

# Plato the Writer

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**ABSTRACT:** In this talk I consider a body of my more recent work in order to isolate the shared approach that it takes to reading Platonic dialogue, an approach which had been absent from my writing on Plato up to that point and is largely absent from any of the traditions that influence how most of us read Plato. Its key feature is a refusal to treat the character Socrates as operating as if he were Plato's secret agent within the dialogue—as if one should attribute to Socrates all of the cunning and the control with which one might credit instead the author who scripted Socrates's habitual triumphs. The focus of this new approach is rather on Plato's "writerly" philosophizing: on how Plato exploits the distinction between what he and his character Socrates are up to as philosophers in order to guide our sense of his own activity and aims as a philosophic writer.

I find myself offering a keynote address to a large, diverse, and eclectic group of ancient philosophy specialists, at a conference where Plato is not by any means the only philosopher being discussed. So I thought it would be appropriate for me to speak on a broad issue that would be relevant to any (or certainly to many) of Plato's dialogues rather than being confined to one or to a few. In order to do so, I propose to look back over some of the work that I have produced in the last five years or so and to draw your attention to a methodological trait, a way of reading Platonic dialogue, that is common to all of this work, but which had been absent from my writing on Plato up to that point. Not only is it absent from my own earlier work, I would also contend that it is largely absent from any of the traditions that influence how most of us read Plato these days—but that last is a much riskier claim, and I'd be happy to stand corrected on it in discussion with you.

All of this more recent work of mine has already seen print.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, I hope you will indulge me if I spend my time today in what is both a retrospective and a prospective exercise, drawing the moral of this work—if there even is one—for us readers of Plato. For one thing, I have no right to assume that just

because the writing has seen print, its content will be familiar to this audience, let alone fresh in your minds; more importantly, I have never before attempted to delineate what these pieces have in common when it comes to reading Plato and to propose this approach as one that others too might use.

I should emphasize at the outset that I have not yet sorted out in my own mind just how far I want to push the way of reading Plato that I will be proposing. The proposal, to which I'll turn momentarily, is one that dissociates Plato the writer of dialogue from Socrates the character within Plato's dialogues: but is this dissociation primarily a way for Plato to describe, from within his philosophic fictions, what his methods and purposes are in writing philosophic fiction in the first place? That's to say, is it primarily a device by which the fiction can refer to itself? Or does the dissociation extend to the philosophic arguments proposed by the character Socrates—an extension which would require revising the kind of thing that gets summarized in textbooks as the philosophy of Plato? And if it does extend to the philosophic arguments, how radically does it do so? These are questions that set my agenda for what remains very much a work in progress, about which I am particularly keen to get advice from this audience.

Enough of the mysteriousness, then: here is the general idea that I propose. I have only gradually come to appreciate what seems to me the full importance of the distinction between Plato the writer and Socrates the fictional character in Plato's writings. That the two are distinct goes without saying, but what I had not previously paid enough attention to was the extent to which Plato *exploits* the distinction between what he and his character Socrates are up to as philosophers in order to guide our sense of Plato's activity and aims as a philosophic writer, in contrast to the spoken philosophizing of the Socrates depicted in his writings. This theme, the investigation of what I have come to call Plato's "writerly" philosophizing, is something new for me.

Now of course, even before, I had always been anything but indifferent to the dramatic and rhetorical context within which philosophic arguments are presented in Plato's dialogues; but still, I find that I did not put the distinction between Plato and his Socrates to much use. And the reason that I failed to do so was that I had a tendency to think of the character Socrates as operating as if he were, so to speak, Plato's secret agent within the dialogue. I tended to attribute to Socrates, at least implicitly, all of the cunning and the control with which one might credit instead the author who scripted that action to unfold as triumphantly as it always does in Socrates's favour.

