ARCTOS

Acta Philologica Fennica

VOL. XLV

HELSINKI 2011

INDEX

Arctos 45 (2011) 123–131

AFTER IRONY: READING PLATO SERIOUSLY

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Schleiermacher's insight that, for Plato, literature is no mere window dressing for philosophy but an essential part of it[1] has been slow in gaining general acceptance. To this day interpreters still insist in finding in his dialogues "doctrines" to be directly extracted from them, mostly from his Socrates' mouth. Plato's dialogues, however, cannot be read as Galileo's on the two new sciences or Hume's on natural religion, to mention only two of a kind in which the names of the interlocutors merely stand for abstract philosophical positions, rather easily identifiable. Plato's dialogues are true dramas, involving not only conflicts of ideas but also of entire personalities.[2] In such dialogues, as in all drama, the dramatic situation is to be taken as a whole: the characters and their implicit or explicit philosophical positions, not necessarily consistent, the setting as well as the other participants or hearers, the dramatic date (with its frequent anachronisms[3]) and the overall context of the dialogue and of each of its passages. Callicles, for example, is not refuted; he is shamed down into silence. The setting of *Gorgias*, in the house of Callicles,[4] in the presence of Ambassador Gorgias, is essential for the act of shaming, for the loss of face (*elenchos*), in Plato's eyes the last remnant of the essential social nature of man. (In this respect, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are more dangerous than Callicles and Thrasymachus. These, at least,

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[1] Fr. Schleiermacher, *Platons Werke*. *Einleitung*, Berlin 1804.

[2] Possibly clearer to his original audience. See H. Thesleff, "Plato and his Public", in B. Amden et al. (eds.), *Noctes Atticae*, Copenhagen 2002, 289–301 (repr. in his *Platonic Patterns*, Las Vegas 2009). But see n. 18 below. And cf., e.g., P. Friedländer, *Plato*, Princeton 1964; A. W. Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construction of Philosophy*, Cambridge 1995.

[3] On anachronisms in Plato's dialogues, see, e. g., M.-L. Desclos, "Platon l'historien", in L. Brisson – F. Fronterotta, eds., *Lire Platon*, Paris 2006, 3–11.

[4] Cf. *Gorg.* 447b.

are still capable of shame; the first two are not.[5])

The written Platonic dialogue requires a reading technique not unlike that of drama. It proceeds step by step and must be read sequentially, without skipping from passage to passage or detaching a passage from its context. (The interpreter, however, cannot avoid doing this, at his own peril, except, perhaps, in a line-by-line commentary.) Every replica in a dialogue is eminently situational and its meaning and significance depend on its place in the dialogue as a whole. As in drama, the same word may, and probably does mean different things for different speakers, and/or at different times. It is therefore misguided to see the dialogues as collections of philosophical puzzles to be examined separately from each other or from the dialogue as a whole.[6] Thus, all a speaker says in a Platonic dialogue is consequent on who he is and on his place in the dialogue. Whatever is said in such a dialogue cannot be unceremoniously detached from the speaker.

Here a distinction is in order, between an *utterance* or enunciation and a *proposition*. An utterance is a unit of speech, long or short, the actual token of words emitted by the speaker at a given moment, essentially dependent on him who produces it. A proposition is the content expressed in the utterance, independently of who produced it or even of the language in which is it was produced. (For our purposes, the modern distinction between sentence and proposition is irrelevant.)

It is easy to see that utterances cannot be easily formalized. Two tokens of the same word or expression can bear different meanings, depending on the speaker and on the hearer. Moreover, as any simple case of misunderstanding will show, the same word or expression can be used by the speaker in one way and understood differently by his hearer. Platonic dialogues are notorious for such misunderstandings.

By contrast, Aristotle, in the *de interpretatione* and in the *Analytics*, deals essentially with propositions and can, therefore, have them combined in order to bring about a demonstration by means of the middle term, no matter who actually produces the syllogism. In the *Sophistici elenchi*, Aristotle is in great pains to show that many of the sophisms in Plato's *Euthydemus*, presented there as deriving from the lack of distinction between utterance and proposition, can be ana-

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[5] Cf. *Euthyd.* 294d.

