

The Use and Meaning of the Past in Plato¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay is based on two premises. The first concerns the vision of writing proposed by Plato in *Phaedrus* and especially the conception of philosophical writing as a maieutic game.

The structurally polyvalent way in which Plato approaches philosophical issues also emerges in the dialogues. The second concerns the birth and the development of historical analysis in parallel with the birth of philosophy.

On this basis the text investigates a series of data about the relationship between Plato and “the facts”.

1) If we compare the *Apology of Socrates* with other sources, we discover a series of important “games” that Plato performs to achieve the results he proposes.

2) The famous passage of *Phd.* 96A-102A, which concludes with the Ideas and with a reference to the Principles, expresses definite

judgments on the Presocratics.

3) In his works Plato attributes to the sophists some merits, even if the outcome of their contribution is overall negative.

4) However, in the fourth complicated diairesis of the *Sophist*, there is a “sophist of noble stock”, an educator who can only be Socrates.

5) Plato in the *Sophist* shows the weakness of the Gigantomachy, and proposes an adequate definition of the beings: the power of undergoing or acting. This reveals, before the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus*, the dynamic and dialectical nature of his philosophy

In summary, a multifocal vision emerges, adapted to an intrinsically complex reality.

Keywords: Past, Plato, Presocratic, diairesis, Gigantomachy, multifocal approach.

1. PREMISE. HOW PLATO WRITES

In this short article I cannot adequately address the central question of “how Plato writes”.²

1.1. PHAEDRUS

It is worth recalling how in the *Phaedrus* Plato, that is a good teacher, clarifies the problem of communication. In the first place, he avoids a simplistic and one-sided view of the issue. The text 1) repeatedly states that Socrates loves both written and oral speeches;³ 2) highlights the importance of the written word, which enabled the birth of rhetoric, because to develop rules it is necessary to have something stable and analyzable, and this is only possible with a written text.⁴ Moreover, Socrates claims to have learned things (235C3) from the ancient poets: he has heard the voice of the ancients by reading their texts.

Plato also explains what characteristics that are necessary for a good speech: 1) to know the truth about the topic; 2) not to despise the “formal” elements elaborated by rhetoricians⁵; c) to know the nature of the soul one is addressing, so as to make a simple speech to a simple soul and a complex one to a complex soul (277B-C). Then Socrates focuses on the problem of “writing”:

It remains only to deal with whether it is opportune to write or not, under what conditions it is beautiful, and under what conditions it is not appropriate (274B 6-7).

The issue is addressed on the basis of a myth (274C ff.). The Egyptian god Theuth has invented writing and praises it as an aid to wisdom and memory for all men, but the Pharaoh takes the contrary view and illustrates the limitations

of this medium. Writing does not strengthen but weakens memory, because people, trusting in the written text, will no longer exercise their memory. Besides, writing does not offer true knowledge, which results from a personal discovery, but only a semblance of it (275A; 276C). Therefore, readers, having a lot of information but no “teaching” (ἀνευ διδαχῆς, 275A7), will believe to be learned men, when in fact they know nothing.

Worse still, by its very nature writing has serious limitations: 1) it seems alive but it is not; 2) it is unable to answer any questions and it always repeats the same statement; 3) it does not know how to defend itself, but it always needs its author (275D-E; 276C); 4) it “rolls” into the hands of anyone, whether he be worthy or unworthy. In conclusion, only a naive person can think of transmitting or receiving some stable knowledge through written words (275C; 277D). This seems like a condemnation, but it is not. Indeed, Socrates adds that there is another speech, a “legitimate brother” of the written one, namely oral discourse, which is better and more powerful (276A). It is

the speech of they who know, a living and animated speech of which the one written can be said, with good reason, to be an image (εἰδωλον) (276A8-9).

There is a peculiar relationship of connection and opposition at work here. We have to accept the weakness of the written word without turning it into a condemnation: it is a more fragile brother that should be taken care of. For this reason, Plato repeatedly makes it clear that one must not put “the most valuable things” down in writing.

To sum up, the philosopher is convinced that communicative weakness is accentuated in the written word. But Plato is also convinced

of the importance of this new tool, and tries to address the problem: his solution is the invention of the “written game”. In short, philosophy must not write the “things of greater value”, but must rather provoke the reader with allusions, omissions, problems and other inventions, in order to force him to “practice” – and not merely to learn – philosophy. In his written words, Plato tries to preserve the Socrates’ educational approach, i.e. maieutics. This choice leads him to define this activity as a “game”: The one, who has knowledge of the just, the beautiful and the good, will be wise:

He does not write seriously (σπουδῆ) [his thoughts] with black water, sowing this knowledge using a straw, with speeches that cannot defend themselves discursively and which cannot properly teach the truth (τᾶληθῆ διδάξαι)... But he, it seems, will sow them in the gardens of writing and he will write, when he writes, *as a game* (παιδιᾶς) (276C7-D2).

All texts are only games, yet not futile games, but very useful ones (276E). Plato even says that some fine games can be so important that a person can dedicate his life to them (276D). It is unlikely that here he was not thinking of himself, as he had already written many dialogues.

The writing game becomes the philosopher’s defining characteristic, insofar as he is

one who thinks that in a written discourse on any subject there is necessarily a large part of game (παιδιάν) and that no discourse worth of great seriousness (σπουδῆς) has ever been written in verse or prose (277 E 5-8).

