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PLATO JOURNAL

Société Platonicienne
Internationale
Associazione Internazionale
dei Platonisti
Sociedad Internacional
de Platonistas
Internationale
Platon-Gesellschaft

Imprensa da
Universidade
de Coimbra
Coimbra
University
Press

What Do We Think We're Doing?

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ABSTRACT

I suggest that there are no universally applicable principles (in the strong sense) for the study of Plato's philosophy. Different students of Plato have different objects of interest (e.g. what the individual Plato ultimately thought vs what emerges from thinking about his texts) that can make different ways of proceeding appropriate. For me the dialogues are the main object of study; I think they are best approached by interpreting literary elements and obviously philosophical content as working together. The paper includes illustrations of how parts of my picture of the developing theory of forms emerge from this type of engagement.

Keywords: testimony, literary elements, dialogue form, theory of forms.

My title question brings out two points that are key for my observations. One is that how we proceed in our interpretative activity depends largely on what we take the purpose of that activity to be. And I've used plural forms in my question not because I think I can speak for everybody but precisely because I expect people will immediately react by thinking that I cannot – and no more can anyone else. 'We' can legitimately have diverse aims and methods and so different ways of interpreting Plato, and in this way different projects can sometimes be compatible with or even complementary to each other.

The umbrella theme question set by Prof. Gerson for our workshop was: 'What in your opinion are the appropriate or correct principles for the study of Plato's philosophy?' One reading of 'principles' yields a very strong sense, in which we come by principles in some special way (different from that whereby we obtain our other results in the domain they govern), the principles are inviolate, and everything else must proceed from them. Principles in this strong sense would be things one *must* start from or bring to the rest of one's work; not to do so – violating the principles – would be incorrect or misguided. So to read our question with 'principles' understood this way suggests that, while we may have different views about what they are, at most one view of the matter can be correct.

My title—'What Do We Think We're Doing?'—opens the way for me to mention that I at least don't think of myself as working from principles in this very strong sense. This is, I think, ultimately connected with the circumstance that I think we—or at least the total class of people who work on Plato—have different goals that make different ways of proceeding reasonable. This makes the present assemblage very collegial for me—it's interesting to compare

notes without having it built in that where our practices diverge some of us have to be wrong and one's purpose must be to prove that one is oneself the correct one.

In fact, the final element in our umbrella theme question seems to me to be open to different readings in a way that corresponds to variation in our goals and so turns out to be closely connected with why I don't think there are principles in the strong sense that apply to everyone. How exactly do we understand 'the study of Plato's philosophy'? For me, though I know this will not be the case for everybody, the primary object of study is actually Plato's *dialogues*. Thus while someone might have as a goal to determine what the human being, Plato, thought was true (over the course of his life or at some privileged stretch of it) with the dialogues only one kind — perhaps not very good — of evidence for that, for me it's the other way around. It's not so much that the dialogues are (more or less good) evidence for Plato's philosophy. For me, engaging with the dialogues is what is really interesting. 'Plato' is pretty much tantamount to the author of those works, and 'Plato's philosophy' is what that author is suggesting or offering for our consideration.

Here again one can have a variety of expectations. Some may build in from the start the expectation that Plato's philosophy should be a unified and completed system, which it is our job to reconstruct or maybe even axiomatize. For me, this matter is open at the start: Plato's philosophy could but need not turn out to be a matter of holding dogmatically certain doctrines. It could just as well be to proceed in a certain way, or to try to carry out a certain program, or to think through certain problems. For me this is one among many issues I find it natural to form a view about on the basis of interacting with the works — rather than bringing a view about this *to* reading.