So far as I can see, this is a tendency that I had been sharing with most other Plato scholars, regardless of the interpretive tradition in which they happen to work. Take the analytic tradition, broadly construed: in this tradition, the character Socrates serves as Plato's secret agent by being the spokesman or mouthpiece for Plato's views at the time of writing. This Socrates may indeed argue strategically,

adapting his moves to the perceived needs of his interlocutor; but ultimately, the basic positions that Socrates shows himself willing to defend (particularly those that he defends repeatedly) are positions that analytic interpreters assume Plato meant to endorse. Mining Socrates's words for this material is therefore an established part of their exegesis.

Those who write in the tradition of Leo Strauss, on the other hand, have no truck with the practice of counting Socrates's pronouncements as so much Platonic doctrine—not even the most positive and constructive of those pronouncements. Nevertheless, they too, in their own way, permit no chink of light to show between the character Socrates and his author Plato. They achieve this by treating Socrates as a politic conversational strategist of such genius and such sureness of touch that in his various ironies and subterfuges we, or those of us who read with sufficient care, are able, as it were, to catch the knowing wink of his author. True, there is much more going on in the action of a Platonic dialogue, to this way of thinking, than just the argumentative strategems adopted by Socrates; it is the whole dialogue that speaks. Nevertheless, there would be nothing to be gained, it seems, by asking what Plato might know or feel that his character Socrates does not. Interestingly, although this does seem to be the prevailing attitude of those who have been inspired by Strauss (among whose number I include myself), still, when it comes to philosophic protagonists in Plato other than Socrates himself, such as the Eleatic Stranger, scholars the like of Francisco Gonzalez have been more than willing to make the philosophic *limitations* of that protagonist vis-à-vis Plato the motor of their interpretation. But not so with Socrates: the ironic, pedagogically oriented Socrates, in this kind of work, typically operates as a direct stand-in for the deviousness of his author.

Oddly similar to this Socrates, though for quite different reasons, is the Socrates of the Tübingen school, who gives his interlocutors only so much philosophy as he thinks they can handle, holding back from them the fullness of the Unwritten Doctrines. Unlike the Straussian Socrates, he does not resort to subterfuge or irony, at least when dealing with interlocutors of good will such as, for example, Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*; but he does at all times have his interlocutors' limitations in mind—a trait he has in common with the Straussian Socrates. And his control of what his interlocutors get to receive is absolute: "When Socrates tackles an issue," writes Thomas Szlezák, "it comes to a definite result—the discussion takes no false turns, leads down no blind alleys."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Plato's principal way of composing precisely the sequence of action and thought that he wished to present to the reader was to insert into that action a conversational maestro whose baton could direct the entire orchestra of fictional voices that the reader gets to hear.

In all three of *these* traditions, at least, which together cover a lot of interpretive ground, the following questions go unasked: what is that the author Plato is doing

that his character Socrates does not do, or could not do? Are there things that Plato knows that his character Socrates does not know, or could not conceive? And how do these disparities, to the extent that they exist, inform what Plato wrote? What role do they play in conveying Plato's intention to his readers? These are just the sorts of questions, however, that I have been asking myself in my more recent work.

Let me begin with cases in which the gap that opens between Plato the author and his character Socrates is that of a difference in philosophic resources and methods, and the interpretive payoff is an appreciation of how Plato saw his task as a writer of philosophic dialogue. First case: Socratic irony. It is common for discussions of this topic to elide the distinction between Socrates and Plato, and this in two ways: one is that they permit Socrates to vault the barrier of fiction as a way of compensating for the fact that his irony in the dialogues often sails over the heads of those with whom he is speaking. On this view, the true audience for Socrates's irony are the readers of the dialogue, as if Socrates were a character on stage addressing a whispered aside to the audience beyond the footlights. In order to understand his author's intention, then, we should make as if this Socrates were able to address the reader, just as his author could, if he so chose. Only grant this, and it becomes very natural to elide the distinction between Socrates and Plato in a second way also, by arguing that Plato aims to have an effect on his readers much like that which Socrates aims to produce in his conversation-partners. The written dialogue would be working on its readers in the same way that the fictional Socrates works on his interlocutors. Different scholars take different views of what that work might be—whether it is to disturb complacency, or to mock pretensions, or to urge toward the philosophic life, or some of each—but all see author and character operating with identical goals in mind.

