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PLATO THE SWAN: INTERPRETATION AND THE HUNT FOR PLATO'S DOCTRINES²

Abstract: In this paper I use the traditional image of Plato as swan to suggest that interpreting Plato should not be a matter of getting to know what his doctrines are (a doctrinal approach), but rather a of getting to know Plato himself (a knowledge by acquaintance approach). I argue that the dialogues encourage the knowledge by acquaintance approach and discourage the doctrinal approach, through the use of Platonic anonymity, Platonic irony and Platonic self-effacement. I point out how the knowledge by acquaintance approach values the rich diversity of historical opinions about Plato, whereas the doctrinal approach seeks to resolve such diversity once and for all. Even though the doctrinal approach has powerful tools at its disposal—such as the testimony of Aristotle, the principle that the main speaker in a dialogue is Plato's mouthpiece, and stylometric analysis—the product of a doctrinal approach is a brand of Platonism that is weak, rigid, and ultimately dispensable. The philosophy of Plato is worthy of more respect than that, and it repays such respect with wider understanding.

Keywords: Platonic anonymity, Platonic Irony, doctrinalism, mouthpiece principle, *Anonymous Prolegomena*, Aristotle

1. INTRODUCTION

Of all philosophers in Western history, Plato has arguably had the most widespread influence. Yet the very diversity of thinkers influenced by him suggests a fundamental difficulty of interpretation. My response here will be to embrace this difficulty rather than try and resolve it. I will argue for a 'knowledge-by-acquaintance' model for the interpretation of Plato (we may call this 'knowing Plato'), according to which diversity is to be expected and even welcomed. I oppose this to a 'knowledge-of-Plato's doctrines' model (call this 'knowing Platonism'), which seeks as much resolution of difference as

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possible. The knowledge by acquaintance model is, I think, already suggested in Plato's orientation to epistemology, as seen in the *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus*, which emphasize knowing objects rather than obtaining propositional knowledge.³ Knowing Plato (rather than Platonism) is even more strongly encouraged by Plato's unfailing attachment to the dialogue form.⁴ The dialogues are richer and more useful when they are regarded as realistic surrogates, through which we come to know the philosopher Plato,⁵ rather than as authoritative expressions of Plato's doctrines. Moreover, the dialogues identify *themselves* as surrogates (see *Laws* 811c, *Phaedrus* 276d), they use analogy, metaphor and myth in a way that acknowledges the limitation of dogmatic philosophy, and their strange internal dramatic chronology, in which the *Parmenides* is very early and the *Phaedo* very late, calls into question the twentieth century story of development, which involves doctrinal crisis and self-criticism.

In order to help direct us away from Platonism and towards Plato, I will set my discussion in the context of a comparison between Plato and a swan. Plato is associated with swans in a number of ancient traditions. According to one story, Socrates dreamt he saw 'a cygnet on his knees, which all at once put forth plumage and flew away after uttering a loud sweet note'⁶—the next day he was introduced to Plato and "recognised in him the swan of his dream."⁷ According to another story, at the end of his life Plato had a dream in which he saw himself as a swan.⁸ Whether the stories are apocryphal or not, they reinforce a comparison already attested to in Plato's *Phaedo* (84e-85b), where swans are treated as prescient animals, sacred to Apollo, and thus in a sense philosophical. The tradition comparing Plato to a swan will allow us to see more clearly the difference that I want to emphasise, between knowing Plato and knowing Platonism. It will also allow us to see how easily we might mistake the decoy for the real thing. I think of knowing Plato as similar to hunting the swan, though not, as in the case of Platonism, out of a desire to possess, but rather out of the desire to understand.

3 The view that Plato's epistemology is oriented towards propositional knowledge has dominated Anglophone analytic accounts of Plato (See Fine 2003:chs 3 and 4, which reprint her 1978 and 1990 papers on knowledge and belief). Unsurprisingly, this approach to Plato's epistemology is linked to a doctrinal model of interpretation. I have argued elsewhere for an interpretation of Plato's epistemology on a knowledge by acquaintance model (see Benítez 1989:117-124; 1996:530-538). Here I simply want to incorporate that interpretation into the larger issue of how we should understand Plato in general.

4 It is often suggested that the dialogue form decays in Plato's later years, to the point where it becomes merely vestigial, or even positively obstructive. But there is really no good evidence for this view (a better account of the change in the literary qualities of later dialogues can be found by examining their own explicitly expressed aesthetic principles). It makes no sense that a philosopher as concerned with the form of philosophy as Plato obviously is, should persist in using a form that had become inimical to his own ideas.

5 The dialogues of Plato may be compared to the 'heteronyms' of the poet Fernando Pessoa, except that in Pessoa's writings, Pessoa himself is just one author alongside of the heteronyms (see Quintanilha 1973: introduction), whereas Plato's dialogues are the 'persons' through whom we get to know Plato. It is important to note that I am not treating the *philosophers* in Plato's dialogues as surrogates, since that comes close to suggesting that a philosopher like Socrates in the *Republic* is a mouthpiece for Plato's doctrines. For a recent account that focuses on Plato's philosophers without collapsing them into philosophical doctrines, see Zuckert, 2009.

6 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* III.5, trans. Hicks, in Hicks 1972.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Anonymous Prolegomena* 1.29-35; (= Olympiodorus *In Alcib.* 2.156-162), trans. in Westerink, 1962.