Why is the object of study for me Plato's works? For one thing, we have them, and they are an enormous and rich treasury of material. And just as important, I find reanimating and engaging with the philosophical discussions they contain of great interest philosophically — and of course, it has been and continues to be so for many others.¹ At the risk of violating a ban by Michael Frede who always used to say to me, 'Look, Constance, no one is interested in *your autobiography*' (though he used this for the odd purpose of discouraging footnotes on the secondary literature), it is relevant to my title today to offer something a bit autobiographical. I note that what I am doing now in working on Plato feels continuous with what I remember doing as a freshman in college. While I now bring much more professional apparatus to bear, the *goal* remains the same. Indeed, the justification for using that apparatus is simply that it makes the reanimation of and engagement with the philosophical content of the dialogues even more interesting — certainly for me, and potentially more widely since other people sometimes make use of one's scholarship.

So for me, what study of Plato is ultimately for is that it leads to valuable philosophical activity, centrally to the activity involved in finding the best reanimations of the discussions he depicted. As is widely recognized, this is of philosophical value for a variety of detailed reasons. It typically leads to a better understanding of the positions in play and the resources developed to handle them. It can be interesting to make case studies of how some problems can be solved, and how at other times people deal with the fact that something hasn't quite been. Moreover, in sometimes unpredictable ways, one may be able to apply some resources one gets from engaging with Plato to a new argumentative context salient in one's

own time. Sometimes as well, one may be able to apply some resources so acquired to the living of one's own life. After all Plato, like other ancient philosophers, thought a great part of the value of the discipline resided in the way wisdom could and should be manifested in living.² Very generally, the study of Plato, like that of all of ancient philosophy, is a useful corrective to the parochiality of our own philosophical context: at least if done in a certain way, it leads to a broader sense of philosophical *options*.

So while I now bring to bear some knowledge of Greek and of elements of Plato's context – both philosophical and more broadly intellectual, cultural, and historical — and of course of secondary literature as well, I continue to do this because I think the dialectical activity so reanimated is an even more interesting version of the sort of thing one came up with as a freshman. Thus, given what I take my project to be, evidence about various views other historical figures attributed to Plato can have a role in it: such evidence can confirm in some respects what we get from reading the works themselves, or give us some hints to help us in reading them. But for me the role of such evidence is secondary.

It can be salutary in this connection to reflect on situations contemporary with ourselves. For example, I once attended a wedding where many of the guests were philosophy PhDs from Harvard – this was a cohort in which many knew and had studied with Quine. But some were also scholars of Quine's work. I remember an interesting discussion between Miriam Solomon and Peter Hylton about how wrong-headed people were who assumed that the circumstance that Quine was around and they knew him left no significant role for interpretative activity.³ As Professor Solomon put it, if she asked Quine a question and he

replied and she wrote down the answer, 'That would just be *another text!*' And this further text would of course itself need to be analyzed.

How, generally, do I go about reading Plato's dialogues? I think the individual dialogue is the basic unit of interpretation. Each one seems manifestly to be finished and crafted as an artistic product that sets and pursues its own particular philosophical agenda. The famous simile in the *Phaedrus* likening a good speech to a living creature, with each part having a fitting relation to the others and to the whole tends to confirm this (*Phaidr.* 264 c 2-5). For the point there seems to me (as to many others going back to Greek antiquity) to extend naturally to written compositions and indeed to Plato's own works: each dialogue, being well-crafted, has this quasi-organismic unity. As Proclus writes in his commentary on the *Parmenides*:

[Iamblichus and his followers] demand that the interpreter bring the matter of the prologue into relation with the nature of the dialogue's subject. We agree [...] in studying any Platonic dialogue we must look especially at the matters that are its subject and see how the details of the prologue prefigure them. In this way we should show that each of them is perfectly worked out, a living being harmonious in all its parts, as Plato says in the *Phaedrus*. (Procl., *in Parm.*, 659.6-24, tr. Morrow - Dillon 1987)

The *Phaedrus* text also has another implication: because the parts of a given composition are designed to relate to each other and to the whole, to cherry-pick a few lines here and a few lines there and then relocate them in a new context one supplies will be at least questionable — that is, at least *open to* question. Even if

we are forced by the scope of a particular paper or a particular talk or class to focus on such an extract, we should be thinking about its role in the dialogue in which it appears – and ideally should complete our reading by showing how that works. (So do I hold *this* as a principle? I suppose maybe yes in a less stringent sense than the one I disclaimed at the start – this ‘principle’ if it is one derives from experience with the texts and is subject to finegraining or modification depending on what emerges as we continue to read.)