Against this, I argued in my article "Socratic Irony as Pretence"<sup>3</sup> that there is nothing unnatural about aiming one's irony over the head of one's audience, as Socrates typically does. What makes Socrates special, and makes his situation poignant, is how constantly he has recourse to the solitary irony that most of us use only occasionally; but however extraordinary a character he is, he need not be turned into a magical being who dwells both inside and outside the fiction at the same time. And if we keep our Socrates realistic in this way, the distinction between Socratic and Platonic irony remains clear. Plato regularly employs that most writerly of ironies, dramatic irony. And unlike Socratic irony, Plato's irony aims very much to make itself understood by its audience. He wants us to watch knowingly as Socrates entraps his ignorant victims, albeit for their own good. By the same token, Platonic irony need not aim at *more* than making itself understood. And the payoff, in this case, for keeping Plato the author distinct from Socrates the character would be the conclusion that an author who so clearly marks the difference between his relation to his readers as ironic philosophic writer, on the one hand, and his character's relation to his interlocutors as ironic philosophic

speaker, on the other, is letting us know that he is not, after all, bound by the same discursive aims as his character. And thus a space opens up for a more theoretically-minded Plato, unlike the more missionary-minded Socrates, not to be seeking to “operate” on the reader in any way, necessarily, beyond simply providing food for thought.

Before I leave the topic of irony, this would be the moment for me to acknowledge one recent and laudable exception among scholars to the tendency to collapse Socrates and Plato. I am referring to David Wolfsdorf’s 2008 book *Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy* (Oxford). Wolfsdorf’s is the most systematic attempt I have encountered to derive a general principle for interpreting Plato’s Socratic dialogues from a fundamental distinction between the character Socrates and the author Plato. Wolfsdorf’s Socrates is allowed to adopt many unPlatonic positions as dialectical expedients or because they are conventional views that he chooses not to question at that moment in the discussion; and in general, Wolfsdorf holds that Plato’s views or attitudes cannot be directly read off from those of Socrates but only emerge when we consider how Plato is adapting the views and attitudes of his character Socrates to their context. With this much, I can agree. But Wolfsdorf goes too far when, rather than simply keeping Socratic irony and Platonic irony distinct, he denies Socratic irony entirely. He seems to believe that, if we allow Socrates any irony at all, the floodgates are opened and we will be swept all the way to embracing a Socrates as omniscient as his author. Rather than accept this, Wolfsdorf is willing to embrace a Socrates naive enough, say, to be wholly sincere in his praise of Meletus at the start of the *Euthyphro*; and if such naivete ill accords with the sophistication Socrates demonstrates in the course of his arguments, as Wolfsdorf admits, we must bite the bullet, he feels, and accept that Plato was just not concerned to preserve realism in his portrayal of Socrates.

But this seems to me an unnecessary hermeneutic price to pay. Provided we recognize that Plato’s views emerge only when the reader asks what Plato is doing—behind the scenes, as it were—by making Socrates and his accompanying cast of characters say what they say, it should make no difference to us as readers, as it made none to Plato as author, whether Socrates, or anyone else for that matter, is being ironic or is being straightforward. The full sense of Plato’s writing can only come across to us by the same surreptitious means in either case—and as a bonus, the plausibility of Plato’s portrayal of Socrates can be maintained.

