

Plato De Magistro

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INTRODUCTION: THE STUDENT PARADOX

The Student Paradox

There is a brief passage at the start of the *Protagoras* that I take to be centrally important to the work I undertake here. In it, the young Hippocrates is excited about the famous sophist Protagoras, who has just arrived in Athens two days before. He asks a young Socrates to bring him to see the sophist, and ultimately Socrates does just that – most of the dialogue is an impressive literary portrayal of the two great men in heated debate about the nature of virtue and whether it is teachable. But before Socrates concedes, he presses Hippocrates on this desire to see Protagoras.

“Tell me, Hippocrates,” I said. “You’re trying to get access to Protagoras, prepared to pay him a cash fee for his services to you. But what is he, and what do you expect to become?” (311b).¹

He is asking Hippocrates about the nature of this teacher, a sophist, and the nature of what he expects to learn from him. Even with some coaxing from Socrates, the young man is rather at a loss, beyond recognizing that Protagoras is a sophist. What is a sophist exactly? And what does he hope to learn from him? Does he hope to become a sophist himself, Socrates asks, like a student of a physician hopes to become a physician? Or does he hope to get something more like you get from a grammar instructor or music teacher, a sort of “general education suitable for a gentleman” (312b)?

Hippocrates isn’t really certain what he is getting into, and this uncertainty worries Socrates.

¹ Translations of Plato are from Cooper (1997) unless otherwise noted.

Then do you know what you are about to do now, or does it escape you? ...That you are about to hand over your soul for treatment to a man who is, as you say, a sophist. As to what exactly a sophist is, I would be surprised if you really knew. And yet, if you are ignorant of this, you don't know whether you are entrusting your soul to something good or bad (312c).

In response, Hippocrates suggests that he *does* understand – a sophist, as the name suggests, is someone who understands wise things. But wise in what way, Socrates presses? And in what respect can they make us wise? Hippocrates again thinks he understands:

What else, Socrates, should we say a sophist is expert at than making people clever speakers (313d)?

This does not satisfy Socrates. He presses further. On what subject does a sophist make one a clever speaker? What subject does a sophist understand and make his students understand? On this, Hippocrates simply doesn't know what to say. Socrates makes his concern clear:

I went on to my next point: “Do you see what kind of danger you are about to put your soul in? If you had to entrust your body to someone and risk it becoming healthy or ill, you would consider carefully whether you should entrust it or not, and you would confer with your family and friends for days on end. But when it comes to something you value more than your body, namely your soul, when everything concerning whether you do well or ill in your life depends on whether it becomes worthy or worthless, I don't see you getting together with your father or brother or a single one of your friends to consider whether or not to trust your soul to this recently arrived foreigner. No, you hear about him in the evening – right? – and the next morning, here you are, not to talk about whether it's a good idea to entrust yourself to him or not, but ready to spend your own money and your friends' as well, as if you had thought it all through already and, no matter what, you had to be with Protagoras, a man whom you admit you don't know and have never conversed with, and whom you call a sophist although you obviously have no idea what this sophist is to whom you are about to entrust yourself” (313a-c).

The emphasis here is on the lack of care Hippocrates is putting into this decision to seek out – and pay for – the teachings of Protagoras. He hasn't given it careful thought, nor has he sought out careful counsel from family or friends. Why this matters is clear: his very *soul* is at stake, and as a result, his well-being and long term prosperity in life. Hippocrates concedes, but Socrates is not finished making the point.

A sophist, he suggests, is a kind of merchant who sells “provisions upon which the soul is nourished” (313c). These provisions of the soul are teachings, and one grave concern is whether the seller of teachings is deceptive in what he sells. For in fact, this is what sellers do. Whether selling food in the market, or teachings on a tour through Athens, those who sell provisions for the body or for the soul do not generally know whether what they sell is good or bad for a person. They just recommend everything they sell as good for us, for they are in the business of selling (313d).

In the same way, those who make their teachings from town to town and sell them wholesale or retail to anybody who wants them recommend all their products, but I wouldn't be surprised, my friend, if some of these people did not know which of their products are beneficial and which detrimental to the soul. Likewise those who buy from them, unless one happens to be a physician of the soul. So if you are a knowledgeable consumer, you can buy teachings safely from Protagoras or anyone else. But if you are not, please don't risk what is most dear to you on a roll of the dice, for there is far greater risk in buying teachings than in buying food. When you buy food and drink from the merchant you can take each item back home from the store in its own container and before you ingest it into your body you can lay it all out and call in an expert for consultation as to what should be eaten or drunk and what not, and how much and when. So there's not much risk in your purchase. But you cannot carry teachings away in a separate container. You put down your money and take the teaching away in your soul by having learned it, and off you go, either helped or injured. Anyway, these are the questions we should look into with the help of our elders. You and I are still a little too young to get to the bottom of such a great matter” (313d-314-b).

There are some important lessons to take from this passage. The first set apply generally to any student seeking a teacher. First of all, finding the right teacher is a particularly difficult endeavor. Socrates is highlighting a special difficulty that any student – particularly a young student – might face when choosing a teacher. I propose calling this *the student paradox*. On the one hand, if you are in the position of seeking a teacher, then because of the ignorance you hope to correct with that teacher's help, you lack the wisdom necessary to choose a good teacher. Without knowledge or wisdom, it is hard to know what kind of teaching you seek, or what you hope to achieve through those teachings. It is difficult to know who would be good at helping you learn, or to recognize who would in fact help you or harm you in this undertaking. It is even difficult to recognize the critical importance of the matter, the danger inherent in choosing the wrong teacher, or as a result, the great care that ought to be put into the matter. Instead, it's awfully easy to be swept away by excitement

and rashly seek out instruction, especially from someone of fame and renown. On the other hand, if you're in a good position to understand just what you want from a teacher, who would be a good teacher for you, and which kinds of teaching would genuinely improve your soul, it seems clear that you are less likely in a position to need that instruction. In a sense, it's built into being young and uneducated that you are not well equipped to make decisions about your education. Hippocrates demonstrates all of this well.

Part of the lesson here is that education is a special kind of good. There are many things you could seek to acquire and pay for from another. Many of these are physical goods, though, and even if you lack the right kind of judgment yourself and rush into a purchase, there is time afterward to seek out help and expertise about whether you've bought something that is good for you. Education is not like that. What is purchased or received is more permanent. It's taken in at the level of your soul, for better or worse, and cannot be changed afterward. (Or if it can, at least not easily.) Further, the goods acquired are more important. Nothing matters more, actually, than the state of your soul. Nothing matters more for your well-being, for your character, or for your prosperity in life. So someone offering or selling education, unlike most merchants, is in a particularly powerful position to affect you and your life with their product, for better or worse. The exchange is lasting, and there is a great deal at stake in your consumption.

Another lesson here is more particular though. It is aimed at the student who is considering seeking out and paying a sophist for his teachings. We can pick out some targeted criticisms of the sophist that should give a potential student extra pause. All of them are concerns about sophists that turn up elsewhere in the corpus. First of all, it seems difficult to understand just what a sophist is and what he teaches, even such a famous one as Protagoras. This difficulty of saying just what a sophist

is shows up repeatedly in other dialogues.² Plato is clearly pre-occupied with the question, for reasons I'll consider carefully throughout this project. It's no surprise then that it would be a criticism included here in the student paradox. One way to complicate the already difficult challenge of choosing a good teacher would be to choose a kind of teacher whose nature as a teacher is tricky to pin down. Despite the sophist's name, it doesn't seem right to define him, as Hippocrates tries to, in relation to the wise things he knows. For it's hard to say precisely what those wise things are, if any. Hippocrates is onto something when he points to the sophist's ability to teach rhetorical skill. This is a famous domain of the sophists in general. But as Socrates suggests, we ought to be interested in just what a teacher could teach us to speak well about, not mere rhetorical skill itself.

One thing we do know about the sophists is that they charged money for their teachings, often very large sums of money. This is an obvious concern for Plato. Elsewhere in the corpus it will be a sharp point of comparison to Socrates. Here in the *Protagoras* passage the criticism is specific, though perhaps two-sided. The sophists here are characterized as first and foremost *merchants*. They sell their teachings, and this puts them in a class with other merchants whose primary aim is selling goods. Because of this primary aim, the motivations of a merchant are suspect. What he advertises may be truthful, but it is also likely to be deceitful. Perhaps worse, sellers of goods often don't possess any real understanding of their goods, including whether or not they'll help or harm the buyer. Plato clearly thinks this is true of at least some of the sophists, and this too will be a grave criticism of the sophist elsewhere. It amounts to a kind of shallow intellectualism in the sophists. They often claim to teach, and charge money to teach, but they lack a real understanding of what they're doing and how they really shape the souls entrusted to them.

² It is the central, careful investigation of the *Sophist*.

It is probably obvious that, in calling this the student paradox, I wish to draw some comparison to Meno's paradox. This famous paradox from the *Meno* is an epistemological challenge to the project of inquiry and discovery – or, more simply, learning itself. It begins with a challenge from Meno to Socrates, after Socrates suggests that they inquire into the nature of virtue together, something neither of them truly understands.

How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know (80d)?

Socrates takes the point of this objection immediately, though he frames the dilemma a bit differently.

I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows – since he knows it, there is no need to search – nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for (80e).

There are two parts of the problem highlighted in the exchange, one of inquiry and one of discovery. How do you first of all go about looking for what you do not know, and secondly, how do you recognize the thing you are looking for when you actually find it? Without knowledge at the start, both inquiry and discovery seem impossible. There is debate about which part of the problem is taken seriously by Socrates in the dialogue, but at the surface level the two issues work together to suggest a general problem for one who lacks knowledge and wants to learn. The process of learning itself, from start to finish, would seem to require knowledge, or else be wholly unnecessary. An unspoken question is left for Socrates and Meno to consider: given this paradox, if one wants to learn, what is one to do?

There is of course a kind of answer in the *Meno*, for what directly follows is a presentation by Socrates of Plato's thoughts on the immortality of the soul and his famous theory of recollection.

As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only – a process men call learning – discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection (81c-d).

It would ignore serious interpretative challenges to say, without qualification, that the theory of recollection is intended as a response to Meno's paradox. I will not take up these interpretive concerns here.³ But if the theory of recollection is right, the person seeking knowledge is not adrift in the project of learning as Meno's paradox suggests. She lacks knowledge, but she is not in a state of full ignorance – she has merely forgotten what she knows. The objects of inquiry and discovery lie innate within her and she has merely to recollect them.

I want to emphasize that Plato offers a solution to the paradox, even if understanding the precise nature of the solution is challenging. Importantly, there is another element to the solution that is more psychological in nature. Socrates finishes his introduction of the theory of recollection with an important lesson:

We must, therefore, not believe the debater's argument, for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search (81d-e).

He repeats this take away lesson again at the conclusion of the discussion of recollection, before they return to their inquiry into the nature of virtue:

Then if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek out and recollect what you do not know at present – that is, what you do not recollect? -Somehow, Socrates, I think that what you say is right. – I think so too, Meno. I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things that one does not know, rather than if we believe that is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it.

³ For a careful discussion of these challenges, see Scott (2006) 75-91.

So the theory of recollection is an answer to the epistemological challenge in Meno's paradox, at least of some sort. But Socrates is saying here that he is committed to something even more than the details of the theory of recollection. That thing is the kind of attitude one should take in the face of the challenge. Whether or not there is a clear way to dismiss the anxieties of the paradox itself, one ought not to give in to them and abandon inquiry altogether. One should strive to gain knowledge, even if it is difficult, and not despair altogether about the possibility of learning.

I want to suggest at least a loose fit between Meno's paradox and what I am calling the student paradox. If a person is concerned about education – deeply concerned, as I'll argue that Plato was – then certain issues might present themselves. On the more theoretical side, you might begin to worry about the very nature of learning itself, and the challenges inherent to learning. In particular, you might start to worry that learning is hard, or maybe even impossible, if you proceed from a place of real ignorance. There's a practical analog to this worry. Someone in search of learning, especially a young person, might naturally seek out a teacher to help them gain knowledge. If learning is hard, perhaps it is easier or more likely to succeed with someone wise to guide you. Still, you're uneducated and lack knowledge, so you face a different, more practical problem. How, from this place of ignorance, can you choose the right teacher? How can you be in a position to make good judgements about the practical questions of your education? In short, I'm suggesting that the *Meno* presents a serious epistemological challenge to learning, while the *Protagoras* presents a more practical, pedagogical challenge.

There's one last similarity I want to highlight, that in my mind further draws the two learning challenges together. As I've said, Meno's paradox is answered first, at least in some way, by the theory of recollection, and further by the call from Socrates not to despair about learning – to

instead push on, even if it is hard. The student paradox is not left unanswered either. There's at least a partial solution to the student paradox offered in the passage I've discussed. If one is young and uneducated, the right thing to do first of all is to recognize the paradoxical position one is in. To recognize that if we genuinely need a teacher, we are inherently poorly equipped to choose one. We ought to also understand the gravity involved in this dilemma. Choosing a teacher is something we ought not to do rashly if we care about the state of our soul. There is simply too much at stake, and too much danger in choosing poorly. Fortunately, there is an alternative to choosing rashly or in poor judgement. We can carefully consider the question of which teacher to choose. And, importantly, we can seek counsel from others, especially those who care about the state of our soul, and those who are in a better position than us to recognize whether a teacher and his teachings will actually benefit us. And so, as Socrates and Hippocrates head off to see Protagoras, there is a hopeful note. We sense that Socrates is still gravely pessimistic about the sophists as teachers, but the possibility of finding a good teacher is not closed off.

In fact, there is a more substantial answer to the student paradox. This solution comes (at least in part) later in the *Protagoras* itself.⁴ But significantly, it comes more wholly from the full corpus. Setting out Plato's answer to this practical, pedagogical problem of learning is the very heart of this project. It will take the full efforts of the proceeding chapters to unpack the solution, but in short, the dialogues themselves offer just the kind of careful guidance in selecting a teacher that the uneducated student needs. And the message will be, around every corner, that the philosopher is that best kind of teacher.

A Platonic Theory of Education

⁴ I will return to the *Protagoras* in Chapter 4.

This is a modest project. I conceive of it, however, as the start of a larger, more ambitious project. My aims here, as a result, serve this larger project as well, and it's worth making clear first what that larger project is about.

Plato plays an enormous amount of attention to questions about learning and education throughout the corpus. This is evident first of all in the dialogues that take up questions of learning and education directly – the *Republic* and the *Meno* are good examples. But it is also true in dialogues that are less obviously about education. For example, as I will try to argue here, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Cratylus*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Theaetetus* are all centrally concerned with education, even though their surface level investigations do not always make that obvious.

It is not merely a matter of ubiquity. I want to make a stronger argument, that this consistent attention to education is actually a driving focus in Platonic thought. Showing this goes beyond making clear that Plato is thinking about education even when it isn't clearly apparent. It involves showing that he cares deeply about the question, in both a philosophical and real-world way. It involves showing that his investigation of questions about education are intimately tied up with his investigations in other areas of philosophy – especially his more theoretical views in epistemology, but also in metaphysics, political philosophy, moral psychology, ethics, and philosophy of language. It involves showing that his thoughts on education cohere with his philosophical commitments in these other areas of philosophy, and that he takes that kind of coherence to be critically important. And finally, and perhaps most radically, I think an argument can be made that his pragmatic concerns about education – very specifically in Athens, in his lifetime – drive at least some of these more theoretical investigations. Why is it worth investigating what knowledge is? How learning works? How the soul is constituted? What kind of thing virtue is? Whether poets ought to be

censored? What punishment in the polis accomplishes? How language works? I will not say full-stop that these questions matter because education is critically important in the city-state, and understanding these things can help us understand issues of education. But the case I do want to make is that Plato's pursuits of these sorts of questions are at least *in part* seriously motivated by deep and pragmatic concerns about education.

Given the importance of education in the corpus, I think it is possible to undertake a systematic project of setting out Plato's thoughts on education – setting out a robust Platonic theory of education, as it were. This seems to me a serious gap in Plato scholarship, both in recognizing the pervasiveness of Plato's concerns about education, and collecting his thoughts on education together in a comprehensive way.

One natural way to organize such a comprehensive investigation is to consider carefully each of the following elements of Plato's thoughts on education: (1) pedagogical method, (2) subject matter, (3) students, (4) teachers, and finally, (5) self-reflective thoughts on the best way for philosophers – and Plato himself in particular – to be teachers. Each of these areas offer a rich set of questions to consider, questions which in fact Plato does have thoughts on throughout the corpus. Each also involves especially difficult interpretive issues that are worth trying to work through in a systematic way.

In the area of pedagogical method, the focus is on how learning works, and how one person might help another in that learning process.

How does genuine learning occur?

What are the ideal or necessary conditions for one person to help another learn?

What is the precise role of the teacher in this learning process?

What are the best methods of teaching?
Is a systematic, gradual process of educating a person necessary?
How active must the student be in the learning process?
What is the role of philosophy in education?
What special intellectual tools or methods does the philosopher bring to education?
What does bad teaching look like?
How can a person's education go wrong?
To what extent are laws or punishment by the state effective means of education?

Some of these questions have clearer answers in the dialogues than others. Plato regularly depicts learning as a process that requires very active engagement by a student, for instance. Others are more difficult. The question about a teacher's role in the process is especially challenging, because we get rather mixed messages. At times, it seems as if a teacher is merely a guide in the learning process, helping a student develop her ideas in a way that leads to knowledge acquisition. At other times, the teacher's role seems either more forceful or more intentional in terms of where and how a student is led to knowledge.

The area of subject matter is especially challenging to work out in a systematic way. Perhaps the most significant difficulty rests in understanding to what extent education is about acquiring knowledge, and to what extent it is about developing moral character. In some dialogues or passages these two aims of education are dealt with independently, but in other places it is obvious that the two aims are linked together in a complex way – maybe even that they are one and the same. There are other challenges as well. At times Plato considers a more systematic regimen of learning that includes traditional subjects like mathematics and music education. What precise role do these subjects have in a student's larger education? What is the difference between learning a *techne* or craft and learning that results in *epistēmē* or knowledge? When and to what end should philosophy be a subject of study? Again, there is a rich set of questions to consider.

What kinds of things can we learn?
What kinds of things can we have genuine knowledge of?
What kinds of things should we teach?

If there is more than one subject matter, how are they related?
Should education be a systematic progression through different subject matters?
To what extent is education a cognitive endeavor?
Can education be, at least in part, a non-cognitive project?
To what extent is education about moral development?
What is the role of reason in education?
What is the role of emotion in education?
Is the aim of education to acquire knowledge, virtue, or some combination?
Where does education in a *technê* fit in?
Can education ever involve leading a student to false beliefs?
What things are people currently being taught badly?

There are interesting questions about Plato's thoughts on students to consider as well. A primary issue here is just who Plato has in mind when he thinks about education in the city-state. Is everyone a candidate for education? Should everyone undergo the same kind of education? If not, what different kinds of education are appropriate for different people? At times it looks as though everyone is capable of acquiring knowledge. The theory of recollection seems to suggest this, for instance, as do Plato's discussions on the role of the state in educating the polis by means of laws and punishments. In other places though, like the *Republic*, Plato seems to envision a systematic education system intended primarily for intellectual elites. What do we make of this apparent inconsistency? Here are the fuller set of questions we might take up in this area.

Who is capable of genuine learning?
Who is capable of being educated in some way?
Is education for ordinary people, or just intellectual elites?
Should an education system treat everyone equally?
Should an education system offer different kinds of education for different people?
Does knowledge acquisition happen in everyone's education, or only some people's?
Is reason involved in the education of ordinary people, or only non-rational faculties?
If some kinds of education are only for the elite, what is special about those individuals?
Should everyone do philosophy?

When it comes to teachers, working through Plato's thoughts is equally worthwhile. For one, his concern about teachers is conspicuously pervasive in the dialogues. There is a broader question at play: what kind of person makes the best teacher? But it often plays out in a more specific way, grounded in the very particular social and political dynamics of Athens in the time he is writing. He is continually concerned with other sorts of potential teacher figures in the polis – most of all, poets

and sophists. And he is continually critical of both these groups of intellectuals. Why are poets and sophists poor teachers? Why does he care so deeply about these two groups and their effects on the citizens of Athens? There is another through line in the dialogues when it comes to the subject of teachers: the philosopher is *always* the best teacher. What is special about philosophers that makes them superior teachers? Again, it is possible to systematically consider a fuller list of questions.

What kind of person makes the best teacher?
Why are some people well suited to teaching and others not?
What traits must a good teacher necessarily have?
Does a teacher need to possess knowledge or understanding herself?
How well does a teacher need to understand his students?
Should a teacher understand well how her teachings will affect each student?
How can we pick out the best teachers when we're yet uneducated?
Why are poets and sophists poor teachers?
Can poets or sophists ever be good teachers?
Should a teacher profess to be a teacher?
Should a teacher charge money for teaching?
Should a teacher make strong claims about what he can teach his students?
Should a teacher claim to make her students virtuous?
Can the state act as a teacher?
What makes philosophers the best teachers?
What philosophical or theoretical commitments, if any, should a teacher have?
Should a teacher's philosophical or theoretical commitments cohere with her teaching practices?

One interpretive issue here is exceedingly difficult. Plato seems at odds with himself about whether a good teacher needs genuine knowledge in order to teach. He very clearly idolizes Socrates as a teacher throughout the corpus, but Socrates himself of course professed to have no genuine knowledge. In some dialogues and passages Plato's picture of a good teacher seems to fit well with the Socratic model. His midwife metaphor in the *Theaetetus* is the best example of this – here a teacher is said to be like a midwife who has never given birth herself. What she is skilled at is guiding a student through intellectual labor and birth, despite never having gone through this full process herself. Despite having no real knowledge, she is skilled at helping others develop ideas to fruition, or even abandon them when they are not viable. Elsewhere, however, Plato seems committed to the idea that a teacher must have knowledge of the subject matter she teaches. This is perhaps most notable in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato explicitly sets this out as a requirement for

successful teaching.⁵ Why does Plato seem to vacillate on this requirement? Does he merely change his mind over time? This is a genuine puzzle in the dialogues with no easy solution.

Finally, connected especially to the subject of teachers, Plato has an awful lot to say in the dialogues about the nature of philosophy itself and the role of philosophy in education. Here are the sorts of questions we might consider in this area of his thought.

How did Plato view himself as a teacher?
Why did Plato write philosophy?
Why did Plato write dialogues in particular?
What role did the dialogues have in his teaching practices?
Did he intend for his written works to have genuine pedagogical value?
Who were the dialogues intended for?
Can a Platonic dialogue do the work of a teacher?
What kinds of things are the dialogues meant to teach?
Are the dialogues meant to teach the same thing to any reader, or different things to different readers?
Were the dialogues intended to be read independently, outside the Academy?
Did Plato see himself only as a teacher inside the Academy, or of ordinary people of Athens as well?
Did Plato think the philosopher's role in education is different in an ideal city-state?
To what extent did Plato think he might improve the actual state of education in Athens?

His thoughts here are not always clear or easy to set out, but sorting through them is a project as worthwhile as any in Plato scholarship. One of the most pervasive through lines in the corpus is the attention he gives to philosophy and its place in the city-state, and I take these issues to be centrally about education – the education of ourselves, our students, the citizens of the polis, and so on. One of the more obvious elements of this is a very continual effort to defend philosophy in the face of public misunderstanding and criticism. Another element though seems equally important, but sometimes harder to recognize. There is a deeply introspective quality at times in the dialogues, where Plato seems to wrestle with the question of how to do philosophy himself. This shouldn't be surprising. It's a commonly accepted view that Plato of the middle dialogues begins to do philosophy very differently from his teacher Socrates – in the kinds of questions he investigates and

⁵ This is explicit at least on my interpretation of the dialogue, which I will set out in Chapter 2.

the extent to which he seems committed to certain theoretical doctrines. And, of course, he undertakes a radically different philosophical project than Socrates by writing down philosophy. These departures from Socratic philosophy do not appear easy to him, however. What's more, I think these difficult decisions about how to do philosophy involve some genuine perplexity about how he himself can be a good teacher. Plato chooses to engage in written philosophy, but not simply with the aim of doing philosophy for himself. We don't fully understand how he intended the dialogues to be used, but it's clear throughout the corpus that he intends for them to be used in teaching. This is, after all, a primary reason to use dialogues over other more discursive forms of philosophical writing. Put as simply as I can, Plato had no real doubts that philosophers make better teachers. But just what way of being a philosopher teacher seems to be a question of real uncertainty for him. One he nevertheless cared very deeply about, and one he appears to be working through in the dialogues.

The Dissertation Aims

The larger project here, developing a full on Platonic theory of education, is obviously very ambitious. What I hope to do here is offer a modest start to the project. Here is what I aim to achieve in this dissertation.

(1) First of all, I wish to begin to make the case that Plato is concerned with questions of education throughout the corpus, including in places where that concern is not made explicit. This will be an important aim in each chapter.

(2) I will do some work to motivate this project. Why should we care about Plato's thoughts on

education? Why is it worth giving these thoughts a comprehensive treatment? While I think these issues of education matter in their own right and deserve systematic attention full stop, I will highlight two reasons we might be further motivated in this project. First of all, I want to show what a practical, real-world concern this was for Plato. He doesn't care about education in merely an abstract way; rather, his concern is deep and pragmatic, because the education situation in Athens during his lifetime was, in his view, in a grave state of disorder. There was special incentive for him then to investigate questions of education, ones that do not always apply to his more theoretical investigations in epistemology or metaphysics, say.

I will motivate the project in another way, however, for those whose primary interest in Plato lies in his more well-known investigations and doctrines. I will do this by showing here – as least in a beginning way – how Plato's thoughts about education are in fact importantly connected to his work in other areas of philosophy, particularly his epistemology. I will start to build a case that his pragmatic interests in education might be a serious motivation for investigating questions in new areas like epistemology.

(3) I will begin to set out Plato's theory of education by focusing here on what he has to say about teachers. In particular, who makes the best kind of teacher. This will be the central focus of each chapter, and Plato's constant thesis will be that philosophers are the best teachers. I want to begin to sort out why that is, and why other potential teachers are not good choices – most of all, poets and sophists.

(4) Along the way I want to draw attention to something significant in the way that Plato treats his opponents, as it were, in this debate about education. At the end of the day his criticism of poets

and sophists will be uncompromising. They will never put in a good showing compared to philosophers as teachers. But nonetheless, Plato does something interesting with his dramatic portrayal of these figures at times, particularly Aristophanes and Protagoras. In short, he gives them rather complex portrayals that allow them to shine in certain ways, instead of being dismissive of them or wholly critical. I will argue that Plato means to show how seriously he takes these men as intellectual rivals or opponents. An easier way to handle your opponents, especially when you are giving them dramatic portrayals in your writing, is to make them buffoons or clowns that the reader can't take seriously. This is just what Aristophanes himself does with Socrates in the *Clouds*.⁶ Plato is up to something subtler and more complex with his rivals, however, and I will work to draw out the implications of this.

(5) Finally, I will do some work to show that Plato is struggling to sort out what kind of teacher he ought to be himself, including how much he ought to be like Socrates, whether he ought to do written philosophy, and whether that writing should be in dramatic dialogue form.

Method

There are several things to say about my approach here. First of all, I will not address the more explicit discussions of education in the corpus. There is room later, in the larger project, for carefully bringing in these dialogues and passages. I will focus instead on dialogues that are not obviously about education, and try to show how they in fact are. In particular, I will focus on the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Cratylus*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Theaetetus*. I do this for two reasons. First, it does more work for this project to begin to show how Plato is broadly thinking about

⁶ I will take up this portrayal in a serious way in Chapter 1.

education, including in places it isn't so easily recognized. All of these dialogues are thematically and dramatically rich. None of them are about education at the surface level. But I will argue that each has something centrally important to say about education in the polis.

There is a second advantage to focusing on these dialogues over more straightforward discussions of education. It allows me to fill more gaps in the scholarship for each dialogue. Obviously a great deal has been written about education in the *Republic*. On the other hand, understanding the *Cratylus*, Plato's foray into the philosophy of language, as being centrally concerned with issues of education – that work fills in something missing in the way scholars have understood the dialogue.

My chapters then will focus on these dialogues. The organizing principle centers on the question of who makes the best teachers. Each chapter considers a possible answer (or two) to this question. In the first chapter, I consider what the *Symposium* has to say about poets as teachers. In the second chapter, what the *Phaedrus* can tell us about rhetoricians as teachers – and by the end, written text themselves as potential teachers. In the third chapter I offer an analysis of the *Cratylus* where the reasons for preferring certain philosophy of language views turn on whether or not language itself can be a teacher. In the final chapter, I consider what the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus* say about sophists as teachers. And of course, along the way there will be a great deal of insight about philosophers themselves as teachers.

There is a pattern that emerges in my analysis of each of these chapters. It takes some care to identify, but the pattern goes essentially as follows:

1. Plato considers whether X is a good kind of teacher.

2. Plato shows why X isn't a good kind of teacher.
3. Plato shows why the philosopher is a better teacher.
4. In the end, Plato is really concerned about poets and sophists as teachers.
5. This concern with poets and sophists arises from the particular cultural and political background Plato is living and writing in.