Therefore, the defining characteristics of the “philosopher who writes” consist not only

in knowledge of the truth, but also and above all in the capacity to demonstrate its weakness *orally*. So what is the difference between a philosopher who writes about mathematics or politics, and the mathematician or the politician who writes apparently similar things? If any one

has composed these works knowing the truth and being able to come to their aid when he is challenged about the things he wrote, and if, by *speaking*, he is able to demonstrate the *weakness* of the writing, he must not be called by a name derived from those [the themes that he addresses], but by what he is dedicated to ... To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems excessive and proper only for a deity, but a lover of wisdom [philosopher] or something similar, would be more appropriate for him and more moderate (278C4-D6).

1.2. THE SEVENTH LETTER

This statement is confirmed in the *Seventh Letter*:

Therefore, every serious man must not write serious things so as not to expose them to aversion and to the inability of being understood by men. In short, we must logically recognize that, whenever we see someone who has written works, whether laws made by a legislator or writings about some other subject, those works were not for him the most serious things, if he is really serious, because the serious things remain placed in his most beautiful part [the soul]. If he has put something in writing, taking them as serious things, “then certainly”

not the gods, but men “have taken his wits away” [Homer, *Iliad*, VIII, 360; XII, 234] (344C1-D2).

The Author explains why he has never put his philosophy down in writing:

In fact, this knowledge is not at all communicable like other sciences, but, after much discussion on these issues, and after a life in communion, instantly, like a light flashing from a crackling fire, it is born in the soul itself and soon it feeds from itself (341C5-D2).

Plato says that the philosophy, unlike other sciences, is not learned by direct lessons, but should be practised together in a Socratic manner, because it lives through discussions. It is a personal work, i.e. a discovery that, even with the guidance of a “teacher”, a man makes by reflecting on the aporias that reality and/or discussions put in front of him. Therefore, it may be useful to write about philosophy only for the few who can make good use of the indications to conduct their research:

But I do not believe that the communication of the arguments on these issues would be of any benefit to men, except to a few, i.e., to those who are capable of finding solutions by themselves on the basis of a few indications. Instead some of the other men would be filled with an improper contempt, absolutely not convenient, and others with exaggerated and vain confidence, as if they had learned wonderful things (341E1-342A1).

For this reason, Plato writes about philosophy, yet does not expose all his thoughts, as he states with a particularly explicit sentence:

There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one (οὐκ οὐκ εἰμί γε περὶ αὐτῶν ἔστιν σύγγραμμα οὐδὲ μήποτε γένηται, 341C4-5).

1.3. TWO FINAL REMARKS

In brief, a philosopher is someone who writes about different issues 1) negatively, by always having more valuable things by which to support the weak statements he lays down in writing; 2) positively, by offering stimuli, problems, indications and allusions – in other words, “games” – that may lead the reader to reflect and to “practise philosophy”.

“This Socratic educational setting (the gradual proposal of problems with an increasingly difficulty) involves a peculiar “protreptic” attitude⁶: Plato builds a sequence of texts that are more and more complex and difficult. This is exactly the succession of the dialogues that we find in the reconstruction based on the “stylometric” method.⁷ This analysis makes it possible to classify the texts into different sets⁸. We thus get the following sequence: 1) many simple texts (for “young readers”) that introduce a series of often unsolved problems; 2) some very fine dialogues, based on the Ideas, that address many important themes; 3) the difficult and technical dialogues, which allow us to clarify in what sense Platonic philosophy is “dialectic”; 4) the final texts, which allude to some fundamental metaphysical and cosmological themes.

To this we should add an additional element. Plato conceives reality as an orderly disorder, which is to say “one-many complex system”, as in system theories. This reality must be grasped from different points of view, of unequal value. Fortunately we can quote Platonic texts

that illustrate this attitude. For example, in the *Laws*, a human being should

live the life according that nature whereby we are mostly puppets that participate of the truth to a small degree (804B2-4).

But Plato also says that

truth is the most important good, for both Gods and men; anyone who intends to be blessed and happy can be its partner from the start, so as to live as much of his life as possible in truth (730C1-4).

On the one hand we participate of the truth to a small degree; on the other hand, we can, and/or must, live as much of our life in the truth as possible.

Moreover, the description of humans as puppets unsettles the listeners, leading to an immediate explanation:

Nay, Megillus, be not amazed, but forgive me. I spoke looking at the divinity and suffering its influence. So, if you like, let's take it that our human race is not worthless, but worthy of some consideration (804B7-C1).

A judgement can be expressed from the divine or the human point of view, and the outcomes are obviously different. This is a clear example of what we call the multifocal approach, which Plato continuously resorts to in all fields.

2. SOME “ENVIRONMENTAL” FACTORS

At this point, it is necessary to define Plato's position in relation to some relevant features of the society in which he was operating.

2.1. THE BIRTH OF THE SENSE OF “HISTORY”

In parallel to philosophy, and as the outcome of the same critical attitude, Greece witnessed the emergence of what later came to be described as “historiography”⁹. An intimation of this is to be found in the *Genealogies* by Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550-476 BC)¹⁰. However, the real “father of history” is Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 484-425 BC): he does not uncritically accept the mythical tales and strives to base his own narrative on what he has personally learned.¹¹ A further step is provided by Thucydides (c. 460-395 BC, i.e. a contemporary of Socrates'), who apparently wishes to set his own work in contrast to that of his predecessors: he recounts facts not by *gathering information from just anyone*, nor on the basis of *how things seem to him* (I, 22). Especially, he sets his own work in contrast to the poetic tradition, which is more interested in aesthetic effects than in facts.

