it is held not casually, but in the face of philosophical objections, marks it as a philosophical view.

I conclude, then, that Vlastos was incorrect in his claim that the Socrates of the early dialogues was exclusively a moral philosopher. I have argued, following Allen, that the Socrates of these dialogues is a metaphysician, an ontologist, as well as a moral philosopher. The ontology of the elenctic dialogues differs from that of the middle dialogues only in a single respect: separation. This is a huge difference, and it is, strictly, an incompatibility. Thus, the ontology of the elenctic dialogues is in this one respect incompatible with the ontology of the middle dialogues. In other respects, however, it is compatible with that ontology, and should be seen as the precursor or first stage of that theory. In this regard, as, I believe, in others, SocratesE was much more closely connected to SocratesM than Vlastos's portrait allows.

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INTERPRETING PLATO'S EARLY DIALOGUES

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1. The mouthpiece principle

Interpretation of philosophical texts usually proceeds on the assumption that philosophers have written in order to disseminate their beliefs. Interpreting their texts, therefore, aims to clarify their beliefs on the topics the texts engage, where the texts constitute the evidence for those beliefs. Difficulty tends to lie in determining the author's meaning or the cogency of the author's arguments rather than whether the author believes what is written.

In the case of Plato's writings—throughout, this paper's principal concern is the early writings—no straightforward identification of the texts' contents with the author's beliefs is possible. Plato wrote dialogues or narratives with abundant dialogue whose sentences express the views of dramatic characters. Some of these sentences obviously do not represent the author's beliefs, but it is not always clear which do.1

An ancient solution to this problem identifies Plato's beliefs with the utterances of the main character Socrates. The earliest surviving expression of this, the mouthpiece principle, occurs in Diogenes

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Laertius. Vlastos offers a modern endorsement: ‘in any given dialogue Plato allows the persona Socrates only what he (Plato), at that time, considers true’. But many scholars, more cautious than Vlastos, resist the mouthpiece principle. One strategy is to restrict interpretation to Socrates’ utterances. For instance, Brickhouse and Smith:

We do not, in this book, intend to answer the question of whose philosophy we are actually interpreting [Plato’s or the historical Socrates] . . . We claim only that a distinct philosophy can be found consistently portrayed as Socrates’ in Plato’s early dialogues, and that the philosophy so portrayed is itself consistent.

Thus, one might say, Socrates’ philosophy is rich and constitutes the dialogues’ main philosophical substance—to have clarified that is interpretation enough.

This approach falters on several grounds. Most plainly, the richer and more cogent the philosophy disclosed by the character Socrates, the more reasonable it seems that Plato maintained that philosophy himself—regardless of whether it originated with him or the historical Socrates. So in this case, avoiding the bugaboo of authorial intention appears a weak manoeuvre.

There is also a problem determining the character Socrates’ beliefs. His utterances are not entirely consistent among the early dialogues or occasionally even within dialogues. Of course, this is an interpretation. But assuming for the time being that it is correct, one is compelled to question which of Socrates’ beliefs are Socrates’. Consequently, it becomes necessary to consider why Plato composed Socrates’ utterances as inconsistent.

Of all the views expressed in the early dialogues Plato clearly is most sympathetic to the character Socrates’, even though he is not sympathetic to all of Socrates’ views. However, an approach to the dialogues that begins with the relation between Plato’s beliefs and Socrates’ utterances begins improperly. It overlooks the texts’ basic dialogic nature. If Plato’s aim were simply to convey his views through Socrates, then why did he not write monologues? And if he

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G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), 117. Cf. also Vlastos’ ‘grand assumption’ that ‘Plato makes Socrates say in any given dialogue whatever he—Plato—thinks at the time of writing would be the most reasonable thing for Socrates to be saying just then in expounding and defending his [i.e. Plato’s] own philosophy’ (Socratic Studies (Cambridge, 1994), 125).


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Interpreting Plato’s Early Dialogues

2. Fundamentals of Plato’s dramaturgy

A dramatic theme pervades the early dialogues, the opposition and conflict of philosophy and non-philosophy, its antithesis. The former category encompasses the love and pursuit of human excellence principally through logical argumentation. The latter encompasses much popular and traditional ethics as well as almost every Greek discursive tradition, including some that we might call ‘philosophical’, in so far as their values and methods contradict philosophy: for example, sophistry, political, forensic, and epideictic rhetoric, Athenian drama, and, in fact, most of the Greek poetic tradition.

Plato’s conception of philosophy is distinct from philosophy as this discipline is currently conceived and has otherwise been conceived. It is one, albeit seminal, form that philosophy has assumed. The distinction between Plato’s conception of philosophy and modern conceptions of philosophy is significant because the early dialogues’ critique of convention and tradition is limited to ethics of a distinct kind and to pertinent issues in the epistemology of ethics. In contrast, ordinary knowledge claims and the grounds of ordinary knowledge are taken for granted. Consequently, the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy, as Plato conceived these,

* D. Wolfsdorf, ‘Aporia in Plato’s Charmides, Laches, and Lysis’ [*Aporia*] (diss. University of Chicago, 1997), where the opposition is characterized as between ‘philosophy’ and ‘counter-philosophy’. The word ἀδιάφορος does not occur in Plato’s early dialogues, but see *Def.* 415 e. The adjective ἀδιάφορος occurs at *Phdr.* 256 b 1 and *Tim.* 73 a 6. A. Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1995), 55, also conceives of Plato’s dialogues as involving a rivalry of this kind; I have adopted her terms.
must be understood to revolve around a limited domain of philosophical topics, again, values of character and their justification.

Plato’s early dialogues present philosophy as the sole legitimate mode of personal and civic life. They demonstrate the practice of philosophy and attempt to persuade the reader of its superiority to non-philosophy. They convey this basic idea by various means, in various tones, often more comical than fanatical—although the final movement of Gorgias involves one powerful and earnest instance. Socrates’ and Callicles’ dispute concludes: ‘Let us follow this, then, and invite everyone else to this—not that to which you trust yourself and invite me, Callicles, for it is worthless’ (Gorg. 527 ε 5–7).