[6] As, e. g., famously done by Vlastos in his influential treatment of the Third Man Argument in *Parmenides*. Cf. G. Vlastos, "The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*", *Philosoph. Review* 63 (1954) 319–49; Id., "Plato's 'Third Man' Argument (*Parm.* 132a1–b2): Text and logic" (1969), repr. in his *Platonic Studies*, Princeton 1973, 342–65.

lysed as based on the improper use of language.[7] In his view, each word carries a meaning in itself and if the same word has more than one meaning, these should be carefully distinguished, as he himself does in *Metaphysics* Δ.

Consistent with its dramatic and situational nature, the Platonic dialogue does not typically aim at giving a purported definitive solution to a philosophical problem, let alone erecting a comprehensive philosophical *system*, such as those of Proclus, Spinoza or Hegel. The Platonic dialogue deals with a specific *aporia*, a "no exit" situation, and aims only at *euporia*, at the dissolution of that particular *aporia*, in a way that will satisfy that interlocutor. And what satisfies *that* interlocutor may not be sufficient for another or for the eventual reader of the dialogue, unless he, explicitly or implicitly, shares with that interlocutor his presuppositions.[8]

In the Divided Line, Plato stresses that philosophy is not primarily a deductive science.[9] Although there is a deductive phase, after the First Principle is achieved, nevertheless the chief aim of philosophy is not to deduce its conclusions from purportedly self-evident first principles, but to go "upwards", from accepted conclusions to their *hupotheseis* and from them to the *anupothetos arkhe*. Rather than deductive, philosophy may be described as "anairetical", in Plato's own words, or, to borrow Husserl's term, "archaeological". In this, Plato sets himself squarely against Parmenides (as against Descartes and quite a few of Plato's interpreters, ancient and modern).

Philosophy's procedure is spelled out in *Phaedo* 100–101, having been already used in *Meno*,[10] as what became known as the method of hypothesis or method of analysis.[11]

This procedure was already in use by the geometricians in Plato's time (cf. *Meno*) and was later the standard procedure in the search for "principles". Philosophy *assumes* the conclusion and looks for the *hupotheseis* which can best support it. And so on from *hupothesis* to *hupothesis*.[12]

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[7] See, e. g., *Soph. elench.* 170a12, b11 ff.

[8] Cf., e. g, in *Phaedo*: Simmias (95a), Cebes (102a, 107a) and Socrates (107b).

[9] *Rep.* VI 511b; and cf. VII 533c.

[10] *Men.* 86e.

[11] And cf. my "Hypothetical method and rationality in Plato", *Kant-Studien* 66 (1975) 157–62.

[12] *Contra* J. Hintikka – U. Remes, *The Method of Analysis: Its Geometrical Origin and its General Significance*, Dordrecht 1974, I do not think the Greek method of analysis can be subsumed under deduction.

The dialogue aims only at an *homologia* between the participants. The proposed solutions, if any, are valid only for them. Unconditionally valid conclusions can be granted only after one reaches the *arkhe anhupothetos*, if one ever does. Until then, one moves only hypothetically, from *doxa* to *doxa*.[13] The dialogue moves always within an *hupothesis*, explicitly or implicitly accepted by the interlocutor. Different sections of a dialogue can, and often do move under different *hupotheseis*. So, e.g., in *Protagoras*, the whole dialogue is conducted from Protagoras' utilitarian overarching point of view, which is not Socrates', but according to which the latter devises all his arguments. In the first part of *Theatetus*, the *hupothesis* is explicitly put forward, that there are no ultimate ontological and epistemological elements; in the second part, the *hupothesis*, again made quite explicit, is that there are ultimate ontological and epistemological atoms.[14]

Plato's dialogues are, as is plain to see, either narrated (about a third of them) or directly presented (and some, like *Theaetetus*, are mixed). One might think that those of either one type or the other would, in principle, be more reliable. But this is not necessarily the case. In the directly presented dialogues, Plato is careful to leave the dialogue incomplete or set up as simply impossible. The aporetic character of the "early" dialogues leaves the events open, sometimes quite abruptly. In others, the dramatic date is suspect, as chronological inconsistencies are purposefully inserted. (The *Apology* is, of its own nature, a case apart. On *Phaedo*, see below.)