2.2. PLATO AND “FACTS”

The young Plato, who had grown up in this milieu, must have faced the problem of the “objective and verified narration” of facts. However, he was not a historian, but rather a great philosopher and a great writer.

Take the *Apology of Socrates*. The topic is a dangerous one: Plato could not lie about a State trial; moreover, many witnesses were still alive at the time, and any refutation would have discredited his attempt to defend Socrates; finally, he informs us that he was present at the facts he is recounting, and so he suggests that he is not lying¹². However, the text does not at all state the pure and simple truth. Take the accusation:

The affidavit in the case – which is still preserved, says Favorinus, in the *Me-tron* – ran as follows: “This indictment and affidavit is sworn by Meletus, son of Meletus of Pitthos, against Socrates, son of Sophroniscus of Alopece: Socrates is guilty of refusing to recognise the gods recognised by the State, and of introducing other new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death” (Diogenes Laertius, II, 40, 1-7).

Xenophon (*Mem.*, I, 1, 2–5; *Ap.*, 10–11) states the same thing: the main charge is a “religious” one, while the charge of corrupting the youth is, in a way, *consequent* upon it. In Plato the charges are the same, but the order is inverted. Socrates himself points out that he is not quoting the exact words of the accusers’ statement:

It states *more or less* (ἔχει δὲ πῶς ὧδε): “Socrates is guilty because he corrupts the youth and does not believe in the gods the city believes in, but in other new gods” (24B8-C1).

However, Plato shows that he is aware of how the charge was formulated:

But nevertheless, tell us, how do you say, Meletus, that I corrupt the youth? Or is it evident, according to the indictment you brought, that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods the city believes in, but in other new gods? Do you not say that it is by teaching this that I corrupt them? (26B2–6; cf. 23D1–7)

Plato repeats the same game in *Eutphr.*, 3A-B: *first* Socrates recalls the charge of cor-

rupting the youth (2C); *then* Euthyphro asks him how he does so, according to Meletus; *at this point*, Socrates recalls that he is being accused of inventing new gods and scorning the old ones, and that *this* is the charge brought against him (3A-B).

Plato does not lie but by inverting the factors at play, he makes education (and the contrast between different ways of life, which enables him to present the figure of the “philosopher”, as we shall see) the main theme on which to focus, as opposed to the theme of Socrates’ relationship with the gods, with regard to which the author wants to propose a much more elaborate reflection (that of the *Euthyphro*). This was made possible through the game of inverting the data of the accusation.

This explanation of mine may be refuted, but the game of inverting the accusation cannot be ignored and must be accounted for.

But let’s move on to another element: the payment of the fine.

A person on trial could suggest, after receiving his sentence, an alternative punishment to the one proposed by the accusers. In Diogenes Laertius, II, 42, Socrates first suggested a penalty of 25 drachmas; then, when this caused uproar among the judges, he claimed that he deserved to be maintained at the Prythaneum at public expense; as a consequence, the judges became annoyed and 360 votes against 140 were cast in favour of a death sentence. We should not overestimate the reliability of this source, but the narrative – at least in its general outline – is a logical and consistent one.

The same is not true of Plato’s narrative (*Ap.* 35E-36A), which states the same things, but then reverses the sequence, making it less logical and – most importantly – less consistent. The philosopher asks what would be best for him, and most just: as he has devoted his whole life to the good of his fellow citizens, he

deserves to receive free meals from the city more than any Olympic victor. In attempt to clarify his point of view, he repeatedly states:

I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged anyone; but I cannot convince you of this (37A5–6).

Since, then, I am convinced that I never wronged anyone, I am certainly not going to wrong myself, and to say of myself that I deserve anything bad, and to propose any penalty of that sort for myself (37B2–5).

Shall I choose one of those things which I know to be evils? (37B7–8).

I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any punishment (38A8–B1).

The philosopher's position is clear: he cannot suggest an alternative punishment, because it would mean committing an injustice against himself. However, immediately afterwards he contradicts himself:

If I had money, I would have proposed a fine, as large as I could pay; for that would have done me no harm. But as it is—I have no money, unless you are willing to impose a fine which I could pay. I might perhaps pay a mina of silver. So I propose that penalty; but, o men of Athens, Plato here and Crito and Critobulus, and Aristobulus tell me to propose a fine of thirty minae, and they will stand as guarantors. So I propose a fine of that amount (38B1–8).

This is the very cause of the uproar among the judges.

There are good reasons to trust Diogenes. But what is most relevant is the fact that, by “inverting” the sequence of events, Plato 1) does

not have Socrates speak as a reaction to the judges' outcries, but out of principle; 2) further idealizes the figure of his teacher. However, in doing so Plato runs into a contradiction: Socrates had stated that he did not wish to commit any wrongdoing against himself, which is what he ultimately does.

In conclusion, Plato does not lie, but recounts the facts in such a way as to reorganize them to suit his purposes. The remarkable thing is that he can do so because, being a magician like all artists, he almost invariably succeeds in “getting away with it”.