The final thing to say about my method here is that I consider these dialogues in the very particular historical context they are written in. There are perhaps parts of Platonic thought that could be considered and understood independently of the particular time and place Plato was writing in – the metaphysics of the Forms, for instance. But Plato's thoughts on education, and teachers in particular, cannot be. His concerns about education are too pragmatic and too grounded in real-world concerns. His grave worries about poets and sophists are not abstract. They arise from the changing, tumultuous intellectual and political world of Athens during his adult life. If there is something like a broad theory of education in the dialogues, we miss something vitally important if we divorce it from its historical context.

CHAPTER ONE: POET AS TEACHER

Any reader of the *Symposium* is likely to notice the intrusion of the dramatic world into the philosophic. There is a curiously heavy emphasis on drama and dramatists in the dialogue, from the presence of its character dramatists, at a celebration of dramatic victory, to the intricately dramatic quality of the dialogue itself. Equally curious, the dramatist Aristophanes is given a surprisingly charitable characterization given his role in the prosecution and death of Socrates, as well as a speech that rivals even the speech of Socrates in its effect and memorability. Finally there is the peculiar ending of the dialogue, where the parting words of Socrates tell us that the same man ought to be able to write both comedy and tragedy. All in all, one gets the impression that drama weighed heavily on Plato's mind when he composed the dialogue. Of course, the philosophical weight of the *Symposium* comes in Socrates' speech, and Diotima's ladder of love in particular. How do these curious elements of drama and dramatists in the dialogue fit together with the philosophy of Socrates' speech? Put another way, if Socrates' speech is the philosophical soul of the dialogue, why does Plato dress it in such a dramatic body?

It is the aim of this chapter to address this question. In so doing, I give careful consideration to the relationship between Plato and the historical Aristophanes. I propose that a real-life tension between the two men underlies the drama of the dialogue, namely tension over the role of poets as educators of the polis. And if the war is over the education of the people, the battles of the *Symposium* are fought over twin lessons – the one on the proper mortal relationship with the divine, and the other on the true character of Socrates. On Plato's stage, we will see, the two lessons are inseparable.

§1. Drama in the Dialogue

I set as my first task of the chapter to draw our attention to the full pervasiveness of drama and dramatists in the dialogue, a task I don't believe has yet been undertaken in whole. We will examine first the emphasis on drama in the narrative frame of the dialogue; next, the treatment of the dramatists (Aristophanes and Agathon) and their speeches; and finally the intrusive presence of Alcibiades and his 'satyr drama'.

The Narrative Frame

There is a striking emphasis on drama and dramatists in the narrative frame of the *Symposium*. To begin we can note that the symposium of the dialogue is itself a celebration of Agathon's first dramatic victory. Here our attention is drawn not simply to drama, but to the idea of good and laudatory drama. Further, there are notably two dramatists in attendance – one comedian and one tragedian. And too, the *Symposium* itself is more dramatic in style than other dialogues. We could easily conceive of a staged production, so effectively does the dialogue stir our visual and dramatic imaginations. Even the elaborate introduction emphasizes the dialogue's dramatic nature: it is as if our narrator, Apollodorus, enters stage left and offers to tell us his best version of a story that has been making the rounds. When he says in the opening line of the dialogue, "In fact, your question does not find me unprepared," and again later, "So, friends, if you too must hear the whole story, I had better tell it," the plural *you* he speaks to is, in a sense, *us* – as if we readers, longing to hear the real story of this curious dinner party, sit before him in the theatre keen to play our role as audience (172a1, 173c2). As the drama unfolds, then, the interplay of its characters draws our attention,

rather explicitly at times, to dramatic elements of their characterization and speeches. We will look in particular at the characterizations of Aristophanes and Alcibiades as we come to each of their speeches.

Finally, the curious ending of the dialogue draws our attention once more to the dramatic world. It is notable that the last standing symposiasts are Socrates and the dramatists, Agathon, and Aristophanes, and further, that the final words of Socrates (reported indirectly) are not about philosophy, love, or any of Diotima's lessons, but rather about the nature of dramatists.

He saw that the others had either left or were asleep on their couches and that only Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates were still awake, drinking out of a large cup which they were passing around from left to right. Socrates was talking to them. Aristodemus couldn't remember exactly what they were saying – he'd missed the first part of their discussion, and he was half-asleep anyway – but the main point was that Socrates was trying to prove to them that authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy: the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet (223c-d).

We will return to this parting suggestion of Socrates – a suggestion of what we might call the *unified dramatist* – in the second half of the chapter.

Aristophanes

It will be worthwhile to turn next to Plato's treatment of Aristophanes in the dialogue, and give careful consideration to the dramatic elements both of his characterization and his speech. We can begin by noting that Aristophanes is given a distinctly comic portrayal. Most notably, he disrupts the speaking order with an attack of hiccups, a comic interruption in what seems otherwise to be a rather serious progression of ideas about the nature of love. We are to imagine Aristophanes here fighting off his hiccups – holding his breath, gargling water, and finally, inducing a sneeze – all the while Eryximachus is speaking his praise of Eros (185d, 189a). This diversion frames the learned

seriousness of the doctor with crude body humor, and we can only laugh at the absurdity of the contrast. Notably, our laughs do not come at the expense of Aristophanes; rather, we laugh with him at Eryximachus.⁷ It is an oddly charitable treatment of a man whose real-world laughs have been delivered at the expense of Socrates. Such charity should give us pause; what is Plato up to even inviting Aristophanes to dine with Socrates? We should, for now, expect he is up to something purposeful.⁸

The hiccupping episode draws our attention to the presence of the comedian in another way: it puts Eryximachus on guard for comedy in Aristophanes' speech.

But watch what you're doing. You are making jokes before your speech, and you're forcing me to prepare for you to say something funny, and to put up my guard against you (189a).

As readers we are on our guard as well. If we weren't already expecting something funny from our comedian, the dialogue brings the question to mind. Aristophanes laughs and replies:

But don't put up your guard. I'm not worried about saying something funny in my coming oration. That would be pure profit, and it comes with the territory of my Muse. What I'm worried about is that I might say something ridiculous (189b).

Aristophanes, reinforcing our expectation, suggests it will be no surprise if his speech has comedic elements, for naturally he is a comedian.

It is worth dwelling a moment on his worry. His fear is not that he will say something funny, but that he will say something ridiculous – something that makes him the *object* of our laughter and not

⁷ I disagree with Bury (1923), 22 in his suggestion that the episode shows Aristophanes “in a ludicrous light”; I think the joke here is on Eryximachus.

⁸ For a discussion of how Platonic characters interest Plato “just to the extent that they serve his purposes in writing” see Rowe (1998) 1-11.

merely the source.⁹ Here perhaps another natural expectation of the reader is given voice – that Plato will put words in the mouth of Aristophanes that make us laugh at him instead of with him. We would not be greatly surprised, I think, to find a ridiculous characterization of Aristophanes in the *Symposium* – the very kind of scornful ridicule we find of Socrates in the *Clouds*. One thinks that Plato must have been tempted to return a bit of that meanness, and here the character Aristophanes appears notably worried.

More curiously, at the conclusion of the speech Aristophanes urges Eryximachus *not* to read his speech as comedy:

Now don't get ideas, Eryximachus, and turn this speech into a comedy... as I begged you earlier, don't make a comedy of it (193c-d).

It invites the reader to ask: what *are* we to make of Aristophanes' speech? Are we meant to receive it as a playful, comic encomium of Eros, something of a comic interruption among the speeches as Aristophanes is among the men? Or are we to read it not as mere comedy but as something more serious, as Aristophanes here seems to ask of us?

We must turn to the speech itself for answers. To begin, it is no surprise that we find genuinely comic elements in the speech. To play out in our minds this story of our original nature requires a comic imagination; these images of round double-people, employing an excess of human parts, tumbling about in a flurry of limbs, and procreating like grasshoppers, amuse even a modern

⁹ The difference here is between the Greek γελοῖα and καταγέλαστα. The former means generally 'causing laughter, laughable'; the latter is derisive in sense, meaning 'ridiculous' or 'absurd', cognate with καταγελᾶω, a verb meaning 'to laugh at, jeer or mock at, to laugh scornfully, to laugh down, deride'.

audience with their charm and absurdity. What is surprising, however, is that we find tragic elements in the speech as well, and the number and effect of these tragic elements dare to outweigh the comic. These elements are not funny at all. Aristophanes' cleaved apart humans are dying from their longing, and in their plight is an acute and poignant suffering. The aggregate of the story's tragic elements is a portrayal of love as a distinctly tragic and woeful phenomenon. Aristophanes, it turns out, speaks well in cautioning us against calling his speech a comedy.

Commentators have noted, at times rather dismissively, the comic or folktale tones of the speech.¹⁰ I suggest here that we can better understand the speech's place in the larger dialogue by recognizing a number of formal dramatic elements in its mythic story, and not merely comic but tragic elements as well. That is to say, the speech is not merely comic and tragic in tone; it is comic and tragic in the specific ways of staged dramas. We will linger here to catalogue these elements with care; after, we will turn to the more difficult task of understanding why Plato has written for Aristophanes this tragic comedy – or comic tragedy, as the case may be.

In what formal ways, then, might we characterize Aristophanes' speech as comedy? The speech shares some key elements with Old Comedy, the comedy of Aristophanes' time: a narrative founded on an absurd premise, what has come to be called the 'great idea', and an emphasis on physical absurdity. We will look first at the comic great idea and how it manifests in Aristophanes' speech.

¹⁰ Nussbaum (1986), 194 dismisses the speech as "only a comedy, and only a myth"; Rowe (1998), 9 too is dismissive. Dover (1980), 113 notes the formal elements of folktale in the story, e.g. "the notion (a world-wide feature of aetiological tales) that 'once upon a time' humans were different". It is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider these folktale elements, but their presence does not, I think, conflict with my task of drawing out the less explored comic and particularly tragic elements.

The comedies of Aristophanes' time were not plot-centered stories, like those of the tragedians, but instead were founded on an absurd premise – the great idea.

Old Comedy depends not on a complicated plot of intrigue or a subtle interaction between characters, but on the working out of a great idea, the more bizarre the better.¹¹

We can see this at work in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. The drama of the play unfolds from the absurd premise that Dionysus might go to the underworld – disguised as Heracles, no less – and bring back a poet to save the city. Athens was a politically and militarily threatened city when Aristophanes wrote the play in 405 B.C. His solution to these threats in the *Frogs* is wildly absurd – if the city was to be saved, it required measures more serious than a resurrected poet. And in fact, beneath the absurd premise of the play there are suggestions of more serious ideas: that poets have a responsibility to offer proper moral instruction in their works, and – more directly relevant to current affairs – that the city ought to bring back the brilliant and dangerous Alcibiades. The drama of the *Frogs*, however, and much of its comic appeal, falls out of its bizarre premise.

Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* is similarly founded on an absurd premise. It is, in short, an aetiological account of the origin of love – an explanation of how humans have come to experience such intense longing for one another. This account unfolds from the bizarre premise that humans were originally double-people, large and round, with twice the body parts and twice the strength and vitality. These globular people had lofty notions to match their strength, and in their hubris they challenged the gods. Such an attack on the gods merits swift and resolute punishment, the story teaches us, and out of this cleaving and eternal separation of human halves arose the powerful

¹¹ Storey and Allan (2005) 174.

longing we call love. It is partly the absurd nature of this premise that makes Aristophanes' speech so striking. It hits our comic imagination keenly.

The second formal comic element in the speech is closely interwoven with the first: an emphasis on physical absurdity. Part of the absurdity of Old Comedy was captured in its visual aspect. Comedy actors were "grotesquely presented in large masks with distorted features, large mouths and eyes, unlike the realistic features of the tragic mask."¹² This comic physicality manifested in the characterization and drama of the play as well. This too we see in the *Frogs*. In the opening scene we are laughing quickly, even as readers, at the costume of Dionysus; we are to picture him dressed in his usual effeminate manner, with the lion-skin and club of Heracles thrown over in mock disguise. The absurdity of anyone mistaking Dionysus for Heracles is delightfully laughable. The same physical comedy is present throughout the play. At any quiet turn in the action of the play the slave Xanthias is quick to offer up an amusing bit of bodily humor, and in the final moments of the contest between Euripides and Aeschylus, the poets are measuring the weight – the ponderous *effect* – of their poetry by grasping firmly to a large scale as they recite lines one against the other (1365-1405). Here Aristophanes transfers poetic wit and dexterity to the realm of absurd physicality, to brilliant comic effect.

Turning back to Aristophanes, we can note first that this physical absurdity is a key element in the comedy of his characterization. It is through bodily humor that the hiccups and attempted cures of Aristophanes distract us from the seriousness of Eryximachus.

Much of Old Comedy is founded on bodily processes, and it is appropriate that Aristophanes, rather than anyone else, should have hiccups.¹³

¹² Storey and Allen (2005) 180.

¹³ Dover (1980) 104.

Afterwards Aristophanes highlights the absurdity of the human body, denying the ordered principles of the body which Eryximachus so carefully set forth:

It leaves me wondering that the orderly principle of the body should call for the noises and titillations involved in sneezing (189a2).¹⁴

The whole episode, then, is not merely funny, but funny in one of the principal manners of stage comedies.

This same physical absurdity is present in Aristophanes' speech. The emphatic descriptions of the double-people, their punishment and extreme physical suffering, their procreation before and after Zeus takes pity, and the threat that Zeus may halve mankind again – in all of this there is a keen physical absurdity. The ridiculousness of the final threat strikes particularly close, forcing us to imagine vividly how silly we ourselves would look hopping about as half-people. Martha Nussbaum recognizes this physical absurdity as a comic element of the speech and attributes to it a distancing effect:

This story is comic because, while it is about our deepest concerns, it at the same time distances itself from the inner delight and pain of those concerns, asking us to watch as we watch a species remote from us and our needs."¹⁵

If we must look at ourselves as the product of this process, then we must distance ourselves from the concerns of that body, noticing instead the oddity of the human situation. The story reminds us, like Aristophanes in his hiccupping intrusion, that the human body is functionally a strange creature, one fitting into another as they do.¹⁶

¹⁴ Trans. from Lamb (1925).

¹⁵ Nussbaum (1986) 172.

¹⁶ Nussbaum (1986), 172-3 elegantly captures the “peculiar, even grotesque” comedy of sexual union.

We can turn now to the more surprising tragic elements of Aristophanes' speech. Several formal tragic elements stand out: an emphasis on a tragic mistake; an incitement of pity and fear; instruction on the relationship between gods and mortals; and finally, an urging for piety and respect towards the gods.

If the myth of Aristophanes' speech unfolds from its bizarre premise, its pathos arises in a familiarly tragic way: an act of hubris is committed against the gods – here a direct attack – and divine retribution follows. The punishment for this ancient hubris, the story suggests, is one that remains, inherent in every mortal; we are each of us sentenced to incompleteness, perpetually flawed and subject to the torments of longing. We pay today for the grievous mistake of our progenitors. Such a mistake is a common element in Greek tragedy (e.g. Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*) and often it is hubristic or impious in nature and affects multiple generations in its repercussions.

Aristotle says in the *Poetics* that it is the role of tragedy to instill fear and pity in its audience (1452b). The emotions fit naturally with stories that exploit the kind of hubristic mistake punished in the *Hippolytus*. We feel pity for Hippolytus when he is punished for his frigid rejection of Aphrodite, as we feel pity for Theseus and Phaedra in their individual suffering. All these characters own some responsibility for the tragic death of Hippolytus, but despite their faults we pity them. Their actions and punishments also instill fear in the audience. Perhaps not the modern audience, with our disbelief of Greek polytheism, but Athenians would have felt a pious fear as they watched *Hippolytus*, a fear that they too might suffer such a punishment for their mistakes. The speech of Aristophanes too instills pity. In fact, the feeling of pity it engenders is what gives the speech much of its tragic tone. We laugh at its absurdity, but what makes it more provocative – what makes it stay with us

afterwards, and what has given it such enduring appeal – is surely its ability to make us feel pity for these ancient humans. Having experienced for ourselves human longing, to imagine a longing so strong it overcomes all desire for eating, working, and living invokes deep sympathies in us. Further, because we are not so far from these humans first cleaved apart, because our longing is at times near enough in its intensity, the story instills in us pity for our own present-day nature. The pity we feel for the suffering of Aristophanes' half-humans resonates in our sense of self. This is a classically tragic effect.

Whether the speech instills fear is perhaps less obvious. We are far enough removed from the Olympian powers to simply laugh at this threat of being split apart again by the gods. It's difficult to say whether Athenians would have felt fear hearing such a story, or whether they too would simply chuckle at the threat. Perhaps the absurdity simply interferes – can anyone really fear being cleaved in half and left to hop around on one leg searching for three other fourth-selves? On the other hand, the general threat of divine retribution, a threat so familiar from the Greek stage, might have resonated in the Athenian mind.

There is also a strong element of instruction in the speech of Aristophanes. The poet is not simply telling a story, but is acting as a teacher for his audience, offering instruction on the origins of modern human nature, the origins of human genders, and the origins of human love. Aeschylus says to Euripides in the *Frogs*: “For children the teacher is the one who instructs, but grownups have the poets”.¹⁷ This is a key element in tragedy, particularly when the instruction concerns the relationship between mortals and the gods. The Oedipus dramas, for example, offer striking lessons about the power of the gods, about unavoidable fates, and about the limits of human agency. In the

¹⁷ Translations of Aristophanes are from Henderson (2002) unless noted otherwise.

final moments of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus learns that his will to avoid the fates and prophecies of the gods was all along futile, that he was powerless despite his strong will. Oedipus is blind to the truth until the denouement, but the audience is privy all along, forced to watch the lesson unfold in all its morbid fatality. Aristophanes' story is likewise a lesson on the proper relationship between gods and mortals and the struggle for power between the two. We learn, in short, what a gross error it is for humankind to aspire to divinity. The lesson is strikingly tragic.

Finally, the speech urges us to be pious and respectful towards the gods. This element of tragedy is closely connected to the others: it is part of the instruction on the proper relationship between mortals and the gods; the lesson is often delivered by the negative example of a tragic mistake; and the lesson on piety and respect falls out of a fear of divine punishment. The audience learns from the *Hippolytus* that mortals face serious consequences if they show contempt for the gods. The play evokes a fear of such punishment, and by doing so, goes a step further and urges its audience to act with piety and respect towards the gods. The distinction is important, because this urging towards piety is peculiar in Aristophanes' speech. We have questioned already whether the speech instills fear in its readers, with its warning of further cleaving. Aristophanes goes further, however, and very explicitly characterizes piety towards the gods as a consequence of Eros – piety is directly connected to this longing we have to be reunited with our other self.

We should encourage all men, therefore, to treat the gods with all due reverence, so that we may escape this fate and find wholeness instead. And we will, if Eros is our guide and our commander (193a5-7).

With Eros as our leader, delivering to each of us our fitting lovers, we will be properly pious and respectful towards the gods. In this final way, then, by urging piety and respect towards the gods, the speech of Aristophanes is tragic in nature. Here, though, piety is interestingly intertwined with a

very compelling reward: love. If the speech does not work to instill fear in its audience, as tragedy does, it seems to still urge piety towards the gods by offering love as a reward.

Agathon

Given how strongly our attention is drawn to the dramatic elements of Aristophanes' speech, and the surprising discovery that his speech contains elements not just of comedy but also of tragedy, the reader is primed to wonder next what sort of drama the tragedian will deliver. Prompting the question further, just before Agathon begins the dialogue draws our attention to his recent dramatic victory, as well as the confident ease with which he assumed the role of dramatist before the great crowd (194b). The natural expectation is that he will deliver to us something tragic in nature, and something winning. We are surprised again. Even on the most charitable reading Agathon's speech disappoints; it appears to have no recognizable elements of either comedy or tragedy. It is poetical perhaps – one might say flowery and gushing – but it is not formally dramatic. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider in great depth what role Agathon's speech plays in the dialogue, but it is worthwhile to note that the tragedian, the celebrated dramatist of this party, delivers a speech that seems to display none of his dramatic *technē*.¹⁸ If the comic-tragic nature of Aristophanes' speech is crafted to some purposeful end – and surely it is – the lack of tragic elements from the tragedian must be as well. And frankly too, the speech's lack of substance and effect. Agathon may be recently lauded, but one is pained to give his speech multiple readings.¹⁹ I

¹⁸ The speech reads as sophistic rhetoric to me, and to Socrates too it seems, but I won't here pursue the idea (198c).

¹⁹ I don't suggest Agathon's speech is entirely lacking. It's significant, for instance, that he first brings beauty to the discussion and calls it an object of love (197b9). But I will argue that his is the most insipid of the speeches, in stark contrast to the substance and craft of Aristophanes' speech.

will suggest for now that the contrast between the dramatic qualities of the two speeches at the very least casts a spotlight on Aristophanes.

Alcibiades

With the speech of Alcibiades another important element of Greek drama enters the dialogue: the satyr play. This intrusion of satyr drama works on several levels. The satyr play is most obviously evoked by Alcibiades' comparisons of Socrates to satyrs, the figures from which satyr drama takes its name. Further, Alcibiades' drunken intrusion into the sober gathering evokes the satyr play and its role in the Greek dramatic festival. Finally, his speech itself is characterized by Socrates as a satyr drama. We will look more closely at each of these ways in which satyr drama is brought to the reader's attention, but first it will be helpful to have in mind what a satyr drama is – particularly how it fits into the dramatic world of Greek tragedy and comedy.

It is worth noting first that satyr plays are themselves comic and tragic in nature. That is to say, they share elements of form, subject matter, and tone with both tragedy and comedy. They were written by tragedians (each tragedian competing in an Athenian dramatic festival wrote and produced three tragedies followed by one satyr play) and resemble tragedy in their form and mythic subject matter. In its “obscenity, hilarity, and joyful endings” however, satyric drama resembles comedy.²⁰ A satyr drama is a comedy-tragedy of sorts, a mixture of the comic and the serious.²¹ This ambiguous nature of satyr drama is reflected in satyrs themselves. Satyrs have their own ambiguity of character in Greek literature:

²⁰ Seaford (1984) 5.

²¹ Seaford (1984), 1 calls them playful tragedies.

The satyr is an ambiguous creature, cruder than a man and yet somehow wiser, combining mischief with wisdom, animality with divinity.²²

A satyr is also ambiguously neither mortal nor immortal, but that semi-divine figure between the two, the daemon.

Satyr drama is particularly fitting for the *Symposium*, and Alcibiades' entrance in particular. Satyrs and satyr dramas have a close association with Dionysus, with drunkenness, with initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries, with garlands and flute music, with unrestrained lust and sexual frustration, and with symposia in general.²³ Alcibiades' entrance returns the symposium to its normal concerns of drinking, flute music, and revelry, and after his speech a larger throng of revelers turns the party to further disorder and drunkenness. Alcibiades' intrusion and encomium of Socrates, distracting the reader from the seriousness of the philosopher's speech but picking up its lessons in a different tone, shadows the role of the satyr drama in the dramatic tetralogy.

Finally we can note that here too, if we didn't recognize the connection to satyr plays in the characterization of Alcibiades and in the comparison of Socrates to satyrs, Plato openly invites us to make the connection. After Alcibiades' speech Socrates gives voice to what the astute reader has already noticed, namely that Alcibiades has introduced a satyric act to the day's drama: "Well, we are *not* deceived; we've seen through your little satyr play" (222d). The dialogue, it seems, is determined to turn our attention to its dramatic elements.

§2. Aristophanes and the Unified Dramatist

²² Seaford (1984) 7. Seaford here notes how this ambiguity is exploited in Alcibiades' speech, an exploitation we will return to in the second half of the chapter.

²³ Seaford (1984) 5-8, 38-40.

I have shown that the *Symposium* is saturated with drama and dramatists. Our attention is drawn repeatedly to the presence of the dramatists at the dinner party and to the elements of drama in the individual speeches. There is also a notable tendency to unify the dramatic arts (tragedy and comedy). We see this unification in the speech of Aristophanes, in the satyr drama of Alcibiades' speech (in as much as a satyr play is ambiguously comic and tragic), and most pointedly in the closing remarks of the dialogue. Perhaps too in Agathon's speech – where there is no expected tragedy, there is no recognizable drama of any kind. This is all rather puzzling, though. If Plato meant to infuse the *Symposium* with elements of the stage, what connection did he make between these elements – particularly this notion of a unified dramatist – and the centrally important philosophy of Socrates' speech? That is to ask: to what end are these curiosities employed? I set as my second and final task of the chapter to explore this question.

The Problem of Poets as Educators

I suggest that one significant effect of this emphasis on drama in the dialogue, and of the tendency to unify tragedy and comedy, is to spotlight Aristophanes as a dramatist. Because he is given the tragic-comic speech, and Agathon the non-dramatic speech, we might take Aristophanes as a representative dramatist (a kind of archetype dramatist).²⁴ Further, the fact that his speech has both comic and tragic elements suggests him as a possible candidate for the unified dramatist. Here is

²⁴ Rowe (1998), 9 suggests that the speeches are each meant to represent a type as well as an individual: "...so Phaedrus is perhaps the amateur rhetorician; Pausanias the real lover...; Eryximachus the theorizing physician; Aristophanes the comic poet; and Agathon the tragic poet." I won't consider here all the speakers of the dialogue as representative types, though I do think such a task is possible and worthwhile. It is my specific aim here though to show that Rowe makes a mistake of superficiality in his type-casting of the dramatists.

someone showing skill in both genres - might Aristophanes be the unified dramatist Socrates speaks of in the closing scene?

In the end, I think not. But it will take some care to draw out why, and we benefit first from recognizing the significance of even asking the question. By offering Aristophanes as a candidate for the unified dramatist, by spotlighting him in the dialogue and attributing to him such a powerful speech, I suggest that Plato casts him as an important and formidable speaker among the symposiasts. I will go further and suggest that he is cast as a formidable *opponent* in the dialogue, but ultimately one who is set up for failure in at least two important ways. In order to understand how he might be an opponent, with whom exactly he is competing, and how I mean to say he is characterized as both formidable and failed, we must look to the historical Aristophanes and his relationship to a long-standing concern of Plato's – namely, the role of poets as educators of the people.

Plato was deeply concerned about poets, particularly the role of poets as educators of the people, and in his dialogues we see this concern manifest as a struggle between philosophy and poetry.

“Plato writes on poetry not as a disinterested observer, but as a passionate participant in a struggle between poetry and philosophy whose repercussions are still being felt today”.²⁵ This conflict does not arise explicitly in the *Symposium*, as e.g. in the *Republic*, but the dialogue speaks indirectly to the issue.^{26 27} Given that Plato worried so intently about the role of poets in the polis, one should

²⁵ Murray (1996) vii.

²⁶ The dialogue does, of course, have something to say about poets in Socrates' speech. A discussion of the treatment of poets there is outside the scope of this chapter. Here I wish only to consider how the dialogue may speak indirectly to Plato's concerns about poets as educators.

²⁷ Even Plato's more direct treatment of poets, e.g. in the *Republic* or the speech of Socrates here, is never direct treatise. “[Plato's] views [on poetry] have to be extracted from a number of different dialogues, and his discussions of poetry are always embedded in some wider context; poetry is never treated as a subject itself”. Murray (1996) 2.

wonder about his dramatization of poets in the *Symposium*, particularly since these poets come together – with Socrates, no less – in celebration of a dramatic victory. We should not be surprised to find his concerns about poets, about their didactic role in particular, woven into his portrayal of them. I suggest that Plato does just this in the dialogue, particularly in his dramatization of Aristophanes. To see how, we must first understand how the historical Aristophanes was himself concerned about the didactic role of poets.

Plato was not the only Greek to reflect on or worry about the didactic role of poets in the polis. Poets were popularly thought of as educators of the people, and the historical Aristophanes was himself concerned about whether, or in what manner, poets ought to educate the city. We can see this perhaps most prominently in the *Frogs*.²⁸ In the *Frogs*, the god Dionysus is in despair about the state of Athenian politics and tragedy, and in order to save the city he travels to the underworld to bring back the recently deceased tragedian Euripides. In the underworld he finds that Euripides has challenged Aeschylus, a tragic poet of the previous generation, for the seat of Best Dramatic Poet at the dinner table of Hades. A contest is held between the two and Dionysus is asked to serve as judge. This contest goes on for some time but ends in deadlock, and finally Dionysus decides he will choose the poet who offers the best advice to the troubled city. He asks them in particular what to do about Alcibiades, who had gone into exile for the second time in 406 B.C. just before the production of the *Frogs*. Euripides criticizes Alcibiades in the language of the sophists, but Aeschylus advises, in high poetic language, that they bring Alcibiades back. Dionysus judges in favor of Aeschylus and returns with him to Athens.

28 See also, for example, the *Thesmophoriazousae*.

The didactic role of poets is a significant issue at play in the *Frogs*.²⁹ The chorus first brings the issue to discussion, and it is later central to the struggle between Euripides and Aeschylus in their contest for supremacy. Aeschylus claims that by depicting brave and noble people in his plays (e.g. the *Persians*) he will instill these qualities in his audience. Euripides claims that by depicting more ordinary and less noble characters (e.g. Phaedra of the *Hippolytus*) he will induce more rationality and critical thinking in his audience. Part of the tension here is between the old-fashioned, conservative values of Aeschylus' generation and the modern sensibilities of contemporary Athens.³⁰ Dionysus, of course, chooses conservative values.