2. PLATO'S DREAM

In the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* we find an account of a dream Plato is supposed to have had. According to the account:

Plato himself, shortly before his death, had a dream of himself as a swan, darting from tree to tree and causing great trouble to the fowlers, who were unable to catch him. When Simmias the Socratic heard this dream he explained that everyone would endeavour to grasp Plato's meaning; none, however, would succeed, but each would interpret him according to his own views ... (*Anon. Proleg.* I.28-35, Westerink 1962)

If you put yourself in the position of the swan, Plato's dream is seductive—you are transformed into an elegant bird, ever-admired and pursued, yet elusive. As soon as you put yourself in the position of the fowler, however, the dream seems frustrating. Plato the swan always slips away from our grasp. This looks like the position that we, as readers of the dialogues, are in. Did Plato think, as the dream implies, that his readers were trying to entrap him? Did he, as writer, think that it was necessary to elude them, when they tried to discover his thoughts? The answer, I think, is a qualified 'yes'. Simmias' view of the dream poses a serious problem, not for all interpreters, but specifically for those bent on 'grasping' (*katalabein*) Plato's 'meaning' (*dianoia*). That description may at first seem innocent and general enough. We must keep in mind, however, that *dianoia*, in the dialogues of Plato and even more so in the neoplatonic terms of the *Prolegomena*'s author, means 'discursive thought' as opposed to *noêsis* 'understanding.' *Katalabein*, too, has a specific sense, connected to the idea of seizing and holding down. An accurate, if not literal translation of Simmias' view of the dream is that Plato the swan will always elude those wanting to 'pin down his doctrines,' and this makes perfect sense, because the doctrines and the philosopher are not the same object.

The dream reported in the *Prolegomena* turns out to have been prophetic. Virtually all who have tried to pin down Plato's doctrines have ended up interpreting him according to their own prejudices. As a result, there exists today a great deal of disagreement about Plato. I think that this is due, in large measure, to the confusion of Plato and Platonism, but I do not want to leave things there. I want to rescue the dream's positive appearance, and argue that it is not such a bad thing, after all, if we cannot pin down Plato the swan. I will try to show what it might be like to have seized hold of him (for many scholars think they have done just that), and why, were we ever able to do so, it would be necessary to release him again. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us begin with some difficulties of the hunt.

3. DARTING FROM TREE TO TREE: DIFFICULTIES OF THE HUNT

In this section I describe what I believe are the three greatest obstacles to pinning down Plato's doctrines. They are Platonic anonymity, Platonic irony, and Platonic self-effacement. There are other obstacles, to be sure, but I think that these three are sufficient to show that the hunt for Plato's doctrines is misguided. The first two difficulties are functions of the dialogue form as Plato developed it. The third stems from Plato's attitude to written works in general.

(a) *Platonic Anonymity*

Philosophers hunting for Plato's doctrines have tended, by and large, to hunt for them in the dialogues.⁹ Yet it is the dialogue form itself that poses the greatest obstacle to doctrinal interpretation. However much modern scholars might like to think otherwise, it is clear that Plato's dialogues, though they contain philosophical discussion, are essentially mimetic literary works.¹⁰ The dialogues belong to a genre of literature that has largely died out, but they are literature nonetheless,¹¹ and so they come to us with all the generic problems of literary interpretation.

One of the problems generic to the interpretation of literature is the gap between author and character. The gap might be supposed to be greater the more eccentric a character is. No one, I trust, would say that Don Quixote is simply the mouthpiece of Miguel de Cervantes. Just so, we should not suppose that Socrates is simply the mouthpiece of Plato. Indeed, Plato does not present himself either as a speaker or a narrator of any of his dialogues. He is mentioned in the *Apology* (34a) as someone among the jury who offers to pay a considerable fine on behalf of Socrates. He is mentioned in the *Phaedo* as being sick on Socrates' last day (59b). That is all. There is a clear gap between characters and author. In Plato's literary works we may refer to this gap under

9 There have been a fair number of attempts to derive the philosophy of Plato from what Aristotle says about his views, particularly in the *Metaphysics*. For more on the Aristotelian reconstruction of Plato, see Sayre (1983) and Fine (1993).

10 See *Laws* 668b, 811c, and 817a. These passages together entail that the Platonic dialogue is a work of poetry (broadly construed), which in turn is a mimetic work. Structure, theme, and tone give us reason to believe that some of Plato's shortest, comic dialogues, like *Ion*, may have been crafted on the model of mimes, such as those of Epicharmus. At any rate, there existed for a short while the distinct literary genre of the Socratic dialogue. In addition to Plato, Antisthenes, Aeschines, and (according to a fragment of Aristotle) Alexamenos of Teos wrote Socratic dialogues. Xenophon incorporated dialogue into his writings about Socrates, and Aristophanes' parody of Socrates in *Clouds* may have connections with the genre. There is some indication in Plato's own works that Phaedo of Elis and Euclides of Megara committed Socratic conversations to writing, and philosophers at Plato's academy, including Aristotle, wrote Socratic dialogues. The literary form of Plato's dialogues ought to be seen as growing out of this genre, and developing according to his own aesthetic and philosophical standards.

