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DOCTRINE AND DRAMATIC DATES OF PLATO'S DIALOGUES

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My purpose in this paper is to raise—without expecting to finally resolve—the question of the doctrinal significance of the several internal cross-references of Plato's dialogues, and particularly his indications of their proper sequence for the reader.

There are two reasons for this exploration, one metaphysical, one largely technical. The technical reason is that those of us who insist on the inseparability of "literary" and "argument" dimensions of Plato's work have not done very well in articulating the larger literary questions of sequence as functions of the central drama of ideas. The metaphysical reason is that there is a necessary problem of perspective inherent in the Platonic theory of forms, anticipated in Plato's own statements, and destined to haunt the Platonic tradition, dividing it into a Neo-Platonic formalism and an alternative "process" position.

Platonic metaphysics does not lend itself to literal, didactic presentation. Part, at least, of the reason is that the metaphysician must address us from a definite standpoint in his report. If that standpoint looks to the forms as future alternative goals or values, its prospective account will differ from the purely descriptive accounts of the forms as classes or universals which look at them in a non-temporal eternal present. In short, the different functions of the forms involve different refractions through becoming, and no one account from a given aspect can do justice to the theory. And there are also other problems of perspective. One of these is the relation of the knower to what is knowable or known; another is the puzzling case of participation.

Very early in his career, as he tried to develop his defense of Socrates into a systematic philosophic vision, Plato discovered this difficulty. Having written the Phaedo, in which Socrates has attained "blessedness" by his incarnation of the form of justice, Plato felt compelled to complete the picture with the contrasting Symposium. Where the Phaedo gives forms that are perfect, pure, and attainable, the Symposium gives forms which lie at the end of an impossible quest for immortality through a demonic pursuit of creativity.1 If for an instant the Symposium allows a glimpse of The Beautiful, that glimpse is followed by a return to time in which the philosopher again functions as a daimon. The two dialogues, by every test of style, structure, and historical reference, were written at almost the same date. They are internally linked by parallel details, indicating their relation to be that of a comedy to a tragedy—as an initial point of such relatedness, pointing up the contrast, we note that the patron god of the Symposium is Dionysus, the patron of the Phaedo is Apollo.

This attempt to do the portrait of Socrates and his thought properly, by doing it twice, in contrasting lights and styles, addresses a problem that is reflected throughout the Platonic tradition. Within that tradition, there tends to be polarization between interpretations which follow the Phaedo in a stress on the purity and remoteness of the real world—this is the orientation of Neo-Platonicism—and interpretations more appreciative of the role of Eros, of the forms as creative powers—this is the orientation, today, of process philosophy; earlier, Renaissance admirers of the Symposium share the view.
The theme of my present discussion is that Plato's indications of the inter-relations of various sets of dialogues represent an intention on his part of indicating relatively complete perspectival accounts of his philosophy. How optimistic he was about the final success of the most ambitious of these ventures, a programmed sequence of eight successive Socratic discourses, to provide a complete perspective-including picture we are not sure. But the final judgment of Letter VII, Plato's or not (and I am certain that it is his own) is surely right, that Platonic philosophy does not lend itself, as other topics do, to literal, textbook forms of statement. 2

It is generally assumed by twentieth-century readers that the doctrines of the "later dialogues" and of the middle ones, particularly the Phaedo, are incompatible. The explanation usually given is that Plato discovered that the "middle dialogue" theory of forms was unsatisfactory. First, it was stronger than it needed to be to explain the phenomena of knowledge and communication which it had been devised to account for; and second, it was not coherent in the face of rigorous logical analysis. It is also widely assumed in our century that a satisfactory but metaphysically far more modest theory is offered in the "logical" later dialogues.

What I now propose to do is first, to organize the dialogues into groups related by internal cross-reference or by common strategy; second, to show how this illuminates the interrelation of the later, logical, series; third, to reconstruct the location and method of The Philosopher as part of this projected set; fourth, to show that if the Phaedo is correctly read, it can appropriately come after The Philosopher in a dialectical order. 3 If this is convincing, it will have shown that the open alternatives for understanding Plato remain, as they have always been, a Neo-Platonic stress on transcendence or a Process Philosophy stress on immanence and emergence; and that contemporary attempts to read Plato as an analytic or linguistic philosopher completely miss the intended strategy of the texts pressed into service in this Megarian enterprise.