The *Frogs* delivers several strong, direct claims about the didactic role of poets. The chorus leader says: "It's right and proper for the sacred chorus to help give good advice and instruction to the city" (687). The chorus then offers a long list of political advice (e.g. pardoning political exiles) and later the chorus leader says: "But even at this hour, you fools, do change your ways and once again choose the good people" (734-5). During the dramatic contest Aeschylus has much to say about the didactic role of poets, most notably at 1053-5: "The poet has a special duty to conceal what's wicked, not stage it or teach it. For children the teacher is the one who instructs, but grownups have the poets." By bringing this issue to the lips of his characters, and by having Dionysus favor Aeschylus in this dispute, Aristophanes reveals himself in the *Frogs* to be a strong proponent of poets as educators. The endorsement comes with qualifications – one ought to consider what sort of values should be taught and what dramatic style is proper for that instruction – but the poet *is* ultimately the educator of the people.

²⁹ I primarily wish to offer some modest conclusions about the *Frogs* here that draw out the relationship between Aristophanes' and Plato's views on the role of poets as teachers. Understanding the relationship is important, I think, for understanding the treatment of drama and dramatists in the *Symposium*, and from that the dialogue as a whole.

³⁰ On the antithesis between the traditional values of the old generation and the uncertain, innovative present in which the play was produced, see Dover (1972), 183.

I will suggest that Aristophanes is not thinking about only tragic dramatists in his play, but that at the end of the day he is aiming himself to educate the people and to rescue the city from its troubles. Through the medium of the *Frogs* he advises them in immediate and practical ways, suggesting in particular that the city bring back Alcibiades, and also in more abstract ways, by engaging his characters in this open and heated discussion about the role of poets as teachers and the dangers and responsibilities inherent in that role. This is ultimately a role he assumes himself. In the end, then, the *Frogs* suggests three possible saviors for the city: Aeschylus (with his conservative moral instruction); Alcibiades, the shrewd general; and Aristophanes, as the pedagogue of the comic stage.

I think Plato must have been aware of Aristophanes' endorsement of the poet as a pedagogical figure, and he must have been keenly aware of the danger Aristophanes posed in assuming this role himself. I will suggest further that he may have been thinking of the *Frogs* in particular when crafting the *Symposium*.³¹ The two works share some striking features: a contest involving poets;³² Dionysus in a central role, and his selection as contest judge;³³ an emphasis on poetic *technē* and victory; a connection to the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries (in the *Frogs*, they make up the underworld chorus); and finally, the late and consequential appearance of Alcibiades.³⁴

³¹ My larger argument need not depend on this more direct connection to the *Frogs*.

³² A contest, or *agon*, is itself another classic feature of old comedy. Arieti and Burrus (2010) 10.

³³ Dionysus, or his cups, will be the judge of Agathon's and Socrates' wisdom (175e8). Given the setting, we might see him as judge for the speaking contest at large.

³⁴ Nussbaum (1986), 169 notes correctly, I think, that Alcibiades is a central character in the *Frogs* long before his appearance in the final lines of the play. We might say that in both works his entrance (in the *Frogs* merely by name) is long anticipated and climactic. This is true of the *Symposium* particularly when re-reading.

Aristophanes and Plato were clearly at odds about the role of poets as educators of the people.³⁵

Returning to the *Symposium*, I would like to suggest that this real-life conflict is played out beneath the surface of the dialogue, most notably in the speeches of Aristophanes and Socrates. We might see that Aristophanes, the representative dramatist of the dialogue, assumes this didactic role of the poet. I suggest this in part because of the tragic elements of his speech, particularly its instruction on the proper mortal relationship with the gods, and partly because the character Aristophanes openly adopts the role. He says at the start of his speech: “I shall, therefore, try to explain Eros’ power to you; and you, please pass my teaching on to everyone else” (189d). If Plato’s Aristophanes assumes this role of teacher – just as Aristophanes did in real life – we might consider how he fares in this role in the setting of the dialogue. If the didactic task is, in short, to teach the truth about Eros, how close does Aristophanes come to the truth in his speech? The question, I think, is relative, and so we must look to the other speeches as well. In particular, we can now consider the speech of Socrates. I suggest that Aristophanes is set up here as an opponent to Socrates, not just in the speaking contest of the frame narrative, but more importantly as an opponent in this role of teacher. Which of the two speeches offers the right and proper lessons on love?

To begin, we can see that Aristophanes succeeds in one significant way, by bringing to the discussion a question about love neglected by the previous speakers. He shifts the lesson plan, as it were, to a new question: namely, what is the *object* of love? From him we learn that the object of love is to be reunited each of us with our missing half (or a suitable surrogate) and from this reunification to be cured of our inherent, flawed incompleteness. This question is picked up directly

³⁵ I do think, however, that Plato might have felt some respect and appreciation for Aristophanes’ exploration of the issue and his worry about the responsibility and danger of the poets’ didactic role. There is a kinship in their mutual concern that poets like Euripides offered the wrong lessons in their dramas, and Euripides was of special concern to Plato too (cf. *Republic* 568b-c). However, his sympathies would surely have been tempered by Aristophanes’ mistreatment of Socrates in the *Clouds*; from Plato’s point of view, Aristophanes failed himself as an educator.

by Diotima in Socrates' speech, and we see there that it is central to her account of love. Diotima, of course, has an alternate truth to teach: the object of love is not to be made whole and complete by uniting with one's proper beloved, but rather to have the good forever, to achieve immortality (or a suitable surrogate), and to reproduce in the presence of beauty. In answering his question, then, our representative dramatist is outdone. Socrates – relaying the lesson of Diotima – proves the more successful pedagogue.

I will suggest that the speech of Aristophanes succeeds in a second, less obvious way. This success too is a matter of bringing the right question to the discussion, and here the question is perhaps more directly relevant to the issue of poets as moral educators. In fact, it comes right from the tragic stage: namely, what is the proper mortal relationship with the divine? We have seen already that Aristophanes answers in classic dramatist form: we mortals must be pious and respectful towards the gods, and certainly we must not aspire to their position in the world. To reach for divinity is to commit the gravest of mortal errors.³⁶ To Aristophanes' misfortune, here too Socrates offers a competing lesson. From him, again relaying the teachings of Diotima, we learn an astonishingly different truth. As it turns out, all mortals desire to possess the good forever, as the gods do, and so all mortals desire what is exclusively the possession of the gods: immortality. It is the natural longing of every human (in fact even of non-human animals) to have a share of immortal divinity. And notably then, it is no hubris at all to aspire to the divine. It is *in our nature*, and in the end we pose no threat to the gods in our striving; we can achieve only surrogate immortality at best. What surrogate we attempt to lay hold of depends on the fertilities of our body and mind: some seek

³⁶ Aristophanes is not the first to connect love to the relationship between mortals and gods. Eryximachus does also at 188c-d. I won't consider Eryximachus' speech at length here, but it is significant that he attributes to love what he characterizes as a universal force of attraction, a harmonious interaction between mortals and gods. His conception of love's role is not too far from Aristophanes'; he too considers love important to maintaining mortal piety and reverence, and in maintaining friendship between mortals and the stronger, more powerful gods (188d10).

to beget biological children; some laws or poems; others virtue. Or perhaps we all in the end seek immortal fame and glory.³⁷ All are pregnant with these possibilities, though, and all desire to reproduce in the presence of beauty. Of course, it is the philosopher who best succeeds. By ascending the ladder of love he comes to know the form of Beauty, and from this he begets true virtue and is remembered always by the gods. This is the payoff of Diotima's instruction, and it is a payoff that cannot be separated from the question Aristophanes has brought to us from the stage: if we wish to have the proper mortal relationship with the divine, we will ascend to the form of Beauty ourselves, step by step as we have been taught. Here again Socrates succeeds as pedagogue. Aristophanes, voice of the Athenian playwright, has been set up and knocked down again. We might not be surprised by all this. If a primary didactic task of the dramatist is to offer lessons on the proper mortal relationship with the divine, then perhaps naturally a philosopher would prove the superior teacher. It is the philosopher, after all, who is best connected to the divine realm – the realm of not just the gods but also of the Forms. And all is not pitiable for Aristophanes. He fails to offer truthful lessons, but it is remarkable that he is given a chance to try. That he is allowed to set out these important questions, and too, that he is given such a stirring and memorable speech. One thinks that even Aristophanes would see his final position here as a fair one, for in this contest he is beaten, but never ridiculed.

This, then, is how I mean to characterize Aristophanes as a formidable but failed opponent. I suggest that Plato casts him in this role as a way of acknowledging the powerful and influential role of dramatists in the polis, particularly Aristophanes himself. To dismiss the Aristophanes of the *Symposium* – to fail to see the substance and appeal of his myth – is as grave a mistake as to dismiss

³⁷ I leave aside the difficult task of sorting out, from these possibilities, exactly how each of the bio-lovers, poets, legislators, craftsmen, and philosophers achieve their surrogate immortality.

the real-life comedian.³⁸ Better, Plato must have realized, to acknowledge him as a formidable opponent and meet him head on with the philosopher's truths. It is fitting, then, that where the narrative Aristophanes succeeds is in his questions. From a Platonic perspective, the historical Aristophanes sets out an admirable question in the *Frogs*: who is the best teacher of the city? It is only in his answer – offering up himself, principally – that he wanders grossly astray.

The Unified Dramatist

We can return now to the question of the unified dramatist. What – or *who* – did Plato have in mind, ending his dialogue with such a proposal? We are prompted, I have argued, to consider Aristophanes as a candidate, in as much as his speech displays both comic and tragic *techne*. In the end, however, since the dialogue's representative dramatist has been beaten at one of the dramatists' most important didactic tasks – to offer instruction on the proper mortal relationship with the divine – I believe we are meant also to discard him as the unified dramatist of the closing remarks. One could argue that we are meant to take Aristophanes as our unified dramatist, and to see that even the unified dramatist is outdone by the philosopher. That should feel rather dissatisfying, however, since Socrates raises the question after the contest is firmly decided. More importantly, we should accept Aristophanes as the unified dramatist of the closing remarks only in the absence of other reasonable candidates. If we find someone better to fill the role – as I think we can – then Aristophanes can be set aside as the formidable but failed opponent Plato has set him out to be. He might have assumed the aims of tragedy, but in reality he is just a comedian.

³⁸ Rowe (1998), 9 suggests that the dramatists are treated as incompetent in the dialogue, and here I think he entirely misses the power of Aristophanes' role; he dismisses his speech as "an imaginative but otherwise useless aetiology of *sexual intercourse*." He is right to note, however, that poets are treated here, like elsewhere in the corpus, as dangerous rivals to the philosopher in the education of the young.

Who, then, is the unified dramatist? Socrates, twice the successful pedagogue, is perhaps a candidate, in as much as he succeeds at this prime task of the poet. We can find a far better candidate, however, in Plato himself.³⁹ If we step outside the narrative for a moment, we see that Plato is the real author of Aristophanes' speech, with its comic and tragic elements. He is the author of Socrates' speech too, with its more truthful lessons about human longing and human relationships with the divine. He is the author of Alcibiades' speech, which he calls himself (through the mouth of Socrates) a satyr play. And Plato of course is the author of the whole of the dialogue and all of its dramatic elements – alternately comic and serious, moving and instructive. When we consider Plato as the author of all the speeches, we find him to be the real unified dramatist of the closing remarks – an author, as it were, of tragedy, comedy, and satyr play.

Here we might say something more of Socrates' and Diotima's roles in the dialogue. If Aristophanes is our representative dramatist, we might see Socrates and Diotima as representative philosophers. So far I have treated them rather interchangeably, but now I will more pointedly suggest that the two work together as a representative *pair* of philosophers – as archetype teacher and student engaged in instructive dialectic. We can go even further, I think, and note that Socrates, in relaying this conversation with his teacher Diotima, treats her much as Plato himself treats the historical Socrates. That is to say, Plato relays in his dialogues dialectical conversations of Socrates just as Socrates of the *Symposium* relays an instructive conversation with Diotima. In either case, whether the conversations are based in historical truth or whether they are wholly imagined hardly seems to matter. They give voice to an admired teacher, and they relay lessons whose obscured origin – teacher or student – detracts not at all from their value. Teacher and student, and the

³⁹ Rowe (1998), 214-5 suggests in passing both Socrates and Plato as candidates. It is Plato “who after all is the one who puts S. on the stage (but P., of course, is not there).”

product of their pedagogic relationship, are all rather inseparable. Socrates and Diotima then are not merely representative philosophers engaged in dialectic; together we might see them as representative of the Platonic dialogue and the relationship between Plato and his teacher Socrates.⁴⁰

This should reinforce our reading of Plato as the unified dramatist. In my discussion of Aristophanes I treated him as an opponent of Socrates in the dialogue. From the external perspective, from which we understand that Plato is the author of the whole dialogue, notably including Socrates' speech, we come to understand that Aristophanes is cast as an opponent also to Plato himself. If the speech of Socrates is more didactically successful, then it is Plato himself, as its real author, who outdoes the dramatist's instruction and is the more successful teacher. By casting Aristophanes as his representative dramatist, and putting words in his mouth that speak for the dramatists at large, Plato has cleverly shown not only that he can assume the aims and *techne* of the dramatists (for he is the author of that speech too) but also that through his dialogues (here represented by Socrates and Diotima) he can carry out these aims to greater effect – namely, by offering more truthful lessons than those of the dramatists' stage.

Plato sets himself in opposition to Aristophanes in another notable way in the *Symposium*, and here I suggest a more direct opposition to the historical comedian. To see this we must return to the speech of Alcibiades. If we read Plato as the author of this 'satyr play' (certainly Alcibiades is no poet) we can see that in the speech he wages a continued defense of Socrates.⁴¹ Through the mouth

⁴⁰ One could question whether Socrates' speech is really like a Platonic dialogue, given that there is relatively little dialectical back and forth in their reported discussion. In answer, I'll suggest that the discursive nature of the speech is more akin to the middle dialogues than the early. In that vein, I agree with the suggestion of Lamb (1925), 76 that the attribution of the speech to Diotima is "meant to indicate that we are passing beyond the bounds of Socratic thought and listening really to Plato".

⁴¹ Rowe (1998) 1; Sheffield (2006) 193. Bury (1923), 16 suggests that this chief aim of the dialogue – eulogy of Socrates – explains why the story is relayed indirectly; it would be inappropriate for him to be the narrative source of this praise.

of Alcibiades he offers a direct and admiring portrayal of Socrates. He is a man unaffected by winter, hunger, or drink, who will stand with dignified calm through the day and night reflecting on a thought, and who displayed extraordinary valor at Potidea and Delium.⁴² Even when Alcibiades makes a charge of hubris against Socrates, the philosopher's temperance is revealed.⁴³ Here, in a speech of professed criticism, Plato offers perhaps his most apologetic portrayal of Socrates, and as readers it is difficult not to turn our thoughts both to the *Apology* and to the *Clouds*. In Socrates' speech Plato challenged the traditional dramatists' lessons on the human relationship with the divine. Here in Alcibiades' speech he offers a competing lesson on a more personal topic, the character and virtue of Socrates.

The two lessons must have been inseparable in Plato's mind. In Alcibiades' speech he embellishes his characterization of Socrates with comparisons to satyr figures, cleverly exploiting the ambiguous nature of satyr drama and satyrs to highlight the ambiguous nature of Socrates.⁴⁴ Socrates' outward appearance, famously unattractive and satyr-like, contradicts his inner beauty, which is full of divine and wondrous images (215b, 216e). "This ambiguous nature that mediates between a lowly ugliness and ignorance, and a divine beauty and wisdom makes the comparison with the satyrs most appropriate".⁴⁵ His *logoi* are given this same ambiguous characterization; they at first appear ridiculous, but inside they have sense and virtue and a divine nature (221e-222a).⁴⁶ This comparison to satyrs serves also to cast Socrates as a semi-divine figure. Like the ambiguously semi-divine satyr,

⁴² This defense at 221b3-4 alludes directly to Aristophanes (*Clouds*, 362) twisting his criticism to praise. Sheffield (1996) 193. We think too of Socrates' reflective delay at the start of the *Symposium*, and his immunity to drink and to lack of sleep in the closing scene.

⁴³ Sheffield (2006) 193: "It is an ironic twist that the hubris often associated with sexual assault, and attributed to the behaviour of the lusty satyr, is here the result of Socrates' *sōphrosunē* and sexual abstinence".

⁴⁴ Sheffield (2006) 188-9, 193-4.

⁴⁵ Sheffield (2006) 197.

⁴⁶ Here we find the familiar *καταγέλαω*. I believe we are meant to think both of the ridicule of Socrates in the *Clouds*, and of Aristophanes' worry that he will be ridiculed in the *Symposium* for his *logoi* (189b).

Socrates and his *logoi* have a share both of the mortal and of the divine. This should be no real surprise. It is the philosopher who ascends to the divine realm, by way of Diotima's ladder, and comes closest to achieving what the gods have, proximity to the Forms. Once there, the divinity he finds is internalized – to have knowledge of the Forms is, in a sense, to have a share of the divine. This is the divinity we find hidden in the inner layers of his character and expressed in his *logoi*.⁴⁷ Here, finally, we see that Plato's two lessons are one and the same. In Socrates' speech we learned that a mortal pursuit of the divine is natural and good. In Alcibiades' speech he offers up Socrates as an exemplar of this pursuit.

We should pause a moment to consider Alcibiades' charge of hubris. When he makes this accusation he calls on his listeners to act as jurymen:

He spurned my beauty, of which I was so proud, members of the jury – for this is really what you are: you're here to sit in judgment of Socrates' amazing arrogance and pride (219c).

The language evokes a legal context, and it is hard not to think of the *Apology* in particular, where Socrates pleads his defense to the Athenian jurymen. As readers of Alcibiades' speech we too are invited to serve as jury members, just as we are reading the *Apology*. Plato means for us to consider whether any of these charges – hubris against Alcibiades, corrupting the youth of the city, acting impiously towards the gods – are just. And too, he means for us to see that they are not. In the *Symposium* Alcibiades may feel his accusation is just, but from our external perspective we see that Socrates' rejection is not hubris, but virtue. I suggest that Alcibiades' charge serves to evoke the more serious charges of Socrates' trial. It was Plato's view, of course, that those serious charges

⁴⁷ I am suggesting here a qualitative interpretation of the philosopher's surrogate immortality, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to defend such an interpretation at length. At any rate, the philosopher does achieve some kind of surrogate immortality by ascending Diotima's ladder, notably the best kind, and this bestows on him a semi-divinity akin to that of satyrs.

arose in part from Aristophanes and his *Clouds*. Through Alcibiades' accusation of hubris, then, Plato strengthens his opposition to Aristophanes. His cleverness is two-fold, however: the charge of hubris against Socrates also evokes the charge of hubris against the proto-humans of Aristophanes' speech. I have shown already how Plato aligns himself against Aristophanes (and the dramatists at large) over this charge of hubris, and how he offers Socrates as a counter-model, striving successfully and without hubris to semi-divinity. We should recognize, I think, the connection between the charges of hubris and impiety in Aristophanes' speech and those against Socrates at his trial. If Plato's two lessons of the dialogue are inseparable – the one on the proper mortal relationship with the divine, and the other on the true character of Socrates – it is no wonder. The opposition had thrown the questions together irrevocably.

In all of this we come to see, I think, that for Plato the prosecution and defense of Socrates was a battle waged well beyond the court of 399 B.C. The prosecution brought by Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon had its opening arguments in the 423 B.C. production of the *Clouds*, and Socrates' defense, failed in its first attempt, was given closing arguments by Plato – in the *Apology*, in the dialogues at large, and here too in the *Symposium*. In Plato's mind, stage, court, and dialogue must all have felt continuous, for he gives over to us readers on appeal what was once set before theatergoers and 500 jurists – the sober task of Socrates' judgment.

§3. Conclusion: The *Symposium* as Didactic Drama

I have argued that Plato himself is the unified dramatist of the closing remarks, and that through the speeches of the dialogue he sets himself in strong opposition to the historical Aristophanes, principally in defense of Socrates and the philosopher's relationship with the divine. In short, I

mean to suggest that Plato conceived of the *Symposium* as a kind of didactic drama and of himself as a kind of didactic dramatist. To conclude that Plato aspired to drama may give one pause, given his deep criticism of poets. Nevertheless, he had an evident affinity for poetry.

He was clearly drawn towards poetry like no other philosopher before or since. There are references to, and discussions of, poetry in dialogues from all periods of his life, and his work itself displays distinctly poetic qualities.⁴⁸

His chosen genre, the dialogue, is unavoidably dramatic in nature,⁴⁹ and the drama of the *Symposium* is especially evident. One commentator notes the intertextual responsiveness of the seven speeches, as well as the witty playfulness in this intertextuality, and concludes that the whole “comes as close to a comedy as anything Plato might have written”.⁵⁰ What I have tried to show in this chapter is how intentionally Plato assumes this role of dramatist, and how he exploits the dramatic elements of the dialogue to draw our attention both to his acceptance of the role and to his opposition to Aristophanes in that role.

We might not be surprised at all. For I would wager that Plato did not object to drama in and of itself, but only drama done badly, to some harmful effect. Socrates says in the *Phaedrus* that writing in and of itself is not shameful, merely writing that is done badly (258d).⁵¹ Remarkably, Pausanias echoes this sentiment in the *Symposium*; speaking of good and bad loving, he says:

⁴⁸ Murray (1996) 12; she quotes here Sir Phillip Sidney (1959), *A Defense of Poetry*: “...though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin, as it were, and beauty depended most of poetry”.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the technical dramatic qualities of Platonic dialogues, and his adaptation of the literary mime, see Tarrant (1955), 82-89. The conclusion of the discussion is that to Plato the dialogue is itself a drama, and that Plato is a dramatist at heart; and further, that his instinct for drama “not only determines the framework of his dialogues, but equally operates in the development of the arguments they contain” (84, 89).

⁵⁰ Rowe, (1998) 8. He continues: “...though it is a comedy which – unlike Aristophanes’ own piece – overlies something more profound.” On the whole of the dialogue he is right, but he misses what underlies the comedy of Aristophanes’ speech. On the dramatic interweaving or responsiveness of the speeches, see also Bury (1923), 20. Nussbaum (1996), 198 too suggests the dialogue is a comic tragedy.

⁵¹ Notable especially given his criticisms of writing in the dialogue’s famous writing paradox.

The reason for this applies in the same way to every type of action: considered in and of itself, no action is either good or bad, honorable or shameful... How it comes out depends entirely on how it is performed (181a).

Socrates says too in the *Phaedrus* that good speaking or writing requires knowledge of the truth of one's subject, and this too resonates in the *Symposium*. The passerby says to Apollodorus in the opening lines, "So please, will you tell me about it? After all, Socrates is your friend – who has a better right than you to report his conversation?" (172b). We are meant also to think of Plato, I believe. He too was a friend and follower of Socrates, and he too is in a better position to speak the truth about him – to set straight ignorant gossip and malicious fictions.

It is as if the author means us to read into his preface something to this effect: 'Socrates has been misrepresented: it is my task to clear his reputation by putting the facts in their true light'.⁵²

And if these lines bring Plato to mind, they also suggest the misrepresentation of Aristophanes.

I wish to return to the *Frogs* one final time. Plato's defense of Socrates in the *Symposium* evokes the *Apology* and the *Clouds*, but I will suggest it is also aimed at the *Frogs*. In the final lines of the play the chorus explains why Aeschylus has won the poetic contest. After setting out the positive reasons for the win, the chorus explains what Aeschylus did not do, and thus what Euripides did wrong.

They say, in part:

To sit by Socrates and talk, discarding poetry and leaving out what matters most in the art of tragedy.
To spend time on idle theorizing and nonsensical quibbling is loony (1491-5).⁵³

Aristophanes' judgment against Euripides turns out to be also a judgment against Socrates. To him, the dangers of the innovative Euripides and the new teachings of the sophists were one and the

⁵² Bury (1923) 18. I disagree about *whose* misrepresentation the dialogue is responding to. The most obvious, he says, is Xenophon in his *Symposium*, but since that is a later work he offers as his best guess Polycrates the *rhétor*. Perhaps Bury is right, but in this chapter I have tried to show how the *Symposium* responds to Aristophanes.

⁵³ Trans. from Dover (1993) 21.

same.⁵⁴ This must have had a sting of irony for Plato, for he shared these concerns. To cast Socrates in with that lot, that old offense of the *Clouds*, must have felt a gross error to Plato.

In the *Symposium* he responds. He does not offer Aeschylus or Alcibiades as saviors of the city, but instead continues his defense of Socrates (who in the *Apology* presents himself as his own kind of benefactor to Athens).⁵⁵ It is not Aeschylus that Plato would bring back from the underworld to instruct the city; rather, it is Socrates himself he resurrects, giving him a living voice in his dialogues. And where Aristophanes ultimately offered himself as the teacher and savior of the city, Plato, I have argued here, offers himself as the unified dramatist of the closing scene – a dramatist whose lessons are really and truly of value to the Athenian people.

⁵⁴ Dover (1993) 21; Nussbaum (1996) 170. Dover (1993), 22 notes also a connection to the *Clouds*; he sees in these lines an allusion to the charges of idleness directed there at Socrates (316, 334).

⁵⁵ A stinging one, of course.

CHAPTER 2: RHETORICIAN AND TEXT AS TEACHER

There are two well-known puzzles often addressed in *Phaedrus* scholarship: the so-called ‘problem of unity’ and the famous ‘writing paradox’. The former recognizes the special difficulty in identifying what holds the parts of the *Phaedrus* together, in as much as the dialogue is uniquely rich in thematic, stylistic, and structural diversity. The latter examines why it is that a written dialogue like the *Phaedrus* ends with a seemingly very harsh critique of writing itself, and how seriously that critique is meant to undermine the many writings of its author. The central aim of this chapter is to show how importantly these puzzles are related, and to offer solutions to them that fit naturally together. In short, I will argue that what most importantly unifies the parts of the *Phaedrus* is that together they function as a kind of course on the art of rhetoric – or, as it will turn out, teaching itself.

§1. The Puzzles

The Problem of Unity

It takes one read through of the *Phaedrus* to grasp the problem of unity. The most notable thing about the dialogue is that its two halves (roughly speaking) seem almost jarringly mismatched. The first half of the dialogue is made up of a series of three speeches on the subject of love. The first is a written speech on love by the famous orator Lysias, read aloud by Phaedrus (230e-234c). In it he argues for the innovative thesis that one ought to succumb not to the pursuits of a lover but to the non-lover instead. Socrates finds the speech lacking and attempts to deliver his own speech defending the same thesis on clearer and more philosophical grounds (237b-241d). At the speech’s conclusion Socrates’ daemonic sign intervenes, however, and compels him to improvise a second

speech recanting his first (243e-257b). This so-called ‘palinode’ has traditionally drawn the most attention and admiration among the dialogue’s parts, and it is not difficult to understand why. The speech delivers the very height of Platonic poetics and mythology, and at the same time visits many of the highlights of Platonic doctrine: the tripartite nature of the soul, the relationship between mortals and the divine, the relationship of each to the eternal Forms, the mortal soul’s reincarnate life-cycle and recollection of the Forms, the role of beauty and love in this process, and finally the nature of philosophy itself.

In its second half the dialogue shifts abruptly in content, tone, and style. The subject of love which dominated the first half is left behind for good, as is for the most part the soaring myth, vivid metaphor, and gorgeous language. We turn instead to a careful, dialectical discussion of the true nature of rhetoric and the conditions that are necessary for successful instances of it. Here too a great deal of ground is covered, but in slower, more rigorous detail.

The problem of unity should begin to be apparent. The content and the style of the two halves of the dialogue differ substantially. Given all of this, one is hard-pressed to reconcile the two halves. What is it that holds them together as a unified piece of work? This is a question invited by the dialogue itself. Socrates says to Phaedrus:

Every speech [*logos*] must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work (264c1-5).

Commentators since antiquity have understood Socrates here to be placing a constraint of ‘logographic necessity’ on speeches and other works of discourse: their parts must fit together into a

unified, balanced whole.⁵⁶ One is forced to wrestle with the question of what gives unity and balance to the dialogue as a whole. Put simply, does the *Phaedrus* itself have logographic necessity?

This is the so-called ‘problem of unity’. The most significant approaches to solving this problem have fallen into two categories, differentiated by the kind of unity they favor: thematic or strategic.⁵⁷ Commentators have often taken the former approach, assuming that the cohesiveness of the dialogue must be a matter of thematic unity. Of these, most have advocated *thematic monism* – a view that there is one and only one primary theme to the dialogue, to which all other themes are subordinate. To take this approach is to ask what the dialogue is primarily about. This question is immediately difficult though, since the first half is most obviously about love and the second half rhetoric. Nonetheless, the most common thematic approach has been to argue that rhetoric is the main theme of the dialogue.⁵⁸ Such a view is grounded in the fact that rhetoric is present throughout both halves of the *Phaedrus*. It is the central topic of discussion in the second half, but it is prominent in less explicit ways throughout the first half as well: the dialogue begins with excitement about the orator Lysias; Socrates and Phaedrus are both said to be passionate about *logoi* (228b-c); the speeches themselves are specimens of rhetoric, and further, each explicitly seeks to improve upon the rhetorical skill that comes before it; and finally, within the speeches the theme of

⁵⁶ For a discussion of ancient commentary on the issue of the unity of the dialogue, see De Vries (1969), Werner (2007), Yunis (2011).

