic dialogues, however, there is no

internal representation of the authorial Plato. Plato is the *deus absconditus* who designs and knows all. He is able to play this role only because the conversations are *written* by him.

The “logographic necessity” of the text mentioned above can now be understood in terms of Plato’s use of irony.¹³ The radically fictitious nature of the dialogues produced by Plato’s art of writing is inseparable from Plato’s use of irony. While the distinction between the Socratic and Platonic levels of irony can be drawn fairly clearly, it does raise several pertinent problems worth discussing briefly (below).¹⁴ I use “levels” here to suggest a lexical order; as I shall explain, Platonic irony is all-encompassing, and thus regulates Socratic irony.

Socratic irony (I use the phrase generically here, for even in the Platonic dialogues characters other than Socrates practice Socratic irony) and Plato’s dramatic irony differ in their means. The Socratic is communicated within the context of the dialogue, a context which is (fictionally) oral rather than written. That is, the context is that of the “living” discussion carried on by means of the spoken word. Socratic irony occurs when the speaker purposely dissimulates his views while in the process of manifesting them either through words or deeds. A particularly famous form of Socratic irony consists in the speaker’s exaggerated professions of ignorance. On both the Socratic and Platonic levels of irony a doubling of meaning occurs, which is made visible by a tension, incongruity, or contradiction between aspects of a discourse, between the context and the discourse (e.g., between the deeds and words), or between different views expressed by the same person. Irony may be a way of speaking (or writing) which is meant to point to what is not spoken (or written); it cannot be exercised without suggesting that something has been held back by its author, or as one might also put it, concealed by its author. It does not necessarily follow that irony is a strategy for “esotericism,” a technique for keeping the author’s “true meaning” concealed altogether. Indeed, it is arguable that at least in Plato, irony is as much a way of revealing as it is of concealing, a way of teaching and motivating the reader/auditor to look further.¹⁵ In the context of the Platonic dialogues, irony does not necessarily come to meaning the *opposite* of what one is saying.

Nor should we infer that irony is, at least in Plato, the expression of something that is false, a lie or an intentional deception.¹⁶ What makes Socratic irony in particular so complicated is that the statements in question are in different ways both false and true. Again, the true kernel in the statement is not necessarily just the opposite of what the

statement seems to mean, as might be the case with a merely sarcastic statement; it might be something different from what is conveyed by the surface meaning of the words. When Socrates professes ignorance, for example, it is false that he is simplistically ignorant, but perhaps true that in some deeper sense he is indeed ignorant—and in a way that shows a certain kind of knowledge.

A: *Socratic Irony*. Let me turn now to the explicit references in Plato to Socratic irony. References to Socrates as ironic are five in number, and it is best to begin with them.¹⁷ The first three are quite similar to each other. One is uttered by Callicles (*Gorg.* 489e1), a second by Thrasymachus (*Rep.* 337a3–7; “the habitual irony of Socrates”). In the third Socrates refers to the jury’s opinion that his piety is ironic (*Apol.* 38a1). Socrates presents himself as the inferior of Callicles, Thrasymachus, and the god, and praises each of them. The first two of these know that Socrates’ public deeds and words (e.g., those offered in the dialogue in question) contradict his humble claim to ignorance and his (ostensible) desire to be instructed. The jurors are not blind to the tension between Socrates’ lifelong, publicly proclaimed, and seeming humble *aporia* about issues fundamental to the polis on the one hand, and his equally public and quite arrogant claim that he represents the god (a claim that does not sit well with his ostensible humility as an inferior of the god). In presenting himself in the *Apology* as the messenger of god sent to benefit the citizens of Athens, Socrates implies that he knows well the truth about virtue and the other issues about which he inquires, or at least that he knows more than he is letting on.¹⁸ In all three cases, a contradiction or tension between Socrates’ public conduct and speech leads to the suspicion that he is dissimulating about his ignorance. These cases constitute what I regard as the first kind of Socratic irony.

On what basis is it decided that one instance of Socrates’ behavior is ironic and that another is not? We understand immediately that Thrasymachus is correct in his accusation. We also see that there is a point in the context to the irony; whereas there would be no point to seeing Socrates’ professed humility as non-ironic and the rest of his conduct (or at least that part of it which suggests that Socrates is superior to Thrasymachus) as ironic. We assume that what we know of Socrates, e.g., his continual questioning of the nature of the virtues, and so of piety, is a truer indication of his nature than is a statement made in a specific situation (e.g., that he is a messenger of god) for

reasons that are quite understandable in the light of the context. We assume that, while not wise, he has learned a great deal along the way, as manifested by the ability to put the right questions and conduct the conversation. Thus, to repeat, in claiming ignorance Socrates both means and does not mean what he says. The interlocutor may well take this as nothing more than deception on Socrates' part, but it does not follow that it was Socrates' intention to deceive,¹⁹ or at least not simply to deceive.

There are more complicated cases of this same kind of irony. In the *Theaetetus*, for example, Socrates describes the paradigm philosopher (the only one named is Thales) in a way that manifestly does not describe Socrates himself. Yet Socrates indicates that both he and Theodorus belong to the class of paradigm philosophers (173b4–5; cf. 175e2). Once again it would be necessary to show that the context provides reasons for Socrates' deliberate dissimulation of his true thoughts.