In promoting philosophy, the early dialogues are propaedeutic. Simultaneously, they recommend philosophy by demonstrating its practice. They portray Socrates and his interlocutors engaged in enquiries into philosophical topics that are, to a large extent, controlled by logical argumentation. These demonstrations achieve several overlapping objectives. This style of speech was relatively new, certainly not well established. Therefore, the depiction of characters employing it serves to introduce the thing itself and to distinguish it from other forms of speech. The demonstrations also orient the reader towards a philosophical life by undermining conventional and traditional ethical views and epistemological views pertaining to ethical topics, and advancing and defending alternatives. And again, the discussions demonstrate the superiority of the form of philosophical discourse to discourse ungoverned by logical argumentation.

The early dialogues’ dramatization of the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy operates in three complicit dimensions: logical, through the style of speech in which the characters engage, logical argumentation; characterological, through the portrayal of character in speech and action; and historical, through reference and allusion to historical persons and events. These three dimensions also converge on the prevailing dramatic mode of the texts, realism, for the three basic aspects of the dialogues’ realism are their historicity, characterology, and diction. The dramatic characters represent historical individuals, and the dramatic settings represent historical places. The dramatic characters are also represented in a realistic manner as saying and doing things that real people would. In particular, they are portrayed as conversing in relatively colloquial language.

Realism can be a deceptive form of dramatic presentation. Often, it is treated as a default mode. Accordingly, scholars view the dramatic style as merely instrumental to engaging the reader in the text’s substance, which begins only with the philosophical enquiry proper. Passages without philosophical argumentation are treated like vehicles that convey the reader through a hermeneutically barren landscape to sites of philosophical interest. This view oversimplifies such passages and neglects whole dimensions of the dialogues, for Plato employs character and history as well as philosophical argumentation to demonstrate the value of philosophy over non-philosophy.

The characters’ conduct as well as utterances reflect their psychological conditions, specifically, their ethical characters and values. Accordingly, willingness and eagerness to engage in logically governed argumentation indicate a philosophical disposition. For instance, in Charmides (153 A 1–D 5), upon Socrates’ return from Potidaea, those present at Taureas’ palaestra are eager to hear news of the battle, whereas Socrates quickly turns the conversation to the subject of philosophy and the education of youth. Similarly, in Protagoras (309 A 1–C 12) the anonymous companion assumes that Socrates has just come from an erotic adventure with Alcibiades, whereas Socrates explains that at Callias’ he found the wisdom of Protagoras far more compelling than Alcibiades’ beauty.

In contrast, some of Socrates’ interlocutors are unwilling to engage in discussion. For instance, Critias initially resists joining the investigation of self-control; twice Protagoras stubbornly falls into silence (Prot. 360 D 6–8); and Callicles ultimately will not continue

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1 The dialogues’ realism and historicity have so captivated some scholars that they misuse dramatic elements as evidence of historical facts. See D. Wolfsdorf, ‘The Dramatic Date of Plato’s Protagoras’, Rheinisches Museum, 140 (1997), 223–30; and, on anachronism in Charmides, Wolfsdorf, ‘Aporia’, 65–9.

2 This has been thought due to the Sicilian genre of mime. However, the evidence for this is extremely weak. See D. Wolfsdorf, ‘The Historical Reader of Plato’s Protagoras’ (‘Historical’), Classical Quarterly, 48 (1998), 126–35 at 126 n. 2.

3 Cf. Charm. 161 b 8–c 2; 162 c 1–d 6.

4 That is, at least for those few intellectually capable. On this point and Plato’s target audience see sect. 4.

5 For instance, in Protagoras and Gorgias Socrates admonishes Protagoras and Polus to refrain from making speeches and to adhere to succinct questions and answers (Prot. 335 b 5–c 7; Gorg. 461 b 2–462 A 5).

6 Compare M. Frede’s characterization in ‘Plato’s Arguments and the Dialogue Form’, in Klagge and Smith, Methods, 201–19 at 201.
the investigation (Gorg. 519 E 1–2). Such cases expose the interlocutors’ fear of humiliation and desire to safeguard their reputations. These attitudes, moreover, suggest a distinct prioritization of personal values, precisely, one according to which truth is subordinate to common opinion.

Related is the character who is willing to engage, but for the wrong reasons; his contributions aim to outdo or defeat his interlocutor rather than foster a co-operative pursuit of truth. Euridyemus and Dionysodorus’ eristic sophisms are a good example. Likewise, in Laches once Nicias supplants Laches as Socrates’ principal interlocutor, Laches becomes contentious, eager to see his military colleague refuted as he was. Similarly, Thrasymachus’ violent and abusive manner shows an appalling lack of interest in his company’s well-being. In short, the characters’ non-philosophical as well as philosophical claims manifest their values. Generally, their motives for speech or silence as well as the content of their speech play an important role in Plato’s dramaturgy.

In addition, Plato employs history to achieve his objectives. The early dialogues are set in a quasi-historical past. Precisely, historical elements populate the dialogues, but the particular configuration of the historical elements is not historically accurate. Among other things, the ubiquity of anachronism confirms this. In short, the dialogues are not intended to represent conversations that actually occurred.

Plato draws the historical elements mainly from the last thirty years of the fifth century bc. This period encompasses the first thirty years of his life, a span of Athenian history marked by the Peloponnesian war and its immediate aftermath and concluding with Socrates’ execution. Much of the history to which Plato alludes surely is lost, and so the texts’ historical dimension is elusive. But surviving historical sources facilitate appreciation of certain examples and so suggest a more general significance of Plato’s engagement of history.13

Plato treats this historical period critically and ironically. Protagoras provides one concrete demonstration. Protagoras claims that he can teach excellence in both private and public spheres, specifically, how to manage one’s household and be an effective citizen in speech and action (Prot. 318 E 5–319 A 2). The ensuing enquiry concerning the relation of the components of excellence exposes Protagoras’ ignorance of excellence and undermines his claim. However, before this enquiry begins, Plato intimates, through his choice of setting and characters, that Protagoras cannot teach excellence.14 In the dialogue, Protagoras is staying at Callias’ house. Callias came from one of the wealthiest and most esteemed Athenian families. In the course of his life, he depleted his family’s fortunes and disgraced their reputation. Callias was one of Protagoras’ principal Athenian adherents. Therefore, the dialogue’s setting at Callias’ house undermines Protagoras’ claim to teach excellence in a private capacity.