It’s not necessarily easy to tell who does and does not proceed this way, since I am aware that sometimes one has considered many details in one’s own thinking or in contexts like seminar meetings that cannot appear in a particular publication. Because of this it may not immediately be obvious just by reading something in print whether the author diverges from the practice I just described or is simply like the proverbial swans that seem to glide along in stately fashion, all the while paddling furiously underwater where we don’t see it.

But just as I acknowledge that we sometimes have to focus on part of a work at least for a time, so I also believe that sometimes it is good to look beyond its boundaries – and this is why I put it that the individual dialogue is the *basic* unit. For one thing, on some occasions there can be particular reasons within a text itself that make something from another work of Plato’s or something else he was aware of and could have expected his readers to know relevant. (I do believe, Proclus-like, that Plato often uses what I call ‘literary elements’ to make such references, and I’ll give some examples later.) And of course once one has read a lot of different works, it will be natural for some picture of how they relate to each other to emerge. After all, even in terms of the case to which the *Phaedrus* likened a good composition

— the case of an animal whose parts must function properly in relation to each other and in relation to the whole — it is also sometimes relevant to think about our chosen animal’s interactions with other animals! So without our bringing from the start an idea that all the dialogues are offering the same view, or that some are working towards a view perfected in others, or that some stake out a position that others reject and improve on, any of these pictures among others *could* emerge from the pointillist picture that readings of individual texts will form.

This has implications for my relation to the hoary battle of Unitarians vs Developmentalists. It sounds odd to say I’m not sure which I am – probably a better way of putting it is that I’m not really happy locating myself at either extreme. On my picture, Plato’s dialogues are the vehicle of continuing pursuit of a characteristic program, but the work each dialogue is doing to contribute to that varies a lot. Different ones may work on different parts of the project. And some of course may motivate or even try out in detail ways of doing things that others rethink and propose improvements on.

I find the opinion of Bernard Williams in his minute gem *Plato* highly salutary, and a useful insight as being from someone who was after all himself primarily a working philosopher:

It is a weakness of scholars who study philosophers to think that philosophers are just like scholars, and it is particularly a mistake in the case of Plato. [...] Above all, it is a mistake to suppose that Plato spends his time in the various dialogues adding to or subtracting from his system. Each dialogue is about whatever it is about, and Plato pursues what seems interesting and fruitful in that connection. [...] We may think of him as driven

forward by his ideas, curious at any given point to see what will happen if some striking conjunction of them is given its head. We should not think of him as constantly keeping his accounts, anxious of how his system will look in the history of philosophy. (Williams 1999, 3, 9-10)

Charles Griswold has provided a historian's bookend to this idea: he makes the valuable observation that it is anachronistic to assume that 'philosophy is *Wissenschaft*' and that for this reason Plato must have 'a complete, architectonic theory purporting to offer definitive answers to the key philosophical questions it addresses' (Griswold 2002, 137). The core assertions of both Williams and Griswold here are certainly compatible with there being no connections between Plato's various works. But I'd also like to note that neither actually provides considerations that rule out our coming to discover that there *are* connections between Plato's works or even a system that emerges from them. What I take from their warnings is that we must be careful not to build in as an assumption that there *must* be.

How then do I go about reading an individual dialogue? I think it is manifest that the main issue for each of them is its philosophical agenda, and relatedly that the way the arguments in a text work is at the heart of this. But that doesn't mean I think we can easily separate out a few lines of text that convey 'the argument' on each major point on their own – let alone that what we should do is quite quickly write out a few prose or formalized lines of *our own* that convey 'the argument' and then think in terms of that, moving on to assess validity and soundness. In my view, a great deal of the action of the interpretative project has taken place on the way to writing up any such compact formulation; much of the work a

dialogue is designed to promote is work *along the way to* any such exposition.