⁵⁷ For a comprehensive overview of approaches to the question of unity, see Werner (2007). Two others approaches have at times been favored. A non-thematic approach, where the dialogue’s unity is sought in its structural, stylistic, or dramatic unity, is taken by Black (1958), Plass (1968), Helmbold and Holter (1952), Rutherford (1995), and Lebeck (1972). A debunking approach, where the textual puzzle is denied altogether, is taken by Heath (1989) and Ferrari (1994). Werner (2007) offers a particularly effective dismissal of the debunking approach.

⁵⁸ See De Vries (1969), Nehamas and Woodruff (1995), Curran (1986), Weaver (1970), Guthrie (1975), Rowe (1986), Thompson (1973), among others.

rhetoric is present as well, in as much as lovers or non-lovers intent on seducing a young man must employ rhetoric to do so.⁵⁹

All of this seems undoubtedly true. However, it is not sufficient for proving that rhetoric is the *only* – and therefore primary – theme that runs throughout the dialogue. As a result proponents of this solution typically need to augment their case with further arguments. One common choice is to argue that the main theme of the dialogue must be either love or rhetoric, for lack of any better candidates, and that love cannot be the main theme given that it is abandoned in the dialectical second half.⁶⁰ Rhetoric, therefore, must be what unifies the dialogue. A significant problem here is that it is not obvious that rhetoric and love are the only themes that run throughout the dialogue.⁶¹

Another choice is to augment this case for thematic unity by appealing to *structural unity*. Rhetoric is not just a theme that runs throughout the whole of the dialogue; it does so in a special way – namely in that rhetoric is *talked* about in the second half, and *demonstrated* in the first.⁶² If thematic unity can be augmented by structural unity, however, one should wonder exactly how this happens. This has not been adequately explained. It does seem significant that rhetoric is both talked about and demonstrated in the text. But why exactly is this significant? How does it strengthen the case that rhetoric is the primary theme of the dialogue? In short, how does the fact that rhetoric is used in these two distinct ways help to stitch together the dialogue's halves? A clearer explanation of this

⁵⁹ As Werner (2007) 97 elegantly puts it: “All lovers are a kind of rhetorician, in so far as they engage in verbal ‘intercourse’ with one another”. See also Griswold (1996).

⁶⁰ See Nehemas and Woodruff (1995) xxxviii, Rutherford (1995) 262, Waterfield (2002) xlv, Rowe (1986) 7.

⁶¹ Other candidates defended by thematic monists include myth (Werner (2007) 108), self-knowledge (Griswold (1996)), politics (Winnington-Ingram (1953) 18), *psychagogia* (Asmis (1986) 154), education (Waterfield (2002) xlvii), and writing (Burger (1980)). I find several of these themes – philosophy, *psychagogia*, and education – to run through the whole of the dialogue more significantly than love, and I will in turn have something to say about each of them.

⁶² Werner (2007) 99.

relationship between thematic and structural unity ought to be given if one wants to defend thematic monism on these grounds.

More recently it has been argued that *thematic pluralism* can better solve the unity problem. A text has unity if there are one or more themes that run throughout and unify the dialogue.⁶³ Here one might acknowledge rhetoric, love, philosophy, and so on, as *collectively* unifying the dialogue.

Plato uses the entirety of the dialogue, in other words, to comment on each of these subjects and to suggest their interrelations, but without thereby ‘subordinating’ one to another.⁶⁴

There are several reasons one might prefer this view. The obvious benefit here is that it avoids the worries stated above about thematic monism. Second, the kind of unity found in thematic pluralism might be understood as better suited to the dialogue form – in contrast with a philosophical treatise, where thematic monism is a better fit.⁶⁵ This argument is strengthened by looking to other dialogues like the *Symposium* or the *Republic* – these too are probably best understood as having multiple unifying themes, though perhaps not to the extreme that the *Phaedrus* does.

I have deep sympathies for a thematic approach. Reading the *Phaedrus*, one is pushed not merely to find a unity in the dialogue, but to understand the *subject matter* in a unified way. For the reasons mentioned, thematic pluralism seems ultimately more promising than thematic monism. That said, there is something dissatisfying with both kinds of thematic approaches. It seems not enough to say that themes like rhetoric or love run throughout both halves of the dialogue and as a result knit them together into a whole. We are still left to wonder why each theme is treated so differently in

⁶³ Werner (2007) 109-114 is the main proponent of this view. It is one element in a hybrid thematic-strategic approach he defends.

⁶⁴ Werner (2007) 110.

⁶⁵ Werner (2007) 111 characterizes this as “seeking black and white answers from a multi-colored text”. See also De Vries (1969) 22-3.

the dialogue's disparate halves. It would be far more satisfying to say why rhetoric is used in these different ways and what the relationship is between the two. Our intuitive search for unity when reading the dialogue partly calls for such questions to be answered.

When the thematic approach fails to fully satisfy in this way, one option is to look to another kind of unity altogether. An innovative approach is to look for *strategic unity*, where the two disjointed halves are unified in that they serve a common *purpose*. What is Plato up to in giving us a dialogue with two seemingly mismatched halves and pressing us to wrestle with the puzzle of their unity? Some interesting suggestions have been made. One is that the disjointedness of the dialogue is meant to reinforce the criticisms found in the writing paradox – because the *Phaedrus* is a written work, it cannot be a serious or successful specimen of rhetoric. As such, we shouldn't be surprised if it lacks the logographic necessity it demands of a good specimen.⁶⁶ A problem should be obvious here though. If the writing paradox is meant to truly undermine the value of written texts including the *Phaedrus*, everything in it fails in some important way. This includes the whole of the discussion of what is necessary for good instances of rhetoric, including logographic necessity. If the writing paradox stands, that the dialogue is disjointed should be the least of our worries about its value and legitimacy.

It has also been noted that the whole of the *Phaedrus* is palinodic in structure.⁶⁷ It is not just the palinode that recants what has come before it in the dialogue. Each part of the dialogue in fact recants or undercuts what has previously been offered: Socrates' first speech does this to Lysias' speech; the palinode in turn recants them both; the dialectical inquiry that follows supersedes all of

⁶⁶ Werner (2007) 132. I will discuss the writing paradox shortly. For now it is enough to know that it criticizes writing as a medium.

⁶⁷ Werner (2007) 121-1, Griswold (1996) 218.

these speeches, first and foremost in that it questions their value as rhetorical specimens; and finally, the dialectical inquiry of the second half is called into question by the criticisms of the writing paradox – the written text itself is superseded by live, face to face philosophical dialectic.

In each case, what initially appears to be a final and complete statement of the truth – a speech about eros, a speech about the soul and the Forms, a discussion about rhetoric – is soon revealed to be *incomplete*; and so the *Phaedrus* as a whole takes on an onion-like structure, with a series of layers built upon one another.⁶⁸

I find this to be one of the most striking and insightful observations that have been made about the dialogue, but I am not sure its significance has been fully appreciated. It has so far been identified as a matter of structural unity, but I believe it is best understood as a matter of strategic unity. The disjointedness of the two halves of the dialogue and its palinodic structure are importantly connected – the disconnectedness of the dialectical half is part of what allows it to call into question what has come before it. More importantly, I will suggest that Plato is up to a single strategic aim in giving us a dialogue that is at first glance carved into two mismatched halves, and that is at deeper examination carved into a handful of subsequent sections that each call into question what has come before it.

If such a single strategic aim can be identified, this might be our strongest candidate for what unifies the whole of the *Phaedrus*. And if such a strategic aim could work alongside, or even augment, the most viable candidates for thematic unity (either rhetoric alone, or thematic pluralism), all the better. In §2 of the chapter I aim to identify such an aim.

The Writing Paradox

⁶⁸ Werner (2007) 121-2.

Late in the dialogue Socrates tells Phaedrus a story about the ancient Egyptian origins of writing in which writing is criticized quite harshly as an occupation (274c5-78b5). Among the criticisms writing is said to in fact produce forgetfulness and not memory. It is said to give its readers only the *appearance* of being wise and not the reality of it. The students of a text will be greatly overconfident in their own knowledge and wisdom of these things. Readers might absorb and perhaps parrot the content of a text without internalizing that content as knowledge. Similarly, writers themselves will be overconfident in what their written texts can accomplish – in particular where they think their writing can teach an art to another. Further, the written text will only ever say a single, unchanging thing – it remains silent in the face of a student’s questions and is unable to defend itself against critics. Finally, written texts are criticized for having no control over their readers – for not knowing to whom they should speak and to whom they should not. The upshot of all of this is that one should not be serious about written works – at best, they are useful only as playful amusements for one’s self and should not be taken as serious business (278a). It is worth noting, finally, that written compositions are criticized in contrast to what is presented as a better and more capable form of writing – writing directly on the soul of a student through the process of philosophical dialectic (276a1-b5). It would seem that this is the only kind of writing one ought to take seriously (276a5).

The puzzle here should be evident. If these criticisms of writing technology are meant to be serious, what do we make of the fact that they are delivered to us *in a written text*? How serious are these criticisms meant to be? How much are they intended to undermine the written texts of their author? Thinking very broadly for a moment, what was Plato’s attitude towards the written word? This is an exciting question to ask, given on the one hand Plato’s idealization of Socrates and his philosophical method, and on the other hand his innovative choice to depart from him and engage in written

philosophy. As exciting and important as these questions may be, however, this is a puzzle that is not easily resolved. If the criticisms of writing are not meant to be serious, what is the meaning of the myth and the discussion that follows? Why does Socrates speak so directly and harshly about writing if it isn't meant in earnest? On the other hand, if the criticisms are meant to be serious, the problem seems downright intractable. Simply put, the criticisms seem self-undermining. One of the lessons of the writing paradox is that we make a grave mistake as writers and readers if we think that something substantial has been transmitted by written text. This would have to apply to the writing paradox itself if it is meant seriously. But as part of a written text it *cannot* be taken seriously. Where does one go from here?

As famous as the writing paradox is, it has received only passing attention in *Phaedrus* scholarship. The puzzle has not been addressed head-on, although commentators have often weighed in on the question of its seriousness. Most have taken the criticisms at face value.⁶⁹ For Plato, written works are inferior to oral philosophy, and as a result writing of any kind is mere play – Platonic dialogues included. Commentators seem untroubled by the worry I have raised about the self-undermining nature of these criticisms.

Others who take the criticisms seriously see it as evidence that Plato felt a crisis of conscience about his departure from Socratic philosophy to written philosophy.⁷⁰ He likely felt a pull towards the written word (evident in his literary output and aptitude) and at the same time a deep distrust of it as a medium for philosophy and teaching. There is something on target here in this interpretation of

⁶⁹ See Rowe (1986) 1-15, notes on 277d6-e3, 278b7, 279d9-e1, De Vries (1969) 21-2, Werner (2007) 105, Thompson (1973) xxii. Some also take the criticisms to reinforce the controversial suggestion that Plato had unwritten doctrines that contained his most serious and important thought. See Aristotle, *Physics* 209b for a suggestion of unwritten Platonic doctrines.

⁷⁰ Hackforth (1952)162-4.

the writing paradox. Plato does seem to have a complex relationship with the written word. He is unmistakably drawn to drama and poetry throughout the corpus, for instance, and yet at the same time deeply critical of them. In the end, I take this interpretation (perhaps charitably) to offer a somewhat tempered view of the criticisms of writing: they are meant in a deeply serious way, but that seriousness may not be the final word on the matter given Plato's continued interest in doing written philosophy.

I believe we can do better, however. First, this resolution of the issue does not really address the self-undermining quality of the criticisms of writing. One still wonders if, in the moment, Plato meant these criticisms to undermine the very dialogue that contains them. Perhaps more importantly, we should wonder what Plato meant for the reader to make of all of this. Perhaps he is stepping back here in an intimate moment and revealing his internal struggle as a writer of philosophy.⁷¹ But is that *all* he is up to here? Or does he mean for the reader to take something more from the discussion? This question is closely connected to another that I think has not been properly answered by commentators: what is the connection between the writing paradox and the other parts of the dialogue? How does it fit into the dialectical inquiry of the second half, or the dialogue as a whole? For that matter, why do we get the writing paradox in this dialogue (and no other)? In short, if there is unity to the *Phaedrus*, what does the writing paradox have to do with it?

A more satisfying solution to the writing paradox then will do two things. First, it will address in a more straightforward way this concern that the writing criticisms seem self-undermining. Second, it will say something about how the writing paradox fits into the whole of the dialogue. In §2 of the chapter I will offer an interpretation of the paradox that does both.

⁷¹ I am inclined to think that this is true.

There is an especially unremarked passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* (266d-269b) that is worth dwelling on for a moment. In it Socrates and Phaedrus discuss traditional manuals on rhetoric. The passage suggests that such manuals of the time contained a dizzying amount of technical rhetorical instruction: one should begin with a 'preamble', continue with a 'statement of facts' and 'testimonies', add in 'proofs' and 'claims to plausibility', 'confirmations' and 'supplementary confirmations', 'refutations' and 'supplementary refutations', 'covert implications', 'indirect praises' and 'indirect censures'; further, one should make one's speech of the right length, neither too short nor too long, make use of 'reduplications', 'speaking in maxims', and 'speaking in images', use 'correct diction', and finally, end with a 'recapitulation'. The passage is deeply critical of these 'things written up in the books on the art of speaking' (266d). Socrates argues that the writers of these manuals are actually ignorant of rhetoric – they cannot define it, and know only the preliminaries of the art. Their particular flaws lie in thinking that they have discovered rhetoric and that their courses and handbooks offer their students a 'full course in rhetoric' (269b-c). This is not, Socrates says, the right method for acquiring the art of rhetoric. Phaedrus asks in response: "But how, from what source, could one acquire the art of the true rhetorician, the really persuasive speaker?" (269d).

Commentators often note the critical tone of this passage, but by and large take it to reflect nothing much more than Plato's usual critical attitude towards orators, sophists, and other teachers of rhetoric. They do not say much about the passage's relationship to the rest of the dialogue, or why the inquiry into rhetoric pauses here to reflect with distaste on traditional manuals on the subject. More importantly, Phaedrus' question to Socrates gets little notice. I think this is a mistake that

requires correction. In the next section of the chapter I will try to offer a unified solution to the problem of unity and the writing paradox. If the solution I offer is on target, it will mean that Phaedrus' question is actually critically important to the whole of the dialogue.

§2. A Unified Solution: A Platonic Course on Rhetoric

In this section of the chapter I want to offer a solution to the problem of unity that is first and foremost a strategic approach to the problem. To do so, I will try to identify what I take to be Plato's primary aim in this admittedly very complex dialogue. I hope to improve upon strategic approaches that have been offered before by showing more clearly why the dialogue is disjointed and palinodic in structure – what end, that is, these features ultimately achieve. In the end, I believe this approach will also be able to draw on some of the advantages of the thematic approach to unity. An important strength of my solution is that it is able to incorporate an interpretation of the writing paradox that is more satisfying than those that have been offered previously. In particular, it will say something more definitive about whether the writing paradox is meant to be self-undermining. This is all admittedly ambitious, but I will go one step further and hang it all on the question Phaedrus poses to Socrates at 269d: if we wish to learn the true art of rhetoric, where should we turn? In short, I'm going to argue that the answer is meant to be philosophical instruction. And perhaps, despite the writing paradox, the *Phaedrus* itself.

A Practical Demonstration and a Theory Course

What I take to most importantly unify the parts of the *Phaedrus* is that together they function as a kind of multi-part course on the art of rhetoric, one meant to be a substantially better alternative to

the trivialities offered in traditional manuals on the subject. This course as I see it has four parts: a practical demonstration of rhetoric, a seminar on rhetorical theory, an applied theory practicum, and finally, a kind of course evaluation that itself is meant to strengthen the student's theoretical understanding and skill. A reader who successfully completes all of these steps of the course – and many readers will not – might be said to possess a genuine art of rhetoric, perhaps at least at a beginner's level of competence.

I take the rhetorical speeches of the first half of the dialogue to serve initially as a practical demonstration of rhetoric. Nothing much needs to be said here, as it is evident that the three speeches are in fact rhetorical specimens. The reader initially needs only to experience them as such to be prepared to move forward in the course, though it helps that the demonstration of rhetoric has a kind of showiness about it. As noted already, the speeches are delivered with some attention drawn to their status as specimens of rhetoric, and further, as specimens that are intended to improve in quality one after another. This helpfully prepares the reader for two tasks that will come later: looking at rhetorical pieces with an evaluative eye, and thinking explicitly about what makes for good and bad instances of rhetoric.

In the second half of the dialogue Socrates and Phaedrus turn from this demonstration of rhetoric to an inquiry into the nature of rhetoric itself and the conditions that are necessary for successful instances of it. I take this to serve for the reader as a kind of seminar on rhetorical theory, and here it is necessary to say substantially more. We should begin by clarifying what is meant by rhetoric in this inquiry. At the start, Socrates identifies the central aim in this way: they are to investigate in what way one delivers or writes a speech (*logos*) well, and in what way poorly (259e1). From the context of their conversation it is clear he has in mind speeches, which traditionally fall under the

scope of rhetoric. Notice though that he speaks somewhat broadly here, identifying their subject matter as both speaking and writing a *logos*. Throughout the inquiry Socrates will make a careful point to broaden the subject matter even further. He discusses speaking and writing interchangeably throughout the inquiry and suggests that rhetoric in general is a kind of ‘leading of the soul’ (*psychagogia*) by means of things said (*logoi*) (261a5-d5). He includes here and at 258e10 both public and private address, poetry and prose writing, matters of great or small importance, and anything that is said in persuasion of another. Philosophic dialectic will ultimately be his model of good rhetoric, and from this discussion it is clear that he has in mind teaching as well. For this discussion then we will roughly include as rhetoric any exchange of words (*logoi*) between two people – an orator and audience, a student and teacher, a writer and her reader, and so on – meant to persuade or teach. Given that Socrates broadens the ordinary sense of rhetoric so drastically, from here on it will be prudent to speak of their inquiry as an investigation into good and bad *discourse* broadly speaking.

Socrates and Phaedrus proceed with their inquiry by identifying the conditions necessary for good instances of discourse. This project stretches through much of the dialogue’s second half, and by its conclusion they have identified by my count seven conditions necessary for good discourse.⁷² Each of these has been discussed individually in the literature, but surprisingly they have not been explicitly set out together at one time. Seeing them together however affords a better understanding of their collective significance. Here is the list of conditions:

⁷² These might be spoken of as *features* of good discourse, or *criteria* by which to identify good discourse, but I take Socrates to mean that they are collectively necessary and sufficient conditions for instances of good discourse.

- (C1) The logographic necessity condition: the parts of a discourse must fit together into a unified, balanced whole (264c1-5).
- (C2) The definition condition: a discourse must begin with a definition of its subject (263b5-d5, 265d3-266b1, 277b6-8).
- (C3) The knowledge of subject condition: the speaker or writer must have knowledge of the truth of her subject, gained through a process of collection and division (259e5, 277b5).⁷³
- (C4) The knowledge of souls condition: the speaker or writer must have knowledge of the various kinds of souls, gained through a process of collection and division (270b5-10, c10-d10, 271a1-10, 277b8-c1).
- (C5) The knowledge of discourse condition: the speaker or writer must have knowledge of the various kinds of discourse, gained through a process of collection and division (271b1, d5).
- (C6) The practical application condition: the speaker or writer must know when to speak and when to remain silent, as well as which kinds of speeches are appropriate for each kind of soul at any particular time (271b1-6, d5-9, 277e1-3).
- (C7) The experience condition: the speaker or writer must have actual experience applying the knowledge of C6 (271d9-272b1).

⁷³ This method of collection and division is an important one for Plato. It is the careful dialectical process of gathering together essences or natures that are alike, and then carefully separating or dividing the into precise sub-categories. Plato mentions and employs the method repeatedly in the corpus. The method is employed here in the *Phaedrus* itself (I will draw this fact out further in the chapter). Perhaps the best understanding of this method though is offered in the *Sophist*. The dialogue itself is a careful, rigorous demonstration of collection and division, employed in order identify the complex nature of a sophist.

I will suggest shortly that a clear picture of what is important in good discourse emerges from this list. First, however, it will be useful to carry out a similar kind of cataloging of the criticisms of writing found in the writing paradox.⁷⁴ Here is the list of identified problems:

(P1) The problem of forgetfulness: writing will increase a writer's forgetfulness (274e5-275a5).

(P2) The problem of false wisdom: a written text will create a mere appearance of wisdom in its reader without the reality (275a5b5).

(P3) The problem of overconfidence: a writer is mistaken if she thinks that something clear and certain has been passed to her reader through a written text (275c5).

(P4) The problem of unresponsiveness: a written text will only ever say a single, unchanging thing, and as a result it cannot respond to the questions of its reader (275d4-e1).

(P5) The problem of reader selection: a written text cannot select its own reader and as a result may end up in the hands of inappropriate readers (275e1-5).

(P6) The problem of defenselessness: a written text cannot defend itself in the face of criticism and abuse (275d5-e5).

It is worth noting here that some of these problems are things that go wrong for the writer, some are things that go wrong for the reader, and some are things that go wrong for the text itself. In contrast, when a teacher writes directly on the soul of a student through philosophical dialectic – the very model of a good instance of discourse – the 'writer', 'reader', and 'text' (*logoi*) in this case are all protected from these problems (276a).

⁷⁴ To my knowledge this too has not been done systematically before.

This model of good discourse can help us understand the relationship between the conditions of good discourse and the problems with written texts set out above. What emerges is a picture in which good discourse is a dynamic process involving three component parts: (1) the speaker, teacher, or author, (2) the discourse (*logoi*) itself, and (3) the listener, student, or reader. In the case of a teacher writing on the soul of her student this process involves an ideally harmonious interaction of the three: the teacher has knowledge of her subject, this knowledge is expressed in *logoi* to the student, and the student internalizes them as genuine knowledge. Here an important feature of good discourse has been preserved: the ‘text’ remains, as Socrates says, a ‘living and breathing’ *logos* (276a5). It is never separated from a living soul – it is delivered by a living, animate teacher and likewise retains a living, animate existence in the soul of the student.

We are in a position now to say something important about the conditions of good discourse taken as a whole that I don’t believe has been acknowledged before – namely, why *these* are the conditions necessary for good discourse and not some others. It is exactly this unbroken, organic connection between a speaker, her *logoi*, and her listener which the conditions of good discourse allow for. Notably most of these conditions are not features of the discourse itself, but rather prerequisite qualities of the speaker. That is to say, a successful instance of discourse first of all requires a speaker who possesses certain good qualities: knowledge of her subject, of souls, and of composition types, an ability to match them together effectively, and actual experience doing so. If the speaker does not have knowledge of the truth of her subject, then knowledge will not be expressed in the *logoi* of her discourse. This is an important condition Socrates argues for in the discussion – he goes to great pains to show that knowledge of the truth of a subject, and not merely

knowledge of what will seem true to the listener, is necessary for good discourse (260a-262b).⁷⁵

Further, without knowledge of the various kinds of souls and discourse, a speaker will not be able to effectively match the right discourse to the right listener. Finally, if a speaker meets the first six conditions but is simply inexperienced at matching the right souls and discourses, we should not be surprised if the discourse process goes astray in its execution.

If we look in turn to the criticisms of the writing paradox, we see that these too can be understood in terms of this dynamic process of discourse – namely we can understand the problems as things that go wrong in the interaction between a writer, her text, and her reader. If we look first at P4-P6, the problems of unresponsiveness, reader selection, and defenselessness, we can understand an important underlying element of the writing paradox: the concern here is not actually with written works *qua* written works, but written works which are *separated from their authors*.⁷⁶ A text which cannot respond to questions, which says only a single, unchanging thing, which cannot select its own reader, and which cannot defend itself in the face of criticisms and misunderstandings is noticeably a written text that has been separated from its author. It is the writer who fulfills these roles in the successful discourse process – a writer presenting her text in person is able, if she has the prerequisite qualities, to choose the appropriate readers and to respond to their questions or criticisms. What we see then in P4-P6 is a breakdown in the discourse process. The problem of reader selection in particular correlates rather directly to C4-C7: if we separate the writer from her texts we cripple her ability to match the right discourses to the right souls. Whatever knowledge of

⁷⁵ This condition, of course, distinguishes him from the many sophists and rhetoricians who argued that knowledge of one's subject matter is not necessary for practicing the art of rhetoric.

⁷⁶ It is worth noting that earlier in the dialectic half Socrates himself is careful to argue that writing in and of itself is not bad; rather, writing is shameful when it isn't done well – when, that is, it doesn't meet the conditions of good discourse (258d1).

discourses and souls she might have, and whatever matchmaking skill she might possess, she simply has no opportunity to exercise them.

Most of what I have called the seminar on theory then is occupied with identifying these necessary conditions of good discourse and the problems with writing. I have tried to show here how the careful reader can put these all together to develop a fuller appreciation of *why* good discourse works the way it does and why writing can be so problematic. My unified solution to the problem of unity and the writing paradox are only half formed, but it is notable already that I have shown how importantly connected the two puzzles are.

2.2 An Applied Theory Practicum

With this picture of good discourse in mind the reader of the dialogue might be inclined to return to the speeches of its first half and consider how they measure up. In fact, Socrates and Phaedrus begin just such an examination. The two propose to take the three speeches as examples of the principles of discourse they have been investigating, and they quickly find fault in the beginning lines of Lysias' speech (258d7, 262c5-64a5). Notably, however, they do not finish this project. Socrates merely suggests that there are further examples in the speeches that might be useful to someone examining the nature of discourse (264e5). We might, I think, read this as a strong invitation to the reader to pick up and complete this project of assessment. Can this in fact be done?

To see, we might look first at the speech of Lysias and finish the task begun by Socrates and Phaedrus. Socrates complains that Lysias does not define his topic from the start of his speech and that he does not order the speech properly but instead throws its parts together in a random heap

(263e-4b10). On the judgment of Socrates, at least, the speech falls down on C1 and C2. Can we tell whether its author has knowledge of his subject, the various kinds of souls, or of discourse? One possible way is if we see evidence of some collection and division of these things – given that collection and division are identified as a necessary means to knowledge. In Lysias' speech we get no evidence of these things. We have been invited to assess the quality of Lysias' speech, but there are no grounds for judging it as good.

How do the speeches of Socrates fare in light of the conditions of good discourse? These, perhaps not surprisingly, seem a good deal more successful. For starters, they both define their subjects – harmful and beneficial madness – more clearly from the start. Socrates prefaces the definition in his first speech with a discussion on how one *should* begin a speech, by beginning with a definition of the subject matter (237c). On C1, the condition of logographic necessity, it is noteworthy that Phaedrus expresses some surprise when Socrates' first speech ends – he thought, he says, that it was only in the middle and that it would go on to say an equal amount about the non-lover (241d4). Interestingly, if we read the two speeches of Socrates together we will get this missing continuation of the speech, in the sense that in the first speech the harmful kinds of madness have been presented and in the second speech love will be collected together with the beneficial kinds of madness and divided from the harmful kinds. The first speech then seems less successful on C1 than the two taken together. In addition, since both speeches engage in a process of collection and division of these various types of madness, to different degrees, we take this as evidence that their author meets C3, the knowledge of subject condition. However, in the palinode Socrates recants the *logoi* expressed in his first speech, in particular that love is a harmful kind of madness. Further, the palinode's more complete collection and division of madness is good evidence that it is an improvement of Socrates' first speech. We might note too that Socrates begins each speech by

addressing a boy as his intended audience. It is this theoretical boy, in fact a beautiful young man, who will have to decide whether to spend time with the lover or the non-lover (237b2-c1, 243e4). Phaedrus suggests at the start of the second speech that he is the boy in question, but Socrates seems to be addressing any beautiful young man who will have to judge either the lover or the non-lover as a worthy acquaintance. We might read this as evidence that the author of the two speeches is skilled at matching the appropriate speech with the appropriate soul, meeting conditions C6 and C7.

We can note finally something rather more surprising than all of this. By defining, collecting, and dividing the various kinds of souls, the palinode shows some evidence that its author might meet the knowledge of souls condition, C4. Most speeches or texts do not take up the soul as its subject matter, and so this condition would typically be more difficult to identify. We are fortunate then to have a speech here that is careful to define the soul, to set out its three-part, winged nature, to explain its life-cycle, and to collect and divide its various types.⁷⁷ We might take this all as strongly suggestive evidence that the author of the palinode meets C4 on our list.

This project of assessing the speeches of Lysias and Socrates could be carried out more thoroughly. What I have tried to show briefly here is that one *can* seriously pick up and carry out the project just as Socrates invites us to. That this actually works is rather remarkable.

2.3 *A Course Evaluation*

⁷⁷ It does this in several ways: it identifies the various types which follow the various gods; it distinguishes those who are successful in seeing the Forms from those who are not; and notably sets the philosopher apart from kings, craftsmen, poets, etc., in terms of his life of virtue, his final judgment in the afterlife, and his short-cut back to the heavenly realm (245c4-249d3).