The narrated dialogue interposes the narrator between the events narrated and the hearer/reader. This makes it easier for the hearer/reader, and indeed for the author, to distance himself from the events. This is, indeed, why Plato prefers *diegesis* over *mimesis*.[15] The direct presentation (as in tragedy) carries with it the *prima facie* presumption of the verisimilitude of the events. The interposition of the narrator allows Plato to question this presumption.

But the narrator is, he too, a *dramatis persona* and, as such, he narrates the dialogue from his own point of view. There is, *a priori*, no speaker for Plato.[16] In reading a narrated dialogue, one must take into account the point of view and the interests of the narrator, not in the least when the narrator is Socrates himself. Socrates too is a dramatic character, with his own interests. He may distort the

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[13] I use here "*doxa*" in the sense used in *Meno*, viz., "unsupported belief".

[14] *Theaet.* 153e4–5, 185a11–b2.

[15] *Rep.* III 396c ff.

[16] On this problem, see G. A. Press (ed.), *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*, Lanham 2000.

story for his own purposes or even tell an impossible story, as in *Euthydemus*,[17] although this is not always necessarily the case. And whether or not this is so is one of the thorniest questions in Platonic exegesis. More on it, below.

Some dialogues are set as "Chinese boxes", a story within a story within a story ..., as the *Symposium* or *Parmenides*. In such dialogues, the personal element is neutralized, without, however, vouching for the historicity of the event narrated. Yet, the personal, idiosyncratic element is filtered out, and even if the entire situation is put in doubt, the philosophical content is presented as "objectively" as possible.

The above is true also of the non-aporetic dialogues. One may wonder why, in a dialogue that seems rather straightforward and expository, as the *Republic* or the *Sophist*, the dialogue format is still necessary. What need is there for responses in which the interlocutor mostly agrees with the questioner and there seems to be a rather explicit exposition of "doctrines"? – Again, it is always important to consider who answers and when, from what position he is speaking and in what way his answers are conditioned by it.[18]

Furthermore, the interlocutor has, in those dialogues, the important function of checking our steps, lest we slip into irrelevant associations or deviate from the agreed meaning of the terms used, and make the wrong move. Thus, in the *Politicus*, we are forced to retrace our steps, because of a faulty assumption.[19] Moreover, in those "positive" dialogues, the interlocutor's task is to make sure that we do not argue outside of the *hupothesis* under consideration at that stage of the argument, although he is not always up to it.

Any hypothetical argument is, of its own nature, ironical. It moves under an hypothesis that is proposed only *argumenti gratia* and is not necessarily believed by the leader of the dialogue, although it must be accepted by the interlocutor. In the aporetic dialogues this is of the nature of the dialogue. There is also the case in which the interlocutor too accepts the *hupothesis* only for the sake of the argument, as Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*,[20] since they too share Socrates' view of *philosophia*, albeit not quite clearly, and want therefore to hear his refutation of the adversary position.

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17 *Euthyd.* 290e.

18 This is true, in a lesser measure, also of *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, which are not dialectical since they deal with facts in the sensible, material world, not amenable to dialectic.

19 Cf. *Polit.* 274e ff.

20 *Rep.* II 358c.

The irony of an hypothetical argument, and especially of those used by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues, is of a particular kind. Socratic irony must be carefully distinguished from other types of irony. The first and most common type of irony is simple irony, which the teachers of rhetoric called "antiphrasis": calling the white – black, and the black – white.[21] The speaker says one thing and hopes we understand he means its opposite.