11 That Aristotle, whose authority doctrinal interpreters of Plato take for granted, thinks the dialogues are literary works belonging to the genre of mime, see *Poetics* 1.1447b9-13.

the heading of Platonic anonymity. Many scholars think that Platonic anonymity is of small significance. Ignoring a basic rule of literary interpretation, they say that we can hear Plato's voice in the mouth of his main character.¹² This 'mouthpiece principle' approach to interpretation simply does not take the literary dimension of the dialogues seriously; it treats the dialogue form as a mere vehicle for the transmission of philosophical views. I will have reason to reconsider the mouthpiece principle later. Right now I want to show that, even if it were true, Plato the author undermines the authority of his main characters through it, by having them endorse a 'say what you think' rule that opposes the mouthpiece principle.¹³

In many dialogues, and across all periods of Plato's career (e.g. *Laches*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*) a cardinal rule of conversation is enforced. That rule is that an interlocutor in a philosophical dialogue must say what he *really* thinks. He should not agree with an argument for the sake of agreement. He should not take a position because it seems like the easiest one to defend. He should not adopt the most popular view, or the most famous one. He must say what *he* thinks, for better or worse. Whenever there is a question of interpretation, either of a poem (e.g. Simonides' poem in *Protagoras* 339a ff.), or a speech (see Lysias' speech in *Phaedrus* 228a ff.), or a philosophical doctrine (see Protagoras' *homo mensura* doctrine in *Theaetetus* 152a ff.), the discussants *invariably* and *explicitly* resort to what *they* think, since the author is not around to defend his own views. Now, the dialogues either directly present Plato's doctrines or they do not. If they do not, then we should stop trying to pin them down there. But if they do, then this view, which says that when the author is not around you have to rely on what *you* think, *not* on what the author thinks, *is* Plato's view.¹⁴ The say what you think rule, taken as a directive from Plato's mouthpiece, undermines the hunt for doctrines in the works of an author who is not present. The swan flies, so we are forced to think for ourselves.

In this light, consider the following remark from the *Phaedo*. Socrates is speaking to Simmias, Cebes and those gathered around at his execution. He says:

As for you, if you will take my advice, *you will think very little of Socrates*, and much more of the truth. If you think that anything I say is true, you must agree with me; if not, oppose it with every argument that you have. You must not allow me, in my enthusiasm, to deceive both myself and you, and leave my sting behind when I fly away. (91b8-c5, trans. Tredennick, emphasis added)¹⁵

12 For an excellent review and criticism of the interpretive method that takes Socrates (or any principal speaker) as Plato's 'mouthpiece' see Nails, 2000.

13 The first appearance of this rule in the modern literature can be found in Vlastos (1983:35), who calls it 'the "say what you believe" constraint'. For more discussion see Benson (2000:38–40). Both Vlastos and Benson are 'doctrinal' interpreters of Plato in the sense that they seek definitive statements of the propositions and theories Plato believed. The fact that the 'say what you think' rule is adhered to by these and other doctrinalists makes the way that the rule undermines doctrinal interpretation more significant.

14 I have argued more extensively for this view elsewhere (see Benitez 2000, esp. pp. 83–4, 88).

15 All of the translations I have used here, unless otherwise noted, may be found in Hamilton and Cairns (1963). Although the Cooper edition of complete works (1997) now enjoys widespread scholarly favour, it is

Again, either Socrates directly expresses Plato's view or he doesn't. If he doesn't then we should have no expectation that the main speaker is Plato's mouthpiece. But if he does, then Plato is warning his readers, loudly and clearly, that *he* is of little account. The swan Plato wants us to catch is not him. Platonic anonymity suggests that we should be on our guard against the decoy. It shows us that we cannot simply and straightforwardly read Plato's views from the mouth of his main speaker. The say what you think rule shows that, ironically, even if we ignore Platonic anonymity, we must suppose Plato to be reminding us of it through his mouthpiece.

(b) Platonic Irony

Along with Platonic anonymity, Platonic irony serves to thwart the capture and control of Plato's doctrines. I must point out immediately that by 'Platonic irony' I do not mean something entirely distinct from the irony employed by Plato's Socrates. I mean Plato's pervasive use of irony as a literary device, in various forms, through many characters, throughout the dialogues. Most scholars do not speak of Platonic irony in this way. Typically, they distinguish between 'Platonic' and 'Socratic' irony.¹⁶ The usual way they draw this distinction is, roughly, in terms of the person or persons to whom the irony is successfully and most directly communicated. If the irony is communicated by Socrates to some interlocutor who appreciates the ironic tone of his remark, then it is Socratic irony. If the irony is appreciated by no character in the dialogue, but only by the reader, then (and only then) it is Platonic irony.

To illustrate Socratic irony, consider *Meno* 84b-c, where Socrates says to Meno that an uneducated slave, with whom he is discussing a complex problem in geometry, 'thought he could speak well and fluently, on many occasions and before large audiences, on the subject of a square double the size of a given square' (trans. Guthrie). It should be clear both that the slave never thought any such thing, and that Meno is aware the irony is directed at himself, since he had only recently claimed, 'I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought' (80a-b, trans. Guthrie). Clearly, Socrates is speaking ironically, and, equally clearly, the irony is directed at and appreciated by Meno.

To illustrate Platonic irony, consider *Laws* 721a where the Athenian proposes as the first, most basic statute in the Magnesian code the law that every man must marry. Readers of the *Laws* will find this statement ironic, because they know what the characters of the dialogue could not know, namely that Plato never married. This illustration of Platonic irony has the added feature of coming from a character *other* than Socrates, one who does not already come labelled with irony as a defining trait. So there need not be any irony within the dialogue frame, even though what the Athenian says is appreciated as ironic by the dialogue's readers.

not authoritative (nor in my opinion obviously superior), and as the editor and most translators in Cooper are hunters after Plato's doctrines in the sense I oppose here, I have intentionally avoided those translations.