The fourth and fifth references to Socrates' irony are uttered by Alcibiades, who says of Socrates: "In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony" (*Symp.* 216e4–5).²⁰ Socrates "constantly follows" beautiful youths around and pretends to be struck by them, and he also dissimulates when he claims to be ignorant (*Symp.* 216d2–4). All of this is only external or public; in fact, Socrates is utterly self-controlled, and indeed he looks down on the beauty of youths. Alcibiades also reports that Socrates responded to his (ineffective) overtures with that "absolutely inimitable ironic manner of his" (*Symp.* 218d6–7). The irony appears in the context of a divergence between Socrates' public words (to the effect that he loves beautiful youths, knows only his own ignorance) or deeds (his actual gawking at the youths) and his private ones. Whatever Socrates may say about his erotic interests, he ultimately does not follow through in practice. I shall classify this as a second kind of Socratic irony. The ancient maxim that "deeds speak louder than words" seems to underlie our judgment that, in such a case, the public words and deeds, rather than the private ones, are ironic. Of course this does not relieve us from showing what Socrates gains from deliberately dissimulating his true estimation of physical beauty and of his own knowledge. Moreover, it is perfectly compatible with the observation that Socrates' interlocutors—Alcibiades, for example—do not understand well the point of Socrates' irony.²¹

A third kind of Socratic irony, also pointed to by Alcibiades, is signaled by the contrast between Socrates' public deeds and those of

others. For example, Socrates is stronger than others in war, he does not pursue money or honor, he drinks but never gets drunk (*Symp.* 220a5–6). Alcibiades recounts that when Socrates declined to wear shoes during a winter campaign, the other soldiers “thought he was only doing it to spite them” (*Symp.* 220b7–c1). Socrates’ public deeds suggest to others that he is disdainful of them, though he does not say so. As Aristotle points out, irony can express contempt.²² To be sure, we could not characterize Socrates’ actions as ironic unless we could show that Socrates professed to honor his comrades. His professions in the *Apology* that he cares for the welfare of his fellow citizens might supply the necessary evidence.

A fourth kind of Socratic irony concerns the contradiction between two different *logoi* in a dialogue. Here is it not a question of Socrates’ behavior but of the logical inconsistency between theses he propounds. An excellent case of this occurs in the *Republic*. In Book X, Socrates claims that god created the Ideas (597b and context), a claim that simply contradicts his account of the eternity of the Ideas given in Books VI–VII of the *Republic*. Which of the two passages should be judged to be ironic? Given that the assertion in Book X appears only in one passage of that Book (and in no other place in the Platonic corpus), and that the contrary view is developed at great length in earlier Books (as well as in other dialogues), and given that the context of Book X but not of VI–VII perfectly sustains an interpretation that relies on irony, it is reasonable to see Book X as containing the irony. Of course one might also resolve the contradiction by claiming that Plato was unaware of it (i.e., that he made a mistake), or that he changed his views in the course of writing the *Republic*. However, such explanations rest on interpretive assumptions that there are good reasons to reject (I have set them out in the works cited in footnote 1 above).²³

Sometimes the contradiction is “dialectically” produced by the flow of the argument, in which case the entire argument has to be recast. This occurs explicitly in the *Protagoras*, where both Socrates and Protagoras end up advocating definitions of virtue which contradict their initial theses. In this instance we can say that Socrates is confused, or that he anticipated and directed the *logoi* in that manner (perhaps with the purpose of teaching Protagoras). In the latter case, as Schaerer points out,²⁴ Socrates is speaking ironically when he suggests at the start of the *Protagoras* that he thinks virtue is not teachable (for his premise is that the Athenians are wise, which itself is an ironic profession in our first “Socratic” sense of the term), and when he suggests at the end of

the dialogue that he has been caught completely by surprise by the outcome. The supposition that Socrates knew what he was doing all along makes very good sense in and of the context.

In the course of a dialectical reversal of positions it is quite possible that Socrates will advocate a thesis which in another dialogue he criticizes severely and which, in fact, would ultimately make his own philosophic enterprise absurd, e.g., by making it indistinguishable from sophistry. Socrates' much debated defense of hedonism in the *Protagoras* is a good example of this, particularly since the question of its irony has already been discussed in the secondary literature.²⁵ The context shows that the espousal of hedonism is actually a step in a larger strategy to force Protagoras to admit the unity of courage with the other virtues and so to accept on his own terms the position of Socrates, which Protagoras had originally rejected, that the virtues are one. Protagoras' admission has important consequences for his entire endorsement of sophistry.

A fifth kind of Socratic irony may be found in Socrates' use of invalid arguments or, more broadly, of fallacies. There has been considerable debate about whether or not Socrates (or Plato) was conscious of many of these fallacies, given that there is no "technical" discussion in the dialogues in which they are systematically identified and labeled. Assuming that Socrates and Plato are thinkers of at least average intelligence, however, they surely can detect fallacies as readily as we can. No one has ever proven, so far as I know, that to be conscious of a fallacy one must possess a theory of fallacies.²⁶ And if, in addition, the use of a fallacy or poor argument makes excellent sense in the context, we seem justified in appealing to irony. The *Phaedo's* "proofs" for the immortality of the soul might supply a case in point.²⁷ Were Socrates' cheerfulness in the face of death a direct result of his confidence in the (to us quite obviously unpersuasive) arguments favoring immortality, the case for his espousal of the arguments being ironic would of course weaken.

