In his wide-ranging and interesting paper, Ken Sayre advances claims both about Plato's views on philosophical method and about the proper method of reading Plato. In fact, his paper contains three distinct kinds of claims. First, it advances specific interpretive claims about several particular Platonic dialogues. Second, it offers a developmental thesis about the evolution of Plato's views across different dialogues. Finally, it recommends a general way of reading Plato. In these comments, I will focus primarily on the latter two kinds of claims. Let me preface my remarks by saying that I greatly enjoyed this paper, and that, where I disagree with Sayre, I do so in the spirit of constructive engagement, and with gratitude to him for providing us with a paper that, I have no doubt, will provoke much discussion from this audience.

In his paper, Sayre discusses no less than eight different Platonic dialogues: the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman* and *Parmenides*. Although many of his claims about these particular dialogues are interesting in their own right, I want to focus here primarily on the general thesis about Plato's philosophical development they are meant to support. This thesis, as I understand it, runs roughly as follows. Plato's dialogues depict two distinct methods of doing philosophy, both of which are sometimes called 'dialectic'. First, there is the method of hypothesis, which features in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus*. Second, there is the method of collection and division, which features in the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*. Plato develops each of these methods across several different dialogues, progressively revising each method and probing its weaknesses. Finally, these two methods are combined in the second part of the *Parmenides*. There, a philosophical method is presented that is superior to any
that has appeared in Plato before, since it does a better job of specifying both necessary and sufficient conditions for an adequate discursive definition. The method presented in the second part of the Parmenides therefore represents ‘a suitable ending to Plato’s long search for an optimal method of dialectical inquiry’ (p.88).

My first question concerns Sayre’s understanding of the nature of the method of hypothesis, and of its relationship to the Socratic elenchus. His official position is that the method of hypothesis is an ‘outgrowth’ of the Socratic elenchus (p.82). The two methods are similar, on his view, because both involve testing a hypothesis for consistency by testing its consequences for consistency: if its consequences are consistent, it remains a candidate for truth. The main difference between them, so far as I can tell from the paper, is that for the Socratic elenchus the hypothesis to be tested is supplied by someone else, whereas in the method of hypothesis one can supply one’s own hypotheses. Presenting these two methods as this close together allows Sayre to claim, as he does, that the Theaetetus contains an application of the method of hypothesis. However, this claim about the Theaetetus might strike us as surprising, since, at least on its face, this dialogue appears to present an instance of the Socratic elenchus, not of the method of hypothesis. Why is it important for Sayre that the Theaetetus depicts an application of the method of hypothesis, this provides a way for him to do this; for in the Theaetetus Socrates fails to reach a satisfactory discursive definition of knowledge (epistêmê), which might be thought to reflect the failure of the method of conducting a philosophical inquiry he deploys. However, if the Theaetetus does not depict the method of hypothesis, no such conclusion can be drawn on its basis. My first question, then, for Sayre is this: how does he understand the nature of the method of hypothesis, such that the Theaetetus, but not, say, the Euthyphro, counts as an application of it, rather than of the Socratic elenchus?

My second question concerns Sayre’s views on the relationship between the method of hypothesis and the method of collection and division. Sayre often suggests that he regards the two methods as alternative and competing ways of reaching the same goal: namely, the goal of providing adequate discursive definitions. For instance, he begins his paper by arguing that the Republic contains subtle allusions to the method of collection and division along-side its explicit discussions of the method of hypothesis, and describes this state of affairs as ‘puzzling’ (p.82). Why would this be puzzling? Sayre explains by providing disjunctive lists of the dialogues in which each method appears, and by claiming that in the Republic alone the methods ‘somehow come together’ (p.82). Perhaps he is inferring from the fact that the two methods generally feature in different works that at any given time Plato always preferred one to the other. However, we might desire a stronger and more explicit argument that Plato regarded
the methods of hypothesis and of collection and division as competing alternatives. This is because there is another possibility, namely that Plato regarded the two methods as in some way complementary, perhaps because they serve subtly different goals. For example, one might argue that the method of hypothesis is introduced in response to a specific problem – the problem of how to make progress in a philosophical inquiry in the absence of certain and secure starting points – whereas collection and division is introduced to show how one might pursue adequate discursive definitions systematically. In support of this, one might observe that in those contexts where the method of hypothesis is explicitly introduced (e.g. in the *Meno* or *Phaedo*), the goal is generally not to arrive at a discursive definition at all. Indeed, I might add, if both methods do appear in the *Republic*, this might seem to lend support to the view that Plato actually viewed them as compatible and complementary, not as directly competing. So, my second question for Sayre is this: does he think Plato regarded hypothesis and collection and division as competing alternative methods for conducting philosophical inquiry, such that one must always prefer one to the exclusion of the other? Or does he think Plato might have viewed them as compatible and complementary methods? If he favours the former view, on which they directly compete, why does he do so?