16 See, e.g. Griswold (1986:introduction), Rowe (1987) and Vasilioiu (1999:464n26). Of these, Vasilioiu alone emphasises that all Socratic irony is a feature of Plato's authorship. I am grateful to Jonathan Fine for bringing Vasilioiu's work to my attention.

In cases like these the usual distinction between Socratic and Platonic irony seems sharp enough. But drawn this way, the distinction is very misleading. The reason is that even when Socrates communicates irony successfully to some interlocutor (and most often there is no clear evidence that he does), the irony is still communicated all the way to the reader, by Plato. The right way to see the distinction, therefore, is to see *all* Socratic irony as incorporated into Platonic irony, since in every case the reader (and in many cases only the reader) is required to see and understand Socrates' irony. Thus, Platonic irony subsumes Socratic irony, in all its forms. Many kinds of 'Socratic' irony have been identified, of course,¹⁷ and the diversity itself may go some way towards showing how complex the use of irony by Plato is. I want to describe yet another form of irony, one that we have very good reason to think of as Platonic, because of its implications for the hunt after Plato's doctrines. The kind of irony I have in mind could be called 'transparently deceptive irony'. It is deceptive because it is appreciated by no interlocutors within the frame of the dialogue. It is *transparently* deceptive because the means to detect the deception are plain in the dialogue itself. Transparently deceptive irony could sometimes be called 'Socratic', if there is reason to believe that Socrates *intends* his interlocutors to appreciate it, even though they do not.¹⁸ Nevertheless, since the success of such irony requires the reader's appreciation, it would always also be a case of 'Platonic' irony.

Let me give an example of transparently deceptive irony in Plato. In the *Phaedo* passage mentioned just a little earlier, Socrates warns his interlocutors against trusting him. Nevertheless, he *does* deceive them, in a transparently ironic way, in the final argument for the immortality of the soul that shortly follows his warning (102a-107b). The final argument depends on a kind of cause (*aitia*) that Socrates calls 'subtle' (cf. *kompsoteran*, 105c2), namely one that is distinct from some attribute but which always produces that attribute. The kind of cause he has in mind is essentially what we would call a sufficient condition. Yet Socrates deceptively treats a sufficient condition as an *exclusive* cause, for he says that fire is '*that thing* by which' (*hôi*, 105c2) bodies are hot, while fever is '*that thing* by which' bodies are ill (*hôi*, 105c4). Clearly there are other things by which bodies can be hot or ill. Moreover, the counterexample is transparently marked. Fire and fever are introduced as *separate* causes (see '*nor could ...*' *oude an*, 105c2-3). Thus, fever could not ever, on Socrates' principle that rules out different causes for the same effect (97a5-b1), be '*that by which*' bodies are hot. But that is absurd. Despite all this, the final argument uses the concept of a subtle cause in the following deceptive way: soul always produces life in bodies; therefore, soul is '*that by which*' (*hôi*, 105c9) bodies are alive. The gap between sufficient condition and exclusive cause is as evident here as it is in the case of fire and fever. Soul need not

17 For example there are: simple and complex irony (Vlastos 1987), conditional irony (Vasiliou 1999), reverse irony (Vasiliou 2002), and dramatic irony (Gordon 1996). Gordon does not give a name to the kind of Socratic irony she discusses. I have taken the term from her claim that it occurs 'within a dramatic context' (134).

18 For example, an argument might be made that supposing Socrates to have such an intention makes for a better interpretation of a dialogue than not supposing so.

be the only thing that animates, and therefore there is no way of knowing whether it animates any of us.

Readers, of course, can go back over the whole argument with the suspicion of transparently deceptive irony in mind. Under those conditions it seems impossible to miss. It is clear that Socrates argues fallaciously and the fallacious move is flagged by nesting the counterexample in the illustration 'fever is that by which bodies are ill'. Moreover, Socrates has already castigated his predecessors for confusing causes and necessary conditions (99b). It would seem amazing if he were now unwittingly committing the parallel error of confusing exclusive cause with sufficient condition. Indeed, when Socrates first began to discuss genuine causes, he urged his interlocutors to dismiss subtleties (*kompseias*, 101c8), and to cling to the principle of one cause, one effect (100e-101b). Yet none of the interlocutors protests when he introduces the subtle causes at 105c. The deception succeeds with them, but not with us. One function of Platonic irony, then, is the deceiving function. Plato's Socrates is always prepared to mislead an interlocutor towards a false conclusion, even if the ultimate aim is for that interlocutor to discover his mistake. The moral is: hunters should not follow the scent of a red herring. Socrates may intentionally lead you into error, you must learn not to trust *him*, you must find a way to trust *yourself*.

Platonic Anonymity and Platonic Irony, then, give us reason to suspect that it will be a more difficult job to determine Plato's views than just to read them directly from the dialogues. And if these devices give us difficulty, there is worse to come. For we possess some comments Plato made that have implications about his own writing.