After the death of Socrates, young Plato--presumably in Megara--began writing dialogues in defense of his older friend and hero. The Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito certainly belong here. Of these, the first defends Socrates against the charge of impiety, by contrasting his attitude toward religion and the gods with that of the fundamentalist Euthyphro. The second, a recreation of Socrates' speech at his trial, at once makes it clear what the real basis of the charges against him was (namely, his persistent inquiry), and brings out his seriousness. (Xenophon's Apology is evidence that many Athenians saw Socrates as a kind of eccentric crank.) The third defends Socrates against the charge of bad citizenship, implied in the phrasing of both counts of the indictment. The form of these works is highly dramatic, brief, and with a minimum of metaphysics and no didactic doctrine. A next step of dialogues is the Lysis-Laches Charmides triad, which defend Socrates against the charge of corrupting the youth, by showing him in action. The case studies are designed to show the good effect of his conversation on young audiences--if not always on elderly generals. Again, the form is highly dramatic, the conversations inconclusive and brief (an Aristotelian critic would say that Plato here deliberately uses a form that has a beginning and middle, but no end), the emphasis is ethical and metaphysics is relatively lacking. There was another charge, though an implicit one, that Plato felt the need to answer. This was the notion--central to Aristophanes' Clouds
and persisting in the public mind—that Socrates was just another Sophist. In fact, as Plato saw it, the whole project of Socrates' inquiry presupposed a possibility for objective non-relativistic treatment of ethical questions which was at the opposite pole from the sophisticated intellectuals of the "Sophist" persuasion. In presenting this line of defense, Plato has Socrates encounter the leading Sophists of the day. The dialogues are longer, the casts larger, the action more complex. An element of contest enters, with Socrates the winner. These discussions begin to include myths and to use mathematical examples. The theory that knowledge is recollection becomes explicit in the Meno, one of the latest dialogues in this set.

In his middle dialogues, Plato tries to carry out the project of systematizing the philosophic vision of Socrates, and of offering a final philosophic justification for his behavior and beliefs. Marvin Fox drew attention some years ago to the way in which Socrates describes his final conversation as a "trial" in which he defends his way of life before a jury of philosophers; if Ionian naturalism were the final philosophic answer, Socratic idealism would indeed have been unrealistic. The Phaedo is a presentation of Socrates' thoughts on immortality; it is a conclusion of the Euthyphro-Apology-Crito, but both form and content indicate a later date of composition, with the Socrates-versus-the-Sophists studies, ending with the Meno, chronologically in between. But at the same time, the Symposium, as we have seen, gives an alternative portrait of an engaged Socrates, a daimon, in pursuit of immortality by creativity. By every criterion—style, relative length, systematic extension of philosophic insight—these two dialogues seem contemporary, and, as we have noted, parallel details stress their complementary character. But "the" Platonic philosophy they present has offered a strong temptation to take one or the other.

The middle dialogues continue with the great philosophic vision of the Republic, with its display of dialectic; and with the philosophical rhetoric of the Phaedrus, where Socrates uses myth and cosmological argument to persuade his literature-loving companion.

In these dialogues, we are dealing with a full-scale philosophic vision: myth, mathematics, and metaphysics alternate in importance; the method depends heavily on analogy and metaphor. The outcome is a picture of the sort of world in which Socrates' conduct is justified, his vision confirmed, and a systematic metaphysics is established. In particular, the "divided line" of the Republic summarizes a new epistemology and proposes a new plan of education, consistent with a Socratic inquiry that expects to find positive answers.

These middle dialogues have interesting structural properties. The drama instantiates the argument, as the characters with their problems and notions offer concrete examples of what the general discussion is about. (Thus the cast of Republic ii-x has a spokesman for each of the three "parts of the soul.") At the same time, when a method is an important topic of discussion, that method is illustrated by the contextual dialogue (so "dialectic" is exemplified by the Republic, "philosophical rhetoric" by the Phaedrus.) But we are still dealing with a philosophic vision, with an emphasis on speculative coherence that sets aside, for the time, sharp critical precision and testing.

This leaves Plato, after the middle dialogues, with three lines of investigation he must follow. The first is logical: can the four-level theory of knowledge of the Republic establish itself against critics who argue that the forms are not intelligible, or that they are not needed, or that "kinds of
knowledge" may not be the extended four-part domain that the Republic supposes? The second line of needed further investigation is cosmological or physical: does the faith, expressed in Plato's myths, that nature and history are ordered with some regard to value find confirmation in empirical science and historical plausibility? The third line is ethical: if this philosophy is true, it should be possible to take it back to the market place from the Academy, and to show that indeed, far from being "idle talking" (Isocrates' description of Plato's work in the Academy), it is a practical tool for human betterment.