2.3. PLATO AND THE PREVIOUS PHILOSOPHY

Let's take a look at the famous passage (*Phd.* 96A–102A), in which Socrates reconstructs the genesis of *his* philosophy. As the culmination of this process is constituted by the Ideas and by a reference to the Principles, it is evident that in outlining the evolution of Socrates, Plato is presenting his own thought as the outcome of Socratic philosophy.

Plato (*first passage*) sets out from the “investigation of nature” (96A), or more precisely from the desire to

know the causes (τὰς αἰτίας) of each thing, i.e. by what (διὰ τί) each reality [1] is generated, [2] by what (διὰ τί) it is destroyed and [3] by what (διὰ τί) it exists (96A9–10),

in brief, to know the causes of being and becoming¹³. Immediately afterwards, Plato notes that a solution internal to this physical material sphere does not withstand logical analysis and seems inadequate to identify the cause sought for.

The *second passage* is constituted by Anaxagoras' suggestion: a higher entity, the Intelligence, orders and causes the cosmos (97C). The text emphasises the causal value of this ordering Intelligence (97C2; 97C4; 97C6) and, on the basis of this, the possibility of

finding the cause of each thing, i.e. in what way (ὅπη) each reality is generated or is destroyed or exists (97C6–7).

Plato repeats here the same sentence used for physical enquiry, with one significant change: we have one single cause and not many.

The fact that this cause, the divine *Nous*, is an Intelligence allows us to posit the problem of the way in which generation, corruption and existence take place. Plato notes, both before and after the text just quoted, that the *Nous* must arrange each reality as well as possible (ὅπη ἂν βέλτιστα ἔχη, 97C5–6; ὅπη βέλτιστον, 97C8). If the *Nous* is an intelligent cause, it operates in view of an aim and not in a mechanistic way. It must seek to accomplish what is best; this implies knowledge of the Good, without which it is impossible to speak of “the best”.

Anaxagoras, however, does not speak of the Good and does not bring the *Nous* into play as the ordering cause of the world, but rather only brings the material co-causes into play. This is like saying that Socrates acts intelligently and then pointing to his skeletal and muscular frame as the cause of his actions.

In brief: natural philosophers denote the cause, but fail to grasp the real cause, distinguishing it from the co-cause without which the cause cannot operate. Their error consists in thinking that one acts 1) because of some things, which at most are co-causes; 2) with intelligence yet not in view of the best, i.e. for the sake of the Good (99A-B).

Third passage: “Socrates” chose to try a different approach and posited some *logoi*, which can be understood as “postulates”:

However, that is the way I began. I assume in each individual case some postulate (ὑποθέμενος ἐκάστοτε λόγον) which I consider strongest, and whatever seems to me to agree with this, whether relating to cause or to anything else, I regard as true, and whatever disagrees with it, as untrue (100A3–7).

This is the kind of cause he has come up with: setting out from the postulate (ὑποθέμενος) that there exists such a thing as the Beautiful in itself, the Good in itself, the Great in itself, and so on (100B5–7).

In brief: Platonic philosophy unfolds according to an analysis of phenomenal reality intended to identify their causes; the discovery that such causes are not to be found in physical reality forces him to posit a second level of ideal causes, which must be subjected to critical analysis. Plato distinguishes 1) the real (and true) cause from other possible causes; 2) a double causality, that of the divine *Nous* (efficient cause) and that of the Good (final cause); 3) other elements associated with these, such as physical ones that act as co-causes¹⁴.

The horizon of Platonic philosophy is not limited to the world of the Ideas, but extends to a Whole that encompasses two dimensions: the physical world of our experience, which must be explained, and another higher reality that provides the foundation for the existence of the physical reality and explains its structure.¹⁵

In summary, Plato presents his philosophical itinerary as being in close continuity with previous thought, a technique that was to become paradigmatic of his great pupil Aristotle.

2.4. PLATO AND THE SOPHISTS

To confirm the angle of the *Phaedo*'s analysis (on both the physical and the metaphysical level), Plato does not bring the sophists into play, even though they represent a crucial step, as is shown their relevant presence in the dialogues. Indeed, between "pre-Socratic" philosophy and Plato there is chasm, and the sophists are the bridge spanning it. Plato acknowledges this: he criticises the final residues of this intellectual movement (Polus, Callicles, Thrasymachus), yet respects the inventive role played by the major sophists, whom he criticises nonetheless.

The sophists' first merit is to have upheld the need for teaching in opposition to the opinion of the multitude, which ignore the problem. In *Men.*, 90E-95A the role as sophists' enemy is played by Anytus, who seems to be brought on stage for the sole purpose of censuring them, even though he claims not to know them. His praise of the citizens of Athens as teachers of virtue is rejected by Socrates, triggering a threatening reaction on the part of his future accuser.

Even more explicitly, in the *Protagoras* the sophist who gives the dialogue its title presents his teaching as *eubulia*, i.e. sensibleness in private and public affairs. Socrates interprets this as the "political art", which is capable of producing good citizens (318E-319A). The end of the dialogue (357D-E) offers a criticism of *hoi polloi*, who ought to recognise that knowledge is stronger than pleasures, which only prevail on account of ignorance. Protagoras, Hyppias, and Prodicus claim to be able to treat this illness, whereas *hoi polloi* do not understand the problem and hence do not send their young to be taught by sophists, a behaviour which has negative consequences for both private and public affairs.