Once we have done some work applying the theory of the dialectical half, we might out of curiosity wonder whether the dialectical inquiry itself can be assessed in this way. After all, it might be taken as another internal rhetorical specimen, one in the style of a typical Platonic dialogue. How well does this dialectic half meet the conditions of good discourse? Interestingly, here too we can see successes. First, it too defines its subject well from the start, immediately identifying its central inquiry (258d). The conditions of good discourse are argued for in several proofs and summarized again at the end – in this we have an easy sense of balance and unity. Again, the author seems to have knowledge of his subject – he collects and divides the various kinds of compositions, and this provides us some evidence that he meets the knowledge of subject condition, C3.⁷⁸ And again here we receive a fortunate gift: because the subject of this dialectic half is the art of rhetoric (it might have been anything and still kept its dialectical form) the collecting and dividing within it gives evidence that its author meets the knowledge of discourse condition, C5.

But who is its author? We might think that it is Socrates, and that here we are meant to see him writing on the soul of Phaedrus. Another candidate however is Plato himself. After all, Plato is in the most direct sense the author of all the parts of the dialogue. Here we are in a position to note what I take to be one of the most interesting features of the *Phaedrus*: there is evidence within all of its parts taken together that their author possesses *all* of the prerequisite knowledge necessary for good discourse. The dialogue offers a skillful collection and division of love, discourse, and souls, and this is at least evidence in favor of its author having knowledge of these things. Again, this needn't have happened, in that most instances of discourse will not include a collection and division

⁷⁸ We might see the efforts to define one single art of rhetoric – speeches, poetry, prose works, dialectic – as a kind of collection, and the conditions of good discourse and problems with writing as a sort of division of good and bad discourse.

of the various kinds of souls and discourse. That we get such evidence in the dialogue is clever craftsmanship.

To reinforce this suggestion, it's worth looking back to the three speeches of the first half. The authorship of the first speech is clearly attributed to Lysias.⁷⁹ This speech served as a model of bad discourse, and Lysias in turn as a model of the unskilled rhetorician. We judged the author of the two speeches of Socrates – particularly taken together as a whole – as significantly more successful. But we can ask here too: who exactly is the author of these speeches? Socrates delivers them within the narrative, of course, but interestingly he repeatedly *denies* authorship of them (238d, 241e, 243a5, 243b4-8, 244a). Should we take these disavowals of authorship seriously?⁸⁰ We might see good reason to do so. First, we've seen that the separation of a work of discourse from its author is a significant factor in its potential success or failure. We've seen too that this separation is an emphasized feature of Lysias' speech. In this environment we should be very cautious about dismissing these repeated disavowals of authorship. We can take them seriously however if we consider Plato himself to be the author of the two speeches. This may in the end be the very significance of Socrates' disavowals of authorship - that he repeatedly makes such a point to disavow authorship of the speeches is an invitation to the reader to consider where they really come from. This invitation helps move us towards a consideration of Plato as the author of the dialogue as a whole, and towards an assessment of the *Phaedrus* itself as a work of discourse.

⁷⁹ We would not be surprised to find that Plato made use of a genuine speech of Lysias. De Vries (1969) 11-14 offers a careful discussion of scholarship on this largely irresolvable question.

⁸⁰ Rowe (1986) 9 thinks not: "This is a transparent ploy. The speeches *are* of course his; and they show him to possess just that expertise as a speaker which he disclaims".

What we have begun to do then, encouraged by the text itself, is something like a course evaluation – where we turn the theoretical principles of the dialogue back on the dialogue itself to assess whether it is an instance of good or bad discourse. We have noted how the dialogue cleverly offers evidence that it succeeds on all of the knowledge conditions. What of the others? The most pressing of those that remain is the familiar problem of unity. Does the *Phaedrus* possess logographic necessity? What I have tried to show is that it has an important kind of strategic unity: its two halves work together to demonstrate good and bad discourse, to help the reader consider carefully the principles underlying good and bad discourse, and finally to press the reader to apply those principles – first in an assessment of the internal parts of the dialogue and later the whole of the dialogue itself.

What, though, of the criticisms of the writing paradox? If the *Phaedrus* intentionally reveals to us an author who meets its own conditions of good discourse, we might also wonder if it evidences an author capable of overcoming the difficulties that ordinarily arise from a separation of author and text. As an independent written text, does the *Phaedrus* fall victim to the problems of separation? Before answering this question, we might first simply acknowledge the possible value of the *Phaedrus* as a teaching tool within the Academy. If Plato remained with his text when it engaged with its readers, the problems of the writing paradox would have been avoided. We can imagine, I think, that Plato used the *Phaedrus* and other dialogues for lectures with his students, and that an important element of this teaching would have been his direct connection to their use – he could have selected the dialogue's audience, engaged his students with questions and conversation, and responded to criticisms of its content. Socrates claims in the writing paradox that a text is only of value to the author himself (who already has knowledge of the *logoi* contained within) (275c9-d2). There is also some suggestion that a composition is of value not just to the author, but also to his followers –

perhaps even when they are separated from him (276d4). The *Phaedrus* may simply have been of use to Plato and his students at the Academy without any disruption in the process of discourse. In short, this is to take a temperate view of whether the dialogue is a good work of discourse: its success is possible only when used directly by Plato or his followers. I suggest that this would be a cautious reading of the writing paradox, one which takes its criticisms to undermine Plato's written philosophy in a serious way.

I think we can see in the *Phaedrus*, however, a stronger defense of its pedagogical value beyond the Academy. I will suggest that the features and qualities of the *Phaedrus* in fact allow it to interact with us more as a living, animate *logos* than as a text separated from its author – despite its actual separation from Plato. In particular I want to suggest that it engages us as active readers, that it forces us to ask questions of it, to read and then continually reconsider its various parts, and to find that they in fact say more than a single, unchanging thing. That in addition it is not overconfident in what it can accomplish as a written composition, but instead resolutely aware of its limitations. And finally, that in the end it attempts to defend its own validity.

To see all of this, let us turn first to the problem of overconfidence. Does the dialogue's author show signs of overestimating what he can accomplish through this exchange of writing and reading? Here the writing paradox itself is helpful. It suggests that Plato recognizes the very real limitations of doing written philosophy as opposed to engaging in direct, face-to-face philosophical dialectic with a student. This simple recognition would seem to be a great step away from the kind of overconfidence condemned in the text. It is noteworthy that at the start of the dialectic half Socrates ties together the self-arrogance of politicians and this sin of overconfidence in one's written works. The most self-arrogant politicians, he says, are most in love with writing and leaving

compositions behind them (a real emphasis, we might see, on the separation of these writers from their texts), and their works become self-eulogies intended to evidence their authors' wisdom (257e-258a10). Overconfidence in writing is here strongly connected to overconfidence in one's own wisdom, and that should feel like a familiar Platonic sin. In contrast, we should not be surprised to find a quality of self-questioning humility on the part of the *Phaedrus* and its author - this is akin to Socrates' acknowledgement that he knows nothing except his own ignorance.⁸¹ If a text were to assume the character of Socrates, or any man aspiring to his philosophical virtue, we might expect it to question its own value and limitations just as the *Phaedrus* seems to do. In these ways the dialogue at least seems to be trying to avoid the problem of overconfidence.

Does the *Phaedrus* create a false appearance of wisdom in its readers? This is perhaps a more difficult question. To begin though, we can ask what it is that we might gain knowledge of by reading the dialogue. A strong candidate are the conditions of good discourse set out in the dialectical inquiry, given that this project of identifying a true art of rhetoric seems to be offered as an alternative to traditional manuals on the subject. The lessons might turn out to be more expansive than that however. Socrates criticizes traditional manuals on rhetoric partly on the grounds that these books are not sufficient for teaching skillful rhetoric because they teach nothing of the soul (268a1-d5). We might understand the discussion of the nature of the soul in the palinode as an important part of the instruction on rhetoric offered in the dialogues. If this is right, it further strengthens the strategic unity of the two halves of the dialogue. Further, we might see that the *Phaedrus* strives to be more successful than traditional manuals on rhetoric at avoiding the problem of false wisdom in an even more important way. It does not merely *tell* its readers what is necessary for good discourse; instead it first engages them in a dialectical process of identifying what is

⁸¹ Burger (1980) 3.

necessary for good discourse and then pushes them to apply those theoretical principles in an immediate project of assessment. Here we might see that we are as readers actively engaged alongside Socrates and Phaedrus in this process of identifying a true art of rhetoric, largely because of the unique nature of Plato's writings – namely, that they imitate perhaps as closely as written texts can the real experience of philosophical dialectic. The second half of the *Phaedrus*, like the many Platonic works of this style, is not an excursive treatise which tell us as readers what is true. Instead, our experience as readers is more like that of an internal interlocutor of Socrates – as we follow his dialectical exchange we are pushed to think through his questions and ideas step by step for ourselves, as if we too are characters within the dialogue. In short, we might see that Plato's dialogues come as close as written discourse might to the dialectical exchange of teacher and student.⁸²

Does the *Phaedrus* remain silent in the face of questions, saying only a single, unchanging thing? There are perhaps two ways we can approach the problem of unresponsiveness. First, and probably less significant, we might notice that the dialectical half of the text has a habit of asking itself questions on behalf of its reader. We see this first when Socrates gives voice to Rhetoric and allows her to challenge their characterization of her (260d3).⁸³ The question she poses could easily come from the mouth of a skeptical reader, and hearing her question and Socrates' response we feel almost as if we are participating ourselves in a two-way exchange. This internal questioning is rather characteristic of Platonic dialogues, and we shouldn't be surprised to see it here. If a text is going to mimic philosophical dialogue so that its reader can engage almost as a participant in the

⁸² De Vries here agrees: "The greatest danger inherent in the written treatise is that it may suggest the premature arrival at a definitive conclusion (this is why Plato composes dialogues which at least "imitate" a living conversation, and "open" dialogues at that)" (1969) 20. See too Hackforth (1952) 9.

⁸³ See too 269b5, 272b3.

conversation, posing questions from the outside which challenge the interlocutors fosters the reader's experience of being actively engaged in the dialectical process.

We might see a second quality of the dialogue which suggests that it is striving to overcome the problem of unresponsiveness. Here we can finally note what I take to be most significant about the palinodic structure of the *Phaedrus*. Recall the effect of this structure: "Various points of view are presented as though they were final and are then purposely undercut to reveal a further, unanticipated, meaning".⁸⁴ This palinodic structure importantly causes the reader at each new stage of the dialogue to question and to understand differently what has come before. We rethink love's place in the collection and division of madness when we come to the palinode. We look back and question the success of the palinode when we come to the dialectical half and its conditions of good discourse. When we come to the writing paradox we rethink the entirety of the dialogue and question its validity. The effect of this retrospective quality is that we don't see in the *Phaedrus* a single, unchanging set of *logoi*. Instead we are forced to rethink what has already been said and understand it from repeatedly new and broadening perspectives. There is, I think, something akin to the student experience here, as if again we were interlocutors of Socrates being led down a road of progressively broadening elenchus, challenged at every juncture in the dialectic to rethink what we have once seen clearly. This does not entirely overcome the problem of unresponsiveness. But it overcomes it to a rather remarkable degree given that its words are in fact firmly locked in place.

What of the problem of reader selection? Does the *Phaedrus* show any evidence of being intelligently matched to some fitting audience? Here we might have a particularly hard time. We can't, after all, expect a written text to have control over who reads it. What we can say, however, is that the text

⁸⁴ Griswold (1986) 218.

shows some evidence of having a targeted, rather self-selecting audience – namely, an engaged and questioning reader. We have said already that the *Phaedrus* actively engages its reader in the project of assessing its parts and its whole, but we might add now that not all readers will accept – or even see – this invitation. It requires, perhaps, some initial interest and enthusiasm for the text, the sort of enthusiasm for discourse that Phaedrus and Socrates notably share throughout the dialogue. Further, it requires a reader who will not quit at the midpoint when the more serious and difficult philosophical work begins. This is perhaps as much as one can say about any written text's ability to select its own reader.

We can ask finally: does the *Phaedrus* defend itself in the face of criticism? Here is a question that we have, in a sense, been answering for some time. To see this we should first note that the dialogue raises questions of its own validity all along. Its jarring disjointedness (especially in the face of the condition of logographic necessity) is the reader's first prompt to question the dialogue's success as a rhetorical specimen. Later the writing paradox does this in its own forceful way. The dialogue in turn invites its reader to assess its success on each of the conditions of good discourse and in light of each of the special problems of writing. By measuring up as well as it does in the face of this self-imposed scrutiny, the *Phaedrus* does what most written texts could not – namely, stand up to questions of its own value without its author present. In a sense, Plato has preempted the critics here and challenged the dialogue himself, and for the engaged, discerning reader he offers up a defense against those challenges. This does not protect the dialogue from a failure to respond to other criticisms, but I believe that here too there is a substantial effort to offer a written text that can in some measure succeed at what most written texts utterly fail to do.

§1 Conclusion

My aims in this chapter were rather ambitious. I have taken a strategic approach to the problem of unity and suggested that what principally unifies the two halves of the dialogue is that they function together as a new kind of manual on the art of rhetoric. Whether it ultimately succeeds the dialogue artfully leaves up to us to discern – knowing that to make such an assessment ourselves requires some mastery of the very subject matter it proposes to teach us. That is cleverness of a high order.

I believe my solution to the problem of unity is more successful than those offered previously for two principal reasons. First, it goes beyond previous thematic and strategic approaches to the dialogue and explains in a more satisfying way why this dialogue has two disjointed halves and what exactly the relationship is between them. In this way it works well with thematic approaches that take rhetoric to be an important unifying thread of the dialogue. Many others have recognized that rhetoric is a prominent theme in the dialogue from start to finish, and some have noted a structural unity in that rhetoric is both demonstrated and talked about in the dialogue. I hope I have offered here a clearer picture of *how* that structural unity can augment the thematic unity – namely by explaining in a more comprehensive way the relationship between the very different roles that rhetoric plays in the dialogue's two halves.

The other principal strength of my solution to the problem of unity is the way in which it integrates a solution to the writing paradox. On my view, the two issues go hand in hand. It is only in understanding what the dialogue is really about – at a level of strategic unity – that we can make sense of the writing paradox. And that at the end of the day is the most interesting puzzle of the *Phaedrus*. How serious *are* these criticisms of writing? Are they self-undermining as one might

worry? I believe this is the right answer: they would be self-undermining in any other written text, but here they need not be. That is to read the writing paradox as pointing to problems in written texts at large, in a written text that itself strives to be something more transcendent. This was all to ask, then: did Plato think that writing can be a worthwhile and serious occupation? I think he did. I think the writing paradox reveals a grave recognition on his part about the limitations of the written word. At the same time, the *Phaedrus* seems to be a written text striving daringly against those limitations.

There are two final notes here I want to make. The first is to acknowledge that some readers of the dialogue will be bothered by the analysis I offer in that it hasn't said anything about why the first half of the *Phaedrus* is about love. If the dialogue is principally a course on good discourse, why does it spend roughly half of its time on the subject of love? How does love fit into the strategic unity I have argued for? There are a couple of things we might say here. First, and probably less satisfying, choosing speeches about love gives Plato the opportunity here, especially in the palinode, to demonstrate some of his skill at collection and division, in particular concerning the nature of the soul. As I've suggested, this is a clever way of signposting to the reader that the dialogue's author has this necessary knowledge.

I think there is a better, more on-target answer here though. To see it, I want offer a second important note at the end of the dialogue here. I have treated the subject matter of the *Phaedrus* as primarily about rhetoric, where rhetoric is understood very broadly as any kind of discourse. But I think there is a special focus here on *teaching* as discourse. We see this especially in the model of good rhetoric offered by Socrates, the writing on the soul of a student by his teacher. We also see this if we understand the *Phaedrus* to be the kind of multi-part course I've argued it is – it is primarily

then an act of instruction. What's more, I've suggested that we understand the dialogue as Plato's attempt to offer an alternative to the traditional written manuals on rhetoric. If we understand it this way, then the kind of discourse that Plato is most centrally concerned with here is *teaching*. And it is not just any rhetorician or text he is targeting here with his criticisms in the dialogue. It is especially the *sophists* and their teachings. He means in particular to highlight the contrast between himself as a teacher and the sophists, the traditional teachers of rhetoric.

If I am right on all of this, the dialogue is, then, centrally about education. And there is evidence throughout the corpus that for Plato, education and love have a complex, intricate relationship. Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* is good evidence of this, as is the palinode itself here in the *Phaedrus*. Both establish the teacher and student relationship as, at least at times, an intimate and loving one. This is not incidental to the nature of the relationship either. Both dialogues take pains, in different ways, to show how love itself works as an impetus in the learning process. Finally, Plato so often defends Socrates in the corpus, and one focal point of this defense is the way that Socrates subverted the ordinary expectations for this loving mentor-mentee relationship. He removed it from the realm of sexual pleasure that gave it a distasteful reputation and delivered it instead to the realm of something more noble and good. A full treatment of Plato's thoughts on education would explore this role of love in education more completely, given its importance and complexity in Platonic thought. But I think for now it's enough to note that love and teaching are meaningfully connected for Plato. Perhaps not least of all in the kind of obvious love he had for his own teacher Socrates.

CHAPTER 3: LANGUAGE AS TEACHER

The *Cratylus* is peculiar. It is a focused discussion of language, unique in the Platonic corpus for this reason alone. The dialogue takes up a central linguistic question: how do words get meaning? In answer to this question Socrates and his interlocutors consider two theories of meaning: conventionalism, on which words get their meaning merely by arbitrary convention, and naturalism, on which words get their meaning by having some natural fit to the things they refer to – i.e. a natural correctness. Conventionalism is quickly dismissed, and much of the dialogue is spent building a case for naturalism –including a long section on etymologies of Greek words that makes up over half of the dialogue. It is surprising then that near the end of the *Cratylus* naturalism itself is rejected in favor of “that worthless thing” conventionalism. In the course of the discussion, Plato invokes concerns about both Protagorean relativism and Hericlitean flux – epistemological and metaphysical views that are not obviously connected to linguistic questions about meaning. What is going on with all of this?

In this chapter I will offer an interpretation of the dialogue that attempts to explain the following: why naturalism is initially so appealing and yet ultimately dissatisfying; why relativism and flux matter in a discussion of language; and why those etymologies are important. My primary approach will be to tease out a hierarchy of questions considered in the dialogue. I will argue that Plato is exploring more than just this linguistic question of how words get meaning. As the discussion proceeds, he considers deeper questions about language: an epistemological question about the relationship between language and knowledge; a metaphysical question about the relationship between language and reality; and finally, a practical pedagogical question about the value or role of language in

education. Further, along the way it becomes clear that answering these deeper epistemological and metaphysical questions about language requires examining one's commitments to broader theoretical questions. For example, to answer whether there are expert language users, one must know whether there can be experts of any kind. Similarly, to understand how language is related to the world, one must know whether there is any steady fixedness to reality. I ultimately argue that the pedagogical question is what matters most in the *Cratylus*, and it amounts to asking: can language be a teacher?

§1. The Linguistic Question

In the course of this chapter I will attempt to show the intricately layered questions taken up in the *Cratylus*, but it is necessary to begin with the central linguistic question. The dialogue is most straightforwardly about language, and in the opening lines Socrates is invited to step into an ongoing linguistic debate:

Hermogenes: Cratylus says, Socrates, that there is a natural correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature. A thing's name isn't whatever people call it – some bit of their native language that applies to it – but there is a natural correctness of names, which is the same for everyone, Greek or foreigner...If you can somehow interpret Cratylus' oracular utterances, I'd gladly listen. Though I'd really rather find out what you yourself have to say about the correctness of names, if that's all right with you (383a-384a).

The question put on the table here can be understood in several ways, but I will begin with the way it is presented. Socrates has been asked to give his thoughts on whether there is a natural correctness to names (ὀνομάτων ὀρθότης) or whether names (ὀνόματα) are merely arbitrary conventions. I will call this question Linguistic Question 1 (LQ1).

LQ1: Do names have a natural correctness?

His two interlocutors in the discussion take up opposing sides of the issue. On the one side is Hermogenes, who alleges that he often talks with Cratylus on this subject of language, but that he cannot be persuaded that the correctness of names is determined by anything other than convention and agreement.

I believe that any name you give a thing is its correct name. If you change its name and give it another, the new name is as correct as the old... No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name (384c-d).

There is something immediately plausible about Hermogenes' view. A name just is the name of something because we give it that name. In English, we give the name 'dog' to man's best friend. But if we're young and playful and spend a lot of time online, we might call him 'pupper' or 'doggo' instead, and those names are just as good. A German speaker will call a dog 'Hund', a Greek speaker 'σκύλος', and an Italian 'cane', and all these names work – they are all good names – simply because by convention these groups of speakers use these words for this referent.

Hermogenes is quickly willing to complicate matters, though, by taking the view to an uncomfortable extreme. When Socrates presses, he acknowledges that on his view whatever *anyone* decides to call a thing is its name (385a-d). If I decide to buck convention and call a comedy 'drama' and a drama 'comedy', those are now their names – for me any way. Just as different communities can use different names for the same referent, so too can individuals. In short, names can simply be changed at will. Our intuitions about language don't follow Hermogenes this far. I can assign any name I want to something, but when I tell others that I practice 'medicine' when I really practice

what is generally called ‘philosophy’, we feel I’ve done something wrong. Or if I raise my child to think that ‘red’ is the thing we all call ‘blue’, ‘chickens’ are what we call ‘dairy cows’, ‘hotness’ is what we feel when touching ice, and so on, we would think I have done something quite wrong. We don’t generally conceive of or use language as a private thing, and so it’s hard to follow Hermogenes this far. On the other hand, we do readily accept – most of us, at any rate – that new words can be coined. And that process seems to begin with some individual using a new word on some particular occasion. I will return to these notions of right or wrong shortly. For now it’s enough to see some complexity in what Hermogenes is proposing.

On the other side of this debate is Cratylus, defending the position that there is in fact a natural correctness to names, independent of custom or practice. He argues that names belong to things *by nature*. This view is less intuitive from the start. In fact, it’s a rather radical idea. It means that there is a natural, correct name for each thing. And this name might be very different from what we actually call a thing. English words like ‘bread’, ‘mountain’, and ‘panda’ might not be the correct names for their referents. And even if they are, it is not in virtue of any custom or agreement as English speakers to use these names. It is in virtue of something else altogether – whatever that would amount to. On Cratylus’ view, even our own names might be different from what we’re actually called – a decree at birth by my parents is not enough to make my name ‘Stacie’. From Hermogenes:

So, I ask him whether his own name is truly ‘Cratylus’. He agrees that it is. “What about Socrates?” I say. “His name is ‘Socrates,’” he says. “Does this also hold for everyone else? Is the name we call him his name? “It certainly doesn’t hold of you. Your name isn’t ‘Hermogenes’, not even if everyone calls you by it” (383b).

We need not even know what our name actually is – yet it is still there, ready to be used, should we discover it. Cratylus does not say much more about his view at the start of the dialogue – in fact this is Hermogenes’ complaint – but we know enough at the start to see how very strange the idea is. What could it even mean for names to have a natural correctness?

Before we move on, we should consider what we know about the dialogue’s interlocutors. Of the historical Hermogenes we know little. Only that he was a constant follower of Socrates, present at his death bed, and that he was the poor, illegitimate brother of Callias, the wealthy Athenian and famous patron of the sophists, at whose home Plato’s *Protagoras* is set.⁸⁵ We know more of the historical Cratylus, including two facts especially salient to the dialogue. He was reported by Aristotle to be an early philosophical influence on Plato, and he was a proponent of Hericlitean flux.

At an early age [Socrates] first became acquainted with Cratylus and the Hericlitean doctrines, which held that all the objects of perception are in perpetual flux and that there is no knowledge about them. This was what he believed later too. But Socrates devoted his inquiries to ethics and did not discuss nature as a whole but sought what is universal in ethics and was the first to focus on definitions, and Plato, who became his pupil, believed that this is done with regard to something else, and not with regard to the objects of perception, for the above sort of reason. For he took it to be impossible for the universal definition to be of any of the objects of perception, given, at any rate, that they are in perpetual change (*Metaphysics* A 6, 987a32-b7).

⁸⁵ See *Phaedo* 59b7 and Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I.2.48, IV.8.4. Davies (1971) §7826, Nails (2002) 68-74.

The intellectual relationships set up here at the beginning of the *Cratylus* are significant. If Aristotle is right, then Plato here is giving us, as David Sedley puts it, “a confrontation between two primary components in his own intellectual formation”: Cratylus, his early teacher, and Socrates, the teacher he turned to and idolized in the end.⁸⁶ This will be particularly important in the climax of the dialogue — when Socrates turns away from Cratylus’ view of language despite its appeal for much of their discussion. Socrates ultimately rejects naturalism for reasons that are tangled up in tricky epistemological and metaphysical ideas – including, at the forefront, the doctrine of flux. These connections to the historical relationships are not accidental. I will have more to say on this late in the chapter.

At the start of the dialogue then, Socrates has been invited to intervene in an intractable struggle between Hermogenes and Cratylus and their two theories of language: conventionalism, on the one hand, and naturalism on the other.⁸⁷ We should clarify now what Plato has in mind with names (ὀνόματα) and correctness (ὀρθότης). Clarifying the former is easier. We see from the examples discussed throughout the dialogue, particularly in the long etymology section, that he has a broad understanding of ὀνόματα: the examples include proper names, nouns, adjectives, infinitives, and participles. At 385c names are said to be the smallest part of a statement, and we can conclude from this that Plato has in mind finite verbs and adverbs as well. He seems to have in mind any word whose primary function is semantic – that is, to name (ὀνομαζέειν) or refer to something.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Sedley (2007) 16-17. I will follow Sedley here in taking Aristotle as a reliable source on Plato’s philosophical background. A great deal has been written on the relationship between Plato and Cratylus, focusing both on Plato’s intellectual development and that of the real life Cratylus. See Kirk (1951), Kahn (1998) 81-3, Allan (1954) 275-6, Baxter (1992) 27-8, Silverman (2001) 8, Cherniss (1955). On the dramatic date of the dialogue, which weighs in on this debate, see Allan (1954) 274, Baxter (1992) 28, n. 77, Owen (1953), Young (1994), Kahn (2003), and Ademollo (2011) 20.

⁸⁷ This terminology for the views was first introduced by Kretzmann (1971).

⁸⁸ Ademollo (2011) 1, Reeve (1998) xi, Crivelli (2012) §6.1.

Understanding the meaning of ‘correctness’ is more challenging. The English word is itself ambiguous, but we need to dig into the meaning of the Greek ὀρθότης. The noun is cognate with the adjective ὀρθός, which has the original physical sense of ‘upright’ or ‘erect’. It has a rich set of metaphorical meanings as well though, including ‘right’, ‘correct’, ‘happy’, ‘healthy’, ‘prosperous’, ‘just’, ‘righteous’, and ‘true’. Plato and Aristotle elsewhere use the adjective to mean ‘real’ or ‘genuine’, and the cognate adverb ὀρθῶς to mean ‘really’ and ‘truly’. The cognate verb ὀρθόω is used, in the passive, of words and opinions to mean ‘to be right’ or ‘true’. I start with the philology to draw out several important senses of the word that will help us along the way.⁸⁹ The first significant sense of ὀρθότης has to do with truth: something would be correct in this sense if it is *true*. It might seem initially strange to think of names (i.e. words) being true, as opposed to sentences or propositions, but Cratylus and Socrates will arrive at exactly this idea in their investigation of naturalism – on that theory names will turn out to have truth or falsity, and names will be correct insofar as they are true. It takes a good deal of discussion to come to this point in their investigation, and a good deal more to understand just how words can be true or not, but for now we can flag this sense of ὀρθότης as significant.

On the second relevant sense of the word, something is ὀρθότης if it is *real* or *genuine*. We can already see the relevance of this sense. Cratylus has said, before the dialogue begins, that ‘Hermogenes’ isn’t Hermogenes’ name. He may say this primarily to prod or agitate his friend, but there is something important there.⁹⁰ The suggestion is that ‘Hermogenes’ is not his real or genuine name, and what is left unsaid is that he has a real or genuine name that is not being used. On this

⁸⁹ The less relevant senses having to do with health, safety, or prosperity come from the active sense of the verb, meaning ‘to stand something upright’, including after something unfortunate like an illness.

⁹⁰ Socrates suspects that Cratylus is making fun of Hermogenes (384c).

sense of the word, a name is correct just if it is the name of a thing – the actual name. This sense of correctness is recognized in an argument by Francesco Ademollo:

We can grasp what that issue is if we pay attention to a basic fact, seldom acknowledged by interpreters, about the way the terms ‘correctness’ and ‘correct’ are used. The fact is this: throughout the dialogue all characters express themselves as if there were no difference between being a *correct name* of something and being just a *name* of that thing. They continuously speak as if the phrases ‘correct name of X’ and ‘name of X’ were perfectly interchangeable and equivalent to each other.⁹¹

He argues for a way of conceiving of ‘correctness’ which he calls the Redundancy Conception: ‘N’ is a correct name of X =_{df} ‘N’ is a name of X. On this conception, we do not look at several names of X and pick out the best one as the correct name. The correct name just is the name of X.