Quite clearly, it is the second of these purposes that motivated the projected Republic-Timaeus-Critias-Hermocrates tetralogy. Setting aside the more metaphysical portions of Socrates' account in the Republic, Timaeus concentrates on the empirical details of natural science and medicine. In the next dialogue, Critias moves from cosmology to mythical history with his "true" story of a small but virtuous state (ancient Athens) triumphing over Atlantis, a large but bad one. Hermocrates, in turn, would be expected to give an account of the defeat of a later Athens that had lost the excellence of the "ancient Athens" of Critias' story. (Plato in fact transferred this theme of Greek history to the Laws, leaving the Hermocrates unwritten and the Critias incomplete.) The theme of the Timaeus throughout is that natural phenomena can be explained by models and laws that embody aesthetic properties of beauty, simplicity, and precision.

The third, applied and ethical, strategic target of Plato's post-middle-dialogue writings is clearly the strategic motivation of the Philebus and the Laws. The Philebus, both by theme ("not the good itself, but the good for human life"), and by choice of cast (young men who are not very philosophical) centers on the practical application of philosophy; the Laws offers a concrete sample of the philosophic legislator in action, establishing "right measure."

The first, logical, set of strategic sequels to the middle dialogues is a more complex affair. The set opens with the Parmenides, a dialogue with a double strategic purpose. The first point that is established is that neither the Megarian nor the Eudoxian interpretation of Socrates' theory of forms is tenable. Still, the forms are necessary to explain how knowledge is possible. The second strategic point of the Parmenides is its showing--by reductio proof--that forms on the noetic level are necessary for philosophy. For the attempt to treat metaphysics as a dianoetic, hypothetical-deductive enterprise runs into antinomies. (We recognize what more is needed when we notice when the noetic forms--the beautiful, the right, and the good--drop out of consideration with Parmenides.)

This gives a reductio proof that the forms are necessary, and that the "divided line" ontology cannot be simplified simply by dismissing the top level. Msgr. Dies caught this clearly in his remark that "the word nous and its derivatives are absent in this dialogue, with the exception of the rejection of conceptualism. . ."7

What would happen, however, if someone with a pragmatic temperament and orientation argued that "forms" are philosophically redundant, whether we treat them as dianoetic classes or noetic systematic patterns? The answer is that it is impossible to explain the possibility of kinds of knowledge which, nevertheless, we actually have. For mere experience plus memory can never give us the necessity or universality of mathematics or Socratic ethics. The Theaetetus is Plato's indirect proof of this. The cast has been chosen so that we have a spokesman for, or representative of, each of the four kinds of "knowledge" distinguished on the "divided line."8 It turns out that Theaetetus'
experiments with empirical and psychological models of learning—models which become the standard paradigms of much later Western psychology and epistemology—cannot explain Socratic ethics or pure mathematics. (And we are given examples in context—Theodorus' and Theaetetus' geometrical theorems, and Socrates "digression" on the life of the philosopher—which show that mathematical and philosophic knowledge are actual.) Plato concludes the dialogue with a cross-reference that makes this series intersect the earlier biography of Socrates, set. This is not a mere casual afterthought: its intention is shown throughout the discussion in the attention given to trials, lawyers, legal imagery (which would, without this explanation, seem puzzling intrusions needing the sort of external explanation that Gilbert Ryle proposed).

Cornford catches the point of the Theaetetus tersely, as Diès did for the anti-hypothesis motif of the Parmenides: "The forms do not appear," he writes; for the reason that Plato wants to show the futility of an attempt to do without them. If we claim to have other entities, such as "concepts," "linguistic dispositions" "impressions and ideas," that can substitute for "forms," this is not a claim or substitution that Plato endorsed!

The participants in the Theaetetus recognize the existence of arts and crafts, which depend on rules and paradigms for their success in construction (e.g., of a wagon) and prediction (e.g., of the effect of an argument on a jury). But what if a critic of the theory of forms not only rejects the philosophic forms and the mathematical ones, but also, denying the common-sense world of paradigms and copies of the Theaetetus, insists on a total reduction of epistēmē to eikasia? Would anyone in fact do this? Yes, a thoroughgoing Sophist well might. But, as the next dialogue in Plato's series shows, the price he must pay for this is to give up the art of communication—of refutation, persuasion, or deception—and this deprives him of his income and function.