Furthermore, many of the Athenians at Callias’ were notorious for political and social misdeeds. The collection of characters in Protagoras, the largest in a Platonic dialogue, contrasts with the collection in Phaedo, the second largest. None of the nineteen characters at Callias’ is present in Socrates’ prison cell. The Phaedonic group consists of Socrates’ disciples and adherents of philosophy who have come to share last moments with a dear friend and teacher. In contrast, the Protagorean group are portrayed as adherents of sophists. Plato thereby loosely correlates their scandalous histories with the sophists’ corrupt activity. Accordingly, their presence undermines Protagoras’ claim to teach excellence in a public capacity. Early in the text Protagoras argues that the Athenians cultivate excellence; he concludes:

the Athenians think that excellence is teachable in both private and public affairs . . . in matters where the death penalty or exile awaits their children if not instructed and cultivated in excellence—and not merely death, but the confiscation of property and practically the entire subversion of their households—do they not have them taught or take the utmost care of them? (Prot. 324 C 4–325 C 4)

The histories of the individuals represented in Protagoras, many of whom suffered death, exile, or confiscation of their property, undermine Protagoras’ claim.

This example illustrates a basic ironic criticism of Athens that pervades the early writings: the Athenians lacked excellence, failed to recognize their ignorance of excellence, and failed to cultivate it. The criticism of the sophists who appear in many of these texts

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13 Such instances reflect the common Greek values of φιλοσοφία and φιλοσωφία, on which see Wolfsdorf, ‘Aporia’, passim.

correlates the corruption in Athens with sophistry. The relation is not portrayed as one of cause and effect. Rather, the Athenian upper class's reception of sophistry is characterized as symptomatic of their non-philosophical character.

Generally speaking, by setting his dialogues in this quasi-historical past, Plato engages the histories of the individuals whom the characters represent and their reputations among posterity with the portrayal of the characters in the texts' settings. The early dialogues portray Athens and a segment of Athenian society of a past generation with the hindsight of Athens' fate during this period. Plato's engagement of history dramatizes the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy because philosophy is a practical social and political enterprise. Therefore, not only the conduct of dramatic characters, but also the biographical activities of the individuals whom these characters represent serve as evidence that is evaluated in relation to the topics and problems that the texts explore.

Generally speaking, Plato's realistic portrayal of character and engagement of history is remarkably compelling. But the treatment of character and history is not fundamentally psychological or historical; it is ethical, more precisely philosophical. Accordingly, the realism Plato employs to dramatize the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy and to demonstrate the value of the former over the latter is cunning. The dialogues incorporate representative elements of philosophy and non-philosophy, including representative persons, but this incorporation involves manipulation. The realism of the dialogues conveys the impression that the portrayal of persons and their utterance is accurate. But the dramatic characters are constructions and entirely subject to their author's interests. This does not preclude aspects of the dialogues from being historically accurate. Still, the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy operates through a conquest of appropriation. Within the dialogues' dramatic worlds, the values embedded in the social and political life of Athens, its inhabitants and discursive forms, are re-evaluated and recalibrated according to the authority of philosophy.


3. Aporia and authority

The early dialogues' sweeping criticism of Athenian culture is a critique of established authority. This critique targets the conventional and traditional values of institutions and practices such as the Athenian democracy, the Thirty's violent regime, sophistry, and Attic drama. It also concerns the manner in which the values of these institutions and practices are imposed and adopted. The early dialogues emphasize that, whether one is persuading or being persuaded, conviction should result not from grounds such as force, threat, cajolery, habit, or rhetoric, but from understanding and rational argumentation.

Accordingly, when Socrates disagrees with Thrasy machus' conception of justice and Thrasy machus responds in exasperation, 'If you are not convinced by what I was saying, what more can I do for you? Should I take the argument and ram it into your soul?', Socrates suggests that Thrasy machus permit a reasoned discussion of his position (*Rep.* 1, 345 B 4–c 9). When Hippocrates rushes to his bed at the crack of dawn expecting Socrates to escort him to Callias' to become Protagoras' student, Socrates suggests that they discuss Hippocrates' intentions and understanding of the situation. When Critias suggests a particular conception of self-control and expects Socrates' agreement, Socrates responds:

Critias... you treat me as though I professed to know the things concerning which I pose questions and needed only the will to agree with you. But the fact of the matter is that I join you in enquiry each time an assertion is made because I myself am ignorant. Therefore, I want to consider first, before telling you whether I agree. (*Charm.* 165 B 5–c 2)

When Crito, anxious and dismayed, arrives at Socrates' prison cell explaining that Socrates must allow him to bribe the guard to let Socrates escape, lest Crito himself be considered negligent of his friend's welfare, Socrates suggests that they ignore common opinion and examine the arguments for a particular course of action. As Socrates says, 'I am not only now but always a man who follows nothing but the reasoning that on consideration seems best to me' (*Crito* 46 B 3–5).

A brief account of the history of the interpretation of aporia in the early dialogues can be found in Wolfsdorf, 'Aporia', 1–41.
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In short, reason should govern one’s convictions and conduct—hence, the dialogues’ persistent identification of excellence and knowledge and emphasis upon the value of knowledge for living well. Accordingly, the texts strive to demonstrate the process of giving reasons and justifying beliefs and courses of action. Notably, the discussions do not always succeed in finding compelling reasons or in reaching satisfactory conclusions; some dialogues end in aporia. Yet the dramaturgical function of aporia corresponds to this very emphasis on the rational justification of belief.

Plato’s early dialogues (arguably) encompass fourteen texts: Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Meno, Protagoras, and Republic. The philosophical discussions in the seven non-definitional dialogues concern the following topics: whether the prosecution of Socrates is just (Apology); whether it is right for Socrates to escape from prison (Crito); whether Euthydemus’ and Dionysodorus’ eristic dialectic is valuable (Euthydemus); the relative value of a life of pleasure or goodness, specifically, the identity of rhetoric, whether orators and tyrants have power and live well, and whether it is better to suffer injustice than to do it (Gorgias); whether voluntary wrongdoing is better than involuntary wrongdoing (Hippias Minor); whether Ion has knowledge (Ion); whether excellence is teachable (Protagoras).