A second type is what Vlastos called "complex irony":[22] The speaker makes it impossible to decide between the two opposite poles. This is the romantic irony of Kirkegaard.[23] Vlastos believed socratic irony to be something like it. But this too is not socratic irony. In socratic irony the other pole is never given, we have to find it for ourselves. Socratic irony is *open*.[24] Socrates makes it abundantly clear in the dialogues what he *does not* mean by the term under examination. But he never volunteers information about what he *does* mean. This he leaves for the interlocutor to find for himself. He can do no more. If called upon to clarify his meaning, he cannot do better than use the same words to say something else. Courage is the knowledge of safe and unsafe things. But for Socrates, "courage", "knowledge" and "safe" have meanings different from those they have for Laches. And no amount of explaining will change Laches' understanding of these terms. Socrates has some success with young lads or with those already predisposed to philosophy: Simmias and Cebes in *Phaedo*, Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*, the young Clinias in *Euthydemus*. They all accept Socrates' position but cannot justify it satisfactorily. With others, Socrates fails again and again. In that respect, it has justly been said that "words cannot teach us more than what we already know – or little else".[25]

Nevertheless, is there not anywhere a fixed point of reference, some criterion that will help us distinguish (at least at first blush) between the serious and the merely facetious, between what Socrates (or, for that matter, Plato) really means and what he says only for the sake of the argument? Such a fixed point, however, cannot be within the text. Everything said in the text is suspect of being ironical. Why should we believe Socrates when he says that no one does evil

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[21] Quintil. *inst.* 6,2,15; 9,2,15.

[22] G. Vlastos, "Socratic irony", *CQ* 37 (1987) 79–86.

[23] S. Kirkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, tr. L. M. Capel, Bloomigton 1841.

[24] See my "Plato's Use of Irony", in A. Bosch-Veciana – J. Monserrat-Molas, eds., *Philosophy and Dialogue: Studies on Plato's dialogues*, vol. 2, Barcelona 2010.

[25] E. Hoffmann, "Die literarischen Voraussetzungen des Platonsverständnisses", *ZPF* 2 (1947) 469.

willingly,[26] but not when he says that he is grateful to Callicles who serves him as a touchstone (or perhaps he really is grateful to him)[27] or that there are atoms of knowledge *kath' auto* (or alternatively that there are not and all there is is but *pros ti*)[28]?

If there is a fixed point, it must be outside the text. In that much, the proponents of the *ungeschriebene Lehre* are right.[29] However, such doctrines too would have to be put in words. But the fixed anchoring point we need cannot be put in words, for words will always be ambiguous.[30] Thus, also *ungeschriebene Lehre* are of little help. What cannot be written, cannot be said either.

A higher-level reality is always implied, of course.[31] However, that higher level will not do by itself. As it is, it is only a necessary but so far unproved presupposition of the Socratic-Platonic ethical intuition. The upper section of the Divided Line treats the ideas themselves as hypothetical until the *arkhe* is reached. That two-level model of reality is far from self-evident and in itself in need of support.

Yet, I believe there *is* a fixed point. But it is not in words, written or spoken. It is an *event*, not a text, an event capable of turning the eye of the soul together with the whole of the soul, of causing a profound *Gestalt*-switch that will bring us to a new understanding of what is and is not of worth: Socrates' death. Socrates' death was an event one must have seen its significance directly, its meaning for Socrates' life as a life of *philosophia*. This is the crucial importance of the final scene of *Phaedo*. And this is why Socrates is present or his death is alluded to in some way or another in all of Plato's dialogues. Those present at his death understood what Socrates meant when he said, in the *Apology*, that the unexamined life is not worth for a man to live it,[32] and why, in *Crito*, he refused to escape from prison. As opposed to other narrated dialogues, the narrator of *Phaedo* was

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26 E. g., *Men.* 77b6–78c2, *Prot.* 352b1–358d4.