Ademollo argues that this notion of ‘correctness’ gives the speakers an abstract noun that allows them to refer to the property of being a name, since there is no Greek word for ‘namehood’. This understanding of correctness has two important consequences. First, it means there are no *degrees of correctness* in a name, since one name cannot be more of a name than another. Second, there is no such thing as an incorrect name of something. It makes no sense to call a name the ‘incorrect name’ of X’. On this view then, ‘Hermogenes’ is not an *incorrect* name of Socrates’ follower. It just isn’t his name, and that is exactly how Cratylus puts it.⁹²

⁹¹ Ademollo (2011) 2.

⁹² Ademollo (2011) 1–4. For other arguments on understanding ‘correctness’, see: Williams (1982) 83, Bestor (1980) 314, Crivelli (2012), Schofield (1982). I am not committed to this full view of Ademollo, nor in particular the consequences of his view. I think it is enough to recognize that one important operating sense of correctness in the dialogue is ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ – the idea at the heart of his view.

There's one more relevant sense of ὀρθότης we should pay attention to, and this is the sense of normative rightness. Here the focus is on the use of the name: by using a correct name, we do something right. Conversely, by using a name that isn't the correct name of its referent, we do something wrong. This conception of correctness is relevant in several ways. First, it captures the idea I discussed above about our natural intuitions about language: when someone decides to call 'cat' what the rest of us call 'dog', we sense he's done something wrong. Correctness here is not attributed to the name, then, so much as the action of using it. The normative rightness at play is a normative rightness of *action*. This normative sense of correctness is central to an important argument in support of naturalism. The first of two parts in the case for naturalism – which I will call the Argument from Correctness – begins by exploring what grounds the correctness of actions more broadly. Socrates will make the case that there is a right way and a wrong way to do many things, and naming will be just the same.⁹³

There is a notion of authority that comes along with this normative rightness. If there is a correctness of action in using names, who has the authority to judge right and wrong action? Is this something all language speakers can do? This question is important enough in the dialogue that I will call this Linguistic Question 2 (LQ2).

LQ2: Who has authority over names?

I suggested above that we all generally sense when someone misuses language in certain circumstances – when we use words to refer to the wrong things, for instance. That rests on an

⁹³ Bestor (1980) 314 comes closest to this conception of correctness I am proposing. He argues that, based on what I'm calling the Correctness of Action argument, correctness should be understood as a success term.

assumption that all of us language users have authority to judge correct or incorrect uses of language. Does Cratylus' naturalism allow for this kind of broad authority? It will turn out not to, in fact. Judging the correctness of names will be a task only for those with special expertise. We'll unpack that in time, but this issue of authority will recur throughout the dialogue, in ways that will mean something for the success or viability of the two main views. In addition to considering who has authority to judge the correctness of a name, including its use, Socrates and his interlocutors consider carefully who has the authority in the first place to create or change a name. It will help to understand that these questions are all tied to this normative sense of ὀρθότης.

I have highlighted several senses of ὀρθότης that I think are helpful in understanding the arguments in the dialogue. Ademollo gives us an insightful way of understanding correctness, and other scholars come close, but there is a failure in the scholarship to appreciate the range of the word. By the end of the discussion, a 'correct' name will be a *true* name, as we'll see in the second part of the dialogue's discussion of naturalism; a *real* name, as we see from the opening lines and explicated in Ademollo's argument; and a *rightly used* name, which comes in the first part of the argument for naturalism. I will not argue that one sense is more important than another, or that these different senses depend on one another. What I think is useful is to allow for this range of senses, for the primary reasons that the Greek word itself has this range and that Plato seems to understand that in his use of the word.

To sum up so far, Plato is directly exploring what I've called LQ1, about whether there is a natural correctness to names. I've suggested that there is another way of understanding what Plato is up to linguistically in the dialogue – LQ2, about who has authority over names. There is a third way of understating the main linguistic issue in the *Cratylus*, though, and it's one likely to be taken up by

contemporary philosophers of language when they encounter the dialogue. That is to understand the inquiry in the dialogue to be fundamentally about *meaning*. This is a central and broad issue in the philosophy of language, but it is useful to touch on it briefly here. The main question is about how words get their meaning – i.e. in virtue of what do words acquire meaning? I will call this Linguistic Question 3 (LQ3).

LQ3: What grounds the meaning of words?

Answering this question involves considering how the words we speak are related to their referents, or, put differently, how language connects to the external world. At this point there is a large range of theories in philosophy of language, far beyond the scope of this project, that attempt to answer this question. Here I merely want to point out that the two theories of language in the dialogue are in fact answers to this question of meaning. In short, conventionalism offers a minimalist answer to the question of meaning: the thing that grounds the meaning of words is merely convention or agreement among speakers in a language community. Or, if you are an extreme conventionalist like Hermogenes, the simple decision or will of an individual to name a thing. There is no other connection, i.e. no tight connection, between words and the things they name. What is interesting about naturalism on the other hand, and even radical, is how it answers this question about how words get their meaning. The theory does more than just answer LQ1, by arguing that words do in fact have a natural correctness to them. What is most interesting is *how* that natural correctness works – how, according to the theory, words do in fact have a natural fitness to the world. Names will turn out to have a tight metaphysical connection to their referents. Most of the dialogue is spent attempting to answer LQ3, in fact, including the long section on etymologies. I will return to this idea more fully in §4 of this chapter. For now, it's enough to recognize that Plato is taking up

what is still a central question in the philosophy of language. This alone is rather remarkable about the *Cratylus*. If we address the scope of the *Cratylus* too narrowly, we risk missing that.

This is a good moment to say a few words about the scholarship on the dialogue. The dialogue has a reputation for being neglected. At the same time, however, there is a vast amount of writing about it. This mismatch seems to come from a trend in the scholarship: a long tradition of treating the work narrowly, followed by more recent work that has gradually broadened the scope of the dialogue.⁹⁴ For well over a hundred years scholarship offered analysis of the *Cratylus* in a very narrow way, interpreting it as being merely about the historical origin of language or about the suitability of particular names for particular things. In more recent decades scholars have begun to find serious and complex philosophical issues at work in the dialogue, and the typical modern approach focusses on its contributions to philosophy of language, logic, or metaphysics. Even so, until very recently most of those discussions dismissed the long etymology section of the work – sixty pages discussing the etymologies (or pseudo-etymologies) of different categories of Greek words.⁹⁵ Some have dismissed these etymologies as mildly interesting but not important. Others have been derisive of this ‘circus parade of etymologies’.⁹⁶ It is a credit to recent writers that the importance of the etymologies is finally being appreciated, and I follow that trend here by giving them a central role in my analysis of the dialogue.

⁹⁴ Ackrill (1999) 25. For a comprehensive overview of early scholarship on the dialogue, see Derbolav (1972).

⁹⁵ Even in a graduate seminar on philosophy of language we skipped the etymologies entirely.

⁹⁶ The question of how to understand the etymologies has become one of the larger ongoing debates in the scholarship. For interpretations dismissive of the etymologies, see: Shorey (1965), Taylor (1960), Ryle (1966), Kirk (1951), MacKenzie (1986), Laky (1919), Levin (2000), Derbolav (1972). For interpretations that acknowledge some importance in the etymologies but do not address their central place in the dialogue: Gaiser (1974), Baxter (1992), Ross (1955), Luce (1965), Benardete (1981), Dalimier (1998), Pettersson (2016), Trivigno (2012), Goldschmidt (1982). For more serious treatments of the etymologies, see Kretzmann (1971), Sedley (2007), Ademollo (2011).

One final clarification is in order, and it concerns LQ3. This question about how words get their meaning – i.e. what grounds the meaning of words – should not be understood as a question about the *origin* of words. That is, how did words originate? That historical question is very different from the linguistic question at hand. It might be easy to mistake one for the other here, given the long section on etymologies as well as the emphasis on name-givers in the discussion. But this is not a discussion about how speakers came to have and use the words they do.⁹⁷ What the speakers here are after is what that thing is that grounds the meaning of words, or grants them their correctness. Importantly the two questions can be investigated and answered independently. You may believe that names originated naturally and that, nevertheless, their link with their referents is conventional, in that names may be changed at will. Or you may believe that the first names were the product of a deliberate human imposition and that, nevertheless, there are certain natural standards which any name must satisfy.⁹⁸

The short of this is that both the conventionalist and the naturalist can agree on a story about how words, or a language, came to be. We will see in the discussion of naturalism an acknowledgement that names are created at some point by name-givers. The debate here, however, is over what grounds the meaning of a name or grants correctness to it once it is given. The conventionalist will say that the mere giving of a name is sufficient to ground its meaning, while the naturalist will look for more.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ For those who see Plato exploring the historical question, and interpret the dialogue as being about the origin of names, see Goldschmidt (1982) 90-96, Levinson (1957) 35, Méridier (1931). For a discussion about how the Epicureans were actually the first to explore this historical question of language, see Ademollo (2011) 4-7.

⁹⁸ Ademollo (2011) 4-5.

⁹⁹ For more on this discussion of grounding vs. origin, see Fehling (1965) 218-29 and Blank (1998) 176-7.

I turn now to the arguments for and against the two linguistic theories. That case against conventionalism comes in two parts. The first is the initial refutation of the view, which I will discuss in §2. The remainder of the case against conventionalism comes in the long case that is made for naturalism through much of the dialogue, which I will take up in §3. In sections §4 and §5 I will look closely at the reasons naturalism is ultimately rejected.

§2. The Epistemological Question

In the interest of understanding the proceeding arguments as well as possible, I'll start here by highlighting another significant question about language that is taken up in the dialogue. I will call this the Epistemological Question (EQ).

EQ: What is the relationship between language and knowledge?

This question is less explicit than LQ1, but I will make a case that it is in the end more significant to the dialogue – or at the very least, that answering LQ1 is dependent on sorting out EQ.

EQ will be important in several significant places in the dialogue, but the speakers come at the question in different directions at different times. The question aims to get at what the relationship is between on the one hand, having knowledge, and on the other hand, having command of a name – that is, either knowing a name or being in a position to give a name. Does knowing a thing give you some special standing in language use? For example, if I know what a dog is – that is, if I understand the essence of dog – what position does that put me with respect to the *name* of dog? This question, as we'll see shortly, brings us back to LQ2, about who has authority over names.

Coming from the other direction, does learning the name of a thing give you special epistemic standing with respect to its referent? That is, by learning the name ‘dog’, could I gain knowledge of its referent? More specifically, could I gain knowledge of the essence of dog? If so, how could that possibly work?

The initial refutation of conventionalism does not draw out EQ in full, but it is grounded in an important epistemological issue.¹⁰⁰ As I’ve noted, on the conventionalist view, words get their meaning simply in virtue of arbitrary conventions and rules of usage. No name belongs to a particular thing by nature; whatever each person says is the name of something is its name (386c-d). After the brief introduction of conventionalism, Socrates goes on to make a strong case that Hermogenes is wrong – that there is in fact a natural correctness to names. His refutation of conventionalism begins with an epistemological question. Right after Hermogenes claims that names are correct for whatever community or individual sets them, Socrates asks him whether the same holds for the things that are (385e). He is asking Hermogenes whether he’s a relativist about truth like Protagoras.

Let’s see, Hermogenes, whether the same also seems to you to hold of the things that are. Is the being or essence of each of them something private for each person, as Protagoras tells us? He says that man is “the measure of all things,” and that things are to me as they appear to me, and are to you as they appear to you. Do you agree, or do you believe that things have some fixed being or essence of their own (385e-386a)?

¹⁰⁰ I will return to EQ in §4 to draw out its role in the dialogue more completely.

Note first of all how unexpected this question is. What does relativism about truth have to do with language? Why does Socrates begin his refutation of conventionalism in this way?

It is notable that Hermogenes is forced to make his epistemological commitments clear before Socrates can properly take up the question of linguistic meaning. Hermogenes is not thrown off by the question himself, and despite being a conventionalist about language he concedes that he is a realist about truth. Socrates suggests that Hermogenes, being a relativist about language and a realist about truth, holds an inconsistent position. One point to take from this straightaway is that consistency or coherence between one's beliefs about language and knowledge somehow matter. Beliefs about whether names have a natural correctness or not should cohere with beliefs about whether or not there is objective truth. Why exactly does this kind of coherence matter? We'll explore this as we proceed.

Despite Hermogenes' commitment to realism about truth, Socrates takes the time to offer a brief argument against Protagorean relativism (386b-d). If Protagoras is right that truth is relative, then it cannot be the case that some people are wise and others foolish. But of course, as Hermogenes agrees, we take it to be the case that wisdom and foolishness exist. Therefore, there must be objective truth. Protagorean relativism thus seems at odds with our common-sense beliefs about expertise. This challenge to Protagorean relativism is carried further in the *Theaetetus*: if truth is relative, there can be neither experts nor teachers – and yet, Protagoras himself professes to be both.¹⁰¹ It is clear in these early moments of the dialogue that relativism about truth and conventionalism about meaning share this in common: both are antagonistic to expertise. On conventionalism, if I decide to call man by the name 'horse', and horse by the name 'man', there is

¹⁰¹ See 151e-152c.

no sense in which I get the names wrong. I am as expert as anyone else in naming things (385b).

This question of expertise will turn out to be centrally important in assessing both conventionalism and naturalism. To fully sort out the relationship between language and knowledge, we ought to know if there are language experts. Is everyone in a special epistemic standing that gives them authority over names, or is that reserved for a privileged few?

Why does Socrates take the time to argue against Protagorean relativism if Hermogenes himself is not committed to the view? I will suggest that the argument accomplishes two things here at the start. First of all it suggests that Hermogenes' commitments are not what is centrally important here, or at least not all that matters. It will take some time to see what is more centrally important, but notice for now that he has brought the sophist Protagoras into the discussion in an important way, not merely by invoking his name but by suggesting an affinity between Protagoras' epistemology and conventionalism about language. We will return to this affinity later in the chapter. Secondly, the argument does some important preliminary work for the initial argument in favor of naturalism that follows after – that argument will take realism about truth as its starting premise.

But the final thing to note for now is the significance of introducing EQ in the argument against conventionalism. The crux of the problem with conventionalism – why Socrates finds it so immediately unappealing – *is* this affinity with Protagorean relativism. This affinity counts against the view. This suggests importantly that a connection to an epistemological view is enough to make a philosophy of language view unattractive (or even worthless). I will return to EQ in section §4 when I discuss the ultimate fall of naturalism at the end of the dialogue.

§3. The Metaphysical Question

I have tried to show that the initial argument against conventionalism is connected to a deeper epistemological question, just as the final rejection against naturalism will be in the end. I turn now though to the arguments *for* naturalism, and the first thing I want to note is how these arguments rest on a deeper *metaphysical* question about language. I will call this the Metaphysical Question (MQ):

MQ: What is the relationship between language and reality?

It will turn out to be necessary to answer this metaphysical question in order to answer the central linguistic questions of the dialogue. The full case for naturalism comes in two parts, and the MQ will be important to both. First, Socrates will lead the others in building a case for naturalism itself – the view that there is some kind of natural correctness to language. They will then turn to investigating just *what* that natural correctness consists in.

The premise that truth is objective will be the starting point for the arguments for naturalism, and Socrates will argue, along with Cratylus, that the former entails the latter: realism about truth will entail that there is a natural correctness to names. Part of what this means is that Hermogenes holds an untenable position being a realist about truth and a conventionalist about meaning, just as Socrates has suggested. How do we get from the first view to the second though – from objectivism about truth to naturalism about language?

To see more how realism about truth entails naturalism about meaning we need to fill in the steps of the argument, which I will call the Correctness of Action argument. Socrates begins by arguing that if there is a truth of the matter regarding how things are, there is also a truth of the matter regarding how we treat them – that is, actions performed in relation to them are either performed in accordance with their nature or they are not (386e-387a). If we wish to cut well, for example, we must cut in a manner that is appropriate to the nature of cutting and being cut, and we must use the right tool for the job (387a). This cutting example makes vivid the importance of choosing the right tools for performing certain actions: if we wish to cut wood, we will be foolish to choose a bread knife for the job. Speaking language, Socrates continues, is also an action, and as such we speak well or correctly only if we say things in the natural way of saying, in the natural way for things to be said, and with the natural tool for saying them (384c).

Realism about truth has been shown to entail naturalism, but the Correctness of Action argument involves an important metaphysical step that is perhaps easy to miss. The structure of the argument works as follows:

1. Truth is objective; how things are is not relative to how they appear to us.
2. As a result, things have a fixed being of their own, independent of us.
3. If things have a fixed being, there is a correct way of acting regarding them that is in accord with their nature.
4. Using language is an action.
5. Therefore there is a correct way of speaking about things that is in accord with their nature.

Notice here how MQ is drawn into the argument for naturalism, a view that answers LQ. The argument for naturalism so far rests importantly on establishing that there is a metaphysical relationship between names and their referents. Given the particular natures of the things that are, there is a correct way of acting regarding them.¹⁰² Still, the exact nature of this metaphysical relationship is not yet clear.

These ideas need more drawing out, obviously, and so Socrates turns to the second important argument for naturalism, one that explains how this correctness of words actually works. I will call this the Argument from Resemblance. While it is relatively clear what it is to cut well or correctly, the question arises – what is it to speak correctly? In the case of statements, speaking correctly turns out to be a matter of speaking the truth: to speak correctly of the things that are – to act correctly towards them – is to speak the truth of them (385b-c). The dialogue is principally interested in the correctness of names though. What is it to speak a name correctly? Here too – surprisingly – it will turn out to be a matter of speaking the truth. If whole statements are true or false, Socrates argues, then its parts must also be true – including its smallest parts, names (385c). What could it mean, though, for a *name* to be true or false? This will take more careful investigation to answer. First, it has become clear that names are tools (388a). Socrates asks then: what is it that we are using these tools for? The answer: we use them as teachers do – that is, as dialecticians do, to investigate and discover things, and to divide things according to their natures (388b). Something peculiar has emerged here: if names are tools, the primary users of these tools are not, as we might have expected, average language speakers. Rather, they are dialecticians, who use names as a tool in

¹⁰² It is difficult to understand the precise relationship between objectivism about truth here and objectivism about reality. The argument suggests that Plato sees the metaphysical view as necessary for grounding the epistemological view. This is in line with his frequent treatment of Protagorean relativism and Hericlitean flux – relativism about truth is often taken unquestioningly to imply flux. This same tricky issue will be relevant in the next chapter.

dividing up things according to their natures (390e). I will return later to say more about what this means, but it's interesting that the primary use of names here appears to be epistemic: language is used not primarily for something like communication, as we might have expected, but instead for *getting at the nature of things*.

The next step in the argument is also epistemologically significant. If names are tools, and dialecticians their primary users, who is it that makes these tools for the dialectician? Who is it, that is, who gives names to things? Importantly, it turns out that not everyone can be a name giver – to give the correct names to things requires expertise. We begin to see clearly here that our starting position, realism about truth, is incompatible with conventionalism. On the conventionalist view, anyone can give names to things without erring. If the Correctness of Action argument is right, realism about truth entails that only people with special expertise can give the proper names to things.

It follows that the giving of names can't be as inconsequential a matter as you think, Hermogenes, nor can it be the work of an inconsequential or chance person (390d).

We are now in a position to see how names can be true or false – and thus, what it is for names to have a natural correctness to them. Socrates continues:

So Cratylus is right in saying that things have natural names, and that not everyone is a craftsman of names, but only someone who looks to the natural name of each thing and is able to put its form into letters and syllables (390d).

What a name giver is expert at doing is expressing the being or essence of a thing in its name. A name is correct, then, if it expresses the nature of the thing it names. Further, this is what it means for a name to be true: just as a statement is true if it expresses the truth about the things that are, a name is true if it expresses the nature of the thing it names. Names then are primarily *descriptions* of the essences of the things they name.

A final question remains: how exactly can the being or essence of a thing be expressed in a name? Socrates answers this question by looking to a specific form of naturalism which some contemporary philosophers of language have called the Iconic Signification Theory. On this view, the intrinsic, natural connection between a name and what it names is a relation of iconic *resemblance*, where an icon is something that refers to what it does in virtue of being perceptibly similar to it. One way a language can do this is pictorially. Consider the ideographic elements of Egyptian hieroglyphics, for example. On Socrates' account of naturalism, this perceptible similarity is vocal in nature – a primary name, he says, is a vocal imitation of what it names (423b). In making names, then, a name giver looks to the essence or being of a thing and uses letters and syllables to imitate that essence or being (427c-d). For example, the 'r' sound in 'rhoe' (flow) and 'rhein' (to flow) vocally imitates the flowing movement that is their essence. 'rhein' is a true name in that its letters express this essence. Other names are derivative from primary names, either historically (they have shifted away from their more obvious vocal resemblance) or compositionally (they are built up from primary names). For example, the name 'Theophilus' is derived compositionally from 'theo' (god) and 'philus' (beloved). The name 'Theophilus' would be false therefore if it were given to an impious man (394e).

The full significance of MQ is clear now. When it comes to speaking – using names – the correct way of acting is to act in accordance with the nature of the thing that is named. The precise metaphysical relationship that grounds this correctness of action is revealed here. A name is correct if it has a tight metaphysical fit to the thing it names, where that fit is cashed out in terms of a physical resemblance to the essence of the thing. In short, a name describes its referent by being

physically like it. A correct name, then, will have a close resemblance, while an incorrect name will not.

Socrates and Hermogenes move on from here to consider the etymologies of primary and derivative names, looking to their natural correctness or incorrectness, for sixty pages of dialogue. What is the purpose of this long section of etymologies?

It is obvious to me that Plato would not spend sixty pages on something that was not critically important to the dialogue. I want to suggest two important roles these etymologies play. First, it is in this long section that Socrates is able demonstrate how this view works. Page after page they investigate the particular nature of words, starting with simple names and moving on to complex. One thing this does is make the view more plausible. It is one thing to argue for this kind of metaphysical relation of resemblance between names and their referents. It does more to defend the view though to show – in painstaking way – that these resemblances can, by and large, be identified. The long section on etymologies does another job though, one I take to be more important. At the same time as they work to strengthen the case for naturalism, they also set the stage for its ultimate rejection by Socrates. Importantly they do not do so through failure, but in their very success. I will highlight how this works shortly when we turn to the rejection of naturalism.

To sum up here, though, the two parts of the case for naturalism rest importantly on metaphysical issues. The Correctness of Action argument delivers the idea that there is a fixed nature of things that determines the right way to act in regards to them, including the action of using names – and therefore that naturalism is right. The Argument from Resemblance explains just what the correctness of names consists in. Correct names turn out to be ones that stand in a proper

metaphysical relationship to their referents: they physically resemble their essences. I want to emphasize here then that sorting out the right answer to LQ depends in part on sorting out the right answer to MQ. Answering MQ though very clearly involves making broader metaphysical commitments.

§5. A Return to the Epistemological Question

After all of this work to defend naturalism, it comes as a surprise that in the final pages of the dialogue Socrates rejects the naturalist account of meaning. He suggests that defending it is like “pulling a boat up a sticky ramp” – though it is preferable, it is untenable (435c). Because of this, he abandons naturalism in favor of ‘that worthless thing, convention’. Why does Socrates reject a view he has worked so carefully to explicate and defend? To understand why we must look one final time to the case *for* naturalism. Recall that in setting out the view Socrates gave language a primarily epistemic function: names are used to divide up things according to their natures – that is, to investigate and discover the beings and essences of things. Near the end of the dialogue Socrates returns to the idea, but here he and Cratylus draw it out further – if the primary function of language is epistemic, then we would seem to have a significant epistemic advantage if names did have a natural, intrinsic relation to the things they name. Because names on this view are likenesses of the things they name, they can function as descriptions of those things. Names are correct or true in as much as they describe or reveal the natures of the things they name. Knowing a thing’s name therefore entails knowing the thing itself – that is, knowing its essence or being (435e). In short, if naturalism is right, then if we wish to discover the essences and beings of things, as good dialecticians do, *we need only learn their names* (436a).

We are in a position now to see the full answer to LQ. What *is* the relationship between language and knowledge? Conventionalism and naturalism give different answers to this question. On conventionalism, there simply is no relationship. Because names are arbitrary, they have no epistemic advantage. On naturalism, on the other hand, there is a significant relationship between language and knowledge, a relationship that works in both directions. If I understand the essence of a thing, I can know its correct name. And likewise, if I learn the name of a thing I come to have knowledge of the thing itself.

Although this epistemic advantage is attractive, Socrates' final criticisms of the view show that the picture is ultimately problematic. He rejects the naturalist account by raising two concerns that undermine its apparent epistemic advantage. First, if we can discover the nature of things by learning their names, we can only do so if the original name givers got the names right – that is, if they encoded the right descriptions in their names. If they chose incorrect names, then the descriptions encoded in the names would be false descriptions (436b). Learning false names would give us false beliefs instead of knowledge – in short, we would be deceived. There is now an apparent weakness in the naturalist account: the natural correctness of names is dependent on the infallibility of the original name givers. By why should we trust them? After all, the price of trusting them and being deceived is, for the dialectician at any rate, rather grave: no less than false beliefs about the essences of things. This question of the fallibility of name givers becomes centrally important here. Cratylus tries to defend them as infallible – he suggests, for example, that the consistency of names is a powerful proof that the name givers got things right (436d). Socrates quickly deflects the suggestion – if the name givers began with false first principles, the names they gave to things would be consistent with one another but still false. Cratylus cannot make a convincing case, and we are left with a deep anxiety about trusting the name givers.

That anxiety is shown to be reasonable in the course of the dialogue. In examining the many etymologies, it becomes clear to Socrates by the end that the original name givers did in fact begin with false principles. There is a pattern in the etymologies explored, and the significance of this pattern is only clear here in the final section of the dialogue. Encoded in a large number of the names they consider are the first principles of Heraclitean flux: that everything is always moving and flowing (439a).

Most of our wise men nowadays get so dizzy going around and around in their search for the nature of the things that are, that the things themselves appear to them to be turning around and moving every which way. Well, I think that the people who gave things their names in very ancient times are exactly like these wise men. They don't blame this on their internal condition, however, but on the nature of the things in themselves, which they think are never stable or steadfast, but flowing, moving, full of every sort of motion and constant coming into being. I say this, because the names you just mentioned put me in mind of it... they are given on the assumption that the things they name are moving, flowing, and coming into being (411c).

The original name givers were, it seems, as fallible as contemporary thinkers who have been seduced by the metaphysics of Heraclitus (or, say, the epistemology of Protagoras). We should, therefore, be as distrusting of them as we are of these contemporary thinkers and investigate things for ourselves.

Socrates raises a further concern that undermines the epistemic advantage of names. Even if it were possible to discover the natures of things from their names, it must also be possible to discover their natures by looking to the things themselves. After all, in order to give things their correct names the original name givers must have discovered their natures by independent means. If it is possible to discover the natures of things from both names and things themselves, however, it is preferable, Socrates argues, to do so by looking to the things themselves (439a). Names, after all, are at best mere likenesses of things, and it is better and clearer to learn about things directly instead of through likenesses. Further, by investigating the things that are independently one is then in the best position to judge if those likenesses are good ones - that is, if the name givers got things right (439a).

Names, on the naturalist account, seemed to offer a significant epistemic advantage. But in fact, that advantage has disappeared. We have no reason to trust that names are true, and in fact some reason to think they are false. Further, even if we did take them to be true, what names can tell us about the nature of things is not as precise or clear as what things themselves can tell us. In the end then, naturalism has lost its driving appeal. For this reason, Socrates abandons the view altogether and settles for “that worthless thing”, conventionalism.

§6. The Pedagogical Question

I have tried to stress how important MQ and EQ are in answering LQ. The primary arguments for and against both candidate views rely on working out these deeper metaphysical and epistemological questions. There is one final question I want to highlight in the dialogue, though, one that I think underlies all the others. I’ll call this the Pedagogical Question (PQ):

PQ: What is the role of language in education?

I want to argue that the investigation of language in the *Cratylus* rests most importantly on questions of education. I want to draw this out in two ways, starting first with PQ. As I’ve said, the primary appeal of naturalism was that it gave language an epistemic role. That epistemic role was tied up with issues of education from early on though – recall that Socrates said the primary purpose of language was to teach. By the end, the dialogue essentially asks this question: can language itself be a teacher? On naturalism, the answer turned out to be yes – because learning a name entailed learning

the essence of its referent, names could act as a kind of teacher. Note though that the view failed in the end because this very idea proved problematic.

It is PQ that seems to be the essential question at play here. If the primary concern in the dialogue were to merely find the most attractive view of how language grounds meaning, independent of concerns about learning or teaching, naturalism would clearly win out in the end. The arguments in favor of it are not rejected, and even the metaphysical views it entails are compatible with Platonic metaphysics. The reason it fails is because of its incompatibility with Plato's views of teaching and learning.