A sixth kind of Socratic irony, evident in many dialogues, occurs when Socrates remains silent about a definition or concept which would significantly contribute to the success of the dialogue. The result is not that the argument is invalid but that it is incomplete. For example, in the *Charmides* an unsuccessful effort is made to define *sophrosyne*; hence Socrates characterizes the discussion as "worthless" and himself as a simple-minded inquirer (172c4–5, 175a9–d6). But the

most obvious definition was never mentioned explicitly, namely that *sophrosyne* is self-control. That Socrates' interlocutors do not mention it deeply reflects their own characters (Charmides and Critias became tyrants). That Socrates does not mention it here and yet discusses it in other dialogues demonstrates his commitment to conversing in such a way as to lead his interlocutors to find the truth on their own. Socrates certainly knows that *sophrosyne* might plausibly be defined as self-control, and his silence about this definition together with his claim to be a poor inquirer are ironic.

B: *Platonic Irony*. We are now in a position to consider the level of "dramatic irony" employed by Plato, as distinguished from that of the irony perpetrated by Socrates. The *Charmides* is helpful in illustrating the difference between the two levels. In that dialogue the issue of self-control is clearly evident on the level of deeds. For example, at the start of the dialogue Socrates has just returned from war, probably from the very battle in which, according to Alcibiades, Socrates exhibited marvelous self-control.²⁸ He seems utterly self-controlled in narrating the news of the bloody Athenian defeat. He then reports that he lost his self-control while glimpsing inside Charmides' cloak (155d7–e3). Chaerephon is pictured as rushing to greet Socrates in an uncontrolled way (153b2–3). Charmides has morning headaches, i.e., hangovers.²⁹ Critias is unable to control himself and he jumps into the discussion, such is his love of honor and victory (162c1–d6). In short, the "dramatic" aspects of the dialogue, which are not necessarily understood by the participants in the dialogue, are designed by the author to communicate something to the reader. The speeches and deeds of the characters mean more to the readers of the text than to the characters in the text.

Another example of Plato's use of dramatic irony is evident from a passage in the *Symposium* which I have already cited as an illustration of the second kind of Socratic irony, namely Socrates' public dissemblance of his views, a dissemblance that becomes visible when they are contrasted with his private behavior. Alcibiades accuses Socrates of being ironic on the basis of his experience of Socrates' public and private behavior. Alcibiades thus claims to be alone in having discerned Socrates' godlike interior (*Symp.* 216e5–7 and context). But is not this accusation itself ironic in Plato's hands? Alcibiades is plainly Socrates' inferior, and does not understand what he sees inside Socrates and hence does not understand the reasons for which Socrates is "ironic"

towards him.³⁰ Alcibiades' words and deeds have a significance, thanks to Plato's art of writing, which transcends what Alcibiades is able to divine about himself.

Thus both argumentative and dramatic aspects must be brought together by the reader in order to understand what Plato wishes to communicate. There are many crucial dimensions of the dialogue whose meaning cannot be attributed to Socrates; indeed, Socrates is not present in every dialogue and does not actively participate in all those in which he is present. From the perspective of this Platonic level of irony, even Socrates' "non-ironic" statements and deeds are ironic. On this level we have, in other words, a confirmation of Alcibiades' intimation that all of Socrates' discourses are Silenus-like (*Symp.* 221d7–222a6). However, the same is true of everything else said and done in the dialogues, as well as (in the ways indicated above) of significant statements and deeds left unsaid and undone. For the Platonic texts communicate their message to the reader through their silence too.³¹ As dramas the Platonic dialogues contain non-linguistic elements (although there is little evidence that they were intended to be acted on stage). There are many references to deeds performed in the course of the conversation, such as the drawing of geometrical figures in the sand (*Meno* 82b ff.). Persons come on and off the "stage," sit in silence (as Socrates does, very dramatically, in most of the *Soph.* and *Pol.*), gesture and whisper to each other (*Rep.* 449b1–6), hide things under their cloaks (as Phaedrus does at the start of the dialogue named after him). In sum, an understanding of Plato's use of dramatic irony is crucial to understanding the dialogues.³²

I have emphasized above that Plato never participates in his dialogues as an interlocutor. While in one sense he "says" everything that the characters say, in a straightforward sense he says nothing in the dialogues (especially given that no character functions as his mouth-piece). He does however present us with a deed that is unambiguously his, namely that of writing dialogues. Plato's views are concealed in his own *logoi*; the dialogues are the externally visible side of the Platonic Silenus. The Silenus' interior is made partially visible, however, by the tension between the deed which is unambiguously Plato's and a thesis put by Plato into the mouth of one of his characters. This tension supplies an example of what might be called dramatic irony, or more properly, Platonic irony; for it is an occasion when Plato dissimulates his own views, rather than just manipulating his fictional (or fictionalized)

characters so as to communicate to the readers a meaning invisible to the characters in the drama.