For my second case in which the payoff of keeping Socrates and Plato apart is to appreciate something of how Plato saw his task as a writer of philosophic dialogue, I turn to the topic of Platonic myth. In a piece that I contributed to a recent collection on Plato’s myths that was published by Brill, I consider Socrates’s act of telling the myth in the *Gorgias* alongside Plato’s act of writing it.<sup>4</sup> For author and character both, I argue there, to construct a myth is to build something wholly within their control—a domain of freedom. But when it comes to how the myth

of the *Gorgias* relates to the discussion that precedes it within the dialogue, there is an important difference in the situations of Plato the writer and Socrates the character, and it is a difference that Plato implicitly draws to our attention when he has Socrates arrogate to himself the right to narrate the eschatological myth that he pleases on the basis of having won the preceding bouts of argument. In those dialectical exchanges, Socrates has to secure agreement from his opponent at each turn, as he proceeds from question to question, point to point. If his opponent shifts his ground—as Callicles, for example, often does—Socrates must adjust his line of questioning accordingly. Throughout the series of exchanges, Socrates has an argumentative goal that he is striving to reach; but he cannot be presumed to anticipate his opponent's every move—the places where his opponent will balk at agreement, or shift his ground, or even withdraw his cooperation entirely. The fictional Socrates is arguing live, and adjusting to a live interlocutor as he goes. Of course, he is a master of such adjustment, and never gets fatally wrongfooted. Nevertheless, when he comes to tell the myth, he is free from the need to make adjustments in the first place, since his opponent's agreement is no longer required; in fact, in the *Gorgias* Socrates is telling the story to an audience whose contempt of such things he openly acknowledges.

Plato, by contrast, is not working with a live audience, but writing the script for the entire dialogue: its dialectical bouts, its mythical narrative, and everything else besides. It is not just the writing of *myth*, then, that constitutes for Plato what the *telling* of myth is for Socrates; rather, it is the writing of an entire dialogue that builds his domain of freedom. Although the dialogue is packed with arguments, what it amounts to overall is a story. Plato is writing a drama, and the drama has a plot. The premise of the plot is that Socrates must win his arguments. Plato decides what obstacles to put in his way, and when to remove them—that is, he decides what concessions will be made by Socrates's opponents. And so he builds his storyline.

When Plato's writing is approached in this spirit, the gradient between *logos* and *muthos* in his dialogues can be seen to be—for Plato, though not for his Socrates—a formal rather than a substantial matter. And this would be the interpretive payoff of setting the author and his character in contrast to each other. Plato will have had many good, writerly reasons for shifting from fictional dialectic to fictional story-telling (as he shifts also, on occasion, to fictional speech-making, fictional history, fictional cosmology, fictional reportage, fictional lecture, and so on). But they are all just grist for his dramatic mill. It is the whole dialogue that carries his intention. None of this, of course, excludes the possibility that Plato's intention for a dialogue as a whole is the intention to get a philosophic position across to his readers; but it gives some insight into how, if so, he went about fulfilling his intention.

I have said that it should make no difference to us as readers whether Socrates is being ironic or being straightforward, so far as our interpretation of Plato is concerned. Nevertheless, it is true that my newfound resistance to the tendency to make Socrates Plato's secret agent inside the dialogue inclines me not to play the irony card too soon. It inclines me at least to try, these days, to take Socrates at his word, if I can. This is no more than a heuristic device to counter an earlier reflex of mine; it is certainly not a methodological principle, and is therefore quite different from Wolfsdorf's blanket denial of irony to Socrates. Still, as a heuristic device, it can yield some interesting results.

So in a piece called "Socrates in the *Republic*"<sup>5</sup> I make a point of taking Socrates at his word on the many occasions in that dialogue when he professes to be unsure of himself, or is tentative about the direction the discussion is taking, or expresses surprise—whether to his discussion-partners at the time or to the narratee, the person or persons to whom he reports the discussion that took place at Cephalus's house. I choose not to think of Socrates as holding the course of that discussion under a tight rein and remaining in control of its progress at all times, as in their very different ways all three of the interpretive traditions that I mentioned earlier do (the analytic, the Straussian, and the Tübingen school traditions). Rather, I take Socrates to be sincere when he represents himself as buffeted by the winds and waves of protest that shape the course of the discussion in Books 2 through 10 of the *Republic*, most notably at the beginning of Book 2 and again at the beginning of Book 5. And by taking Socrates at his word here, I am able, among other things, to see the contrast between Book 1 and the remainder of the work in a new light.