In the end, that the primary advantage of naturalism falls apart in this way should come as no surprise to the familiar Platonic reader. The picture of learning offered by naturalism is incompatible with Plato's own view of how learning occurs. He endorses a picture of learning throughout the corpus on which a learner cannot passively receive knowledge from others but must instead actively engage in a careful process of investigation and discovery. In short, genuine knowledge cannot be gained by testimony from others about the nature of things – at best, we might gain true opinion, and at worst, we run the risk of being deceived by false opinion. For those who wish to discover the true essences and beings of things – to gain knowledge of them, that is – the only sure and safe route is through the hard work of dialectical investigation. This, in fact, is the *proper* role of language in education.

There is a final reason that I think PQ is foregrounded heavily by the end of the dialogue. I want to argue that while the dialogue is about language at the surface level, Plato is particularly concerned here both with education more probably, and the education by sophists in particular. I noted at the start that Plato has given us in the *Cratylus* a dialogue featuring two of his intellectual mentors in

philosophical debate. His focus on Protagorean relativism and Heraclitean flux is further evidence of focus on sophists here. So too is his worry that we might adopt the false first principles of men committed to these views. And finally, Plato himself is not the only Greek intellectual concerned with issues of language. It shouldn't escape our attention that language is a topic of instruction among the sophists, most famously of the sophist Prodicus. The dialogue seems to me to be a more careful investigation of language than the sort Prodicus and other sophists were known for, and one that ultimately keeps a careful eye aimed at the sophists.

CHAPTER FOUR: SOPHIST AS TEACHER

I have argued in the last two chapters that the *Phaedrus* and the *Cratylus* are ultimately concerned with the sophists in a serious and focal way, particularly concerning their role as educators in the polis. I now take up Plato's thoughts on sophists more directly. It is good first of all to recognize just how many of the dialogues deal with the sophists. There are four which give sophists the role of title characters: *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, and *Protagoras*, each of which offers rich commentary on sophistry. The *Euthydemus* tackles the problematic eristic style of argumentation famously taught and employed by the sophists, and sets this method of argumentation in clear contrast to the more noble Socratic dialectic. The *Sophist* explores the question of what a sophist really is, employing the careful philosophical method of collection and division as yet another way of demonstrating what philosophers are in contrast to sophists. The *Theaetetus*, like the *Cratylus*, rests its central investigation of knowledge partly on criticisms of Protagorean relativism. This was clearly a consuming focus of Plato's life work: trying to understand the nature of sophists and their methodology, offering criticisms of their thought and educational practices, and doing constant work to demonstrate just how different sophists and philosophers are – and as a result, why philosophers are superior intellectuals and teachers.

Given the breadth of writing on sophists, my examination in this chapter will necessarily be narrow in focus. I take it as a good starting place to consider what Plato has to say about the most famous and perhaps respected sophist of all, Protagoras. He gets the most frequent and serious attention in the corpus, and is treated as an especially strong intellectual and pedagogical opponent.¹⁰³ He also

¹⁰³ Zilioli (2007), Lee 2005) 4-5, Broadie (2003) 76.

stands as the best representative for the sophists – what is shown about Protagoras in the dialogues does not apply to every sophist in the particulars, but the criticisms leveled at him do apply in broad strokes. What Plato thinks about Protagoras is representative of his general thoughts on sophists.

This narrow focus will also allow me to trace some important through lines from previous chapters. I will take up the treatment of Protagoras first in the *Theaetetus*. There we get a similar treatment of the sophist to that in the *Cratylus*. The dialogue's central investigation of the nature of knowledge turns very importantly on criticisms of Protagorean relativism. The particular way this plays out will highlight again the significant relationship between theoretical epistemological questions and more pragmatic questions about education. It will also highlight the same biting criticism of Protagoras as before: that his own thought is incoherent with his teaching practices.

I will then take up a fuller discussion of the *Protagoras*. Here I will focus on four of the most interesting and tricky elements of the dialogue: (1) what I have called the student paradox in the prologue of the dialogue; (2) the complex portrayal of Protagoras and his thought; (3) the rather long diversion on method in the middle of the dialogue; and (4) the reversals of position in the dialogue's conclusion by Socrates and Protagoras, on whether or not virtue is teachable. I want to offer an analysis of the dialogue that makes sense of these elements together by arguing that the central question all along in the dialogue is about whether Protagoras is a good teacher. The answer in the end is that no, he is not a good teacher, but it involves some complexity. First, I want to highlight how seriously and even respectfully Plato treats Protagoras as a foe. And second, how this dialogue argues again that the biggest problem with Protagoras lies in an inconsistency in his thoughts and teaching practices.

§1. The *Theaetetus*

The *Theaetetus* is centrally concerned with an investigation into the nature of knowledge. Aside from the narrative frame, it is a long conversation between Socrates and Theaetetus, a promising young student of mathematics. In the course of the dialogue Socrates pushes Theaetetus to offer a series of possible definitions of knowledge, since he cannot understand himself what knowledge is.¹⁰⁴

Theaetetus proposes definitions that are initially off target, but grow increasingly more successful. His first grasping attempt is to merely list off different branches of knowledge: geometry, astronomy, and so on (145c-148e). Once he understands that Socrates is looking for a definition of the essence of knowledge, he suggests that knowledge is perception. The investigation and ultimate rejection of this definition occupies a large part of their discussion (151d-186e). Afterwards he offers a third definition, that knowledge is true judgement. This definition seems more promising but is also rejected (187a-201c). They finally land on the idea that knowledge is true judgment along with an ‘account’. This final definition comes closest to succeeding, but it too has problems in the end that force them to abandon it (201c-210a). Theaetetus has shown great promise as a student, but the conversation ends in *aporia*.¹⁰⁵

I want to focus in this chapter on the arguments against the second definition, that knowledge is perception, and the surrounding sections of the dialogue that bookend it: at the start, an important metaphor for teaching, and near the end, a digression on the nature of the philosopher.

Teacher as Midwife

¹⁰⁴ See Forster (2006) and White (2008) for a discussion of Socrates’ typical demand for definitions.

¹⁰⁵ On what to make of this *aporia*, see Politis (2012).

In a digression early in the dialogue, just before the long discussion of knowledge as perception, Socrates offers a metaphor for himself as a teacher (149a-151d). He claims to practice an art of midwifery, just like his mother. His though is an intellectual midwifery. Like a midwife who has never given birth to a child herself, but who is skilled in helping others give birth, he is barren of knowledge but skilled at assisting others in giving birth to their ideas. Using this metaphor, he suggests several key talents by which a teacher might help his students realize their potential. First, the intellectual midwife is able to recognize which individuals are pregnant or fertile in soul and which are barren – recognize, that is, which students have a genuine potential for acquiring knowledge and which do not. For those who are barren, he plays a kind of matchmaker – he is able to match them with other teachers like Prodicus, with whom they will be able to spend the most productive time.¹⁰⁶ For individuals who are pregnant in soul, the intellectual midwife is able to help them realize their potential – at times inducing labor and bringing about a birth, and at appropriate times promoting a miscarriage so the process can begin again in a healthier, more productive way. His greatest, noblest, and most important function, Socrates says, comes after the birth of a student's idea, when he applies tests to the offspring and discerns whether it is a 'fertile truth' or simply a 'wind-egg' – an error or falsehood. Note that on this picture, the source of a student's learning is internal – the student's own pregnant or fertile nature. The precise role given to the teacher is to help guide an intellectual process that is fundamentally an internal one.

The discussion of the teacher as a midwife is a noticeable digression from the dialogue's principal inquiry. What is the purpose of suspending the search for a definition of knowledge for several

¹⁰⁶ It remains a question how seriously we are meant to take this suggestion. It reads more as a jab at the sophists – how much, after all, can they help a student who has no potential for genuine learning?

pages in order to set out this picture of Socrates as a midwife? How does the metaphor fit into the dialogue? It is first worth noting that the discussion of midwifery is importantly connected to the *method* of the central project here. Socrates is placing himself in the role of midwife to Theaetetus, and their search for a definition of knowledge will take place in this context. He recognizes that Theaetetus is pregnant, having thought about and labored some over this particular question before, and having been successful in developing a similar mathematical idea previously (148e). He suggests that his role first will be to attend to Theaetetus in his labor, helping him to “bring his belief forth into the light” (157d). Further, once Theaetetus has given birth to his idea, it will fall to Socrates to judge whether it is fertile or a wind-egg.

I have suggested that the midwife metaphor presents a picture of how learning and teaching occur. If Socrates is successful in his role as midwife here, however, what will evidently happen is that Theaetetus will come to know what knowledge is. That knowledge will come from Theaetetus himself, helped along by the questioning and prodding of Socrates. He says (at 161b) that he will “get their answer out of Theaetetus” in his role as a midwife – an answer, of course, to the question of what knowledge is. Once the belief is before them, it will fall to Socrates to test it and discern its truth. In the course of the dialogue, we see this process play out. Theaetetus will soon offer his second definition of knowledge (that knowledge is perception, 151e), and Socrates will apply careful scrutiny to this belief. He ultimately finds it deficient, but had it passed the test (or either of the proceeding definitions) and Socrates declared it a ‘fertile truth’, it would seem plausible to take Theaetetus to know what knowledge is – and to have acquired that knowledge in the course of the conversation with Socrates. To give birth to fertile truths then, aided by an intellectual midwife, might be understood as a way of describing the process of learning or acquiring knowledge, aided by a skilled teacher.

If the dialogue is principally about the question of what knowledge is, the midwife metaphor seems then to introduce two related, secondary questions: how is knowledge acquired, and what is the role of a teacher in this process? The important connection between the dialogue's primary question and these secondary questions becomes clearer in the refutation of Protagorean relativism that follows. Here in the digression, however, the secondary questions perhaps serve to highlight an important element of what makes epistemological questions significant in the first place. Why is it important to understand what knowledge is – why, that is, is the dialogue's principal inquiry worthwhile? One purpose of the digression might be to underscore the practical implications of this otherwise very theoretical inquiry. Whatever knowledge turns out to be, the midwife metaphor reminds us that we especially care to understand how one gets it, and what sort of person can help us do so.

The Refutation of Protagoras

The dialogue ultimately does do a more careful job of connecting these secondary questions to the principal inquiry. Immediately following the midwife digression, Theaetetus offers up the second definition of knowledge as perception (151e). In the course of testing this definition, Socrates attributes the same position to Protagoras, connecting it to Protagorean relativism – the doctrine that how things appear to each individual is how things are for that individual.¹⁰⁷ Some of the arguments against this second definition, then, come in the form of a refutation of Protagoras. It is

¹⁰⁷ He goes on to connect the position to Heraclitean flux as well. Exactly what the connection is between the three positions is widely debated, but on one interpretation Theaetetus' claim that knowledge is perception implies (and is thus supported by) Protagorean relativism and Heraclitean flux. There are further debates about what kind of relativism is up for discussion in the dialogue. I leave these difficult interpretive questions aside for the purposes of this discussion, but see Zilioli (2007) 8-ff. for a philosophically sophisticated examination of the relationship between these two doctrines. See also Irwin (1977) 1-13 and Reed (1972) 65-77.

in an important argument against Protagorean relativism that the dialogue's secondary questions about knowledge, first introduced with the midwife passage, become critically important.

If whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him; if no man can assess another's experience better than he, or can claim authority to examine another man's judgment and see if it be right or wrong; if, as we have repeatedly said, only the individual himself can judge of his own world, and what he judges is always true and correct: how could it ever be, my friend, that Protagoras was a wise man, so wise as to think himself fit to be the teacher of other men and worth large fees; while we, in comparison with him the ignorant ones, needed to go and sit at his feet – we who are ourselves each the measure of his own wisdom?

This objection highlights a kind of problem a proponent of any theory of knowledge might face: namely, a problem involving an incoherence between one's epistemology and one's thoughts and practices concerning education. The objection here is that relativism about truth does not allow for some men to be wiser than others – or even gods to be wiser than men (162c). And yet it is a special wisdom or expertise that Protagoras professes to have, and which places him in a special position to be able to teach others or make others wise or virtuous.¹⁰⁸ Socrates and Theaetetus, and we as readers, are prepared to abandon Protagorean relativism in part for this inconsistency between Protagoras' view and his teaching practices.

Instead of rejecting the view here, and along with it Theaetetus' second definition of knowledge, Socrates tries to offer a robust response in the spirit of Protagoras. This response reinforces the importance of one's epistemology cohering with one's educational theory – in short, the defense amounts to an attempt to explain away the incoherence between Protagoras' epistemology and his teaching practices. Notably, he does not offer a view of education that does not depend on a teacher having special wisdom or expertise (e.g. a view like that we get in Socrates' midwife

¹⁰⁸ That Plato believed Protagoras held this position, that it was in virtue of his wisdom that he could make others wise or virtuous, is more evident in the *Protagoras*. There he has Protagoras say: "If there is someone who is the least bit more advanced in virtue than ourselves, he is to be cherished. I consider myself to be such a person, uniquely qualified to assist others in becoming noble and good, and worth the fee I charge and even more, so much so that even my students agree (328b).

metaphor). Instead, he attempts to explain how relativism *does* in fact allow for wisdom and wise men - wise because they can “change appearances” for other people (166d). Protagoras, in the mouth of Socrates:

I certainly do not deny the existence of both wisdom and wise men; far from it. But the man whom I call wise is the man who can change the appearances – the man in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him.... In education, too, what we have to do is to change a worse state into a better state... the professional teacher does this by the use of words (166d-67a).

This wise man is not wise in the traditional sense, then, but wise because he can make others see a different reality that is not truer but merely *better*. This is what professional teachers do in educating others.

Similarly the professional teacher who is able to educate his pupils on these lines is a wise man, and is worth his large fees to them. In this way we are enabled to hold that some men are wiser than others, and also that no man judges what is false (167d).

It is significant that Socrates is here giving a defense of Protagoras that squares away his epistemology with his beliefs about education and the role of the wise teacher figure. It is notable also that the defense offered on behalf of Protagoras takes the seemingly more difficult route of squaring away relativism with wise men. This picture of wisdom is strained – there is an oddness in his re-characterization of the wise man and what he is up to as a teacher.¹⁰⁹ Socrates might more easily have offered a view of teaching that does not depend on a wise teacher figure. This suggests a strong commitment on Protagoras’ part (at least in Plato’s mind) to his view of teaching.

All of this suggests that one might indirectly approach the dialogue’s central question by means of the secondary questions I’ve highlighted here. If we have a sense of how learning and teaching take

¹⁰⁹ Further, although Socrates and Theaetetus leave it unchallenged and turn to another way of ultimately refuting the view, one could press Protagoras here on the notion of ‘better’ he employs – if truth in all matters is relative, how can one thing be objectively better than another?

place, or we are committed to a particular view of how learning and teaching work, we have a further way of testing our candidate accounts of knowledge. If a definition of knowledge seems oddly inconsistent with our thoughts on learning and education, we have cause to worry, or cause for some revision of our epistemology. This further reinforces the importance of these secondary questions within the dialogue, and the importance of coherence between one's epistemological commitments and one's teaching theory and practice.

One important focus in *Theaetetus* scholarship is on the argument that follows – what is presented as the most serious argument against Protagorean relativism, the self-refutation argument (170a-171d). Here Protagorean relativism is said to be self-refuting, because, since it holds that all opinions are equally true, the opinion that the theory itself is false must *also* be true. I won't take up the careful work of analyzing that argument here, as I think sufficient attention has been given to the project.¹¹⁰ But I want to suggest that this more serious argument against Protagoras works to reinforce the earlier argument against him. Plato criticizes Protagoras himself, both here in the earlier argument and in the *Cratylus*, for having teaching beliefs and practices that do not cohere with his epistemology, and this issue of internal coherence seems critically important to him. It is not surprising then that the final criticism here of Protagorean thought is a matter of internal incoherence as well. He prefaces the argument by bringing the reader's attention back to Protagoras as a thinker and teacher. He emphasizes once again that people often seek teachers, and that some men believe they are able to teach, despite what relativism would suggest. And he starts the self-refutation argument by focussing on the implications of the view if either Protagoras himself endorsed it but the majority did not, or on the contrary, if the majority held this view while

¹¹⁰ See Bartlett (2003), Zilioli (2007), Barker (1976), Bett (1989), Bradshaw (1998), Bostock (1988), Castagnoli (2004), Cole (1966), Cornford (1935), Emilsson (1994), Fine (1996 and 1998).

Protagoras denounced it (170e-171a). I think this emphasis on Protagoras and teaching in the lead up to the self-refutation argument emphasizes a certain kind of fit between the two criticisms. That Protagoras' epistemology is ultimately incoherent in itself does not seem surprising in the context of the incoherence of his larger beliefs and practices. So, the self-refutation argument is reason for taking Protagoras as intellectually unsuccessful. His epistemology is not only incoherent with his teaching claims and practices, but it also does not hold up under careful scrutiny itself.

Midwives and Platonic Innatism

In light of this challenge to Protagorean relativism, the reader of the *Theaetetus* is in a position to question whether Plato's thoughts on education cohere with his epistemology. The dialogue suggests some answers to that question. In the midwife metaphor we get a view of education from Plato – a view of how one person can help another person acquire knowledge – that is in some ways at least broadly consistent with his thoughts on education found elsewhere in the corpus.¹¹¹ On this picture, broadly speaking, a teacher helps a student acquire knowledge by engaging the student in philosophical dialectic. Importantly, the teacher does not hand over or give the student knowledge, but instead elicits from within the student herself an understanding of the subject matter. The midwife metaphor captures this important idea in Plato's theory of education – the midwife, like Socrates, can be barren herself, as the source of understanding lies in the student's own potential. What the midwife-teacher must be skilled at is helping to draw out this understanding from within the student, through the questioning and testing of dialectic.

¹¹¹ Consistent, for example, with views of learning and education in the *Meno*, the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*.

If it is reasonable to speak of the midwife metaphor as broadly representative of Plato's thoughts on learning and teaching, there is still a challenge in sorting out whether that view is consistent with his epistemology. In the case of *Protagoras*, we are able to judge the coherence of his epistemology and educational theory within the bounds of the dialogue – both are offered up for discussion, and the question is raised directly for us. Since the *Theaetetus* ends in *aporia*, there is no clear definition of knowledge offered up by Plato. The dialogue offers us a Platonic view of education, but what in his epistemology should this cohere with? I will suggest here two ways of assessing Plato in the way the dialogue challenges Protagoras. First, although the dialogue ends in *aporia*, its final definition of knowledge – that knowledge is a true belief with an account – might be taken as more successful than the others. It is worth considering whether Plato's view of education coheres well with this definition. Perhaps more significant, we might consider whether this view of education coheres well with a core epistemological commitment of Plato's – namely, the innatist view of learning found in his theory of recollection. It is difficult to speak of this innatist view as a consistent commitment in the corpus, since the theory of recollection is mentioned explicitly in only a few of the dialogues.¹¹² That said, given its importance in Platonic thought, it is worth asking whether Plato's thoughts on education cohere with the view. I will argue that the view of education presented in the midwife metaphor is deeply consistent with Platonic innatism. Further, it is consistent with the view that knowledge is true belief with an account.

It is perhaps too easy to see the compatibility between the midwife view of teaching and the theory of recollection, or an innatist view of learning more broadly. What is essential to both of these pictures – the one of a teacher's role in the learning process, and the other about how learning itself happens – is that what a student learns comes ultimately from within the student, and not from the

¹¹² The *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Phaedrus*.

teacher. The teacher's important role is to elicit this understanding from the student – to induce in them, or hasten along, the process of recollecting, say. Depicting the student as pregnant or fertile, as the midwife metaphor does, captures well the potential one has for acquiring knowledge found in an innatist view of learning.¹¹³ The midwife metaphor goes further and suggests other important elements of a teacher's role – namely, recognizing which student's have this potential, and being able to judge when a student has successfully come to know something. In short, it would be difficult to find a view of the teacher's role in the learning process that is more compatible with Platonic innatism than the view suggested by the midwife metaphor.

Given the very direct challenge to Protagoras' epistemology in the dialogue, it is worth considering whether the tentative view of knowledge offered by Plato in the dialogue also coheres with his views on teaching.¹¹⁴ This too seems to cohere well. In the course of the discussion of Theaetetus' second definition, that knowledge is perception, Socrates first gets Theaetetus to state this belief about what knowledge is (a belief which arises from a spark of insight). He then engages him in a discussion of the belief during which Theaetetus comes to give reasons or arguments in favor of that belief. It is significant that Socrates suggests that the arguments given for and against the definition of knowledge are not his, any more than the belief itself – these too he says he is eliciting from Theaetetus (161b). If these arguments in favor of a definition come from Theaetetus himself, they might be counted as the justification or account necessary for knowledge on the dialogue's final definition. It is by carefully working through the reasons for holding a belief that one ties it down,

¹¹³ This notion of some people being pregnant or fertile in soul is found in other dialogues, one of which explicitly discusses the theory of recollection (the *Phaedrus*) and one of which does not (the *Symposium*).

¹¹⁴ Again, although the view that knowledge is a true belief with an account is ultimately found deficient by Socrates and Theaetetus, it can be taken as more successful in Plato's mind than the previous attempts.

so to speak, in one's understanding.¹¹⁵ Socrates and Theaetetus ultimately reject the second definition as false, but had Socrates judged it to be true, then in the course of their discussion Theaetetus would have come to meet all three of the conditions necessary for knowledge on the dialogue's final definition. What the dialogue seems to show, then, is that in as much as Plato endorses the dialogue's final definition of knowledge – that knowledge is true belief with an account – his view of knowledge coheres especially well with his view of how teaching occurs.

Defense of the Philosopher

There is another peculiar diversion directly following the refutation of Protagorean relativism, before the final arguments are given against the definition of knowledge as perception. Socrates shifts his attention from Theaetetus at this point to his older companion Theodorus, and the two go on for half a dozen pages discussing the differences between the character of the practical man (the man who has been “knocking about in the law-courts since he was a boy”) and that of the philosopher (172c-d). The purpose of this diversion in a discussion about the nature of knowledge is even more puzzling than the midwifery passage. Why pause the careful progress of the dialectic at this point to talk about philosophers?

The focus of the discussion is especially odd. It is not, as maybe we could expect, concerned with the *knowledge* of philosophers in any clear way. Instead, the focus is on the reputation philosophers have acquired in Athens, particularly their reputation in the law-courts and other public spaces. Shifting directly from the discussion of wisdom – especially political wisdom – being relative to what

¹¹⁵ In the *Meno*, when one has ‘tied down’ a belief through the process of dialectic, one counts as having knowledge: “He will have true opinions which, when stirred by questioning, become knowledge” (86a).

people think it is, Socrates says that they are now getting involved in a “great discussion emerging from the lesser one”. He is reminded, he says, of an idea that has often occurred to him before: how natural it is that men who have spent most of their lives in philosophical studies make such a fool of themselves when speaking in the law-courts (172c). This focus on the reputation of the philosopher, how he appears to the general public, is maintained throughout the digression, and the intention through the end seems clearly to be a defense of the philosopher.

It’s notable that the discussion is concerned especially with how the philosopher and the man of the law-courts go about *speaking*. With respect to what and how they speak, the latter is like a slave, he says, while the former is like a free man. The practical man is beholden to others when he speaks in the law-courts; he can’t choose his subject matter; he is always in a hurry with one eye to the clock; he always has an adversary standing over him, reading out sworn statements as he speaks; his speech is always about a fellow slave and is directed at a master – the jury, that is, representing the *demos* or the people¹¹⁶; and the struggle is always a matter that directly concerns the speaker, sometimes with life or death at stake (172d-e). This servitude of speech has a harmful effect on the practical man, Socrates says – it warps his soul like a tree that isn’t allowed to grow straight and true, forcing him to do crooked things like lie and repay wrongs with more wrongs. In the end, he grows into a man without a healthy mind, even though he takes himself to be wise (173a-b).

In contrast, the philosopher, who spends so much of his life in studies, has the chance to speak in an unhurried way, on his own terms and in his own time, with the only aim of getting at the truth. Socrates notes that this is in fact just what they are doing here in their discussion of knowledge – carefully working their way through, in no hurry, now on their third attempt to refute the definition

¹¹⁶ Burnyeat (1990) 300.

of knowledge as perception. They could speak for a day or even a year if they want, simply in the hope of getting at the truth (172d). They are, in short, the master of their discussion. A significant consequence of this is that they have no one to please.

We have no jury, and no audience (as the dramatic poets have), sitting in control over us, ready to criticize and give orders (173c).

They are beholden to no one. There are, however, unfortunate consequences that also come from this manner of engaging in dialogue. The philosopher grows up not understanding practical things – how to get to the marketplace or the law-courts and public assemblies, the laws themselves, issues of birth or social standing, social functions, dinners, or parties with flute girls. Importantly, he doesn't hold himself above these things in order to get a reputation, but because it is only his physical body that is moored in the city. His mind dwells elsewhere, in a realm where more important matters lie (173b-e).

His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way, as Pindar says, through-out the universe, 'in the deeps below the earth' and 'in the heights of heaven'; geometrizing upon earth, measuring its surfaces, astronomizing in the heavens; tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among other things that are, and never condescending to what lies near at hand (173e-174a).

The effect is that the philosopher appears foolish to those outside philosophy, especially in the law-courts.

Whenever he is obliged, in a law-court or elsewhere, to discuss the things that lie at his feet and before his eyes, he causes entertainment... to all the common herd... On occasions when personal scandal is the topic of conversation, he never has anything at all of his own to contribute... a lack of resource which makes him look very comic... on all these occasions, you see, the philosopher is the object of general derision, partly for what men take to be his superior manner, and partly for his constant ignorance and lack of resource in dealing with the obvious (174c-175b).

There are pointed references in these passages. The nods to poetry in the passages above, including the charge of philosophers investigating what is below the earth and in the heavens and the mention of having audiences to please, evoke the portrayal of Socrates by Aristophanes in the *Clouds*. This is

reinforced by the emphasis on how comical philosophers appear to the public. The mention of a philosopher defending against “personal scandal” seems intended to make us think of Socrates on trial as well, and how he seemed to the jurors to be ridiculous in certain ways (e.g. in the punishments he suggested he was worthy of in the second part of the trial).

The passage then seems aimed to invoke the trials of Socrates both on the dramatic stage and in the legal court. We are meant to have in mind the poor reputation Socrates gained in Athens, and by extension, philosophers more broadly. This is made even more clear by what follows in the discussion. Socrates wants to consider now what happens when the practical man and the philosopher turn their attention to higher matters – not particular questions of justice, like “my injustice towards you, or your injustice towards me”, but justice itself, what it is and how it’s different from injustice (175c).

The situation is reversed; his head swims as, suspended at such a height, he gazes down from his place among the clouds; disconcerted by the unusual experience, he knows not what to do next, and can only stammer when he speaks. And that causes great entertainment, not to the Thracian servant girls or any other uneducated person – they do not see what is going on – but to all men who have not been brought up like slaves (175d).

The reference to Aristophanes is completed here then, and it’s the practical man who is now the fool. When it comes to speaking about the things that really matter, the comic stage is reversed – it is the practical man suspended in clouds in absurdity. His eloquence dries up in discussions of substance, and he is left looking more like a child (177b).

The Digressions Together

Take stock of where we are at now. The *Theaetetus* is a careful, serious work in epistemology. It takes up perhaps the most important question in epistemology – what knowledge itself is. The

discussion proceeds in a careful, unhurried way, where Socrates is able to demonstrate his art of midwifery by engaging a young mind in the artful dialectic of the philosopher. The largest part of the dialogue is spent arguing against the idea that knowledge is mere perception. Because that view of knowledge is immediately taken as akin to Protagorean relativism, much of the refutation of the view is aimed at refuting Protagorean epistemology.¹¹⁷

But this important refutation of Protagoras is bookended, as I've shown, by two digressions that are not immediately connected to the central investigation of the dialogue. The first digression offers a rich picture of Socratic teaching. Socrates himself offers this as a model of how he intends for the discussion with Theaetetus to unfold – as in fact it does. As I've suggested, the first thing this accomplishes is to suggest that there are secondary, more practical questions about knowledge in the background of the dialogue – namely questions about teaching and education. And if we care about the background questions about what good teaching is, we have extra motivation to engage with the hard questions about the nature of knowledge itself.

These background questions set out in the midwife digression also set us up for the arguments against Protagoras that follow. One significant problem with Protagoras' epistemology is that it does not cohere with his teaching claims and practices. The idea that relativism does not admit of expertise or wisdom, and therefore teaching, need not on its own count as a strike against it. A proponent of the view could accept that consequence. Socrates himself claims no wisdom, after all. And this is not the thrust of the criticism. The view is criticized precisely because it is inconsistent

¹¹⁷ The final part of the refutation of the second definition, coming after the digression defending philosophy, is an argument against Hericlitean flux. As in the *Cratylus*, the relationship between Protagorean relativism and Hericlitean flux is not easy to parse out. But they are treated in both dialogues as importantly connected, in a way where the refutation of each seems like a single project in Plato's mind.

with how Protagoras *himself* operates as a teacher in the world. The problem, at least for this argument, lies in Protagoras' own inconsistency as an intellectual. In the end, of course, the most serious argument against relativism is that the view itself is self-refuting. This charge of self-refutation – or internal incoherence – is extra biting though, as I suggested, because it comes in the context it does, where Protagoras has already been shown to have a problem with incoherence.