The example in question reflects on the corpus as a whole. At the end of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is made to criticize the written word, a medium in which Socrates does not seriously engage. Unbeknown to Socrates, the criticisms are themselves written in a form that imitates his spoken dialogues, or rather, which are his dialogues, but transformed in a medium he rejects. In writing these criticisms of writing, Plato creates a tension between the surface meaning of the text (what is said in the text) and the form of the text itself (and by extension all of Plato's dialogues). In so doing Plato as it were silently points to his own position about writing, a position partly at odds with that which he puts in Socrates' mouth. That is, by the deed of writing, Plato denies that Socrates' criticisms of writing are decisive. By writing dialogues, he partially accepts the criticisms. The reasons for his simultaneous acceptance and rejection are complex; since I have worked them out elsewhere, I shall not restate them here.³³ The self-referentiality of Plato's dialogues which is visible here reminds us that his texts are illusions; but as self-conscious illusions they necessarily distinguish themselves from reality, and refer us back to the non-illusory (more on this in section III below).

To state this point differently: by writing dialogues which present themselves as spoken exchanges and which do not explicitly call attention to their status as written texts, Plato appears to be affirming without qualification the Socratic praise of spoken dialogue. This appearance is a dissemblance, for Plato did write, and his putatively spoken dialogues could exist only as written (above). Plato might then appear, given his deed of writing, to be endorsing without qualification the genre of the written dialogue. This endorsement is revealed as a dissemblance when we realize that the texts are not meant as substitutes for spoken dialogue but as invitations to it (more on this below). Platonic irony (which parallels Socratic irony) is compatible with Plato's use of dramatic irony. Socrates' criticisms of writing may well represent the one occasion in the Platonic corpus in which Socrates is himself the victim of Plato's dramatic irony.³⁴

Thanks to this complex Platonic irony, Plato's intentions are as difficult to ascertain as are those of the Platonic Socrates. We are helped in this task, however, by the fact that there are a number of junctures in the dialogues at which Plato's hand is especially visible,

analogous to the junctures at which Socrates' irony is manifest (the six kinds of irony already outlined). The first of these concerns the choice of the titles of the dialogues, a choice which reveals a decision by Plato (like the decision to write and to write dialogues) that cannot be ascribed to any of the characters and of which they cannot be conscious. To be sure, the significance of the titles can only be established by careful analysis of the dialogue in question. But at least we have an outside point of reference, a signpost erected by Plato to direct us to some, probably crucial, aspect of a dialogue.³⁵

It seems also to be the case, secondly, that the occurrence of the same phrases, definitions, or arguments in the mouths of different characters who do not know each other, may reveal something about Plato's intentions, rather than about those of his characters. For example, in the *Protagoras* Socrates refers to the sophist as a merchant or peddler of the goods which nourish the soul, which he sells while travelling from city to city (313c–d). In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger constructs a similar definition (223c–224c). Even if there are contextual reasons why each character uses the definition, its recurrence sounds like an invitation from Plato to the reader to compare Socrates' with the Stranger's analysis of sophistry.³⁶

Third, when the dramatic dates of the dialogues are kept in mind, and contrasted with relevant historical events, another window into Plato's intentions is partially opened. In the *Charmides* Socrates converses about *sophrosyne* with two men who, as I have already mentioned, subsequently became—after the dramatic date of the conversation—tyrants (i.e., radically immoderate). That development was known to every reader of the dialogue, since the dialogue was composed after it had taken place. But it could not have been known at the dialogue's dramatic date to any of the characters in the dialogue (including Socrates). This situation gives the dialogue both comic and tragic aspects which are not visible, at the dramatic time of the conversation, to the *dramatis personae*.³⁷ Similarly, at the end of the *Phaedrus* Socrates makes a prophecy about Isocrates, who at the dramatic date of the dialogue is still young. The readers know (and Plato knew when he wrote it) that the prophecy turned out to be false (Isocrates did not become a philosopher in the requisite sense).³⁸ Something is thereby indicated about the accuracy of Socrates' powers of prophecy (perhaps the indication amounts to an ironically conveyed Platonic criticism of Socrates).

Fourth, to the extent that it is possible to gather dialogues into

symmetrical groups on the basis of their subject matter, the hand of Plato is again discernable. For none of the *dramatis personae* could have intended this. Or again, if the reader were to find that a passage in the mathematical center of a dialogue is of particular significance, and that in the same dialogue passages of comparable significance recur at mathematically regular intervals, or if one finds that a term or phrase recurs a philosophically significant number of times, one might well refer to Plato rather than to the characters of the dialogue in explaining it.³⁹

Fifth, we can point to the fact that Plato presents his dialogues as being either narrated or performed.⁴⁰ The motives for narrating are sometimes given within the dialogues, as is the case in the prologues of the *Protagoras*, *Euthydemus*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*; at other times, we are simply given a narrated dialogue without explanation of the narrator's motives or of the number and nature of the auditors (as is the case in the *Republic*). Although in the *Theaetetus* we have an example of a narrated dialogue being transformed into a performed dialogue, normally the narrated dialogues do explain how they have come to be conveyed to the reader. The difference between the two modes of presentation certainly means something in each specific case for the interpretation of the dialogue in question. E.g., a narrated dialogue is conditioned by the narrator's ability to remember, as well as by his prejudices; in such a dialogue the narrator can comment on the happenings of the dialogue, and so add another dimension to them. In some cases the fact that the dialogue is narrated bears an interesting philosophical relation to the conversation being narrated.⁴¹ Finally, the way in which the narration or performance begins and ends, whether abruptly and part way through the conversation, or not, seems also to evidence Plato's hand in a direct and specific way. Again, the significance of such facts must be ascertained with reference to the context.⁴²

Finally, a sixth kind of Platonic irony concerns the choice of characters participating in a dialogue, as well as the time and place.⁴³ The significance of the choice of interlocutor is immediately obvious when we recall the Platonic corpus contains no dialogue between mature philosophers (Protagoras is a self-proclaimed sophist, so I exclude Socrates' conversation with him), even though in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* the opportunity is present.⁴⁴ No one character ever seems responsible for the presence of all the participants in a Platonic dialogue at a certain time and place. The whole of the drama is greater than the parts and cannot be explained through them alone. What is

not explained within the dialogue seems to show us the intentions of Plato.