The forms are still shown to be presupposed in this dialogue, but only in the very weakened roles they play as public "meanings" and "syntactical frameworks" which make discourse possible. In this and the following dialogue, a great point is made of a new "method of division," which is elaborately illustrated. At first, it seems that this may be able to handle the relations of "forms" without reference to systems, hierarchies, and so on; it does not turn out until late in the Statesman that the method in fact presupposes more elaborate logical and metaphysical distinctions. (In the interim, our trust in it is weakened by its two definitions of "man," one as a featherless biped, one as a sub-species of pig!) With the final capture of the Sophist, at the end of the great hunt, this radical proposal for reduction of the "forms" to "icons and semblances" seems laid to rest.

What one might now expect is a rehabilitation of the theory, arguing from Sophistic skill with appearances to arts and crafts, from arts and crafts to sciences of measure, from the formal metric studies to systems of criteria, the value forms. This expected return is begun in the Statesman, where the forms are presupposed by the art of statesmanship as the criteria for the "right amount" (to metrion) which separates the "too great" from the "too small." Since there are arts, and since arts presuppose such criteria, there must be measures of this sort. We are tentatively promised a "later" discussion of the nature of "normative measure."

As the dialogue sequence was designed, the Eleatic Stranger has served his turn: he has handled the levels of eikasia and pistis (taken together,
the level of doxa) admirably with his critical logic; now it is time for Socrates and his namesake, Young Socrates, to carry on with The Philosopher. That conversation should argue back to a systematic logical order among genuine diaecetic forms. The argument probably would not necessarily take us to the total normative system of the middle dialogues, but to the sort of coherence that is presupposed by the deductions of the Parmenides, the definitions of the Sophist, the operational accounts of the Theaetetus and the Statesman. The result could be very like the theory of forms that Socrates described himself as developing in the Phaedo, having failed to carry out the "best, as opposed to the second best" method that "the book by Anaxagoras" had suggested to him. In effect, I would take this stage of the theory as resting on the axiom (in the language of the Phaedo, "the most certain-seeming hypothesis") that logic is relevant to physics and ethics because the systematic relations of the forms create causal relations among their participants. This does not yet tell us, however, why the formal system is organized as it is, nor whether there are normative functions served by the forms which require them to be more than classes, types, or universals.

Why Plato never wrote The Philosopher (at least not under that name) probably admits no final answer. But our discussion of the grouping of casts and topics does suggest what this was destined to say, had it been written. We can show this in tabular form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Divided Line</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOESIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIANOIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parmenides</td>
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<tr>
<td>PISTIS</td>
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<td>Theaetetus</td>
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<tr>
<td>EIKASIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(????) Philosopher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The suggestion of the possibility of the identity of this projected dialogue with one we actually have has provoked many questions. Should we go back from the Statesman to the Parmenides, and treat Parmenides as The Philosopher? Should we assume that this part of his total project inspired Plato's Lecture on the Good, which was "highly mathematical" and proved the unity of the system of forms? Or might we look in another direction, and say as Klein suggested (though only half-seriously) that perhaps The Apology is really The Philosopher? In any case, notice how the projected sequence of these "logical" later dialogues is related to the levels of the divided line.

It is worth noticing, as well, that there is a combination of political and legal concerns with purely logical motif running throughout this set. We have commented on the legal motif that runs through the Theaetetus; in the Parmenides, the second respondent is young Aristoteles, "who later became one of The Thirty"; Sophistry and justice are explicit themes of the Sophist and Statesman.