The more I work in detail on individual dialogues the more convinced I am that, as the *Phaedrus* extract suggests, all the parts of each really do work together. Thus, since the main agenda is to do philosophy, it follows that the parts that are not *obviously* philosophical are there to do something that bears on the dialectical activity the text is designed to promote in us. I call these 'literary elements' — I find this catch-all phrase useful though I do not mean to suggest that these elements are *merely* literary and have no philosophical role. So I would like to make clear that I disclaim any such pejorative or dismissive connotation.

Ultimately, the best way to make this clear is in one's interpretative practice as one proceeds passage by passage. But perhaps now I should at least list in the abstract some of the kinds of thing I have in mind. As I mentioned above, personal or place names or striking vocabulary can put us in mind of real figures or of other texts, whether by Plato or others; we then need to identify the point of referencing these.⁴ Action within the plot can have relevance. Indeed, even whether and how the drama is framed can affect how we readers relate to the play of ideas in a work. (I'll be going into some examples in a bit.)

So we now confront the question: if literary elements and the parts that are more obviously philosophical are *all* important, how should we (pl.) approach studying them? One possibility is that different people from different disciplines should deal with different aspects of the text; this might seem the best way to get expert interpretations of each. On this view, someone like me should confine myself to the arguments, while classicists would weigh in on literary elements and textual problems – and perhaps our results (or the best of each type???)

would be combinable at some indefinite horizon – but by whom?

Obviously, I do not think this is the way to go. Because of the way Plato has designed the different kinds of elements to work together, an ‘expert’ reading of just one kind in isolation doesn’t have enough to go on. Notice how the *Phaedrus* simile already supports this thought: given that the heart e.g. functions to support the overall function of the animal whose heart it is, you can’t understand the heart in isolation from the rest of the organism.

Or again, I find it useful to think a little about the metaphor of a frame, so pervasive in secondary discussion of Plato’s works. In the case of a painting, the job of a frame is (in part) to set off the inner work in a certain way: such things as the color, texture, size and shape of the frame affect how the painting looks to us. So when the original artist has herself or himself selected the frame, its effect on how the painting looks to us shows something about how the artist wanted us to see the inner work: after all, the artist was guiding our perceptions in the way this particular choice of frame does.

Here I’d like to point out two things. First, in the case of a painting, it would be bizarre (or at least appropriate only in very special circumstances) to interpret the ‘significance’ of the frame in isolation, to so to speak read off its meaning when it is empty. And second, when one undertakes to consider the effect of the frame on our perception of the inner work, this won’t be something one can simply read off mechanically. For such descriptions as the following could all be *equally* available: ‘it brings out as especially bright a certain patch of color’, ‘it directs our attention to the face of a certain figure’, ‘it emphasizes the face shining with the innocent joy of childhood’, ‘it highlights the face, crucial as displaying the family resemblance this figure bears to important

ancestors’, or even ‘it emphasizes the face, now rendered in a style departing radically from the work of [salient artistic predecessors]’. Any choice among these seems to me best made in close connection with study of the inner work including relevant facts about the context of its production; and *that* study would in turn only reach completion with the development of a complementary study of the frame.

Of course, one can read around a bit in the enormous secondary literature on Plato and sometimes someone will have made some suggestion on one of the literary details that one can magpie up and adopt as part of one’s overall reading. But obviously one can’t expect enough of other peoples’ activity to be either fortuitously useful or actually motivated by the wish to help out one’s own interpretation in this way! Still, one can sometimes adopt the suggestions of others. Moreover, experience with the kind of thing other people have offered helps one to go on doing that.

As I’ve already indicated, I believe that literary elements often provide a way for Plato to refer to passages in his own work or to the work of other authors; in effect they function as footnotes do for us. Thus literary elements are often important when we are in what Professor Lane called the ‘retrospective’ mode.⁵ Or perhaps I could reapply her term to mark that I think Plato’s own compositional practice is ‘retrospective’ in this sense: he often uses literary elements to refer to things that he was already aware of and that he could reasonably have expected readers to know about. Thus I believe that having Cephalus the narrator of the *Parmenides* be from Clazomenae is a touch that prepares us for and confirms the relevance to the dialogue of the work of Anaxagoras (cf. Procl., *in Parm.*, 625, 629-30).