The Socrates of Book 1 proceeds in the inquisitorial, ironic manner familiar from the aporetic dialogues and maintains the firm control characteristic of a man who is out to assemble a refutation from the concessions made by his opponents in argument. In the remaining books, in which he is dealing with interlocutors of good will, he becomes less controlling, more openly investigative and didactic, and correspondingly less able to anticipate protests. Yet it is just these unanticipated protests, such as the demand at the opening of Book 5 that he should not pass over so skimpily the topic of marriage and childrearing among the Guardians, that mark the structural pivots of the work as *Plato* rather than Socrates conceives it. The new light in which I place the contrast between Book 1 of the *Republic* and subsequent books, in other words, derives from my focus on Plato as a writer.

When it came to writing the *Republic*, Plato was faced with the task of composing Socratic dialogue on an epic scale, far grander than anything he had attempted before (at least if we think of the *Laws* as a later work). And by relaxing Socrates's control as character, Plato found an excellent way to increase the scope of material he could control as author. The many parts of the magnificent whole that is the *Republic* respond to each other in the manner of a large-scale narrative, written by an author who must bear in mind the complex structure of the whole as he

writes, and who can weave into its web not only grand themes but also smaller motifs that may recur over long intervals, knowing that he writes for readers who can study and re-read his work. A structure on such a scale exceeds anything that could plausibly be attributed to the control of even so brilliant a conversational strategist as Socrates. That is why the work is built around interventions that even Socrates finds surprising. And by building it this way, but also reminding us in the first book of the very different kind of dialogue he was also capable of writing, Plato manages to *declare* himself a writer of philosophic epic even as he goes ahead and composes an example of the genre.

Now, notice that, in this case, my focus on the writerliness of Plato's philosophizing has consequences not only for how we interpret Plato's conception of himself as writer of the *Republic*, but also for how we interpret the *Republic's* philosophic argument. It does so by offering a way to opt out of the various doctrinal hypotheses that others make to account for the contrast between Book 1 and the books that follow it. Many scholars in the analytic tradition, after all, see Book 1 as a farewell to the historically inquisitorial Socrates, and the turn to constructive theory in Books 2–10 as an important contribution to a more dogmatic and systematic phase of Plato's philosophic thought. In work of the Straussian and Tübingen school traditions, too, the transition has its doctrinal consequences, albeit indirect ones, deriving in both cases from the thought that the controlling Socrates persists, in a way, even when his cast of interlocutors changes in the later books. Thomas Szlezák, for example, emphasizing the fact that Socrates withholds information even from his good-willed interlocutors Glaucon and Adeimantus, finds support here for his general thesis about the limits Plato imposed on transmission of the Unwritten Doctrines. Strauss, for his part, argues that Socrates's strategic handling of Glaucon and Adeimantus casts suspicion on the sincerity of many of the recommendations that he makes to them about the ideal city. The writerly focus, by contrast, so far as I can see, fully accounts for the transition while trailing no doctrinal implications in its wake.

But there are more positive ways in which the writerly focus can affect our interpretation of Plato's philosophic views in general, not just his views about himself as a philosophic writer. For an example, I turn now to Plato's utopianism, which is the topic of a piece of mine entitled "Plato's Writerly Utopianism."<sup>6</sup> My contention is that, although the kind of utopianism in which Plato engages by writing the *Republic* is too theoretical to be called crusading, it is nevertheless a realistic kind of utopianism. And it is realistic in a peculiarly writerly way.

Once again, the argument proceeds by taking Socrates at his word, and allowing his motives within the dramatic action to work differently from Plato's motives as composer of that action.