Every definitional dialogue ends in aporia. Hippias Minor and Protagoras end in some degree of aporia. For instance, in Hippias Minor the argument compels Socrates’ conclusion that the good man voluntarily does wrong, but he finds this contrary to his intuitions and difficult to accept (H.M. 376 e 8–c 1). The other five non-definitional dialogues (Apology, Crito, Euthydemus, Gorgias, and Ion) do not end in aporia. For example, in Gorgias Socrates strongly affirms that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, although he disavows knowing this (Gorg. 508 e 7–509 b 1).

In some cases a dialogue concludes with a proposition that Plato clearly intended to advance; for instance, those in Apology, Crito, Gorgias, and Ion. However, the non-definitional dialogues’ non-aporetic conclusions do not necessarily convey positions that Plato intended to advance. Hippias Minor is the obvious example. The historical Socrates seems to have believed that nobody voluntarily does wrong and so that the good man does not voluntarily do wrong. At several points in the early dialogues Socrates makes this claim.

It is implausible to suppose that when he composed Hippias Minor Plato intended to advance the view that the good man voluntarily does wrong. Thus, it is a question why Plato composed the enquiry to conclude with a proposition that he did not intend to advance.

The aporetic conclusions in the definitional dialogues are similarly puzzling. Throughout the early writings Socrates suggests that excellence is a kind of knowledge. However, Plato did not conclude the definitional dialogues by having Socrates affirm, with whatever degree of confidence, that, whatever precisely it is, the defendant is a kind of knowledge. How are the conclusions in Hippias Minor and the definitional dialogues to be explained?

In composing the early dialogues Plato had some interest in developing and advancing arguments for (putatively) true ethical and, to a lesser extent, epistemological propositions; for instance, the conclusions of non-definitional dialogues such as Gorgias and Crito. But Plato was also concerned to convey the view that belief in a given ethical proposition should be rationally justified. Accordingly, through the dialectical enquiries that Socrates promotes, one might worry here that I am committing the intentional fallacy. I cannot see that the particular claims that follow are unreasonable, even though they attribute intentional states to Plato. In sect. 5 I offer a more restricted conception of that which Plato intended to advance in a particular dialogue as well as further justification for my attribution of particular intentional states to Plato.

In other words, Socrates’ prosecution and conviction were unjust, Socrates was right not to have tried to escape from prison, Ion lacks knowledge, and it is better to suffer injustice than to do it.

Admittedly, significant controversy surrounds the interpretation of this claim. For the most important recent contribution, with bibliography, see H. Segvic, ‘No One Errs Willingly: The Meaning of Socratic Intellectualism’, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 19 (2000), 1–43.

Of course, Lysis and Hippias Major must be understood as exempt from this comment because friendship is a relation and not a psychological state and beauty is treated as a property of inanimate entities as well as human beings.

18 Issues of chronology and, to a lesser extent, authenticity persist. For example, it is debated whether Republic 1 was written significantly earlier than the rest of Republic. I assume that it was. It is sometimes claimed that Meno 80f. does not reflect the philosophical content of the early period. This is irrelevant for my discussion. Hippas Major is occasionally regarded as inauthentic. I assume it is genuine. Some important recent contributions to these matters—with which I am not always in agreement—include C. Kahn, ‘Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?’, Classical Quarterly, NS 31 (1981), 305–20; H. Hesleff, Studies in Platonic Chronology (Helsinki, 1983); id., ‘Platonic Chronology’, Phronesis, 34 (1989), 1–26; C. Young, ‘Plato and Computer Dating’, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 12 (1994), 227–50. All are reprinted in Smith, Plato. See also D. Nails, Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy (Dordrecht, 1995).
Plato demonstrates processes of and attempts at rational justification.

In concluding *Hippias Minor* with a proposition that he probably did not intend to advance and in concluding the definitional dialogues without affirming, however tentatively, that the definiendum is a kind of knowledge, Plato drew particular attention to the character and quality of the arguments upon which the conclusions rest. As such, the aporiai in these texts compel the reader to examine the grounds of his beliefs rather than to adopt, even on Plato’s own authority, but with insufficient grounds or inadequate examination or understanding, any particular ethical proposition.

These texts’ emphasis on the examination of the grounds of ethical belief is consonant with their propaedeutic character. Tenable conclusions require understanding, which requires rational enquiry. Granted, Plato could have concluded the definitional dialogues with Socrates, however tentatively, affirming that the definiendum is a kind of knowledge, on the grounds that this is the most reasonable view developed in the discussion. Moreover, this would not have entirely undermined his interest in demonstrating the value of rationally justifying ethical belief. Plato’s concern with the rational justification of ethical belief clearly pervades all the early writings. Even in *Gorgias*, whose conclusion strongly affirms that it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it, Plato is able to convey the importance of justifying this proposition on rational grounds. Still, the decision to conclude *Hippias Minor* and the definitional dialogues absurdly or aporetically reflects a relative degree of emphasis on and preference for conveying the significance of justifying ethical belief.

This explanation of the conclusions of the definitional dialogues and *Hippias Minor* ironically suggests that it is the non-definitional dialogues’ non-aporetic, non-absurd conclusions that require explanation. Such explanations are readily available. For example, *Apology* and *Crito* constitute a distinct set. Were Socrates unable to present a compelling defence of his mission or to offer a compelling explanation of his decision to remain in prison, this would trivialize his life’s activity. In so far as Plato wished to examine whether Socrates’ activity was just or whether he should have escaped from prison, there was no question of concluding consideration of these topics in *Apology* and *Crito* aporetically.

In sum, the aporetic conclusions in some early dialogues especially demonstrate Plato’s emphasis on the process of rational enquiry and justification. In sacrificing explicit endorsement of a particular proposition, aporia serves to endorse the authority of reason.

4. Audience and a-structure

Just as distinct objectives inform individual dialogues, Plato most likely did not compose every early dialogue with precisely the same audience in mind. Still, generally speaking, Plato’s intended audience must have been mainly drawn from the Athenian leisure class. This is clear from the fact that serious pursuit of philosophy would have required means for ample leisure time. Also, many dialogues are set in locations that only the wealthy would have frequented; for example, public and private training grounds and wrestling schools: the Lyceum (*Euthydemus*), Mikkos’ palaestra (*Lysis*), Taureas’ palaestra (*Charmides*); or the homes of the rich: Callias’ (*Protagoras*) and Cephalus’ (*Republic*). Moreover, the dramatic characters are engaged in costly or distinctly upper-class activities: seeking a teacher of hoplite exercises (*Laches*), attending a private epicritic demonstration (*Gorgias, Hippias Minor*).