Yet it should be obvious with very small literary touches such as this that each of them

on its own is quite slender. Thus it seems to me clearly misguided to just dogmatically subscribe to a reading of each on its own and have that ‘wag the dog’ of one’s reading of the text. (This seems to me a problem that followers of Leo Strauss often fall into.) Indeed, each such idea we have I think needs to be confirmed by relating usefully to something in the philosophical substance of the arguments at hand. To resume the Clazomenae example, the physical theory of Anaxagoras had of course already received attention in the *Phaedo*: it is of particular interest as a theory that is isomorphic to Plato’s own theory of Forms. The *Phaedo* (as I read it) drew our attention to the straightforward way having a share/participation works in the physical theory of Anaxagoras and showed problems with it. In a famous declaration, Socrates proclaimed allegiance to a type of explanation that in fact is isomorphic to that of Anaxagoras, but made a point of declining to specify any particular interpretation of what participation amounts to.⁶ Looked at this way, the touch in the frame of the *Parmenides* that reactivates our recollection of Anaxagoras does help our understanding of 131 c 12-e 5: it helps us to see that Socrates, lacking a clear view of what he takes participation to be, is himself lapsing back into the old Anaxagorean notion, and suffering from the familiar problems with that. This indicates the ongoing need to make progress on this matter and in turn prepares us to look for that in the second part of the dialogue.

Sometimes literary elements can condition how we relate to different parts of the text. One way this can work is through Plato’s handling of narration.⁷ So for example in the first part of the *Parmenides*, Cephalus tells us what his source, Antiphon, told him that *his* source, Pythodorus, told him that Socrates, Parmenides and the others present at a long-ago

discussion said. This is completely explicit when Cephalus says:

ἔφη δὲ δὴ ὁ Ἀντιφῶν λέγειν τὸν Πυθόδωρον
 [...] Antiphon said that Pythodorus said
 [...] (127 a 7-8).

Because of the way Plato handles the chain of narrators, even though the innermost speech of Socrates, Zeno, and Parmenides is typically quoted, this direct discourse is typically introduced by *phanai* or *eipein*. That is, the original ‘he said’ of an inner narrator is transformed to an infinitive of indirect discourse when reported by a further narrator. Thus, the quoted words of the famous speakers are typically near a reminder of the multiple mediation: we register that the words of the inner narrator have been transformed by further reporting. These frequent reminders systematically distance us from the original occasion, however interesting and amusing it is.

By contrast in the second part of the dialogue, after a single introductory *phanai* in 137c4 all this apparatus falls away and for almost thirty Stephanus pages the presentation is like that in a play: simply the words of Parmenides, then those of his interlocutor Aristotle, then more words of Parmenides etc. This technique makes *us* the real audience for the demonstration (though it had been fictively offered to help *Socrates* realize the exercise he needed to do to reach the truth in philosophy). In fact, we are being presented directly with the thinking offered here because this is the part of the text designed for our primary philosophical engagement; the parts of the text from which we are distanced serve as background for this project.

Though there isn’t time to go into this now, I have recently explored Plato’s use of a similar technique in the *Symposium*, so offering

an answer to the puzzling question of why the *Symposium* — or really, my point is, *most of it* — is composed with so many tell-tale infinitives of mediation. I suggest that this is all in aid of a contrast whereby Plato privileges the part *not* so presented.⁸

The reactions of the characters can also give us a cue about how we should respond to various portions of a text. Here the second part of the *Parmenides* is perhaps the most extreme example. Just to summarize briefly, the most obvious and immediately puzzling fact about the demonstration we get there is that it consists wholly of massive sections of arguments paired so that the results of the first section seem to be systematically contradicted by those of the second, and so on with subsequent pairs. The reaction of most in the twentieth century was to take the thing as a giant *reductio ad absurdum*/indirect proof.⁹ For me this interpretation is not the way to go because the text does not confirm this reading strategy. In part this is because the text does not systematically target for destruction mistakes by rejecting which we can avoid the mass of paradoxical results.