Again, in *R.* 492A-C, Socrates opposes the opinion of *hoi polloi*, who believe that the sophists corrupt the young, whereas they them-

selves are responsible for the (lack of) education that comes from people's behaviour at assemblies and in law courts. The sophists, then, are right to raise the problem of education: the answers they offer are wrong, but this should not prevent us from grasping the correctness of their position.

Moreover, the sophists have provided contributions that explain why Plato displays, despite his many criticisms, a respectful attitude towards them. Here I cannot adequately discuss the two leading sophists, so I will only provide a few remarks.

GORGIAS

Here it is impossible to demonstrate the connection between the *Peri tou me ontos* and some of the *Parmenides*' arguments,¹⁶ but I can recall that in the *Sophist* the Eleatic Stranger is forced to acknowledge that the Eleatics have been vanquished about the refutation of non-being (239B), because they are in contradiction when they say that "non-being is not". It is difficult to find another text, in addition to Gorgias' pamphlet, in which the Eleatic philosophy is forced to acknowledge its defeat.

Plato's esteem for Gorgias emerges from his positive appraisal of rhetoric. The conventional idea that Plato frowns upon rhetoric ignores one basic fact: the existence of *two forms of rhetoric* (*Grg.*, 502D-503A). One is demagogic flattery¹⁷, while the other is a fine thing that makes souls good and states excellent things, whether listeners like to hear them or not. This "true rhetoric" must "persuade" by conveying the truth received from "those who know": indeed, the rhetorician is one of the three collaborators of the true politician (the general, the judge, and the good rhetorician: *Statesman* 304D-E).

This explains Plato's ambivalent attitude towards Gorgias, whom he appreciates as the fa-

ther of rhetoric. The sophist defines this (452D-453A) as the technique of dominion, and the philosopher seems to agree: this is confirmed in *Apology* 73C and in *Philebus* 58A-B, and in the *Gorgias* Socrates states that this definition is very close to reality and that we only need to add that it concerns justice and injustice, both in law courts and at assemblies (454A-B). However, Gorgias is guilty, because he does not provide any real teaching about virtue¹⁸, even though he is not an immoralist. Indeed, in the *Gorgias* it is he who raises the issue of morality. According to the sophist, a teacher of rhetoric cannot be held accountable when this technique is incorrectly used for immoral purposes; rather, it is the person who uses it in such a way who deserves punishment (456A-457C). Gorgias adds that, if one of his pupils knows nothing about justice and injustice, he will learn it from him (460A), through his example.

Plato, however, proves the failure of this hypothesis, by the existence of bad pupils like Polus and Callicles. In brief, if a person has no concept of virtue, but only a method to describe and list the virtues (as in the sophist's case), it is impossible to avoid the negative use of a powerful tool like rhetoric. However, Gorgias is "a good person", and Plato treats him with respect. During the discussion Socrates points out that he is asking questions for the sake of the reasoning (453B-C; 454B-C), and not because Gorgias is unclear. Socrates goes so far as to hypothesise that he has not correctly understood Gorgias' speech (458E); then, when he attacks rhetoric, he adds a further caveat: he does not know whether Gorgias' rhetoric coincides with this kind of empirical practise he is discussing (462A-463A). On his part, the sophist first accepts to be refuted (458B); then he allows his pupil Polus to step in and criticise him; finally, when a problem emerges, he speaks up again and expresses his interest in what Socrates is

saying about rhetoric (463D-464A). In an even more evident way, in *Phlb.*, 58 A-D, after Socrates has asserted the primacy of dialectic, Protarchus recalls Gorgias' praise of rhetoric. The philosopher does not dispute this claim, but grants the superiority of the rhetorician's technique on account of its usefulness, while at the same time reaffirming that the dialectic is superior from the point of view of the truth.

PROTAGORAS AND THE SOPHIST

In order to discuss Protagoras, it would be necessary to show that he is not a relativist at all, but this is impossible here.¹⁹ But it is necessary to understand how Plato can show so much esteem for Protagoras, the most interesting sophist of all. I will only recall the fact that in the *Protagoras* the sophist and Socrates often agree about important issues and that the former even gives a lesson in logic to the philosopher (350C-351B), who does not react to this (because the sophist is right). The underlying question, connected to an epistemological interpretation of the *Homo mensura* doctrine, is discussed in great depth in the *Theaetetus*, with a respect that suggests we should look beyond the letter of the Protagoras' text²⁰.

Let's consider just one further element: the *Sophist* offers proof of the complex nature of the sophistic movement²¹. Plato repeatedly emphasises that the art in question takes many different forms (223C, 226A; 240C), which explains the difficulties posed by this "hunt" (218C-D; 231C, 236D, 241C, 261A). Ultimately, it is impossible to dismiss the sophistic movement with a one-sided judgement. This is confirmed first by three different *diaireseis*, which start with the distinction between an acquisitive art (which prevails) and a productive art. Then a fourth *diairesis* is put forward (226B-231B) which is very long (it takes up as much space as the other

three combined) and is of a completely different sort: it sets out from the art of separating things, deals with various ethical topics, and presents an utterly unusual figure: *a sophist of noble stock, a purifier of the soul*.

This odd figure of a sophist tackles the decisive kind of ignorance:

this sort of ignorance is separate, large and bad, and may be weighed up against all other sorts... to suppose knowing something that is not known (229 C 1-5).