Given the prevalent theme of educating the youth and the role of youths, the dialogues appear to have targeted the young adults of this social class as well as its older members. Moreover, foreigners might have constituted part of the intended audience, but abundant topical allusions suggest that familiarity with Athenian social history was necessary for comprehending the texts’ historical dimensions.

22 As Hippias notes, Callias is ‘one of the most opulent houses in the city’ (Prot. 337 d 6–7).
21 Cephalus was known as the wealthiest Athenian metic. See Nails, *People*.
24 In *Apology* Socrates is on trial in part for corrupting the youth. In *Euthyphro* Socrates announces that Meletus is prosecuting him for corrupting the youth. In *Charmides* Socrates is concerned with the state of the Athenian youth. In *Laches* Lysimachus and Melesias are seeking proper education for their sons. In *Protagoras* Hippocrates is seeking education from *Protagoras*. In *Lysis* Socrates is focused on the youth Lysis and Menexenus.
25 Note that, aside from the famous itinerant teachers, the foreigners in the early dialogues are resident aliens. *Euthyphro* is an exception; *Euthyphro* is too, although Naxos, his home, was under Athenian jurisdiction.
The early dialogues were not written for philosophers. Rather, their intended audience consisted of potential adherents. This follows from the claim that the texts are propaedetic, but it is particularly evident from another common feature of the dialogues which I call 'a-structure'. a-structure fulfils a linear pedagogical function: to lead the intended audience from a conventional or traditional conception of a topic to a novel, unconventional, Socratic-Platonic39 conception of that topic. In the non-aporetic dialogues the discussions conclude by affirming the Socratic-Platonic conception. In the aporetic dialogues they advance towards such a conception without confirming it.

In fact, aporia often results from a conflict of conventional and novel views. For example, at the beginning of the investigation in Laches it is assumed that courage is part of excellence, a conventional view. At the end of the discussion courage is defined as the knowledge of good and bad. The final definition is rejected because excellence is thought to be the knowledge of good and bad, and courage and excellence are not identical. Similarly, in Lysis the traditional view of friendship based on likeness is introduced and refuted early in the discussion. By the end of the investigation, Socrates has developed a novel conception of friendship based on belonging (ανεστήρας). However, in clarifying a final description of this view, Lysis and Menexenus confusedly propose that the good is friend to the good, the bad to the bad, and the neither-good-nor-bad to the neither-good-nor-bad. This suggestion, which Socrates' novel conception of friendship does not compel, conflicts with the refutation of friendship based on likeness; thus, the investigation ends.

Other examples of a-structure include the following. Apology begins with Socrates clarifying the popular conception of himself and his guilt for impiety and corrupting the youth. It ends with his clarification and justification of his mission and his innocence. The investigation in Charmides begins with Charmides' popular conceptions of self-control as quietness and modesty and concludes with a conception of self-control as a kind of epistemic state. Crito begins with Crito's suggestion, explicitly based on appeal to common opinion, that Socrates should escape from prison. It ends with Socrates' argument for remaining in prison. Ion begins with the false assumption that, as an inspired rhapsode, Ion has knowledge; it ends with the view that he lacks knowledge and that knowledge and divine inspiration are distinct. The investigation of the relation between the components of excellence in Protagoras begins with the conventional conception that the principal components of excellence are indeed distinct and not identical to knowledge. It concludes with the unconventional conception that the putative parts of excellence are similar, if not identical, and a kind of knowledge.

a-structure pervades the early dialogues. It operates as a broad structuring principle organizing entire discussions as well as parts of these. It also operates in relation to minor aspects of the dialogues. For example, in the early dialogues where Socrates' interlocutor is an alleged expert—Gorgias, Protagoras, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Laches, Ion—the text begins by conveying an impression of that figure as wise. However, through the investigation, the figure is exposed as ignorant in so far as he fails to resolve the discussion's central problem. Similarly, Thrasymachus, Meno, and Critias are unable to offer satisfactory accounts of justice, excellence, and self-control.

Some scholars have also observed the following related characteristic of the dialogues. In texts where Socrates engages multiple interlocutors, the views of successive interlocutors are increasingly more sophisticated, unconventional, or difficult.7 For instance, Critias' views are more sophisticated than Charmides', Nicias' more unconventional than Laches', Thrasymachus' more challenging than Cephalus' or Polemarchus'. Moreover, in some cases a single interlocutor's views are more sophisticated at the end of the investigation than at the beginning. The hypothesis that the interlocutor has gained insight from the intervening discussion is not always defensible, for this condition can be extremely pronounced. For example, in Hippias Major,8 even granting the intervening discussion, it seems implausible to assume that certain of Hippias' later remarks are psychologically consistent with

39 By 'Socratic-Platonic' I mean a view identifiable with the historical Socrates or with one that Plato intended to advance as a compelling alternative to the related conventional or traditional view. In fact, occasionally these may be identical. In any event, the views Plato advances in these texts are clearly indebted to the historical Socrates.


8 Contrast Socrates' criticism, through his alter ego, of Hippias' initial definitions as simple-minded (H. Maj. 203 b 8) with Hippias' relatively sophisticated criticism of Socrates' method late in the investigation (H. Maj. 301 b 2-c 3).
his earlier ones. The operation of a-structure offers a more compelling explanation.

Generally speaking, the contrast between conventional or traditional opinions and Socratic-Platonic opinions about which the dialogues are organized according to a-structure corresponds to the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy in so far as conventional or traditional opinions represent social, political, and, broadly, established authoritative positions that Plato aimed to criticize. This is as much true of the early non-aporetic dialogues as of the aporetic ones, and it occurs with regard both to the specific propositions debated in the discussions and to the grounds of those discussions. Precisely, with respect to the latter point, the value of the rational justification of ethical belief often either implicitly or explicitly contrasts with the disvalue of the following alternative grounds of ethical belief. It is unsatisfactory to maintain given ethical positions merely because they are common or held by the majority, traditional, advanced by an allegedly wise person or expert, or because the position has been expressed in a rhetorically compelling manner. In short, the early dialogues expose as inadequate conventional and traditional views as well as the traditional or conventional grounds upon which such views are maintained.