But to focus on the present point about the characters: I also find it significant that neither venerable father Parmenides nor his respondent expresses consternation of the sort we are familiar with in depictions of Socratic elenchus when even a single contradiction threatens.¹⁰ Consider what happens when the interlocutor is presented with the maximally paradoxical summary of the overall results:

Εἰρήσθω τοίνυν τοῦτό τε καὶ ὅτι, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἐν εἴτ' ἔστιν εἴτε μὴ ἔστιν, αὐτό τε καὶ τᾶλλα καὶ πρὸς αὐτὰ καὶ πρὸς ἄλληλα πάντα πάντως ἐστὶ τε καὶ οὐκ ἔστι καὶ φαίνεται τε καὶ οὐ φαίνεται. — Ἀληθέστατα.

Let this be said therefore, and that, as it appears, if The One is or is not, it and the others in relation to themselves and in relation to each other are all things in all ways and are not, and seem and seem not. —Most true. (166 c 2-5)

Notice that the interlocutor goes to an extreme of acceptance with the superlative. *Alêthestata* is literally the last word of the dialogue!

I take this to be a significant indication from within the text about how we should react to its contents. I have followed up on the indication by exploring the thought that, if this summarized conjunction of all the results is really 'most true', then the results must not be really contradictory after all.¹¹ This is perfectly possible if they are only *apparently* contradictory: if the appearance is only at the surface level of the verbal expression. But this thought so far is only a promissory note, which one needs to cash out by giving an interpretation of the apparently contradictory results.¹²

Alêthestata as the last word and as the response to a summary which is superficially maximally paradoxical amounts to a suggestion from Plato that we try to figure out how to understand these results such that they are all fine and they don't contradict each other. In fact, another extended passage helps us in carrying this out. For the demonstration has been preceded by a methodological discussion. After Socrates had repeatedly failed elenctic examination offered by the venerable Eleatic, Parmenides offered admiration and encouragement, and counseled Socrates about the need for a certain exercise.

He prescribed the exercise by specifying it both in general terms and in the case of several examples, resulting in a tediously long and detailed passage. Yet that labored and lengthy methodological advice – whose key terms all

appear as well in the compressed summary quoted above, with which the exercise concludes – was completely opaque.¹³ Not only were we at a loss to see the point or procedure of the recommended exercise, but within the drama of the discussion Socrates said that he couldn't understand it – and indeed this is what led to Parmenides' being prevailed on to demonstrate what he was talking about. I regard this as a vitally important interpretative constraint from within the text. Since the demonstration of the exercise is given to illustrate the methodological advice, we must read the two in such a way that they match each other.¹⁴ In effect, our homework is to figure out how to interpret the conclusions of each section in such a way that they are appropriately characterized by the phrases used in the methodological advice and summaries to describe them, and appropriately supported by the arguments given for them.

The *Philebus* provides another case in which Plato indicates the way parts of his text fit together. Socrates introduces the passage known as the 'Fourfold Division' by referring to his previous discussion (called the 'Promethean Method' among other tags); he says he will need new apparatus but some will be the same (23 b 9). The fact that the terms *peras* and *apeiron* figure clearly in both passages suggests that they mark the shared apparatus. And the Fourfold Division passage straightforwardly confirms this. Socrates says:

Τὸν θεὸν ἐλέγομέν που τὸ μὲν ἄπειρον
 δεῖξαι τῶν ὄντων, τὸ δὲ πέρασ; [...]
 Τούτω δὴ τῶν εἰδῶν τὰ δύο τιθώμεθα [...].

We said I suppose that the god revealed the *apeiron* in things, and the *peras*. [...] Let us set these down as two of our kinds [...]. (23 c 9-12).