There is a certain ambiguity in speaking of the choice of interlocutors and situation as constituting a specific kind of irony. For this choice can also, in some cases, be explained in terms of the context, and so does not constitute a clear instance in which Plato is communicating to the reader by means not explicable in terms of the context. In the *Charmides*, for example, Socrates chooses to go to the palestra at a certain time; he chooses to talk to Charmides, and so forth. These events are already intrinsic parts of the fabric of the fiction, and while the fiction as a whole must be understood on the level of Plato's use of irony, it is difficult in some cases to separate that level from Socratic irony, or simply from the irony ascribable to characters in the text.

A particular form of this difficulty presents the interpreter with a serious challenge. In crucial cases a distinction between Socrates' and Plato's use of irony seems called for, but is not easily made. For example, in the *Phaedrus* Socrates recounts a story, which he claims to be true (245c4, 247c3–6), about the nature of the soul, eros, knowledge, philosophy, and the Ideas. We are told that the philosopher is one who recollects the Ideas and his god (Zeus), and who does so in the context of a "mad" love affair. But while telling the story Socrates is certainly not involved in such an affair. More importantly, given the assimilation of knowing to recollection advocated within the story, Socrates could not know central elements of the story itself—including know the comprehensive meaning of *anamnesis* ("recollection"). The story about *anamnesis*, Forms, and the soul's cosmic journey of which *anamnesis* and Forms are an integral part, is not itself "known" through *anamnesis*.⁴⁵ Since in the *Phaedrus* Socrates offers no other standard of knowing these topics that his myth recounts, the account is ironic not just in the sense that it is not an accurate description of Socrates' own philosophizing, but also in that it is not a description which can vouch for its own truth. Reversing the Silenus image, we might be tempted to say that the palinode is beautiful on the outside, deficient on the inside.

The question arises as to whether "Socrates" is conscious of this irony or not. If so, we must presume that he has grounds for hoping that Phaedrus will understand the irony; for otherwise Socrates is in the (impossible) situation of a man alone on a mountain top ironizing for his own amusement. However, not only is Phaedrus' reaction to the palinode abysmally poor (see *Phaedrus* 257b7–c7); it is quite clear, even before Socrates begins the palinode, that Phaedrus is not equipped to

understand the irony (even though Socrates hopes that Phaedrus will turn towards philosophy; 257b). Socrates thus acts as though he were—*per impossibile*—addressing himself to the reader, an act which can be intended only by Plato. This kind of situation occurs in other Platonic dialogues as well.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, one's interpretation of the dialogue will vary depending on whether or not it can be shown that Socrates is conscious of his own irony. For example, if he knows what he is doing, as I believe he does, the very sudden shift immediately after the palinode to a discussion of the apparently unrelated topic of "method" makes sense. If he does not know what he is doing, a quite different interpretation results (one which would include, I think, quite a strong Platonic criticism of Socrates). In such a case, a tension between our two levels of irony exists.

III

Why does Plato use any of these forms of irony? Given my comments about "Platonic irony" in particular, this question comes close to asking why Plato wrote the sorts of dialogues he did. The answer to that latter question is a subject for separate inquiry.⁴⁷ In the present context, I would like to conclude by considering, first, one rationale for Plato's use of irony and then, second, how that rationale fits with the above mentioned view that the dialogues are to be seen as "mimetic."

Irony in the dialogues could be seen as having one of two functions. On the one hand, we could interpret the ultimate point to be that in every philosophical position there is a puzzle, within which there awaits a riddle, one that in turn conceals an enigma, and so forth *ad infinitum*. Irony so understood would ultimately reflect a view of things to the effect that the universe is intrinsically unknowable, that it is (to speak in loose terms) somehow absurd. We tend to associate this sort of irony with the Romantics and some Existentialists. On the other hand, we could hold that the function of irony in the dialogues is to encourage us to become philosophical by rightly appropriating for ourselves the dialogic search for knowledge. In this event irony would reflect not the absurdity of the cosmos but the limitations of the human ability to understand it.⁴⁸ Our evaluation of the purpose of irony in Plato, that is, will be connected to our evaluation of the meaning of "philosophy" for Plato and therewith various theses about the limits of knowledge, the intelligibility of the Whole, and the like. Form and content are once again linked.

I could not prove here my view that the second interpretation is more accurate than the first without providing detailed interpretations of several of the dialogues, although I think few will disagree that the *prima facie* evidence supports this view. So I shall limit myself to sketching an important feature of the Platonic dialogues connected to Platonic irony in particular.