These sophists

seem to think that all ignorance is involuntary, and that he who thinks himself wise will not learn any of those things that he supposes to know (230 A 6-8).

Besides, they employ a method of refutation to handle the matter, in the belief that a fatherly warning does not go far enough:

They ask questions about subjects, so that a man thinks he is saying something but is really saying nothing; they then easily test the inconsistent opinions of these men who are wandering here and there; these they then collect by reasoning and, comparing them to one another, show that they are in contradiction with themselves in the same things about the same issues and in the same respect. Seeing this, they become angry with themselves and grow gentle towards others (230 B 4-9).

There is only one figure which matches this profile: Socrates. Indeed, the Stranger of Elea is worried about ascribing this purifying art to the sophistry. These are kindred activities, although the likeness between them is reminis-

cent of that between a wolf and a dog: great care is called for in comparisons of this sort, as likenesses can be misleading (231 A-B). Only with these provisos does the Stranger accept such a character as the sophist of noble stock (231 B): unlike the previous ones, he is a true educator, interested in elevating his pupil's soul, without being paid. In any case, Plato could not avoid acknowledging that, for all his peculiarities, his teacher was part of that intellectual movement we call "sophistic".

However, there is an even more serious problem. The first three *diaireseis* are acquisitive arts, which is to say that they make use of pre-existing things. Ultimately, the fifth *diairesis* (264B-268D) states that what all sophists have in common²² is the fact that they are conscious deceiver. The problem is that this is a productive, not acquisitive, art. Now, this is not the place to propose a solution. What matters are the two following concepts. First of all, if in its most profound form sophistry is a productive art, it engenders something which did not exist before (265B). The sophists are the "inventors" of something new and "useful" – so much so that, in his final recapitulation, Plato states that sophistry imitates the science which produces contradictions: a convoluted expression which can nonetheless easily be considered a reference to dialectics, which is to say philosophy itself (268C).

Secondly, this final definition is possible because Plato has engaged in a difficult battle with the Eleatics and won, regaining the possibility to say "is not". Philosophy progresses by deeply engaging with previous thought.

2.5. A "HISTORICAL-THEORETICAL" OPERATION

This last concept is worth exploring in greater depth, as it reveals the connection between

the historical framework and the theoretical redevelopment undertaken by Plato.

An Eleatic teacher – the representative of a third generation of Eleatic philosophers which, as far as we know, never actually existed – addresses a plea to Theaetetus before embarking on his analysis: “do not think that I am becoming a sort of parricide” (241D3). What we have is both a request and a negation. The Stranger *fears* that he may be taken for a parricide, i.e. for one who opposes the Eleatic school, and is keen to avoid this impression²³. Rather, he wishes to save philosophy and being, which is to say Parmenides; the only way to do so is to force non-being to somehow be. Without this transition, there is no way to prevent the sophist, who denies the existence of falsehood, from winning. This is not parricide, but a confirmation and overcoming – a move which philosophers will repeat countless times.

Finally, the Stranger makes another plea to Theaetetus, issuing a further warning to the reader: not to consider him mad, if he seems to be turning things upside down. The discussion is complex, because what is at stake is the loftiest product of earlier thought, the concept of being. This necessarily calls for an overall reassessment. It is necessary to set out from Parmenides and the pre-Socratics, and to put their views to the test, since they do not offer any demonstrations:

it seems to me that each is telling a kind of myth, as though we were children (242C8-9).

This is followed by a polemical exposition of the inconclusive multiplicity of their philosophical positions. While all these thinkers deserve respect, *they themselves have shown little respect towards their readers*: they have developed their arguments without adequa-

tely clarifying the concepts they employ. The question is addressed by drawing an initial distinction between monists and pluralists (244B). We here find an attack on absolute monism, according to which only one thing exists, the being (244B). To this, one may easily object: is this “One Being” one thing or two? (244 C-D). For: 1) it is ridiculous to establish two names when the thing is one; 2) the name itself, the very moment the One Being is mentioned, gives rise to two things; 3) the name cannot be identical to the thing, since it is either the name of nothing or it is only the name of a name. Therefore, it seems impossible to admit of an absolute form of monism²⁴.

Through a kind of leap, Plato does not continue his attack on the monists’ conception, but brings some basic concepts of his dialectic into play: one, whole, all, parts. Indeed, the Stranger abruptly poses a question about the *holon*:

Will they say that the whole is other than being one (τὸ ὅλον ἕτερον τοῦ ὄντος ἐνός) or the same with it? (244 D 14-15).

Monists support this identification, which is impossible, because a whole implies parts, whereas the One in itself is absolutely simple and hence cannot have any parts. The contradiction is evident in the case of Parmenides’ Sphere (244E-245A), a perfect One which nonetheless clearly has parts. Being, moreover, can be both an all (πᾶν) and a whole (ὅλον), and it is one by participation in the One, and not in itself. From this a consequence follows that forces us to rethink the whole question, because reality emerges as being intrinsically manifold:

Indeed, if the being that is affected is somehow one, it is not identical to the one and the all (τὰ πάντα) will therefore be more than one (245B8-10).

Being is both one and manifold; hence, it is necessary to address the question of whether it is a whole or not. According to Plato, being must be a whole, because *if being is not a whole but the whole is*, then being is not because it lacks itself, namely the whole which is (245C1-7).