(c) Platonic self-effacement

One of the letters attributed to Plato, the seventh, describes at length his involvement in political affairs at Syracuse. These were both protracted and involved, and whoever wrote the letter had inside knowledge of them. Most scholars accept the letter, or at least its contents, as genuinely Platonic. In it the author expresses concern about people composing manuals of his doctrines and claiming to understand his views. He writes:

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself—no matter how they pretend to have acquired it, whether from my instruction or from others or by their own discovery. Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. ... For this reason no serious man will ever think of writing about serious matters... (*Ep. VII*. 341c-d, 344c, trans. Post)

This is self-effacement at its most extreme. Even so, it is not evidence that the letter is a forgery. Indeed, we may take it as evidence that the ideas expressed *are* authentic: a forger who would say, in Plato's voice, that he had 'composed no work' in regard to his own philosophical doctrines, when it was well known that Plato *did* write dialogues, would give the game away if there were no distinction between doctrine and dialogue. Whether genuine or not, then, the *Seventh Letter* gives us reason to believe that the dialogues do not express Plato's doctrines. Amazingly, a very similar Plato-effacing statement is made by Socrates in *Phaedrus*:

... [A]nyone who leaves behind him a written manual, and likewise anyone who takes it over from him, on the supposition that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent, must be exceedingly simple-minded; he must really be ignorant ... if he imagines that written words can do anything more than remind one who knows that which the writing is concerned with. ... You know ... that's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself. (275c-e, trans. Hackforth)

If we were hoping to read Plato's views directly from the dialogues, we should be absolutely baffled to find the main speaker in a written dialogue confirming that you cannot put any faith in the written word. In this passage, anonymity, irony, and self-effacement are rolled into one. In a statement that might have amused Pirandello, Plato's character Socrates ironically effaces Plato's authority as author, by stating that written works are essentially ignorant and useless.

4. TRACKS LEADING EVERYWHERE: THE VARIETY OF INFLUENCES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Platonic anonymity, Platonic irony, and Platonic self-effacement practically ensure that Plato's doctrines will elude our grasp. But this does not mean that Plato wrote the dialogues as mere diversions, nor does it mean that he had philosophical doctrines that he kept secret and unpublished. It is plausible that the use of devices like anonymity, irony and self-effacement are intended to put us off seeking doctrines altogether, in the interest of getting us to practice philosophy ourselves. One of the things that might be

both expected and tolerated if that were Plato's goal is diversity among his followers, and that is exactly what we find. There is no evidence that Plato tried to impose any particular system of philosophy upon the members of his Academy. Aristotle, Speusippus, Eudoxus, Xenocrates, Heraclides Ponticus and Philip of Opus all seem to have had liberty to develop their own philosophical views and temperaments both within the Academy and without it.

The dialogues of Plato have gotten into many hands since then and have been interpreted in many different ways, both historically and in recent times. Leaders in the Middle and New Academies (e.g. Arcesilaus and Carneades) saw Plato as a skeptic. The Neoplatonists, especially Plotinus, who admired the philosophies of India and the East, saw him as a mystic. St Augustine, who found in Plato solutions to the problems of evil and of sin, saw in Plato, above all, a religious thinker. Through Alfarabi and Maimonides the political and legal dimensions of Plato's dialogues were given emphasis. The erotic Plato found favour with the Florentine Renaissance. English writers from Chaucer to Milton to Wordsworth fell under the sway of Platonic imagination. Hegel rediscovered the dialectic. Freud and Jung discovered Plato the therapist (though they saw quite different models of therapy in him; Freud in the structure and integration of personality, Jung through the archetypal elements of dreams, myths, and art).

In recent history, we have seen Plato appear as a logical atomist (in the hands of Russell), as a hermeneutic philosopher (in the hands of Gadamer), a deconstructionist (in the hands of Derrida), and even as a spiritualist (in the hands of Rudolf Steiner). It is in this context of diverse views and uncertainty about what Plato really believed that we should consider Whitehead's famous remark that:

The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. (Process and Reality, II.1.1)

By considering the effects of Platonic anonymity, irony and self-effacement, we are in a position to understand Whitehead's remark properly. Why is it safe to characterise the European philosophical tradition as footnotes to Plato? Because of the abundance of tantalising but at the same time inexact ideas 'scattered' about the Platonic dialogues. Only in this sense is the European philosophical tradition a series of footnotes to Plato. Whitehead's statement is a testament to the accuracy of Plato's dream: Plato the swan has captivated all, and eluded every one. Nevertheless, it seems that Whitehead had more esteem for Plato's scattered, general ideas than the 'systematic scheme of thought' we know as Plato's doctrines. In order to show why he was correct to see it that way, we must first consider the extraction of Platonism from Plato. Whitehead speaks of 'doubt' about this, but we need not take him to be doubting whether it is possible to extract doctrines from the dialogues, nor must we take him to doubt whether the things extracted are in some sense really Plato's doctrines. He may simply have been raising doubt about the value to the philosophical tradition of doctrines so extracted.

5. HOW TO EXTRACT PLATONISM FROM PLATO

Contemporary philosophers have generally not been content to leave Plato without a system. Academic careers cannot be built on the scatter of general ideas. There appears to be only one way out of their difficulty: to 'extract' a 'systematic scheme of thought' from the dialogues: Plato's doctrines. Some very clever and industrious people have been applying the most up to date logical, philological, historical and scientific methods to this problem for the better part of a century, and they are satisfied that they have made progress. I would like simply to lay out the grounds for that progress here.

The most important tool the doctrinalists have for extracting Platonism from the dialogues is Aristotle. Aristotle, they say, is an unimpeachable authority. After all, he was present at the Academy for twenty years, right up to the death of Plato; he knew the man personally. Moreover, he had all the characteristics of a reliable witness: he was intelligent, frank and sympathetic. If he tells us that Plato had doctrines (and it seems he does) we should believe him. If he tells us that a view presented in some particular dialogue is Plato's view (and it seems he does) we should believe him. For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says:

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made repugnant by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by our friends. Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends. (*EN* I.6.1096a11-1096a16, trans. Ross)¹⁹

After making this statement, Aristotle proceeds to criticise the idea of an abstract, universal, metaphysical good. His target seems very clearly to be the form of the Good described by the character Socrates in Plato's *Republic*, book VI.506-509. If this were not really Plato's view, it would seem absurd for Aristotle to make such a sincere apology for criticising it. It appears, then, that the beliefs expressed about the form of the Good by Socrates in the *Republic*, and criticised by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, are indeed Plato's own beliefs.