Do that, grant Socrates his relatively humdrum dramatic plausibility, and you have in the *Republic* a character whose reason for finally turning to address

the topic of what practical measures would be needed to bring the ideal city into existence is the one he openly gives: he is doing it, as he puts it in Book 5, “for your [Glaucou’s] sake” (472e). But let us not too hastily tune our ears to the deeper resonance of such a phrase, and think of Socrates as bent on rescuing Glaucou from, say, his worrisome attraction to tyrannical power. I’m not denying that such a motive could be at work in Socrates’s fundamental concern for Glaucou; what I deny is that it is the motive for his uttering those words in this context. I take his motive instead to be the superficial one that the context demands, and that Socrates has made explicit in this stretch of the conversation: Socrates is only turning to the practical measures required to realize the ideal city, Callipolis, because Glaucou has broken in on his presentation to insist that he do so. Socrates had been praising the Guardians’ family life and the finer points of their warmaking, and seemed set to continue along those lines for a while. It is Glaucou, not he, who is impatient to hear what measures would turn these ideals into reality (471c). That is the mundane sense in which it is “for Glaucou’s sake” that Socrates finally turns to this topic.

Again, when Socrates explains at this point (472d) that, for his own part, he would think his argument just as good if it were to limit itself to portraying the paradigmatically fine city in the way that a painter portrays the paradigmatically beautiful person, never bothering with the issue of feasibility at all, I assume that he means it. And by so assuming, I am able to find dramatically plausible the fact that his argument for the feasibility of Callipolis is itself remarkably offhand. The practical condition required to bring Callipolis into existence turns out to be, as we all know, that philosophers should become rulers, or vice versa. Philosopher-rulers, once in place, could take the practical measures that would bring a Callipolis, or something close to it, into being. But this proposal prompts the further question: what practical measures could bring philosopher-rulers themselves into being, especially given the hostility felt toward philosophy in society at large? To tackle *this* question, Socrates offers only the airy hope that it is at least not *impossible*—not if one takes all of history and all the rulers there ever have been or will be—that a ruler’s son could be born with a philosophic nature, could escape having that nature corrupted by the society around him, and could persuade his people to follow him on the path of reform (502a–c).

The comparative feebleness of this claim ought to surprise us when we consider Socrates’s promise that, for Glaucou’s sake, he would now explain “how, exactly, and in what circumstances this would be most possible” (472e)—where “this” is the setting up of a Callipolis. That announcement certainly makes it sound as if we are about to be given practical measures and an account that goes into some detail about them, a how-to manual, as it were, for prospective utopians—all the more so since Socrates has set what he is about to do in strong contrast to the activity of constructing a paradigm city in words, as the painter paints the

paradigmatically beautiful human being. Yet a how-to manual is not at all what we get. Instead, in the pages that follow, almost all Socrates's energy goes toward explaining whom he means when he speaks of philosophers, and why the rule of people such as they would be the best thing for a city. Precious little time is spent on showing how philosophic rule could be established. And even less time is spent on showing how the rule of philosophers would bring about the other reforms that distinguish the social arrangements of Callipolis.

As a good dramatic writer should do, however, Plato has contrived to surprise his readers at this fundamental level, while plausibly motivating the action at a superficial level. Yes, we feel surprised and perhaps even frustrated not to be given the how-to manual that seemed to be promised; but at the same time, there are perfectly acceptable reasons for this turn in the fictional discussion. One we have already considered: Socrates himself is not especially interested in this aspect of his argument. And his lack of interest would fit with other traits of his character as we know it from the dialogues: his lack of concern for his own practical affairs; the fact that he is not an institutional, professional philosopher, or a man of politics beyond what duty requires; the fact that he spends his life wedded to Athens as its very own gadfly.

Not only is Socrates relatively uninterested in the question of Callipolis's feasibility; he is also notably reluctant to address this question, and seizes every opportunity to prevaricate about it. And again we can take his reason to be the one he openly admits: his argument, he retrospectively confesses in Book 6, had "veiled its face" (503a), not letting on that he meant his Guardians to be full-fledged philosophers, because he feared stirring unnecessary controversy. This, too, is dramatically plausible, in its mundane way: Socrates is, after all, at a party in the house of Cephalus and supposedly planning to go out on the town with his friends after dinner.