As my discussion of the irony of the *Phaedrus*' criticisms of writing indicates, Plato uses the dialogue form self-consciously. Not just the self-referentiality of his aesthetic language, but the very complexity of its artifices, show that Plato bestowed extreme care on his philosophic poetry. To what end does Plato write as he does? It seems to me that a plausible answer would understand Plato's purpose as that of educating his readers into leading reflective, possibly philosophical, lives. When fully fleshed out, the "philosophical life" requires self-knowledge and knowledge of how things are by nature. If the purpose of the dialogues is to engender a life so understood—at least among those capable of such a life—then the dialogues, however fictional in their frame, are not self-subsistent illusions. That is, in a complicated way the dialogues do point away from themselves and back to the realities and appearances of the everyday human world—including that unachieved reality that is the reader. In my view the *Phaedrus*' critique of writing reflects just such a view.⁴⁹ How can the written work draw the reader into reflection on him or herself?

There are many things to be said in response to this question. I have commented above on the importance of Platonic anonymity and in general on Plato's evident intention to let the reader appropriate insights on his or her own rather than to tell the reader the conclusion that ought to be drawn. This strategy seems obviously connected with the notion that philosophical learning is a form of "recollection," a kind of knowledge to be brought out by the learner "from within." Irony in its various guises, on both Socratic and Platonic levels, seems fairly obviously to be one way to compel the reader to rediscover on his or her own. But what is to be rediscovered is not just some proposition about mathematics or other subject matter, but also an understanding of what it would mean to be a perfected, complete human being. For on the present hypothesis, the Platonic dialogues have an ethical point to make to the effect that the unexamined life is not worth living.

To continue several more steps with this sketch of an argument: I suggest that we understand "the point" of irony as connected to Plato's wish to invite the reader into a life of self-examination. The broadly

imitative, dramatic character of all the Platonic dialogues serves the same purpose. For the dialogues are mimetic in that they imitate the words and doings of individual human beings engaged in, or attempting to avoid being engaged in, or perhaps remaining indifferent to being engaged in, philosophy. In the interplay of these various characters, the reader is offered the opportunity of identifying with, and seeing both the virtues and vices of, various kinds of lives, various kinds of responses to philosophy. In that extended sense the dialogues mirror the reader's dispositions, but in such a way, it seems to me, as to encourage reflection on and improvement of those dispositions.⁵⁰

This comes to a much more complicated notion of *mimesis* than that which Socrates attributes to the poets in *Republic* book X. However Platonic imitation is ultimately to be understood, the dialogues must not only be treated as dialogues, but also as *representations* of dialogues. In light of the suggestion that Plato's texts are structured so as to involve the reader in the love of wisdom, we might say that the dialogues are both descriptive of the sorts of exchanges we might witness, and also pedagogic; they are both phenomenological and protreptic.⁵¹ In the last analysis, a full understanding of Plato's use of irony must take into account the fact that the surface of the dialogues consists in representations of human beings working their way around a multi-faceted question: what is the good life for the human being?

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1. For a sampling of both the broad consensus and the debate, see the contributions to *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, ed. C. Griswold (1988, Routledge; rpt. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). See also the bibliographies to that work as well as the bibliography to my *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (1986, Yale University Press; rpt. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); my "E Pluribus Unum? On the Platonic 'Corpus,'" *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 361–97 and the follow-up, "E Pluribus Unum? On the Platonic 'Corpus': the Discussion Continued" (a response to C. Kahn's reply to my original piece), *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000): 195–97; and *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations*, ed. G. A. Press (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).

2. See L. Edelstein, "Platonic Anonymity," *American Journal of Philology* 83 (1962): 1–22.
3. I note that by "Socrates" I mean, unless otherwise noted, the "Socrates" of Plato's dialogues.
4. As C. Kahn notes in *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: the Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 41–42.
5. An excellent discussion of the history of the interpretation of Plato's dialogues may be found in E. N. Tigerstedt's *Interpreting Plato* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1977), a book discussed by A. Bowen in "On Interpreting Plato," *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, pp. 49–65.
6. See C. Rowe's "Platonic Irony," in *Nouva Tellus: Anuario del Centro de Estudios Clásicos* 5 (1987): 83–101.
7. "The best precaution is not to write them [these doctrines] down, but to commit them to memory; for it is impossible that things written should not become known to others. This is why I have never written on these subjects. There is no writing of Plato's, nor will there ever be; those that are now called so come from an idealized and youthful [modernized] Socrates" (314b7–c4), trans. Glenn R. Morrow, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p. 1639.
8. Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 60.
9. A discussion of the significance of the dramatic dates of Plato's dialogues may be found in W. Wieland's *Platon und die Formen des Wissen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1982), pp. 83–94. For a determined but problematic effort to locate the dramatic dates of all the dialogues see E. Munk's *Die Natürliche Ordnung der Platonischen Schriften* (Berlin: F. Dümmler's Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1857). The dramatic dates of some dialogues cannot be worked out (the *Laws* seems to be such a case). Note that the difference between the date a dialogue is supposed to have taken place, and the date at which it was narrated, generates layers of fictive chronology. The *Theaetetus*, for example, seems to be narrated in 369, long after the conversation itself, and might make the (narrated) *Tht.* one of Plato's (fictively) "latest" dialogues.
10. On this matter see Diskin Clay's "Gaps in the 'Universe' of the Platonic Dialogues," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 3, ed. J. J. Cleary (Washington: University Press of America, 1987): 131–57; and M. Miller's response in the same volume, pp. 158–64. On the general problem of seeing Plato's literary output as a "corpus," see my "E Pluribus Unum?" (the article discusses at some length the "fictive chronology" issue and proposes an ordering of some of the dialogues); and on the problem of working out a defensible theory of the chronology of the composition of the dialogues, my "Plato and the Problem of Chronology" (commentary on C. Kahn's "On Platonic Chronology"), in *Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient*, ed. J. Annas and C. Rowe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, forthcoming).
11. For a discussion of this point see *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, pp. 222–23 *et passim*.
12. On uses of the term "irony" before Plato, and Plato's transformation of the word, see G. Vlastos's *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

1991), chap. 1 (“Socratic Irony”); also C. L. Miller’s “Ironic or Not?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1976): 309–13.