In sum, Plato composed the early dialogues according to a-structure for propaedeutic reasons, to turn his readers from the non-philosophical to the philosophical life. More precisely, he attempted to address his intended audience in the doxastic condition in which he found them, namely, committed to conventional or traditional beliefs and modes of life. Consequently, the dialogues tend to begin with the expression or affirmation of such beliefs. In the course of the discussions, these views are scrutinized, undermined, and rejected. Meanwhile, novel, Socratic-Platonic views are introduced. The latter are often introduced as a means of criticizing the former. Thus, ideally, the reader is led through a critique of his own views; he is impressed by the problems of the grounds of his belief; and he is shown, if not superior beliefs, at least an alternative and superior manner of grounding his belief and, more generally, orienting his life.

The prevalence of a-structure and the notion that the early dialogues' target audience consisted not of adherents, but potential adherents of philosophy also relates to an important idea regarding the interrelation of the early dialogues. Although the topics treated among the texts are related and overlapping, no early dialogue demands another as a prerequisite for its comprehension. Every text has the same point of departure, common opinion. In this respect, the texts function as self-contained explorations. Contrast this with a textbook the understanding of whose successive chapters logically depends upon prior ones. Accordingly, it seems that Plato did not intend the early dialogues to be read in a particular order. Rather, each text serves as a fresh occasion to explore an ethical or epistemological topic, and, again, that exploration begins with conventional and traditional opinions. As will be seen, the notion that the early dialogues share a common doxastic baseline (as I call it) is particularly important for interpreting Socrates' utterances.

5. The uses of Socrates

The foregoing considerations provide more secure foundations upon which to understand the uses of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues and so to interpret Socrates' utterances and their relation to Plato. In so far as the texts dramatize the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy, Socrates is clearly the outstanding proponent of philosophy. In so far as the texts criticize established authority, Socrates serves to interrogate and undermine the claims of alleged experts and authority figures. This suggests that Socrates' beliefs should be identified with Plato's. However, this claim requires several qualifications.

First, it is necessary to distinguish Plato's beliefs from views that in a particular dialogue he intended to advance as compelling alternatives to related conventional and traditional views, particularly those scrutinized and rejected in the given dialogue. In a given case, the two might be identical. But Plato's views on a particular topic were probably deeper and more elaborate than those advanced in a given dialogue. The aporiai in which more than half the early dialogues end support this view. For instance, Plato surely believed that human excellence was a kind of knowledge. But no
definitional dialogue concludes with Socrates, however tentatively, affirming that the definiendum is a kind of knowledge. A similar point pertains to *Hippias Minor*’s conclusion. Plato surely did not endorse the view that the good person voluntarily does wrong. Moreover, he must have had some understanding of the problems of the argument on the basis of which Socrates and Hippias reach this conclusion.

Furthermore, in some dialogues Plato simply withholds information that, as other dialogues indicate, he thought necessary for full comprehension of the subject matter treated. For example, in *Apology* Socrates stresses the importance of pursuing ethical knowledge. However, in contrast to the definitional dialogues, he says nothing about the importance of pursuing definitions. There is no compelling reason to believe that when Plato composed *Apology* he considered definitional knowledge unnecessary for ethical knowledge. It is more plausible that his objectives in *Apology* simply did not require him to introduce that point. Likewise, in *Laches*, *Charmides*, and *Republic* 1 Plato does not indicate that the definiendum is a form (ἐδῶς), whereas in *Meno*, *Euthyphro*, and *Hippias Major* he does. Again, there is no compelling reason to believe that when Plato composed the former set of texts he did not view the definienda as forms. In the light of such considerations, it makes more sense to examine the relation between Socrates’ beliefs and those that in a given text Plato intended to endorse as compelling alternatives to the relevant conventional and traditional views, as opposed to Plato’s beliefs per se.

Granting this, not all of Socrates’ utterances should be identified with those Plato intended to advance in a given text. Consider Socrates’ outlandish interpretation of Simonides’ ode in *Protagoras*. It may be objected that in such cases one must distinguish Socrates’ utterances from his attitude towards them; like any complex personality, sometimes Socrates is insincere. For various reasons, sometimes he does not say what he believes; occasionally he is portrayed as joking, deploying *ad hominem* arguments, deliberately refuting his interlocutor, being ironic, or simply polite.

In many instances Socrates is being sincere, but still, his views should not be identified with those Plato intended to endorse. For example, when Plato intended to compose a dialogue to advance a particular ethical proposition, he tended to make Socrates advance that position (*Gorgias*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Ion*, *Protagoras*). But when Plato intended to conclude a dialogue in aporia or with a conclusion to which he was unsympathetic, he used Socrates to do that as well. Specifically, he made Socrates succumb to aporia. Yet it is doubtful that Plato was perplexed, at least not precisely as Socrates is. Most generally, Socrates’ beliefs are constrained in so far as he is a character in a fiction. He cannot foresee how his discussion will go, whereas Plato does.

Inconsistencies in Socrates’ beliefs among texts (intertextually) and within individual texts (intratextually) provide the most significant and decisive evidence that these beliefs should not always be identified with views Plato intended to advance. For example, Socrates’ view of death differs in *Apology* and *Gorgias*.

In *Protagoras* Socrates argues that holiness and justice are identical or as similar as can be; in *Gorgias* he implies that they are distinct; in *Euthyphro* he says that holiness is part of justice. In *Protagoras* Socrates argues that courage is the knowledge of what is to be feared and dared; in *Laches* he argues against this view. At the beginning of *Hippias Major* Socrates concedes to Hippias that the questions ‘What is the beautiful?’ and ‘What is beautiful?’ are equivalent. However, in *Euthyphro* and *Meno* (and later in *Hippias Major*) he emphasizes the distinction between forms and their instances. In *Gorgias* Socrates says that like is friend to like; in *Lysis* he argues against this view. The list could be extended to include some deep and controversial matters; for example, Socrates’ views on the relation of definitional knowledge to non-definitional knowledge, on that between the components of excellence, and on that of pleasure to goodness.

31 Although notably in *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates does not begin the investigation believing that excellence can be taught.


33 *Prot.* 310 D 7–320 A 2; *Gorg.* 515 B 6–516 D 3.