Finally, and most importantly, no sooner has Socrates made the announcement that philosophers should be kings, than he finds himself scrambling to deal with the indignant protests first of Glaucon and then of Adeimantus at the very idea that philosophers *should* even come to power, never mind whether they could. The idea is so outrageous that Glaucon—again, quite plausibly—forgets all about his insistence on getting the how-to manual, and is content instead to hear Socrates explain, at length, why the rule of philosophers is in fact a very good idea, tacking on only at the end a suggestion as to how it might become reality.

Glaucon forgets; but the reader does not, and should not. By keeping Socrates's motives distinct from Plato's, we are prompted to ask: Why does *Plato* arrange for Socrates to tantalize us with the promise of a how-to manual, but then fail to deliver? Is this simply a failure on Plato's part? If it is not to be, then we need to ask a further question: How is it that, merely by arranging for philosopher-rulers to be favourably depicted in the discussion, Plato could suppose himself

to be contributing in a practical way to the ascent of philosophers to power and thereby to the actualization of Callipolis—as this turn in the discussion suggests he wants to do? And once asked, the question pretty much answers itself. To depict the philosopher-ruler favourably and make the depiction convincing, when that depiction is the high-point of a written work that can be presumed to move in influential circles, is in itself to increase the chances that, one day, a philosopher of just this stamp will rule. Convince enough powerful people that it is a good idea, and the idea may just catch on.

This, then, would be the reason why Plato does not write about the practical measures that would have to be taken to bring philosophers to power—that is, does not make such measures a topic of discussion among his characters. He does not write *about* them because the practical measure he is most concerned to take at this juncture in his life is constituted by this very act of writing—writing not about the practical measures required to bring philosophers to power but simply about why bringing philosophers to power is a good idea. This is what I mean by the phrase “Plato’s writerly utopianism.” To call it “writerly” is not to suggest that Plato was content to write about Callipolis, however convincingly, with no thought for its realization on the ground. Rather, it is to suggest that Plato took his writing about Callipolis to constitute, just by itself, an effective contribution toward the realization of Callipolis on the ground.

My conclusion, then, is one that takes a stand on Plato’s views about something other than his philosophic writing; I take Plato to be a sincere utopian in general, and I take the particular reforms represented by Callipolis as sincerely meant. What I want once more to emphasize, though, is how crucial an element of this interpretation it is that none of the motives we can plausibly attribute to the character Socrates in the *Republic*, at least on this particular issue, are also true of Plato. Interpretive charity bids us assume that Plato wrote the book he wanted to write and was not a prisoner of its development as he wrote. *Plato* is not in the least reluctant to defend the controversial idea of philosophic rule, since he made sure that such a defence would form the centrepiece of his book. Nor is *Plato* so sanguine as his character Socrates about the value of portraying the paradigm city without addressing the issue of its feasibility. Plato, unlike Socrates, was a philosopher running a school; he was, in his way, what we would now call an academic politician, much concerned about turning institutional ideas into reality. Certainly, Plato could agree that, were the issue of feasibility not to be addressed, the account of Callipolis would not lose any of its value *as an account of the paradigm city*. But he would not suppose it equal in value to an account that, in addition, did address the issue of feasibility. That much is clear from his having ensured that, in the book he chose to write, the issue was indeed addressed. The further fact that he arranged for it to be addressed with conspicuous airiness by

Socrates is what shows the reader how *Plato* takes himself to be addressing it with adequate commitment.