This is followed by an argument which is connected to the previous and addresses the issue of becoming:

STRANGER – *If the whole absolutely is not*, these same things will belong to being and this, in addition to not being, will never be able to become being.

THEAETETUS – Why?

STRANGER – What becomes has always become whole, so he who does not reckon the whole among existent things must not regard either being or generation as an existent thing (245C11-D6).

If the whole is not, the contradiction highlighted in relation to being will also manifest itself in relation to becoming. In short, without the whole-parts game, no ontology is possible.

Through this criticism of monism, Plato is revealing his own theoretical stance, which can further be illustrated by turning to the *Philebus* and *Timaeus*. Indeed, the analysis is brought to an end because, as the Author himself explains, there are countless other problems related to both the pluralist and the monist position: the work is far from complete, but enough has been said (245 E).

Plato operates on the historical level in view of the theoretical proposal he intends to bring out through his “games”. He does the same thing with the *Gigantomachy*²⁵ (245A-249D). The Stranger states that it is necessary to proceed by dealing with those who reason differently. Actually, though, Plato is changing the point of view: he no longer considers the

number of principles at play, but their nature. On the one hand there are the materialists, who identify being with corporeality, reducing it to contact and resistance. On the other hand there are the champions of the *eide*, intelligible and immaterial forms²⁶. The text says that those who posit the Ideas are adopting an easier position, whereas the materialists’ position is harder – indeed, almost impossible – to grasp. The argument will show that the opposite is the case. As usual, reality is ambiguous.

The materialists’ approach is coarse and restricted, so it must be improved by leading them to reason without restricting themselves to the statement that only what is tangible exists. In other words, the position discussed here is not the historically attested one, but an improved version it, enabling a more fruitful engagement. Socrates justifies this choice: “We do not deal with such men, but seek the truth” (246D8-9).

The argument is straightforward: we simply need to get these people to grant the existence of any incorporeal thing whatsoever. Plato confirms that this only holds for those materialists who have improved, because the others will continue to claim that what cannot be grasped with one’s hands is nothing at all (246E-247C). At this point, a sudden and in many ways remarkable turn occurs in Plato’s argument. The Stranger appears to be concerned about the situation in which he has put these materialists who are no longer capable of defining reality on the basis of a term applicable to both what is material and what is immaterial. Hence, he makes a helpful suggestion, which will ultimately prove metaphysically crucial:

I suggest that everything which possesses any *power* (δύναμιν) of any kind, or which by nature is predisposed to *produce* any other thing, or to *undergo* even the *slightest action on the part of the most*

insignificant reality, even if only on one occasion, truly exists. For I propose the following definition: beings are nothing but *power* (δύναμις) (247D84-E4).

This definition is more strongly confirmed in the discussion with the Friends of the Ideas. The latter uphold the existence of *eide*, which are intelligible and incorporeal Forms that are stable and may be known by thought, whereas the corporeal world is unstable, as it is constantly changing, and may be known by sense-perception. Their position naturally leads to an acknowledgement of the possibility to act and to undergo, or at any rate of knowing and being known. However, these idealists do not accept what the materialists have granted. Whereas it is possible to engage with the (less coarse) materialists, it is more difficult to do so with those people with whom it actually ought to be easier to discuss certain issues, given certain shared premises. However, Plato also runs to these people's rescue:

If I am not mistaken, we have set up as a *satisfactory definition of beings*, the presence of the power *to undergo or to act*, even with respect to the slightest reality (248C4-5).

The most relevant element is the formulation itself: what seemed like some necessary aid here becomes an adequate definition which Plato wishes to propose even to the dogmatic Friends of the Ideas. In sum, *twice and with no apparent need to do so*, Plato invites materialists and idealists, which is to say all philosophers, to consider *the capacity to act or to undergo as the defining feature of reality*.²⁷ For Plato, the reality is a dynamic, i.e. dialectic, and not a static ontology.

To sum up, in order to defend ontology against the sophists, Plato here clarifies certain

key elements of his philosophy in opposition to all previous thought²⁸. Perhaps precisely for this reason, he also makes it clear that a pure ontology is not enough to ensure an adequate vision of reality: what is also required is a dialectic based on the whole-parts game and on the capacity to act and to suffer, as will later be explicitly laid out in the dialogues *Philebus-Timaeus*.

A final paradox: the *Sophist's* success derives from the fact that later philosophy proved deficient in dialectic yet rich in ontology.

This is not Plato's position, but the relationship with the past, as for him as for us, is always a very complex one.