34 *Prot.* 330 C 1–332 A 1; *Gorg.* 507 B 1–3; *Euthph.* 12 D 5–E 2.

35 *Prot.* 360 D 4–5; *La.* 196 B 16 ff.


38 Also, on the highly controversial topic of inconsistencies among Socrates’ avowals and disavowals of knowledge, see D. Wolfsdorf, ‘Socrates’ Avoeals of Knowledge’, forthcoming in *Phronesis*, 49 (2004).
Beyond such intertextual inconsistencies are numerous intratextual inconsistencies. For example, early in *Apology* Socrates emphasizes his ignorance of the value of death. However, at the end of *Apology*, although he continues to disavow knowledge of the value of death, the outcome of the trial persuades him that death is a good thing. Thus, his conviction regarding the positive value of death shifts. At the beginning of *Protagoras* Socrates denies that excellence can be taught, but at the dialogue’s conclusion he believes it can be taught. In *Lysis* Socrates initially believes that the presence of badness in the neither-good-nor-bad is responsible for friendship. He then rejects this view and suggests that friendship could occur if badness did not exist because desire is responsible for friendship. In *Charmides* Socrates initially thinks it would be a good gift if every member of society performed only those tasks in which he is knowledgeable. Subsequently, he suggests that only the knowledge of good and bad would bring happiness to society.

The pervasive theme of opposition between philosophy and non-philosophy again provides some clarification of such inconsistencies and their prevalence. In endorsing the value of philosophy over non-philosophy Plato’s objective was not merely to replace established authority figures with Socrates. Given Plato’s critique of authority, this would be inconsistent with the spirit of philosophy itself. In fact, Socrates is generally portrayed as paradigmatically anti-authoritarian. He often proclaims himself to be a layperson in contrast to the many alleged experts he engages. He generally describes himself as speaking with the vulgar, not in a trained or rhetorically sophisticated manner. He sometimes claims to have had no teacher, and he tends to disavow ethical knowledge. In *Apology* he characterizes himself as the wisest Greek, but only in so far as he recognizes the triviality of his knowledge. He consistently denies the ability to teach, and he clearly does not teach, at least not in a conventional way, let alone dogmatize. Accordingly, Socrates is often portrayed as hesitant to assert his views, open-minded, willing to hear others’ opinions, and intent upon engaging his interlocutors in joint investigations. Socrates’ occasional shifts of opinion in the course of investigations, his development of new views on the basis of new arguments, and his capacity to admit mistakes are explainable, at least in part, in this light. Recognition of one’s epistemic limitations, willingness to admit ignorance, to subject one’s beliefs to scrutiny, and to revise these in the light of alternative explanations is consonant with and indicative of philosophy. In addition, shifts in Socrates’ views in the course of some early dialogues also demonstrate how understanding develops through the process of rational enquiry.

Occasionally Plato also makes Socrates assert conventional or traditional views that Plato did not intend to advance, irrespective of the function of α-structure. The reason for these occurrences pertains to the point, introduced earlier, concerning the texts’ doxastic baseline: each text serves as a fresh occasion to explore a given ethical or epistemological topic, and the point of departure for each exploration is common opinion. Accordingly, unconventional Socratic-Platonic views tend to emerge through the course of the discussion. Otherwise, if they were made without prior justification, the unconventionality of the view might provoke confusion in the interlocutor and, given the propaedictic function of the text, the intended reader. In that case, the author would be obliged to have Socrates explain or defend that unconventional assertion. This, of course, occurs to some extent. However, Plato cannot have Socrates asserting the unconventional Socratic-Platonic view of every concept that might arise in the course of a discussion. That would result in a full-scale exposition of Plato’s philosophical views and thus entirely transform the dialogues into treatises. Accordingly, Socrates’ assertions occasionally conform to common opinions, especially in cases where the subjects of those opinions are not the main subject of the discussion. Such common opinions are, therefore, simply employed in passages whose objective is the investigation, problematization, or advancement of some other view. An indication that Plato did not intend to advance a given Socratic assertion in such cases is the conjunction of that assertion with the following features: (1) the opinion asserted is conventional or traditional; however, it is not scrutinized or contested within the passage or text in which it is employed; (2) in another text Socrates does problematize or even refute it; (3) Socrates does not repeat the assertion in several dialogues.

Whereas the operation of α-structure often explains intratextual inconsistencies among Socrates’ assertions, the texts’ doxastic

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17 *Ap*. 29A 4–B 1; 40B 7–C 3.
19 *Lys*. 218B 8–C 2; 218C 5 ff.
20 *Charm*. 171B 6–172A 3; 172C 4–D 5.
baseline often explains intertextual inconsistencies. For example, in *Gorgias* Socrates assumes that friendship is based on likeness. The assumption is employed, for convenience, to advance a different point, namely, that in befriending a tyrant one corrupts one’s soul. The argument begins with the assumption that in order to avoid suffering harm one must either be a ruler in one’s own city or else a supporter of the government (*Gorg. 510a 6–10*). Socrates then suggests that because friendship is based on likeness, to befriend a tyrant one must make oneself like a tyrant and thereby corrupt one’s soul.

In *Gorgias* Socrates does not problematize the nature of friendship. In *Lysis* Socrates does; this is the central topic of the text. Furthermore, Socrates’ view of friendship in *Gorgias* is traditional, based on received wisdom, whereas early in the investigation in *Lysis* he argues against the view of friendship based on likeness. In contrast, the view of friendship based on belonging—towards which the investigation develops—is unconventional. Furthermore, the argument in *Gorgias* is *ad hominem* or *ad hoc* in that Plato did not intend to endorse the view that in order to avoid suffering harm one must either be a ruler or a supporter of the government. Rather, evidence from *Gorgias* and other dialogues such as *Apology* suggests that Plato intended to advance the view that the conventional conception of harm is unsatisfactory and, accordingly, that a good person can suffer none. These considerations support the view that neither in *Lysis* nor in *Gorgias* did Plato intend to advance the view that friendship is based on likeness—even though in *Gorgias* Socrates assumes that it is.