In conclusion, let me return to the question that I raised at the start, about whether the dissociation between Plato the writer and Socrates the character is primarily a device by which the fiction can refer to itself, or if it is not only this, then how far it should change our understanding of the arguments proposed by Socrates within the dialogues. Certainly, I have presented cases where the dissociation does have implications for the views we should attribute to Plato on matters other than his activity as a philosophic writer. The writerly approach has led me, on the one hand, to deny that the contrast between Book 1 of the *Republic* and the remaining books has anything to tell us about Platonic metaphysics, and on the other hand, to defend the sincerity of Plato's utopianism and its instantiation in Callipolis. In both of these cases, however, Plato and Socrates are dissociated by virtue of differences in the media and the environment in which they chose to philosophize (writing, on the one hand, conversation, on the other; Plato the leader of a school, on the one hand, Socrates the eccentric gadfly, on the other). They are dissociated by these things rather than by their philosophic views as such. What I remain uncertain about is whether it would be fruitful to pursue the dissociation into the more fundamental area of their philosophic views as such.

I'll sketch one example of what I have in mind: a very familiar Socratic move in the dialogues is his preference for investigating what something is before attempting to discover anything else about it. In the *Meno*, for example, Socrates claims to be unable to answer the question "is virtue teachable?" until he knows what virtue is (71b), and at the end of the dialogue attributes the inconclusiveness of their investigation to Meno's refusal to stay diverted from that secondary question of teachability despite their not having answered the primary one (100b, 86c). In my earlier mode of thinking, I have thought of Socrates's position in the *Meno* this way: the character Socrates in fact has no intention of deducing the teachability of virtue from its definition. At most, he is dangling the illusion that he could do so via a method akin to hypothesis in mathematics. What he does intend to do, however, is to show Meno that virtue is not (as Meno imagines) a known quantity whose teachability can be broached as a separate question. Focusing on what virtue is will reveal the ignorance that is a necessary first step, *not* to the discovery of a definition, but to a process of familiarization and intimacy with patterns of living well, and with how those patterns belong together. That's to say, I have taken the "priority of definition" doctrine traditionally ascribed to Socrates, and thereby to Plato, and subverted it by attributing strategic pedagogic behaviour to the character Socrates.

But what if I were to take Socrates at his word in such cases as these too? What if the historical Socrates was indeed as Aristotle describes him, a philosopher concerned above all to discover definitions in the realm of ethics, and Plato thought

that this was a big mistake on his beloved Socrates's part? Then Plato might choose to demonstrate this point by writing dialogues in which the character Socrates tries repeatedly to find definitions, and repeatedly fails. Not that definitions, for Plato, are a bad thing, or unimportant; the bad idea is to insist on finding a definition of X first, so as to deduce from it the attributes of X. What Plato seems rather to have sought is a system through which we acquire an understanding of X as an individual whole made up of attributes, only one of which is the definition. Just as Socrates in the dialogues is no writer, no poet, and no teacher, so too he is not a systematic philosopher. In this domain too, Plato's views would emerge only when we consider how he strives to transcend his fictional hero. But this I must leave as a mere suggestion, and as earnest that my thinking on the relation between the writer Plato and his character Socrates does indeed remain a work in progress.

## NOTES

1. When the talk was originally delivered, not quite all of this work had in fact seen print; it has since done so. Warm thanks go to Catherine Zuckert and to Gretchen Reydam-Schils for inviting me to present this address at the 2013 meeting of the Ancient Philosophy Society.
2. See Thomas Szlezák, *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985), 302. Translation mine.
3. G. R. F. Ferrari, "Socratic Irony as Pretence," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 34, ed. David Sedley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–33.
4. G. R. F. Ferrari, "The Freedom of Platonic Myth," in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, ed. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Mnemosyne Supplements*, vol. 337 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 67–86.
5. G. R. F. Ferrari, "Socrates in the *Republic*," in *Plato's Republic: A Critical Guide*, ed. Mark McPherran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11–31.
6. G. R. F. Ferrari, "Plato's Writerly Utopianism," in *Dialogues on Plato's Politeia (Republic)*, Proceedings of the Ninth Symposium Platonicum, ed. N. Notomi and L. Brissonin (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2013), 131–40.