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- as a whole (Migliori 2013). I have published a more succinct and linear exposition of this new interpretation: Migliori 2017.
- 2 Migliori 2013 addresses this issue in 165 pages, pp. 25-190; see also Migliori 2017, pp. 23-54. This issue, which has become increasingly important in contemporary hermeneutics, has been firmly established – albeit not in exclusive terms – by the *Tübingen* (Krämer, 1959 and 1982, Gaiser 1988, Szlezák 1988) - *Milan* (Reale 2003, 2008) - *Macerata school*, although few scholars are generous enough to acknowledge it.
- 3 The philosopher even says that he is "ill" due to his passion for listening to speeches (228B; cf. also 236E).
- 4 Phaedrus is able to memorize the Lysias' speech only because the author has given him the text; Socrates twice asks Phaedrus to read the text from the beginning again (262D-E); he also interrupts Phaedrus and then asks him to resume reading (263E). This is possible because the written word is always available.
- 5 As Robin (1930 p. CLXI) observes, Plato quotes a dozen rhetoricians, but using very generic expressions (cf. 258D, 266C, 271A, 272C, 273A, 273C, 277D).
- 6 The Author invites the reader to address these issues which always leave something unwritten, which must be pondered by the reader. These problems can be dealt with in subsequent texts, which leave new unresolved problems. Consequently the final solution cannot be written (cf. *Seventh Letter* 341C4-5, which I have quoted above).
- 7 The frequency of particular expressions and words was statistically calculated starting from the *Laws*, which are certainly the last work. This method became a hermeneutic paradigm in the work of W. Lutoslawski 1897 (a masterful analysis of the debate in Stefanini 1949 pp. LXXII-LXXXI); for a more recent version of this kind of research, see Ledger 1989; Brandwood 1990 (and the interesting assessments in Kahn 1999 pp. 36-100).
- 8 No doubt, stylometric analyses never yield identical results, as is bound to be the case with any statistically based research. Moreover, one must accept a classification by sets and forgo any claim to establish the place of individual dialogues.
- 9 For the necessary in-depth analysis, I will refer to the excellent reconstruction by G. Giorgini 2017, esp. pp. 92-98.
- 10 Given the loss of his works, it is difficult to appreciate the important role which this author undoubtedly played. Still, a Heraclitus fragment stresses his importance: "Knowing many things does not teach understanding. Else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, as well as Xenophanes and Hecataeus" (B40).
- 11 "Surprisingly, he does not claim that Greek customs are better" (Giorgini 2017, p. 95).

Endnotes

- 1 I will make some references that the reader may find "outlandish" or otherwise at odds with the traditional view of Platonic philosophy. Hence, I shall need to refer to the monograph in which I have suggested a reconstruction of Plato's thought that is, in my opinion, more faithful to the dialogues taken

- 12 Plato only refers to himself here (34A; 38B) and in the *Phaedo* (to say that he was not present).
- 13 This investigation regards the cause (αἰτία, 96E7, 97A4, A7, B1) of biological and physical-astronomical processes.
- 14 Plato ends his narrative with a reference to the Principles, because he formulates a further hypothesis, that the postulate itself be attacked (101D3-E3). Plato employs a single procedure: from the aporias of purely physical explanations we ascend to the theory of the Ideas, from the aporias of the Ideas we ascend to the First Principles.
- 15 Without this “theoretical” respect for the empirical dimension and our world, Plato’s political interest would remain philosophically unexplainable.
- 16 For a more in-depth discussion of this connection, see Migliori 2019 pp. 52-59.
- 17 Plato clarifies here that sophistry and rhetoric are either the same thing or very similar (520A). If we instead maintain that there is some difference, sophistry proves to be superior to rhetoric, which is purely instrumental (463A-466A). On the structure of this distinction, which takes the form of a complex *diairesis*, see Migliori 2013 pp. 370-371; 896.
- 18 This is stated both in the *Gorgias* and in the *Men.*, 95C; cf. 70C-D; 76A.
- 19 For this perspective, see Eustacchi 2016 and 2017, esp. pp. 37-43
- 20 I will also refrain from illustrating how many words of appreciation are reserved for Prodicus of Ceos.
- 21 On this dialogue, see Migliori 2007; on these *diaireseis*, see pp. 29-45.
- 22 Obviously, in this context no reference is made to the fourth *diairesis* and to Socrates.
- 23 These words are uttered in vain, confirming the risks of writing: for the statement that Plato committed parricide is among the most frequently reported in textbooks on Platonism.
- 24 The possibility of an ineffable One is not taken into consideration here because it was not historically attested. Plato will only present it and deny it in the first thesis of the *Prm.*, 137C4-142A8.
- 25 The very epithet used shows that this is a crucial philosophical distinction for Plato.
- 26 This confirms that the Ideas are not an invention of Plato’s, but a concept introduced before his time. Cf. the earliest formulations of the “Third Man”, which do not present an endless regress and are not applicable to Plato’s position, for example: “A sophistic argument leading to the Third Man was the following one. When we say ‘a man walks’ we are not talking either about the Idea (man), that walks (for it is motionless), nor about some particular individual that walks (for how could we identify him? We know that man walks, but not which particular individual); then we are saying that a third man is walking alongside these: so there will be some third man of whom we predicate walking. Now, the starting point for this sophistic argument is offered by those who separate the common term from particular things – which is what champions of the Ideas do” (Alex. Aphr., *In Metaph.*, 84, 9-16; this English translation follows the Italian text by L. Lugarini 1954 p. 9, with various changes).
- 27 Plato immediately (248C-249B) emphasises this *dialectical and dynamic nature of reality*, which manifests itself: 1) on the psychological level: if the soul knows and something is known, there is an acting and undergoing; 2) on the epistemological level: knowing and being known imply acting and undergoing; 3) on the cosmological level: it cannot be granted that movement, life, the soul and the intelligence are present in individual realities but absent in that reality that *is* in the full sense of the term.
- 28 Pluralists multiply their positions in a way that is unclear. Monists affirm a self-contradictory position. Absolute monism is impossible. Without the whole there cannot be any ontology.