13. See Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. xxv and xiv; and F. E. Sparshott, “Socrates and Thrasymachus,” *Monist* 50 (1966): 421.

14. Cf. Paul Friedländer, *Plato: an Introduction*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff, 2nd rev. ed., vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 145. The distinction between Socratic and Platonic irony is drawn and discussed in W. Boder’s *Die sokratische Ironie in den platonischen Frühdialogen* (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1973). Consider also Diskin Clay’s *Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), pp. 33, 34. For further discussion see C. Rowe’s “Platonic Irony”; the various categories I am distinguishing overlap with those Rowe sets out.

15. See R. Schaerer’s “Le Mécanisme de l’Ironie dans ses Rapports avec la Dialectique,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 48 (1941): 181–209; also J. Klein, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 5–6. For a helpful discussion of irony in its modern context, see G. Palante, “L’Ironie: Etude Psychologique,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger* 61 (1906): 147–63.

16. Both here and in my earlier statements that to be ironic is not necessarily to mean the *contrary* of what one says, but at a minimum is to say something different from what one means (and in the context of Plato’s dialogues also in some way to conceal what one means), I am accepting A. Nehamas’ criticism of Vlastos’ understanding of Socratic irony. See Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 12, 52–63.

17. In addition to those discussed, the other references to irony are to be found at *Gorg.* 489e3, *Crat.* 384a1, *Euthyd.* 302b3, *Laws* 908e2, *Soph.* 268a7 and c8, *Lovers* 133d8 (the *Lovers* may well not be authentic). Additionally, there are references in the dialogues to Socrates “playing” with his interlocutors, and this could mean the same as “being ironic” (e.g., see *Symp.* 216e4). Vlastos notes that “the words *eiróneia*, *eirón*, *eiróneuomai* are never applied to Socrates in Xenophon’s Socratic writings either by Xenophon himself or by anyone else.” *Socrates*, p. 32.

18. About which see Clay, *Platonic Questions*, p. 94.

19. As noted by Vlastos, *Socrates*, pp. 31–32.

20. I shall be using the translation of the *Symp.* by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, included in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson.

21. See E. L. Burge’s “The Irony of Socrates,” *Antichthon* 3 (1969): 6. While Plato may be effecting a change in the meaning of “irony,” Socrates’ interlocutors may sometimes assume a pre-Platonic sense of the term.

22. On the connection between irony and contempt, ostentation, and boastfulness, see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1379b25 and *N.E.* IV, chap. vii, 1127b24–32.

23. This interpretation is substantiated in my “The Ideas and the Criticism of Poetry in Plato’s *Republic*, Book 10,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 135–50. I add that to take the drama and irony of a dialogue seriously is to remove a crucial prop of the

“historical” approach to resolving inconsistencies in the dialogues. For an example of that approach see Werner Jaeger’s interpretation of *Tht.* 172d–177b (which I mentioned above in discussing the first kind of Socratic irony), in *Aristotle*, trans. R. Robinson (1934; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 430–31. My approach to the problem of interpreting Socratic and Platonic irony is harmonious with that of Paul Shorey, *The Unity of Plato’s Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), p. 5.

24. “Le Mécanisme,” p. 186, n. 1.

25. See J. P. Sullivan’s “The Hedonism in Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Phronesis* 6 (1961): 10–28; S. R. Hemmenway’s “Sophistry Exposed: Socrates on the Unity of Virtue in the *Protagoras*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 16 (1996): 1–23; and L. Duncan’s “Courage in Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Phronesis* 23 (1978): 216–28. I discuss aspects of the complicated rhetorical clash between Protagoras and Socrates in “Relying on Your Own Voice: An Unsettled Rivalry of Moral Ideals in Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999): 533–57.

26. For a classification of various kinds of fallacies to be found in Plato, see R. Robinson, “Plato’s Consciousness of Fallacy,” *Mind* 51 (1942): 97–114. See also R. K. Sprague’s “Logic and Literary Form in Plato,” *The Personalist* 48 (1967): 560–72; and G. Klosko, “Criteria of Fallacy and Sophistry for Use in the Analysis of Platonic Dialogues,” *Classical Quarterly* 33 (1983): 363–74.

27. For a (controversial) interpretation of the *Phaedo* along these lines see H. G. Gadamer’s “The Proofs of Immortality in Plato’s *Phaedo*,” in *Dialogue and Dialectic*, trans. P. C. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 21–38.

28. The usual assumption that the battle referred to in the *Charm.* is the same one as that referred to by Alcibiades (*Symp.* 220a–b) is questioned by K. W. Luckhurst, “Note on Plato *Charm.* 153B,” *Classical Review* 48 (1934): 207–8. If it is not the same battle it is nevertheless near to it in time, and equally bloody and tragic for Athens.