This brings me to my third set of questions, which concern Sayre’s understanding of Plato’s goals in writing the dialogues in question. Sayre often speaks of a Platonic dialogue ‘revealing’ or ‘demonstrating’ the weaknesses of a particular philosophical method. However, it is not always clear whether he thinks we should envisage Plato as himself already aware of these weaknesses when writing these works. Let us grant for the sake of argument that many dialogues clearly display flaws or weaknesses in the philosophical methods they employ or discuss. Should we imagine Plato applying the method in question to the best of his ability at the time of writing each dialogue, then, perhaps only later, noticing its limitations? I submit that this would be a strange and unlikely way to read a dialogue such as the *Theaetetus*. Or should we rather envisage Plato as fully aware of these weaknesses before writing the work in question, and then proceeding with the deliberate intention of *highlighting* them, perhaps for pedagogical purposes? But if this later way of understanding Plato’s goals remains an open possibility, it seems we cannot straightforwardly base a narrative about the development of Plato’s thought on differences in the philosophical methods depicted in different Platonic dialogues, or from any flaws in the depicted methods that appear.

I turn now from Plato’s views on philosophical method to the method of reading Plato that Sayre’s paper is meant to both exemplify and recommend. Sayre describes his preferred method of reading Plato as follows: ‘First collect together all the dialogues that deal explicitly with the topic in which you are interested [...] then sift through relevant passages in these dialogues with a sharp eye for differences from case to case, dividing them into groups with obvious affinities. This can (but need not) be done without concern for chronological order. Then set about constructing a coherent narrative connecting these passages in a plausible sequence of development’ (p.88). In the present case, he claims, it is ‘obvious’ that ‘collection in the *Sophist* has been replaced by paradigms in the *Statesman,*’ and that “the treatment of hypotheses in the *Theaetetus* preceded that in the *Parmenides*’. Finally, Sayre acknowledges that one’s antecedent views on chronology will come into play, but
suggests that they will be open to adjustment if
the narrative so demands (p.88).

In keeping with the general theme of this
conference, I want to conclude my remarks by
raising two concerns about this general method
of reading Plato. The first concerns its efficacy.
My basic worry here is that Sayre may be too
optimistic about the degree to which his recom-
mended method will typically (or ever) prove
sufficient to determine a single narrative, or to
dictate that the passages in question be placed in
a certain order. Here, it seems to me, we should
be wary of our tendency to find immediately
compelling any account that ties disparate ele-
ments together into a coherent narrative. We
should also surely be mindful of our tendency
to favour evidence that supports what we already
believe. As a check against these tendencies, we
might always ask ourselves: could a different
story be told to tie together these very same pas-
sages? Could other passages be brought into play
to complicate the story that has just been told?
Might a difference between two passages reflect
a change of emphasis, context, or intent, rather
than a change of mind on Plato’s part? These
are precisely the kinds of questions I have tried
to raise here. My aim in doing so is not to deny
that the textual evidence Sayre cites can support
his particular developmental story, but rather to
ask whether it supports this story uniquely, or
could equally well be interpreted in other ways.

My second, related worry begins with Sayre’s
remarks about methods of reading Plato other
than his own. Sayre seems to have in mind two
main kinds of opponents: unitarians (whom he
provocatively describes as the ‘climate-change
deniers’ of Platonic studies, p.88) and interpreters
who insist that we should regard every Platonic
dialogue as strictly self-contained. Now, I am
inclined to agree with Sayre that reading Plato
as someone who wrestled with hard problems
throughout his life, and who sometimes revised
his views in light of these reflections, is not only
more plausible than regarding him as a god-like
figure who fully worked out all his ideas even be-
fore he first started to write, but also makes him
a more interesting philosopher. My goal is not
to question developmentalism as such. However,
there is more than one way to be a developmen-
talist. Many scholars of Plato compare themati-
cally related passages from different works, while
remaining open to the possibility that Plato may
have changed his mind as his career progressed. I
take this to be a familiar and relatively orthodox
ting to do when reading Plato. However, as I
understand him, Sayre recommends something
more specific than this. That is, he recommends
gathering together several thematically related
passages from disparate works, and then com-
paring them based primarily on linguistic al-
lusions and the like, with the expectation that
they alone will determine a single narrative and
relative order of composition. My worry with this
approach is that, to the extent it is novel, it is so
in the degree to which it recommends excerpt-
ing brief passages from different dialogues and
comparing them with each other, in isolation
from the full dialogues in which they originally
appeared. This approach risks leaving us more
open than we otherwise would be to the psycho-
logical tendencies towards narrative construc-
tion and confirmation bias I have mentioned. At
the same time, it may lead us to neglect complex
and important questions about what Plato (or
one of his characters) is actually trying to do in
a particular part of a particular dialogue.

In conclusion, I want to thank Professor
Sayre once again for contributing such a bold
and thought-provoking paper to this event. I
look forward to the lively and interesting dis-
cussion I have no doubt it will provoke.