To take another example, consider the following remark, again from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. While discussing the importance of good habits, Aristotle says:

... [M]oral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education. (*EN* II.3.1104b4-1104b12, trans. Ross)

¹⁹ The translations of Aristotle that I have used here may be found in Barnes (1984).

Although Aristotle writes ‘as *Plato* says’, his statement is virtually a quote from the *Laws*, where the *Athenian* says:

A child's first infant consciousness is that of pleasure and pain; this is the domain wherein the soul first acquires virtue or vice. ... By education, then, I mean goodness in the form in which it is first acquired by a child. ... if you consider the one factor in it, the rightly disciplined state of pleasures and pains whereby a man, from his first beginnings on, will abhor what he should abhor and relish what he should relish—if you isolate this factor and call it education, you will be giving it its true name. (653a-c, trans. Taylor)

To anyone who compares these passages, say the doctrinalists, it must be plain that Aristotle takes the dialogues to be stating Plato's views. And each one of Aristotle's corroborations (there are enough of them to fill about thirty pages of references) adds more weight to the claim that Plato expressed his doctrines in the dialogues. Even though Aristotle doesn't say enough about Plato's views to reconstruct all of the doctrines, the correspondences between what Aristotle says and what the dialogues say, encourage the view that we may extract the rest of Plato's doctrines from the dialogues ourselves. In fact, Aristotle's testimony does more than encourage us: it returns to us the key, in the form of the mouthpiece principle. For, heedless of any doubts stemming from anonymity and irony, Aristotle straightforwardly takes the main speaker of the dialogues to present Plato's views. And, so the argument goes, he ought to know. Indeed, when quoting from the dialogues, Aristotle uses the name ‘Socrates’ or ‘Plato’ indifferently, just as doctrinalists often do, and for just the same reason: from his point of view, it really doesn't matter. Aristotle even speaks at some length about what Socrates says in the *Laws*,²⁰ which is incredible, because Socrates is not a character in the *Laws*. Such carelessness might be forgiven if the main speaker simply presents Plato's views.

So the doctrinalists have the authority of Aristotle to rely on, and he, in turn, provides them with support for the mouthpiece principle. There is one more important tool used by doctrinalists. Obviously, the dialogues were not written in a day. Some were written earlier, some later. History has seen many different arrangements of the dialogues, and, as one might expect, when they are read in a different order, a different Plato seems to emerge from them. If we could pin down the right order of the dialogues, say the doctrinalists, it would be a great help extracting Plato's doctrines. At the outset, only a few assumptions seemed safe: the *Laws* was unfinished at Plato's death; the long dialogues like *Republic*, *Gorgias*, *Timaeus*, and *Phaedo* were not written first. But very few other assumptions could be made. Most importantly, since the aim of having a chronology is to establish Plato's doctrines, a hypothesis about what those doctrines are cannot be used to establish the chronology. What was needed was an *independent* way of ordering the dialogues. Enter stylometry, the science of determining the chronological order of an author's works by statistical measurement of stylistic features, some

20 See *Politics* 1265a12-1266b4.

of them conscious (e.g. the avoidance of hiatus), some of them unconscious (e.g. the measurements of the last five syllables of every sentence, the frequency of negatives, etc.). In recent times, many careful stylometric studies of Plato's dialogues have been made, to the satisfaction of the doctrinalists, who are now confident at least of the general order of composition. The distinction between early Socratic, middle Platonic, and late critical dialogues is now well-entrenched.

Armed with the testimony of Aristotle, the mouthpiece principle, and the chronological order of the dialogues a very complex, interesting and philosophically robust story begins to emerge. It is the story of Plato's philosophical development. It turns out that the main reason for all the diversity of interpretations was that Plato did not have a single consistent set of doctrines across his whole career. No, he began philosophical life as a Socratic, turned strongly in the direction of mathematics after meeting some Pythagoreans, and then, after a mid-life intellectual crisis, finished up as an Eleatic dialectician.

6. THE THING EXTRACTED: PLATONIC METAPHYSICS

What gets extracted from the dialogues by way of Aristotle, the mouthpiece principle and the developmental chronology is more or less familiar to every university student nowadays. I cannot detail the whole picture here, but I will review its main line. In the first book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says:

Socrates ... was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions; Plato accepted his teaching, but held that the problem applied not to any sensible thing but to entities of another kind—for this reason, that the common definition could not be a definition of any sensible thing, as they were always changing. Things of this other sort, then, he called Ideas, and sensible things, he said, were apart from these, and were all called after these; for the multitude of things which have the same name as the Form are by participation in it. Only the name 'participation' was new; for the Pythagoreans say that things are by imitation ... and Plato says they are by participation, changing the name. (*Metaph.* I.6.987b1–13, trans. Ross)

Let us consider how this statement is reflected in the standard view of Plato's philosophical development. According to the developmental story, in the beginning Plato was a Socratic. And Aristotle confirms this: 'Plato accepted [Socrates'] teaching.' So we should expect to find Plato, in his earliest dialogues, 'busying himself about ethical matters.' Stylometry tells us that the earliest dialogues include: *Lysis*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*. What is the business of these dialogues? Nothing but friendship, courage, temperance, piety, and justice—i.e. ethical matters.