29. For this interpretation of Charmides’ headaches see D. Hyland, *The Virtue of Philosophy; an Interpretation of Plato’s Charmides* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), pp. 41–42.

30. This example was suggested to me by Ronna Burger.

31. Cf. Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 62. I mention here another possible instance of irony that is connected with omissions, namely the intentional misquotation of texts by Socrates and others. For examples, see Seth Benardete, “Some Misquotations of Homer in Plato,” *Phronesis* 8 (1963): 173–78. The irony in such cases may or may not be intended by the speaker in the dialogue.

32. As noted too by Schaerer, “Le Mécanisme,” p. 209.

33. See chapter 6 of my *Self-knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*. The point is also discussed in the Introduction and chap. 6 of Ronna Burger’s *Plato’s Phaedrus: a Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980); in C. J. Rowe’s *Plato: Phaedrus*, commentary with translation (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1986), pp. 213–14; and in T. A. Szlezák, *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1985), chaps. 1 and 2.

34. A full consideration of Plato's use of irony would have to consider, among numerous other questions, whether the Platonic dialogues are akin to tragedies, comedies, or both. I limit myself to noting that nowhere in the dialogues is Socrates portrayed as understanding himself to be *harm*ed by forces outside his control.

35. For further comment on this see Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 55–56; and Klein, *Commentary*, pp. 35–38, and notes. It is possible that the meaning of the proper names which Plato uses in his titles, especially when these names are his inventions (as “Philebus” seems to be), could contain clues to Plato's intentions. The importance of the titles to our understanding of Platonic irony depends on the extent to which the titles are well attested. Where subtitles are equally well attested, they too may serve as indications of Plato's design.

36. To push this point a bit further: the dramatic date of the *Prot.* is between 435–432, and of the *Soph.* 400–399. Perhaps Plato is indicating to the reader that Socrates already knows elements of the Eleatic Stranger's analyses, and so that the Stranger is not automatically to be considered superior to Socrates.

37. Similarly, in the *Laches*, Nicias is made to suggest that a general should not rely on seers in making decisions (195e8–196a3); but during the Athenian expedition to Sicily Nicias lost the battle by relying on the advice of seers. With respect to the *Meno*, see Klein, *Commentary*, p. 44.

38. Irony in the reference to Isocrates is also detected by C. Rowe in his *Plato: Phaedrus*, p. 215.

39. See J. Klein, *Plato's Trilogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 60.

40. See Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 58.

41. For example, see Rosen's remark about the connection between the fact that the *Symp.* is a recollection of a recollection and the dialogue's analysis of Eros which “remains almost entirely within the intermediate domain of Becoming.” *Plato's Symposium*, pp. 2–4.

42. E.g., the *Philebus* begins in the middle of a conversation and ends before it is over, and this non-limited aspect of the dialogue may have some relation to the *Philebus'* doctrine of the *apeiron* (unlimited) and the *peras* (limit).

43. For further discussion of this issue, see Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 57.

44. Concerning the reasons for the absence of such a dialogue see my “Reflections on ‘Dialectic’ in Plato and Hegel,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1982), section II.

45. The problem is noted by H. Sinaiko, *Love, Knowledge, and Discourse in Plato* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 109–13. My solution is proposed in *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, pp. 151–65.

46. E.g., *Republic*, book X. Boder points to the same difficulty with respect to the *Laches* (*Die sokratische Ironie*, p. 53). A further ambiguity: a “spoken” dialogue may be portrayed within the fiction as having been written down, as in the case with the *Tht.*, all which is (except for the prologue) written down by Euclides, who checked with Socrates several times to be sure that he (Euclides) was writing the conversation down accurately (143a).

If Socrates was aware that Euclides was recording the conversation, then in effect Socrates was aware that his spoken dialogue was becoming a written dialogue.

47. I have taken a stab at the answer in "Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, pp. 143–67.

48. In Wayne Booth's terms, Platonic irony is intended, stable, covert, and infinite. See his *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 267–76. The "absurdist" irony of some modern writers (such as Camus or Beckett) may, by contrast, be intended, unstable, covert, and infinite, such that any knowledge of the Truth is impossible in principle. For further discussion of the various sorts of irony and ways in which they may be detected, see D. C. Muecke's *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969).

49. As I argue in *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, chap. 6 and Epilogue. In *The Art of Living*, Nehamas agrees that "Platonic irony forms the ultimate background of the dialogues" (p. 47) and distinguishes Socratic from Platonic irony, but offers an interpretation of the latter that is otherwise at odds with that sketched here: "Plato's irony is more disturbing than Socrates'. It uses Socratic irony as a means for lulling the dialogues' readers into the very self-complacency it makes them denounce. It is deep, dark, and disdainful. It is at least as arrogant a challenge to Plato's readers as Socrates' irony was to his interlocutors and perhaps even more so" (p. 44). Indeed, even Plato himself turns out to be "a target of his own creature's [Socrates'] irony" (p. 69)! Meaningful engagement with Nehamas's interpretation would require separate treatment.

50. See M. Miller's *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), Introduction *et passim*; and Miller's *Plato's Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986; rpt. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), Introduction *et passim*. J. Klein's distinction between ethological, doxological, and mythological mimes is also useful here. See his *Commentary on Plato's Meno*, p. 18.

51. Cf. Stanley Rosen's *Plato's Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 12–13.