The crucial point that seems to me indicated by this plotting of Plato's projects is that the last word of Plato's Socrates is still provided by the Phaedo, coming after and going beyond the projected technical Philosopher. Once more we are offered as side by side presentations positions which later readers would prefer to think of as exclusive. Socrates' conversations in prison, correcting the Megarian analysis of forms written down by Euclides, is followed by the Myth of the True Earth, precise analytic philosophy succeeded by exuberant mysticism.
But to appreciate its location here in the sequence, the *Phaedo* must be correctly read. In particular, one must not miss the relation of Socrates' two philosophic methods, nor the point of the final myth. Socrates, having given up natural science, recounts his further researches in two stages. First, he develops a new and powerful hypothetical-deductive logical method, intended to seek the strongest hypotheses; and with this method he shows that the psyche is indestructible.13 (The proof does not establish personal immortality, however.) But he had already had the idea of a still better method, inspired by the quotation from Anaxagoras: this would be to relate the order of things, cosmos and forms alike, to The Good as a first principle.14 If this could be done, perhaps philosophers could find evidence for the existence of Cosmic Justice written in the stars. And in a world ordered in that way, the fact that Socrates ought to have personal immortality would lead to the conclusion that he does have it. But this revelation of the Good occurs here only as a story, a hope; it is a project bequeathed by Socrates to Plato.

The Myth of the True Earth has two important properties. The first is that it is intended to show how the method of appeal to The Good would look as explanatory principle in empirical science. In this story, there is an exact match between the findings of scientific geology—of the impious atheists who pry into "things under the earth"—and the geography of purgatory taken from Orphic eschatology.15 Having first solved the question of the shape and stability of the earth by an appeal to what is best, the mixture of geology and theology continues on this same line.16

A second property of this story is that, as mythos should, the account changes abstractions into personifications and reifications. Thus the True Earth has showcases of precious stones and living gods who greet the visitors to their temples face-to-face. What is the invariability of the logical domain is replaced here by the beauty of the museum of perfect instantiation. Such projections are as philosophically misleading, when their proper status is not recognized, as they are aesthetically and religiously effective. One can hardly resist comparing this great myth to Kant's account, in his Third Critique, of religious vision as an aesthetically coherent representation of "what we may hope." Like Plato's Socrates, Kant had his own conjectures, of a geography of the planetary system in which the various planets are stages for the education of our souls.17

By the time of his farewell to Socrates, before turning to the *Laws*, Plato had developed his philosophy systematically. As he wrote successive conversations he managed to correct—by anticipations if one follows the dramatic dates, by later revision if we follow the chronological dating—misinterpretations, and also to take account of new findings. In the end, he saw, Socrates' faith in a total moral and aesthetic order, and in philosophy as the contemplation of it, remained not only a central hope, but the central doctrinal thesis of Platonism. But Socrates' last word was his message of purification and escape; and that still did not do justice to the Socrates who challenged his fellow Athenians, bringing philosophy into the everyday arguments of the Agora. For that, a further extension was in order; an extension which would once more find its expression in a linked pair of aspects that modern readers at first glance find antithetical. And the two aspects of Platonism—the ascetic moment of the *Phaedo*, where we see the whole earth from remote space, and the engaged activity of the *Laws*, where we measure every field and river in our own immediate territory—once more combine in the final projected strategy of Plato's philosophic presentation. An appendix to the *Laws* seems also to have been projected...
by Plato, though it is doubtful how far our extant text represents his own execution, or if it is his, how completely it carries through his intention. But the *Epinomis*, a sequel to the *Laws*, is an astronomical myth, parallel in location, similar in theme, and probably intended to be similar in its moral to the Myth of Er at the conclusion of the *Republic*. And both of these concluding postscripts seem to draw their inspiration, ultimately, from the Myth of the True Earth at the end of the *Phaedo*. 


3. Various other orderings are not relevant here, for example Thrasyllus' organization by philosophic theme, or the several arrangements designed for pedagogical effectiveness reported by Albinus.


5. In the summary of the Republic that opens the *Timaeus*, the metaphysical section (bks. vi and vii) is omitted. At least since Proclus, commentators have suggested a connection between this fact and the cryptic "One, two, three, but where is the fourth. . .," with which the dialogue opens.


8. The correlation is: Noesis : Socrates :: Dianoia : Theodorus :: Pistis : Theaetetus :: Eikasia : Ghost of Protagoras.


11. *Phaedo* 95A-97C; 99D-107C.


14. *Phaedo* 95A-97C.

15. Aristotle takes the geology seriously—something he does not do for the "empirical" details of other Platonic myths, such as the Myth of Er or Myth of Metals in the *Republic*, or the *Gorgias* Myth of Last Judgment. See *Meteorologica* II.1, 355b32-356b2.

16. Compare Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 94b34: "If then, a thing can exist through two causes, can it come to be through two causes—as for instance if thunder be a hiss and a roar necessarily produced by the quenching of fire, and also designed, as the Pythagoreans say, for a threat to terrify those that lie in Tartarus?"