Next Aristotle tells us that Socrates ‘neglected nature’ and ‘was fixed on definitions.’ Again the early dialogues confirm this fixation. What does Plato’s mouthpiece do in the early dialogues but ask, again and again, ‘What is friendship?’, ‘What is courage?’, ‘What is piety?’ This fixation is the turning point in Plato’s development, because, instead of remaining busy with ethical matters, he became interested in definitions *per se*. In the *Meno*, which comes at the end of Plato’s ‘Socratic’ period, we see, for the first time, explicit discussion of the conditions for adequate philosophical definition. In terms of these conditions, which involve both mathematics and Pythagorean metaphysics, we are shown why the earlier attempts at definition led nowhere. Armed with his new approach to mathematical definition, Plato begins to develop his Theory of Forms.

This is just what Aristotle tells us next: Plato came to believe that ‘sensible things’ couldn’t be defined, because they ‘were always changing.’ So, definition must ‘apply to entities of another kind,’ namely ‘Ideas,’ or ‘Forms,’ which are ‘apart’ from sensible things. Sensible things are ‘called after’ the Forms and are what they are ‘by participation’ in Forms. If we look at the dialogues of Plato’s ‘middle’ period (*Symposium*, *Republic*, and especially *Phaedo*), we find a rather dogmatic Socrates saying this sort of thing all the time. In fact, in the *Phaedo* he uses *exactly* these terms: at 100b he insists that each form—‘Beauty, Good, Largeness and so on’—exists ‘itself by itself’, in distinction from sensible things, and at 102a-b it is declared that sensible things ‘get their names from the Forms’, and that they are what they are by ‘participation’ in the Forms.

Aristotle doesn’t tell us what happens next, but we can finish the story for ourselves. In the *Parmenides* Plato subjects the Theory of Forms, and particularly the relation of participation to comprehensive criticism. All avenues are pursued to make sense of the theory, and all avenues end in absurdity. The Theory of Forms cannot survive. And, lo and behold, if we look at those dialogues which stylometry tells us come after the *Parmenides* the Theory of Forms does not appear. We find very penetrating skepticism in the *Theaetetus*, a renewed interest in Presocratic metaphysics in the *Sophist*, a set-theoretical classification of things in the *Philebus*, but no Theory of Forms. Neither in the *Statesman*, nor in the *Laws*. What we find in the late dialogues is a post-critical Plato, once again searching for answers. And there are flashes of brilliance here too, but Plato is aging now, his powers of intellect are failing, and he is encumbered by his past. The late dialogues are the home of scattered general ideas, without any systematic doctrine. Or so the story goes.

7. CONSEQUENCES OF THE EXTRACTION

There are, of course, many objections to the developmental view. One is that Aristotle is hardly a disinterested historian; he has his own purposes for describing Plato the way he does. Another concerns the mouthpiece principle. Even if the main speaker is, in a sense, Plato himself, scholars must be selective about which of the things he says form his doctrines and which do not. Bits of the dialogues do not come with a label that says ‘I am important for philosophical purposes.’ Then there are both technical and philosophical problems with stylometry. And finally, the chronological ordering of the dialogues may be undercut by the dramatic ordering of the dialogues. But all these ob-

jections, though they have been developed with great care and force, we may let pass. The doctrinalists are so sure that they have captured Plato, that they guard his cage day and night. No one is even allowed to see the swan who does not first swear allegiance, and there is no debate about these matters.

Instead of debating the doctrinalists, we should observe the consequences of their approach. There is one positive consequence. The doctrinal Plato is useful for the classroom, or the lecture hall, where there is a need for focus and a question of time. Plato's philosophy was not meant for these kinds of situations. Nevertheless, to focus on specific doctrines reduces an otherwise bewildering array of topics to somewhat manageable size. But there is a danger in doing this, if it is not made clear that the doctrines are constructions. Our job is to shed light, not to master. Other consequences of doctrinalism are more serious. Let me mention three of them.

The first is *asthenia*, or general weakness. The doctrinalists' Plato is skin and bones. In their hands, only Plato's arguments remain of any importance. His doctrines are in the conclusions, and his philosophy is in the premises. Everything about the drama—setting, characterisation, and action—is left to one side. This includes the opening scenes of dialogues and the speeches of interlocutors. To doctrinalists, these are just feathers and downy fluff; they may be left out of the translation altogether.²¹ It also includes myths and stories, which are either boiled down to the Platonic doctrines they represent,²² or not mentioned at all.²³ It includes comparisons and metaphors, allegories and similes. To the extent that these are discussed at all, they are glossed in terms of more exact propositions.²⁴

The second consequence of doctrinalism is *sclerosis*, or general hardening. In their quest to understand *exactly* what Plato means, the doctrinalists have employed very strong medicine: the medicine of formalisation. What the main speaker in a dialogue means is not always quite clear. The doctrinalist's job is to *render* it clear. If you pick up a mainstream contemporary scholarly book on Plato, you will probably soon find out that Plato held, for example, the Intellectualist Assumption (IA), The Dialectical Requirement (DR), The Dependency Thesis (DT), or something similarly acronymic. These principles, or requirements, or theses, are then given a very exact statement, often in formal terms. For example:

(IA): For any predicate *F*, some individual *a*'s knowing what *F* is, is a sufficient condition for *a*'s knowing whether that predicate is true of some subject.²⁵

21 For example, in his translation of the *Sophist*, Cornford (1957:170) omitted the opening divisions because in his view they might be too wearisome.