Another example is Socrates’ claim in *Euthyphro* that holiness is part of justice. In *Euthyphro* Socrates problematizes the nature of holiness. However, he does not problematize the relation of the putative components of excellence. He does not argue that holiness is part of justice, but simply asserts it. In *Protagoras* Socrates does problematize the relation of the putative components of excellence; this topic is central to the discussion. Moreover, he argues for the unconventional view that holiness and justice are identical or at least as similar as can be. Furthermore, evidence from other early dialogues such as *Charmides* and *Laches* suggests that Plato intended to advance the view that the components of excellence are identical or at least more closely related than in the conventional conception *Protagoras* expresses. In *Euthyphro* Socrates’ view of the relation of holiness and justice is commonsensical, at least within the legalistic context of the dialogue. Socrates and Euthyphro are engaged in cases concerning impiety. In so far as matters of justice are conceived as coextensive with matters of positive law, matters of holiness clearly do form a subset of judicial matters. In short, there is good reason to believe that Plato did not intend to endorse the view that holiness is part of justice, even though in *Euthyphro* Socrates says it is.

In sum, Plato sometimes conveniently put conventional, traditional, or commonsensical views into Socrates’ mouth, but without intending to advance those views. Of course, Socrates occasionally also asserts conventional or traditional views that Plato did intend to advance, e.g. the view that the components of excellence are good and beautiful. But in this case it is clear for the following reasons that Plato intended to advance that view. First, Socrates never objects to it. Second, Socrates repeats the view in several dialogues. Third, in *Republic* 1, when Thrasymachus suggests that justice is not a component of excellence and so neither good nor beautiful, Socrates is shocked and forcefully argues against him. In short, it is necessary to evaluate Socrates’ conventional or traditional assertions in the light of their functions within the dialogues in which they occur. In particular, this involves the recognition that the early dialogues share a particular doxastic baseline.

The foregoing considerations about Plato’s uses of Socrates, and the general conclusion that Plato uses Socrates in various ways to achieve various objectives and that these uses can result in inconsistencies and even psychological implausibilities, provoke a deeper question about the character Socrates in the early dialogues. To what extent should interpreters treat the main characters in the early dialogues as a single character with a transtextual identity?

Consider Socrates’ intertextual and intratextual inconsistencies. One may be inclined to wonder why—despite a long history of experience in philosophical discussions—Socrates has not come to stable, if not certain, views on the ethical topics he examines; or, why Socrates continues to express some naive conventional or traditional beliefs; or again, why, if in one dialogue Socrates advances a given proposition, in another dialogue he asserts a contrary or adjusted view.

The basic and general solution to such particular difficulties requires relinquishing the view that the Socrates of a given early
dialogue is in a strong sense identical to the Socrates of another early dialogue. Instead, it is more reasonable to adopt the following weaker view. Plato had his reasons for creating a main character named ‘Socrates’ to serve as the philosophical protagonist in his early dialogues. These reasons clearly include debt and tribute to the historical Socrates. Still, Plato did not feel so bound to the historical Socrates that the Socrates in any one dialogue had to be strictly identifiable with the historical Socrates, and that, as a result, Socrates in one early dialogue had to be strictly identifiable with Socrates in another early dialogue.

Clearly, a general body of commitments governs Plato’s depiction of Socrates in every early dialogue. Socrates is not merely a vague stock character, the philosophical type. But again, Plato felt free to manipulate Socrates in various ways to achieve various ends. Any interpretative project that aims to determine what Plato intended to advance in his early dialogues or in any given early dialogue must acknowledge and respect this fact. The attempt to assemble all of Socrates’ utterances on a given topic and to distil from these a consistent conception of that topic may succeed in certain cases, but as a general interpretative principle it is naive. It ignores the dramaturgy and dramatic dimensions that distinguish Plato’s literary-philosophical texts.

In place of the mouthpiece principle I offer the qualified conception of Socrates as Plato’s favoured character. Socrates is the character to whom, of all dramatic characters, Plato is most sympathetic. Accordingly, Socrates often expresses or develops views Plato intended to advance. Socrates is the philosopher in texts that dramatize the opposition of philosophy and non-philosophy and argue for the superiority of the former to the latter. Yet Plato did not intend to endorse all the views Socrates asserts. The central reasons for this qualification have been described above. Moreover, I regard them as quite comprehensive. Granted, it would be naive to assume that one could specify an exhaustive set of criteria for determining whether or not, in each case, Plato intended to advance a given Socratic assertion. The interpreter is bound to consider cases on an individual basis. Yet, as a general principle,

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IN Meno 97 ff. Plato, for the first time, explains how, in his view, knowledge differs from true belief; he also notes some similarities between them. This is often thought to be the first passage in Western philosophy to say that knowledge is true belief plus something. Some commentators think it is also the first passage to say that knowledge is justified true belief: that is, that justification is what must be added to true belief so as to yield knowledge. However, both the view that the Meno says that knowledge is justified

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1 The (probably earlier) Gorgias explicitly distinguishes knowledge (both επιστήμη and σιδέρα are used) from belief (μόρια), but not from true belief; see 454 c 7–9. Cf. Chrm. 168 a. Meno 85 e–g (which I discuss below) makes it clear that he thinks knowledge differs from true belief. But it is not until 97 a ff. that he says how they differ. Plato speaks interchangeably of true (δύνατον) and of correct (ἀπόφημα) δόξα; contrast e.g. 97 b 1 with 97 b 9. I use 'belief' to translate δόξα; others sometimes use 'opinion' or 'judgement'. 96 e–100 c uses various forms of γνώσει, επιστήμῃ, σιδέρᾳ, δόξᾳ, φιλόσοφῳ, and νοημα. So far as I can see, Plato uses them all interchangeably here (though he does not always do so elsewhere). I render them all by 'know'.

2 D. Armstrong, for example, says that this is the 'first recorded occurrence' of the claim that knowledge is justified true belief (Belief, Truth and Knowledge (Cambridge, 1973), 137. I assume he has 97–8 in mind, but it is misdated as 87–8). E. Gettier says that 'Plato seems to consider some such definition at Theaetetus 201 and perhaps accepts one at Meno 98' (Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?, Analysis, 23 (1963), 121–3 at 121). Cf. D. Bostock, Plato's Theaetetus (Oxford, 1988), 203; M. Williams, Problems of Knowledge (Oxford, 2001), 21; P. Moser, Knowledge and Evidence (Cambridge, 1989), 232; J. Rosenberg, Thinking about Knowing (Oxford, 2002), 132.