27 *Gorg.* 486d.

28 See n. 2, above.

29 K. Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre*, Stuttgart 1963; see now Th. A. Szlezák, *Platon lesen*, Stuttgart 1993, Engl. tr. G. Zander: *Reading Plato*, London 1999; G. Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone*, Milano 2003. *Contra*: R. Ferber, *Warum hat Platon die ‚ungeschriebene Lehre' nicht geschrieben?*, München 2007.

30 As Plato has shown abundantly in *Cratylus*.

31 As in Thesleff's two-level model. See H. Thesleff, *Studies in Plato's Two-level Model*, Helsinki 1999.

32 *Apol.* 37a6.

present himself. In the first words of the dialogue – of crucial significance, as often in his dialogues – Plato stresses the importance of the personal witnessing of the event: *Autos paregenou? […] Autos*, "Were you present yourself? […] I was present myself."[33]

For those who were not present, Plato tries, in the last pages of the dialogue,[34] to convey the emotions experienced by those who witnessed the scene themselves. Socrates' stance towards life and death is ultimately not to be argued for, but directly intuited. And Socrates knows there is no convincing those who do not share his view.[35]

Two other formative events in the history of mankind depended ultimately on personal experience, and that experience had to be re-created for the benefit of those who could not participate in them: the giving of the Tables of the Law on Mount Sinai and the Crucifixion. Those who "saw the thunderings"[36] at the foot of the Mount or heard the Seven Last Words on the Calvary directly understood the significance of those events. *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*, on the one hand, and the Gospels, on the other, are attempts to fix for posterity their emotional impact. And so is *Phaedo*.

But there is a crucial difference between Socrates' death and the other two occasions. In the giving of the Torah and in the Crucifixion, the messages are independent of the event. Whatever support these dramatic happenings gave to the injunctions associated with them – say, the Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount – is external to these injunctions. Socrates' death, by contrast, validates by itself the claim he made in the *Apology*: If he cannot continue with *philosophia* as he understood it, he might as well take the cup and drink it willingly.[37] In other words, Socrates' death demonstrates the absolute primacy of *logos* (as Socrates first termed it) or *nous* (as Plato was later to call it).

The Platonic dialogue is a search for the *hupothesis* that will support Socrates' moral intuition that reason is not merely instrumental but, primarily, *normative*, that it is its own justification. According to the method of hypothesis, as set out in *Phaedo*, whatever is consistent with this intuition is deemed true,

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[33] *Phaed.* 57a1.

[34] *Phaed.* 115a–end.

[35] *Apol.* 37e.

[36] *Exod.* 20.18.

[37] *Phaed.* 117c. Contrast *Matthew* 26, 39: "Let this cup pass from me; nevertheless not as I will but as thou wilt."

until proved otherwise or until the *arkhe anhupothetos* is reached, if it ever is. Its eventual attainment is never guaranteed. And this is why *logos*, the discussion, must go on after Socrates' death.[38] True, one cannot read the dialogues without presupposition.[39] But this presupposition is not a *Prinzipienlehre* outside the dialogues or even coded within them. It is the existential, emotional, intuitive conviction of the value of normative reason, exhibited in Socrates' death and in need of defence by providing it with *hupotheseis* to support it.

Plato, however, is not Kant: Plato's idea of the Good is not a regulative idea in Kant's sense but must have ontological status. And although it is doubtful that the unhypothetical beginning can ever be reached – certainly not by all – Plato cannot leave it as a postulate. The last step in the upward movement is a necessary ontological step – or else Socrates' *philosophia* is but a pious wish.[40]

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[38] See the important central digression on "misology" in *Phaed.* 89b ff.

[39] Szlezák, *Reading Plato* (above n. 29), 95.

[40] I am grateful to my colleagues at Helsinki, and especially to Prof. Holger Thesleff, for perceptive queries and comments that forced me to rethink some points and saved me from a few misunderstandings.