22 For example, Plato's eschatological myths are boiled down to Plato's eschatology by Michael Inwood (2009).

23 For example, Bostok (1986) does not discuss at all the myth in Plato's *Phaedo*.

24 For example, Fine (1991:97) reduces Socrates' hyperbolic statement in *Republic* VI.509a-b that 'the good is beyond being' to 'the good is the teleological structure of things'.

25 This particular formulation is actually an English language version of Dancy's symbolic formulation of Plato's 'intellectualist assumption,' or (IA 'c) as he calls it (2004:44). It is simply presented as an example of formalisation.

(DT): G is a dependent good if and only if G is good for a just or good person and G is bad for an unjust or bad person.²⁶

I confess I must be very simple-minded not to see these principles in the dialogues. I do not see anything so definite. The trouble with the hardening of Plato into principles is that it encourages us to narrow the focus of our inquiry to just what Plato's words (might have) meant at just one time. When that is done, the dialogues very quickly cease to be companions for repeated reflections. And that is exactly the effect if the doctrinalist's job is done well. Once we find out exactly what a dialogue means, it can be put aside.

The third and most dire consequence of doctrinalism is: *rigor mortis*. Inevitably there will be a point at which the whole body of doctrine is exact, and the development complete. Indeed, we are at that point now, or very nearly at it. The only thing left to do then is to consign Plato to the history of philosophy. The autopsy has already begun: The doctrinalists speak respectfully, but freely, about Plato's mistakes, Plato's confusions, Plato's naiveté. Alas for the theory of recollection; alas for the theory of forms; alas for the doctrinalists, who will turn themselves out of a living.

8. PLATO'S DREAM (REPRISE)

I think that Simmias the Socratic, and Whitehead, and many others saw that we cannot learn so much from capturing Plato's doctrines as we can from living with his dialogues. When we extract the doctrines we obtain everything that is solid, but not everything that is important. After all, isn't Plato, even the doctrinalist's Plato, the philosopher of the *in*-visible? The genius of Plato is that he has endowed his creations with a sort of soul, like the statues of Daedalus.²⁷ They are like living beings²⁸—with a head, a body, and appendages—and, in most cases, they were given names of living beings. Some are lovely at first sight, some have their beauty deep inside. Like persons, knowing them is not the same thing as analysing their views.

That is something the doctrinalists completely miss: the importance of the activity over the content. In Plato's dream we felt sympathetic with the plight of the fowlers, but maybe we can think of a more positive image. Let us imagine instead some naturalists who love the swan. They would not want to hunt it down, but they would want to be near it, and see it as often as possible. Instead of snares and traps they would use lures and mimics to bring it close to them, and all along they would be learning as much about the swan as they possibly could. They would have it in their minds day and night, yearning and hoping to know it better. Perhaps some might never even see it directly;

²⁶ See Bobonich (2002:126).

²⁷ Some might say that this allusion to *Meno* [97d], where Socrates says that true opinions, like the statues of Daedalus, are useful only when they are tied down, shows that Plato himself would have approved of the doctrinal approach: our quarry is to be captured and kept on the leash. How poorly they understand. The tether is a lifeline, not a leash (see *Laws* 644d-645c).

²⁸ See *Phaedrus* 276a-277a.

there is still a sense in which they are already bound together. Those who *do* catch hold of it must set it free right away, else it die.

Plato's philosophy is like that. You get to know it by living with it, questioning it, trying it this way and that, giving up the direct approach and taking the long way around, finding its tracks by stealth, and so on. The Athenian Stranger in Plato's *Laws* practically makes this point. Practically, I say, because, ironically, he mixes the images of hunting down and getting to know that I have tried throughout this paper to separate. But after all I have said, that does not surprise me. He says: 'Nothing a man has is more naturally disposed ... than his soul ... to track down and capture the best of all things, and having captured it, to live in communion with it for the rest of his life.'

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PLATON – LABUD: TUMAČENJE I TRAGANJE
ZA PLATONOVIM UČENJIMA

Sažetak: U ovom radu koristim tradicionalnu metaforu Platona kao labuda da bih ukazao da tumačenje Platona ne bi trebalo da bude stvar upoznavanja štagva njegovih učenja (doktrinarni pristup), nego upoznavanja samog Platona (znanje pomoću poznavanja). Pokazujem da dijalozi podstiču znanje pomoću poznavanja i da obeshrabruju doktrinarni pristup kroz upotrebu platonovske anonimnosti, platonovske ironije i platonovske skromnosti. Naglašavam kako znanje pomoću poznavanja uvažava bogatu raznolikost povesnih mišljenja o Platonu, dok doktrinarni pristup pokušava da razreši takvu raznolikost jednom za svagda. Premda doktrinarni pristup ima moćna oruđa na raspolaganju – kao što su Aristotelovo svedočanstvo, princip da glavnu reč u dijalogu ima Platonov glasnogovornik i stilometrijska analiza – proizvod doktrinarnog pristupa je brend platonizam, koji je slab, krut i na koncu neobavezujući. Platonova filozofija zaslužuje više poštovanja od toga i ona uzvraća takvo poštovanje širim razumevanjem.

Ključne reči: platonovska anonimnost, platonovska ironija, doktrinarnizam, princip glasnogovornika, *Anonymous Prolegomena*, Aristotel

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