Yet on perhaps the most obvious readings of each passage in isolation, what *peras* and *apeiron* each refers to changes from the first passage to the second. Thus, I believe that the remark of Socrates about some apparatus being the same is setting us the homework of developing an understanding on which *peras* and *apeiron* each truly does remain the same in both passages. To do this, we need as it were to jiggle our understanding of both the Promethean Method and of the Fourfold Division until we can see how the two fit satisfyingly together.

I'd also like to mention here that there is an analogue of the 'wag-the-dog' problem I mentioned above that can plague people who take themselves to be focusing on the arguments. This is when one takes such terminology as *pros allo* or *chôris* to have built into it automatically some technical meaning not developed from the text one is reading but rather that one already takes oneself to know it has — based sometimes in some other text of Plato's, and sometimes really in Aristotle.¹⁵ For me rather, no terms in Plato have magical force such that all by themselves they can do such work.

While I am aware of course that some philosophers (such as Aristotle, the Epicureans, the Stoics as well as many closer in time to us) do introduce and use technical terminology, Plato seems rather to be the kind of philosopher who is able to use ordinary language in such a way as to achieve even his most technical ends. Of course, he does often use the same phrases for parallel purposes in different passages and even different works. But he also can use superficially parallel phrases for different purposes, or superficially distinct phrases for parallel purposes.

Finally, what are some of the results I get from my approach to reading Plato? The present occasion does not provide scope for me to give anything like a comprehensive catalogue.¹⁶

But, especially since I do not give special status *as starting points* to testimony about Plato's mathematizing the Forms and having The One and the indefinite dyad as principles, I'd like to mention that I in a way do end up reading the *Parmenides* and the *Philebus* as engaged in a project that this testimony could be getting at. For me, the *Parmenides* represents the official debut of The One as a principle. After all, it shows among other things how participation in The One is necessary to everything that is: the other Forms run together and lose their definition without their relation to The One.

And what results from my homework on the *Philebus* is that Forms turn out to be members of the 'mixed class', that is, mixtures of *peras* and *apeiron* (*pace* Silverman). My interpretative strategy of figuring out how the Four-fold Division and Promethean Method passages work together results in interpreting each case of the *apeiron* as a pair of opposites that left to themselves blur together. This is something that testimony about the 'indefinite dyad' could be getting at. And the *peras* component of each mixture is a desirable ratio that can govern a pair of opposites and so marks off the kind in question from the blurred continuum of other combinations of the underlying *apeiron*.

Vocabulary in this passage (25 d 11-e 2, 25 a 6-b 2) connects fruitfully with the idea developed by some Greek mathematicians according to which some ratios were better than others for mathematical reasons; the preferred ones were associated with concord – in turn thought to be a matter of unification – and had a special, explanatory role.¹⁷ So in the *Philebus* as I read it, we have Plato systematically mathematizing the Forms, and in a way that recalls discussion in the *Republic* about the need to discover which numbers are concordant and why (531 b 4-c 4). So on my readings, we find ideas emerging from Plato's texts themselves

that could fit under both slogans about The One and the indefinite dyad and those about mathematizing the Forms.

As I've said, for me the main action is in reading the texts themselves to get our interpretations, with noting the testimony a kind of confirmation. And this is both because of the fact that my main object of interest is the dialogues, and because of the Quine point: each piece of testimony is itself just 'another text' – in fact a much briefer and more cryptic one – that itself is in need of interpretation. Note that because of this, interpretations of Plato as different as Professor Sayre's and mine can *both* fit under the banners of making The One and the indefinite dyad principles and mathematizing the Forms.¹⁸

This last observation of course shows not only that the banner slogans from testimony underdetermine the detailed view to be attributed to Plato, but also that not even focusing on Plato's texts lets us automatically read off some view as his dogmatic contribution. But this is not at all surprising. Given Plato's famous – and perfectly reasonable – warnings about the naïveté of thinking one can transmit wisdom by writing it down for people to assimilate by reading, the most we can expect from his texts is material to help us make philosophical progress by putting in our own work. Indeed, I agree with those who hold that drawing us into doing this philosophical activity ourselves is the main purpose of the dialogues.¹⁹ So while not even the dialogues themselves let us read off a philosophy as a simple act, nevertheless the fact that they have survived in their entirety, and with such richness of literary and philosophical nuance, means that they provide a wealth of evidence for competing interpretations to test themselves against.