The point I want to make is that the dialogue intertwines these primary and secondary questions about knowledge in the way it treats Protagoras and his epistemology. If we were only concerned with the merits of the view itself, the argument on self-refutation does the important work needed to reject the view.¹¹⁸ That is, ultimately, the harshest criticism against the view. The initial arguments against Protagorean relativism do fit into the dialogue especially well though if you consider the background questions about teaching that have been foregrounded directly before in the midwife digression. That digression reminds the reader, if they are paying attention, that there are practical reasons to care about epistemological investigations like the one Socrates and Theaetetus are engaged in.

This understanding is reinforced in the philosopher digression that follows, though it takes some care to see. As I've said, it is a harder puzzle to understand the purpose of this digression. Why in this dialogue, at this time? At first glance the discussion about the practical man and the philosopher does not appear to be concerned with knowledge, even in the secondary way I have argued that the midwife digression is. But there are things to say that help clarify its role in the discussion.

¹¹⁸ In conjunction, anyway, with the final arguments against Heraclitean flux.

The focus on *speaking* in the philosopher digression is significant. It does a couple of things. First, it lends itself to the clear distinction Plato wants to make between philosophers and those who are rhetorically skilled in public and legal settings. In particular, the focus is on those who come to maturity under the influence of philosophy and those who do so under the pressures of developing rhetorical skill. This is rather subtle, but I think Plato has in mind here to contrast the student of philosophy with the student of rhetoric – who is often, as I’ve argued earlier, the student of the sophist. The soul of the student of philosophy grows right and true, while the student of rhetoric is corrupted, twisted, and stunted in his growth.

The reason these souls grow so differently is highlighted too in the digression. The philosopher’s aim is truth, and he flourishes under the conditions that lend themselves to a search for truth. Most importantly, he is motivated and driven from within, without external pressures and controls. And because he takes up the kind of concerns and investigations that really matter, his soul is nourished. He is the kind of person who speaks – who employs words and conversation – to a noble end. The practical man, on the other hand, is harmed by the way he approaches speaking in the world. His aim is skillful rhetoric of the sort valued in public and legal settings and taught by sophists. And this kind of upbringing or education, the digression suggests, is inherently harmful. Principally because it forms him into the kind of person who is not a master of his own discourse – he is continually motivated or controlled by the external demands of his speaking opponents or audience. Beholden to those pressures from others, his mind is disfigured and corrupted.

The philosopher digression then accomplishes something the midwife digression does as well. It reminds the reader why Socrates and Theaetetus are engaged in the kind of conversation they are. Why they can give all the care and time they need to the discussion as it unfolds. Importantly, part

of what the philosopher can accomplish in speaking in this unhurried and careful way is to guide another through an investigation like this – to teach, in other words. There is an emphasis on internal agency in both digressions that work together here, I think. The important thing we do with language is not aimed at pleasing someone outside of us, like a slave to a master. It's something with internal purpose and meaning. We aim at the truth, hoping to acquire knowledge in the course of our conversations, either for ourselves or for those we guide. So part of the message in the philosopher digression to is to reinforce the method of discussion the interlocutors have adopted.

I have suggested though that the most important message of the philosopher digression is a defense of philosophy. That's hard for any reader to miss. This too seems fitting though, in this particular dialogue at this precise time, if it's considered in the broader context of Plato's writing. In particular, the broader context I've tried to highlight in these chapters. As I've tried to show repeatedly, when Plato is considering the flaws of the poets or sophists as educators, it is usually in tandem with showcasing the merits of the philosopher as teacher. And that work to show the merits of the philosopher is conceived of by Plato as an uphill battle. The philosopher is not just the best candidate teacher in Athens, in Plato's mind. He is also a grossly misunderstood one. And that adds a particularly tragic element to Plato's pragmatic thoughts about education. He realizes very starkly what the polis has come to think of the philosopher, and how people fail to distinguish him from the sophist. He cares deeply about the poor state of education in the Athens, and he sees philosophers as the best kind of teachers to fix the ails of the city-state, but it is a painful obstacle for him that the people of Athens do not see this. In particular, they don't see the important distinction between philosophers and sophists.

So here in the philosopher digression he offers a lengthy, robust defense of the philosopher. The message works on several levels. First of all, within the dialogue it should serve to encourage Theaetetus, if he's paying attention. There is more hard work to be done yet, and this digression reminds him why they should push on, why they need not be hurried or pressured to a quick resolution, and why, ultimately, he benefits from dialogue with a philosopher. The same message is effective for the reader, if he too is paying attention. There is always rigor in reading a Platonic dialogue, but Plato likes at times to pause and remind the reader why his time and careful engagement is worthwhile. Finally, I think the defense of the philosopher here, like anywhere else in the dialogue, is intended on some level for the general populace. Philosophy can never be the great teacher Athens needs until Athens comes to understand her worth, and so the dialogues rather systematically undertake this project of defending her value.

§2. The *Protagoras*

While the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus* both take up a refutation of Protagorean relativism in the course of their investigations of language and knowledge, perhaps the best opportunity to understand Plato's thoughts on Protagoras is, not surprisingly, in the *Protagoras*. I have already discussed the prologue of the dialogue in the introduction of this project – what I have called the student paradox. I wish now to take up an analysis of the dialogue more fully. There are four elements in particular that I wish to focus on here: why the dialogue focusses so heavily on the proper method of discussion; why Protagoras is given the portrayal he is; what to make of the fact that Socrates and Protagoras reverse positions in the end on whether virtue is teachable; and how the student paradox

fits into the dialogue. My approach, not surprisingly, will be to highlight how these peculiar elements all turn on the questions of education that run through the dialogue.

Dialogical Method

I want to start by talking about method. The central question taken up in the dialogue is about whether virtue is teachable, and along the way, whether there is a unity of the virtues and whether *akrasia* is possible. But one of the other central concerns of the dialogue is methodology. What is the right way to have this kind of conversation? This is a concern primarily of Socrates. He interrupts the dialogue at regular intervals, including a full-on digression at one point, to stress the importance of engaging in this conversation in the right way. Protagoras does not share this preoccupation – in fact, he’s resistant to Socrates on this issue – but in as much as their audience participates in the conversation along the way, it is often on this issue of method. What is the significance of this secondary focus on how Socrates and Protagoras converse? How does it fit in with the primary conversation about the nature of virtue? In order to offer some answers here, it will help to give a sketch of the dialogue as I go.

After the prologue where the student paradox is introduced (309a-314c), Socrates and Hippocrates set out for the wealthy Callias’ house. There’s a rich dramatic setup awaiting their arrival. The house is full of sophists and their students and admirers, coming and going, including a good many characters familiar from Athenian life and other Platonic dialogues. Protagoras is holding court over two groups of men, one of locals and another of foreigners he has collected from city to city, and the famous sophists Prodicus and Hippias have their own smaller attendants gathered before them. Notably, among the participants are nearly all of the companions from the *Symposium*: Eryximachus,

Phaedrus, Pausanias, Agathon, and Alcibiades.¹¹⁹ Protagoras is in a mood to show off, and so everyone gathers around for a discussion between him and Socrates (317e-319a).¹²⁰

To start off the discussion, Socrates takes the question set out in the prologue and puts it to Protagoras himself: what will Hippocrates get if he studies with him? Protagoras replies that the young man will be made better by learning the art of citizenship (317e-319a). This art of citizenship is taken to be virtue, and so Socrates puts another challenge to Protagoras that will occupy the remainder of the dialogue: is virtue actually teachable?¹²¹ He expresses doubts himself, offering some brief arguments for why it does not seem so (319a-328d). The discussion that follows for the remainder of the dialogue breaks neatly into five parts. In the first, Protagoras responds to Socrates' question with a great rhetorical speech arguing that virtue is teachable – the first half in myth form, and the second in the form of an argument (319a-328d). The conclusion of his speech is that everyone is a teacher of virtue; he himself has exceptional virtue, though, and so he is exceptionally well suited to teaching it.

The second part of the discussion is Socrates' first attempt to offer arguments in response. He begins with a note on methodology, though.

Now, you could hear a speech similar to this from Pericles or some other competent orator if you happened to be present when one of them was speaking on this subject. But try asking one of them

¹¹⁹ Only Aristophanes is missing.

¹²⁰ The very obvious focus here in the dramatic setting is the reputation and excitement the sophists generate, and on the character of Protagoras, eager to demonstrate his excellence as he is. For a discussion of the way Protagoras presents himself here, see Coby (1987) 37-44.

¹²¹ The jump from this art of citizenry to virtue itself is not altogether clear. Protagoras explains the art as “sound deliberation, both in domestic matters – how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs – how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action” (318e-319a). When Socrates begins to challenge whether this is teachable, he slips quickly into treating this as virtue, without dwelling on the relationship between sound deliberation in private and public affairs and virtue itself. Later Protagoras himself will draw a somewhat closer connection: there is a political art or virtue that allows all humans to live together, the thing everyone must have in some measure in order to have a city, and this thing he says is justice, temperance, and piety – or, in short, the virtue of man (324e-325a).

something, and they will be as unable to answer your question or to ask one of their own as a book would be. Question the least little thing in their speeches and they will go on like bronze bowls that keep ringing for a long time after they have been struck and prolong the sound indefinitely unless you dampen them. That's how these orators are: Ask them one little question and they're off on another long-distance speech (329a-b).¹²²

He suggests that Protagoras, while capable of long, great speeches, is also capable of engaging more directly in a question and answer dialogue. He changes their conversation then to a dialectic back and forth, and shifts the investigation to whether the virtues are unified (329b-334c).

Protagoras does not hold up well under this form of dialogue, and so in the third part of the conversation Socrates pauses for a full digression on method (334c-338e). He urges that they avoid long speeches and stick to dialectic, and that they dispense with eristics and debate each other as friends on good terms. Protagoras resists, and ultimately the others present intervene and suggest a compromise of methodology, giving some leeway to what both Socrates and Protagoras desire in the conversation. Protagoras must not let out the full sails in his rhetorical ship, and Socrates will not insist on full precision and brevity.

Protagoras is given leave then to take control in the fourth part of their conversation, and he wants to shift gears from this direct discussion about the nature of virtue to instead take up an analysis of a poem of Simonides. The greatest part of a man's education, he says, is to be able to understand the words of the poets, to be able to assess their quality, and to be able to answer questions about them. Socrates is reluctant to engage in this project, but he goes along with it. In the end, he proves himself adept at this analysis, but afterwards rejects the activity as meaningless.

¹²² Socrates here is invoking the same kind of criticism about orators that we get in the *Phaedrus*. One of the problematic things about long orations is that they are in kind no different from written speeches or documents that do not have their author present. The orator is there merely to deliver a speech, not engage with his audience in a meaningful way. So a great rhetorical speech like Protagoras' here, whatever merit it might have, is not the sort of thing Socrates can really engage with in conversation.

Discussing poetry strikes me as no different from the second-rate drinking parties of the agora crowd. These people, largely uneducated and unable to entertain themselves over their wine by using their own voices to generate conversation, pay premium prices for flute-girls and rely on the extraneous voice of the reed flute as background music for their parties. But when well-educated gentlemen drink together, you will not see girls playing the flute or the lyre or dancing, but a group that knows how to get together without these childish frivolities, conversing civically no matter how heavily they are drinking. Ours is such a group, if indeed it consists of men such as most of us claim to be, and it should require no extraneous voices, not even of poets, who cannot be questioned on what they say. When a poet is brought up in discussion, almost everyone has a different opinion about what he means, and they wind up arguing about something they can never finally decide. The best people avoid such discussions and rely on their own powers of speech to entertain themselves and each other. These people should be our models. We should put the poets aside and converse directly with each other, testing the truth and our own ideas (347c-348a).

There is an obvious reference to the *Symposium* here with mention of the flute-girls and drinking parties. As in the *Symposium*, Socrates wishes to distinguish between the crass kind of social gathering that unsophisticated people engage in and the more noble kind of conversation that intellectuals like those present are capable of. We might think here too of the philosopher digression in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates is essentially pressing Protagoras and the others to take control of their conversation and be agents in determining how they speak and what they say, instead of relying on the voice of others – whether music or poetry. He is still pushing for Socratic dialectic, and it is clear he (or Plato) thinks this method of discussion is the way to use their own power of speech to good end. The rejection of poetry echoes the earlier rejection of the long speech of orators. Here too is this repeating criticism from the *Phaedrus* that certain kinds of speech cannot be engaged with in conversation. Poets cannot be questioned in what they say any more than orators of great speeches: you simply can't converse with them, and so investigating the meaning in their poems is a fruitless endeavor.¹²³

¹²³ The absence of Aristophanes now seems especially significant. Despite Protagoras' claim that the most important part of a person's education is focused on understanding poetry, poetry is ultimately rejected altogether here as a useless kind of *logos* to engage with. There is an insightful analysis of the dialogue by Arieti and Barrus (2010) that suggests that the *Protagoras* most resembles a prose version of the kind of comic plays, particularly by Aristophanes, that mock the sophists. (They look to the *Clouds*, especially, but also to fragments from Aristophanes' play *The Frogs*, which mocks Prodicus, as well as fragments of *The Flatterers*, the prize-winning play by Eupolis, which lambasts Callias for wasting so much money on sophists.) They do some careful and persuasive work to mark out how many comic elements the dialogue contains, including a chorus which speaks in a kind of parabasis, and a peripeteia or reversal of position. I

In the fifth and final part of their conversation Socrates succeeds in turning the conversation back to dialectic. He returns to the question of whether virtue is unified and presses Protagoras through a series of arguments that result in a seeming reversal of their starting positions. Socrates is in the end defending the idea that virtue is teachable, while Protagoras seems committed to the view that it is not (349a-362a). I'll discuss the significance of this reversal of positions shortly. I want to turn first though to the portrayal of Protagoras in the dialogue, and how importantly connected it is to this heavy focus on method.

Portrayal of Protagoras

One important subject of scholarship on the *Protagoras* centers on the question of how we're meant to see Protagoras at the end of the dialogue. Is the dialogue intended to be wholly critical of the sophist? Scholars have traditionally taken this to be the case, and I am sympathetic.¹²⁴ I will highlight myself the harsh criticisms that arise in the course of the dialogue. Some have understood the treatment of Protagoras here as much kinder, however, and I am somewhat sympathetic to these readings as well.¹²⁵ There is a sense in which all of these scholars are picking up on significant elements in the treatment of Protagoras in the dialogue. I want to argue here that there is an important subtlety to his portrayal that occupies a kind of middle ground. This subtlety is in line with the portrayal of Aristophanes in the *Symposium* that I argued for in Chapter 1. Protagoras *is*

won't make this a focus of my analysis here, but there is a particularly good fit with my analysis of the *Symposium*. In contrast, Benitez (1992), who reads the dialogue, incorrectly I think, as a display of sophistic rhetoric.

¹²⁴ See, for example, Adam (1893), Jager (1944), Taylor (1937), Kirk (1951), Robinson (1985), Goldberg (1933), Wolfsdorf (1998).

¹²⁵ See Garin (1969) in particular, who argues that Plato shows great respect for Protagoras in the dialogue, and that Plato is ultimately pro-Protagoras and means to show how much he has in common with Socrates. See also de Romilly (1992) 101-3, who argues that Protagoras influenced Plato in a significant way, and that "without Protagoras, there would be no Plato".

ultimately criticized quite seriously here, but his depiction marks him out as a particularly strong and serious opponent. He is not easily dismissed or underestimated, nor is he made to look absurd.

There is a significant progression in his depiction as well: while there is skepticism about him from the very beginning, he is initially given a rather strong showing in the conversation with Socrates. It is only as the conversation progresses that his weaknesses are drawn out more and more.

There are some subtle and not so subtle hints at Protagoras' ego in the dramatic set-up of the conversation, but one early point in his favor is his acknowledgment to Socrates that sophists have acquired a bad reputation. Further, that there is in fact some danger in this reputation as they go city to city, trying to convince young and old men alike to abandon their family and friends and associate with them instead in the hopes of being improved by their association. Some have hidden behind the guise of poetry or other kinds of teaching as a result, Protagoras says, but Protagoras thinks it is more prudent to be honest and direct as a teacher. He simply admits that he is a sophist and that he educates men (316c-317c). The language here seems to evoke the charges against Socrates and the role this bad reputation of the sophists played in his trial and execution. I suspect the acknowledgement of this dangerous reputation might have seemed a point of respect for Plato.¹²⁶ At the very least, Protagoras' directness about his status as a sophist, measured as it is, seems to strike the reader as something positive.

The full conversation between Socrates and Protagoras works as a kind of demonstration of the sophist's abilities, and the one thing I want to highlight here is how these strengths and weaknesses

¹²⁶ Did the real-life Protagoras own up to the poor, even dangerous reputation of sophistry? That is not clear. But it is clear that while some sophists were cagey about what they claimed to teach, Protagoras was famously direct in his claims to teach virtue. This kind of directness seems in line with a directness about the realities of his chosen profession.

are drawn out in large part by the emphasis on methodology in the dialogue.¹²⁷ Once Protagoras lets out his rhetorical sails in his great speech, the impression he gives is not altogether negative. In fact, there is something impressive about both his flourish and the arguments he offers. Socrates has argued before that virtue does not seem teachable first of all because we let anyone give advice in political matters – as opposed to matters of craft – and second of all because men of great virtue do not always have sons of great virtue. If virtue was teachable, this shouldn't be the case. Protagoras' speech answers both of these challenges surprisingly well. There's something important going on here in terms of method in particular. He asks at the start whether he should answer by telling a story or by giving arguments, and the consensus is that he should proceed how he likes. And so he goes on to do both. First he offers a rich myth that explains the origins of human arts, starting with the arts necessary for survival and eventually including the political art or wisdom that is necessary for humans to live well together. Every human has some share in this political art or virtue, at least some small trace, or humans wouldn't be able to live in harmony together. As a result, it's reasonable to admit everyone as an advisor in the public sphere (320c-323c).

He turns then to giving arguments that fill out his response to Socrates. First, he offers a rather careful argument to show that although everyone has a share in this political art, people do not take it to be something that is natural or self-generated. Rather, people think it is something taught and carefully cultivated in those who develop it. A lot of attention and effort is thus given by society to teaching this virtue to people from a young age, from regular practice and training through punishment for serious infractions (323c-324d). He goes on at length to emphasize how much

¹²⁷ As is typically the case, the contrast will be on the strengths and weaknesses of Socrates in comparison, or the philosopher more broadly.

effort is put into formal education of the young.¹²⁸ He finishes with a final argument that responds to the second challenge from Socrates on the teachability of virtue, the puzzle that especially virtuous citizens do not always have virtuous children. His argument here is rather elegant: just as the children of talented men of the crafts – flute-players, for example – do not always end up talented at the same craft, neither do the sons of very virtuous men always turn out to be especially virtuous themselves. The best flute-player might have a son who is not naturally suited to playing the flute, while the most promising student might in fact be the son of a non-musician. In this same way, some people are more naturally suited to developing virtue. Importantly, everyone living in a city-state has some share in this compared to those who lack the culture and legal institutions of cities. But nonetheless some are more naturally inclined to virtue and others less (326e-32a).

There are several things I want to say about Protagoras' showing here. First of all I want to suggest that it strikes the reader as rather impressive on the whole. Socrates calls it a virtuoso performance perhaps in jest, but there is something masterful about it. Much like the story told by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, Plato has given one of the liveliest and richest passages of dialogue to Protagoras. One notable element of the speech is just how Platonic it actually is. It is Plato who shows himself again and again to be the master of both myth and argument. And here he does not give the two forms of speech a weak showing in Protagoras' hands. Another remarkable element of the long speech is how well it responds to Socrates' challenges. The myth does as well as any myth in Plato in making its case about political virtue – myth is especially useful in Platonic dialogues for talking about the origins of cities or human arts. His arguments are not weak either. To start, his thoughts are well organized. He is careful to actually respond to Socrates' arguments and makes no attempt

¹²⁸ There is a notable emphasis here on the importance of reading the poets as a part of a proper education, especially for moral development and models of good citizenship. Protagoras, for his part, shows no sign of being skeptical about this role of poets in education.

to avoid them, and his myth and arguments build carefully to a full response to Socrates. Second, the arguments themselves strike the reader as rather convincing. It is especially plausible that the Athenians took virtue to be something inculcated through training and practice from a young age. It is also not a weak argument to see the point of judicial punishment as a kind of moral education – this idea is presented by Plato himself in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*.

Another notably interesting element here is that Protagoras in his long speech argues for a picture of virtue that is compatible with his teaching practices. He suggests a picture where everyone has some piece in virtue, and as a result some ability to be an advisor on virtue (323c). When it comes to virtue or citizenship, then, everyone is an expert, at least of some capacity. And yet, on his picture, this doesn't come naturally and so must be taught. He ends his long speech on these points.

So it is with good reason that your fellow citizens accept a blacksmith's or a cobbler's advice in political affairs. And they do think that virtue is acquired and taught (324c-d).

I have emphasized elsewhere that the debate between Protagorean relativism and Platonic objectivism is partly a debate about expertise, and that a critical problem with Protagoras' views is that his relativism generally does not admit of the kind of expertise that is necessary for teaching to be a coherent project. Admittedly his epistemology is not up for discussion here. But nevertheless, it seems rather remarkable that he has given us such a coherent view: everyone has some level of expertise in public affairs or political matters, and yet there is room for someone especially virtuous to be a teacher to others who aspire to greater virtue themselves. In short, he starts the conversation with the view that virtue is teachable, and through this point in the dialogue defends that view surprisingly well.

I want to argue here that Plato gives Protagoras such a strong showing at this stage in the dialogue to mark him out as someone to be taken seriously. As a rhetorician, he can command a room. And he can do so, the dialogue suggests, in a way that cannot be wholly dismissed as empty rhetoric. He perhaps even has some skill that could put him in real competition with Plato. And so, before the dialogue proceeds with its sharp criticisms of the man, it first gives him a showcase to demonstrate his strengths, in the same way Aristophanes is allowed to shine for a serious moment in the *Symposium*. It is not just his rhetorical skill that is given some space to shine here either. Protagoras shows some skill as a thinker in his long speech as well, and I think this strongly suggests that Plato had some amount of respect for Protagorean thought as well.¹²⁹

Unfortunately for Protagoras, his great speech is the peak of his performance in the dialogue. What follows afterwards is an increasingly poor showing, highlighted in particular by the shifts in method as the dialogue progresses. The cracks begin to show in the first part of the dialectical discussion with Socrates, when Socrates shifts the conversation to the question of the unity of the virtues. Socrates is careful to press Protagoras to stick to his own thought here, and not resort to hypothetical positions. Two things become clear soon enough, both of which are connected. First, Protagoras has trouble answering Socrates' questions about his view. Socrates is in clear command of the conversation at this stage, and Protagoras' struggle to defend his thoughts under scrutiny is increasingly clear as the conversation goes on. What begins to be demonstrated here is Socrates' claim that you can't actually engage with an orator who delivers great speeches. In particular you

¹²⁹ I am not the first person to think this. Cornford (1935) 87 calls Protagoras the "archenemy" of Plato, a kind of adversary respected for the strong position he occupies as a foe. Zilioli (2007) calls Protagoras Plato's "subtlest enemy". He offers a systematic and thorough examination of Protagorean arguments in the *Cratylus*, the *Theaetetus*, and the *Protagoras*. His central thesis is that Protagoras is not presented as a weak thinker with weak doctrines, but instead a formidable opponent to be taken seriously. "Plato sees logical inconsistencies and weaknesses in Protagorean thought, but he takes him to be a very serious thinker who deserves close and thoughtful attention" (3).

can't ask question and receive answers, even with speeches that seemed intellectually promising. The content of such a speech doesn't hold up when pressed, because the orator of long speeches is not suited to defending his ideas in the face of challenging questions. It begins to be clear that Protagoras may not really understand what virtue is, and that at the very least he has not worked out his view in real depth. He doesn't seem to have a sorted out view of whether the virtues are a single unity or not. Related, Protagoras does not fare well in the careful back and forth dialectic Socrates prefers. His mood and tone grow increasingly dissatisfied, enough that Socrates has to work hard to keep him in the conversation. It is this growing unwillingness to engage in this careful back and forth manner that pushes Socrates to pause the conversation for a full-on diversion on method.

Things get progressively worse. After the diversion on method Protagoras chooses to disengage entirely from Socrates' dialectical project. He instead withdraws to a skill he feels confident in, the analysis of poetry. It's fairly obvious by the end that this is a crutch, turning to a kind of conversation that largely runs on rhetoric skill instead of the careful investigation of his beliefs about virtue. There has been some debate about whether the poetry diversion continues the main theme of the dialogue.¹³⁰ Whether or not it does in a substantial way seems beside the point to me.

Socrates makes clear afterward how he feels about the value of this kind of discussion, and it's easy to take this as Plato's view. One clear lesson there is that it's not valuable partly because it's an examination of someone else's thought, and that person isn't there to engage with them in a careful discussion of ideas contained in their poetry. Again, what Socrates wants is to engage Protagoras on the subtler elements and implications of *his* thought – not hypothetical positions and not positions of someone like Simonides who is not present to speak for himself.

¹³⁰ Shorey (1933) thinks not. Bartlett (2003), Goldberg (1983), Weingartner (1973) 95 think it does.

By the final section of the conversation, the return to Socratic dialectic, Protagoras has lost his way. Quite literally, in fact, since by the end Socrates has pushed him so far in the discussion about the unity of the virtues that now Protagoras seems committed to the view that virtue is not in fact teachable. Socrates, for his part, is now defending the view that virtue is teachable. This is one of the most puzzling elements of the dialogue. Why do the two reverse positions, and what are we meant to make of this as readers?

This section of the dialogue has received the lion's share of scholarly attention because of the important views up for consideration here: they return more carefully the issue of the unity of the virtues; they focus especially on the nature of courage as a virtue; Socrates appears to defend hedonism for a time; they consider the possibility of *akrasia*; and they discuss 'the art of measurement', a kind of wisdom that allows for a beneficial hedonistic calculus in decision making. I don't want to dismiss the rich philosophical importance of these elements of the discussion, but again I wish to focus instead on the treatment of Protagoras in this final section.¹³¹

I want to argue that the reversal of position by Protagoras does important work in showing why Protagoras is not a good teacher. He has claimed from the start to be especially virtuous and therefore to be an especially great teacher of virtue. But the dialectical sections of the dialogue, and this final reversal of position, demonstrate very clearly by the end that Protagoras does not understand virtue. As impressive as his long speech might have seemed when it was delivered,

¹³¹ For discussions on the art of measurement and the hedonistic calculus, see Dyson (1976), Richardson (1990), Weiss (1989), Nussbaum (1986). For discussions on the treatment of courage in the dialogue see Coby (1987) or Weiss (1985).

including its coherent picture of virtue and teaching, when he is pressed carefully on his larger beliefs and commitments he fumbles. He is pressed so far in the end that he ends up defending a position on virtue that is incoherent with his teaching claims and practices. This is the familiar criticism from the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus*, but here the incoherence seems even more damaging. Before, the charge was an incoherence between his epistemology and his teaching claims – an incoherence in essence between certain theoretical commitments and practical affairs. That kind of incoherence demonstrates a kind of intellectual shallowness, and this alone seems obviously problematic to Plato.

But the incoherence at play here in the final pages of the *Protagoras* seems more fundamentally inconsistent with good teaching. There is more than one element to it. First there is the direct conflict between his claims to teach virtue and the view he is now defending that it is not actually teachable. But someone listening to this conversation or reading it might be sympathetic to Protagoras in the end. He seems in the end to defend a view that he can't really hold – after all, he *does* claim to teach virtue and he doesn't seem to doubt his suitability for this role. On this sympathetic reading, he has simply been walked into a corner by Socrates and ended up defending a view he doesn't really believe. I think that is a natural way someone might understand what has happened to Protagoras here, despite how much Socrates urges him to stick to his own thoughts in the discussion. On this reading the poor showing would amount to an embarrassment at his lack of prowess in the discussion.

But notice what a poor position even that puts him in. The reason Protagoras ends up in the position he does, whether he really believes the view or not, is because he does not have any sophisticated, worked out view of what virtue really is. He is unprepared for questions about this

thoughts on virtue after his great speech, and he does especially poorly trying to work them out in the course of the conversation. He is so unclear in his thoughts on virtue that he ends up defending the view that it is unteachable. This seems like a different kind of incoherence: he claims to be virtuous and to teach virtue, but in the end, he doesn't actually know what virtue is.

The Student Paradox

Let's return finally to the student paradox. I want to argue that the central, most important question investigated in the Protagoras is not about the teachability of virtue, but instead about whether Protagoras himself is a good teacher.¹³² This question is set out in the prologue and answered in a robust way by the end of the dialogue. The difficult philosophical work of the dialogue has value that should be appreciated, but it is secondary to the project of investigating Protagoras himself – in short, it is work done in the service of demonstrating Protagoras' flaws as an intellectual and teacher. He is the kind of respected foe that Aristophanes is in the *Symposium*, but the final answer on him is just as clear: neither Hippocrates nor anyone else should study with Protagoras. He is, in the end, just like the sellers of food in the marketplace that don't really understand the nature of their product, or whether or not it will harm their buyers.

¹³² Bartlett (2003) 613 sees this as the central question of the dialogue as well, and sees the dialogue as primarily a demonstration of the failure of Protagoras as a teacher.

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