For me, the way to do this is the very thing I've been talking about in this paper.

In fact, even determining what problem a dialogue has in view and what positions it is developing or criticizing seems to me something we should do in the way I've been discussing today: by reading and rereading the dialogue in question so as to be guided by both its overt philosophical content and the role of the literary elements. Sometimes the questions and positions we need to think about may be explicitly laid out within the work itself. And sometimes it is reasonable to think that Plato is responding to or making use of thinking already existent in his surrounding culture or his own corpus of written works.

I'm not against invoking things that are outside a dialogue in its interpretation, but just saying that for me these become relevant just in case something within the dialogue we are reading makes them so. Otherwise we can fall immediately into such extreme anachronism as to make the supposed study of Plato's text redundant: we assume we know 'the problems of philosophy' such that he must be dealing with one of them; we know the possible positions that can be taken on each, maybe we even already know his supposed answer. All this seems to me to reduce quite counter-productively the interest of what one can get from actually reading and thinking about Plato's works in all their richness, nuance, and complexity.²⁰

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NOTAS

- 1 I agree with the remarks of Alan Silverman at the workshop in thinking that often what we do in working on Plato is philosophy. But I don't go as far as his suggestion that 'Plato' can drop out of the umbrella theme question. For me, working on Plato is doing philosophy in a way that is guided by or in response to Plato's text(s) — and not all parts of one's philosophical life need to be so guided!
- 2 A prominent recent example of application of a selected strand from Plato's works to environmental issues is Lane 2012.
- 3 Thanks to Prof. Solomon for confirming and supplementing my recollections, and allowing me to quote her.
- 4 I liked some of the specific things Professor McCoy offered in her contribution to the conference. See also Sedley 1995 and Rutherford 1995.
- 5 Session 4 at the Workshop.
- 6 See Meinwald 2016, ch. 8.
- 7 McCabe 1996 pointed this out in the case of the first as compared with the second part of the *Parmenides*; I developed a variant on her view in Meinwald 2005.
- 8 Meinwald 2016, ch. 4 goes into detail about how different parts of the text are composed, and how they have their disparate effects.
- 9 Professor Gonzalez and I are alike in not wanting to go this route.
- 10 To quote Gilbert and Sullivan, "What, never? — Hardy ever." While my critics make a great deal of *Parm.* 141 e ff, to me (see Meinwald 2014a) as to Peterson 1996, these lines are an atypical case admitting of special explanation. Besides, even if we consider these rejections to stand, they are not nearly enough to get rid of half of the total results, which is what this style of interpretation requires.
- 11 For development and defense of the interpretation that follows, see Meinwald 1991, 2014a.
- 12 If one accepts such an interpretation then the first and

second hypotheses of the *Parmenides* will not after all lend themselves to the characterization of Professor Gonzalez (Workshop Session 1) that in them Plato is arguing 'both sides of the question' in a way whose results are not reconcilable as parts of a single view.

- 13 Sayre 1978 and 1983 pioneered the approach of taking seriously all three pairs of phrases that figure prominently in the description of the exercise to characterize sections of argument one must produce.
- 14 Gill 2012 and Rickless 2007 are unable to read the methodological advice as correctly describing the exercise. See Meinwald 2014a and 2014b.
- 15 As often in Gill 2012. Cf. the criticism expressed by Gerson 2013.
- 16 I can now direct those who are interested to Meinwald 2016, intended as a discussion of issues of wide interest.
- 17 On this intriguing and technical theme in Plato, see Barker 1994; Burnyeat 1987, 2000; Meinwald 1998, 2002.
- 18 Sayre 1983; Meinwald 1991, 1998, 2002, 2008, 2014a.
- 19 Such as Professor McCoy at our workshop.
- 20 Thanks to the organizer and hosts of the Workshop on Ways of Interpreting Plato, and indeed to all the participants: I found the interactions most enjoyable and useful.