

## INTERPRETING PLATO'S DIALOGUES

The history of scholarship, philosophical or otherwise, about Plato and his writings reveals a quandary pertaining to the interpretation of the contents of Plato's dialogues. To understand Plato one must come to terms with this problem: how ought Plato's writings to be interpreted?

There are at least two conflicting ways to interpret the Platonic corpus. I shall refer to them as the 'Theoretical Interpretation' (TI, sometimes referred to as the 'Dogmatic Interpretation') and the 'Socratic Interpretation', respectively. According to the TI, Plato's writings ought to be taken as communicating the theories,<sup>1</sup> doctrines,<sup>2</sup> or beliefs<sup>3</sup> of Plato himself. By this it is meant that the basic positive points and conclusions of the Platonic corpus express (systematically or unsystematically) Plato's own convictions in the form of either theories or doctrines. There are variants of the TI. One extreme version holds that the contents of the early, middle, and late Platonic works are expressive of Plato's beliefs,<sup>4</sup> while a less extreme position argues that only the middle and late dialogues express them.<sup>5</sup> In either case, Plato's dialogues, in whole or in part, are seen by the theoretical interpreter as reflecting Plato's own theories or dogmas.

There are several ways in which theoretical interpreters have sought to ground the attribution of certain theories to Plato. Some have attempted to base the TI on the idea that whatever philosophical gaps or contradictions and so forth exist in the Platonic dialogues are the result of Plato's lack of philosophical acumen. Among others, Richard Robinson held a view similar to this one.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most popular way of interpreting Plato's dialogues is that employed by Karl Hermann. Hermann argued that there was a natural philosophical development of Plato's ideas over time, and that such intellectual changes help to explain the ambiguities, obscurities and the like found in Plato's writings.<sup>7</sup> This hermeneutic had variations, whether it was Franz Sussemihl's claim that the radical development of Plato's thought led to its demise or self-destruction,<sup>8</sup> Sigurd Ribbing's assumption that Plato's philosophy slowly revealed

<sup>1</sup> F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome, Volume 1: Part 1* (Garden City, 1962), p. 286; W. J. Prior, *Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics* (London, 1985), pp. 163–4.

<sup>2</sup> By 'doctrines' I mean beliefs which are part of a system of ideas that is taught to others, consciously. Doctrines are typically elements of theories and typically seek to distinguish one's own way of thinking from competing world views. At the very least, theories set forth, in a systematic way, statements about the nature, function and purpose of a concept, practice, etc.

<sup>3</sup> By 'belief' and its cognates I mean, as Saul Kripke does, a statement to which one sincerely assents without ambiguity (S. Kripke, 'A Puzzle About Belief', in A. Margalit [ed.], *Meaning and Use* [Dordrecht, 1979], pp. 239–83; J. Angelo Corlett, 'Is Kripke's Puzzle Really a Puzzle?', *Theoria*, 55 [1989], 95–113). Beliefs are constituent elements of doctrines and theories.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I shall refer to the 'beliefs' of Plato as a shorthand way of meaning to refer to his theories, doctrines or beliefs.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kraut, 'Introduction to the Study of Plato', in R. Kraut, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 26–7. A still weaker version seems to be represented in M. Frede's 'The Literary Form of the *Sophist*', in C. Gill and M. McCabe (edd.), *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 135–51 (herein cited as *FALP*), where he argues that the *Sophist* gives us more than mere Socratic dialectic. It presents a certain view or 'dogma' of Plato's on truth and falsity.

<sup>6</sup> R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford, 1953).

<sup>7</sup> K. Hermann, *Geschichte und System der Platonischen Philosophie* (Heidelberg, 1839).

<sup>8</sup> F. Sussemihl, *Die genetische entwicklung der Platonischen Philosophie* (Leipzig, 1855–60).

the great theory of forms which itself remained unchanged throughout Plato's intellectual life,<sup>9</sup> or some other version interpreting Plato's dialogues under the assumption that the corpus of writings ascribed to him showed or contained the development of his thought. For those who favour a biographical mode of interpreting Plato's dialogues, there is the hagiography pertaining to Plato, his many detractors (one of whom was Aristoxenes of Tarentum), the Greek biographers of Hellenistic and Roman eras, Diogenes Laertius, and other such sources from which to extract an idea of 'Plato's doctrines'. Those who have tried to construct from such biographies Plato's thoughts 'as stated in the dialogues' include Paul Friedlander.<sup>10</sup>

Over against the interpretation of Plato's philosophy as expressed gradually in the dialogues is the move to find the unity of Plato's thought.<sup>11</sup> Some, like Heinrich Gomperz, interpret the *Seventh Letter* in such a way as to support the interpretation of the unity of Plato's thought.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these sorts of Theoretical Interpretations, there is the method of construing Plato's words set forth by the 'esoterists'. Esoteric interpreters deny that Plato's doctrines can be found in the dialogues. Indeed, the Platonic corpus does not contain Plato's authentic philosophy. For his real ideas were systematically communicated to his students in the Academy, e.g. Aristotle, Albinus, and Numenius. Moreover, certain of Plato's doctrines can be extrapolated from Neoplatonists. That Plato may have taught his students some ideas not expressed in the dialogues was held by Eduard Zeller, Hermann, Friedlander, and others. But esoterists differed from these interpreters by construing the Platonic corpus as a *secondary* (or nearly so) source for the discovery of what Plato believed, i.e. his systematic views. One example is Hans Kramer, who tended to devalue the Platonic corpus as the primary source from which Plato's thought can be derived.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, there are still other versions of the TI of Plato's dialogues. But my current task is to provide but an overview of a hermeneutical problem that has plagued Plato scholars for centuries.<sup>14</sup>

Some have challenged the TI.<sup>15</sup> In this paper, I will examine some recent arguments provided in favour of this dominant interpretive tradition.<sup>16</sup> I argue that, unless

<sup>9</sup> S. Ribbing, *Genetische darstellung der Platonischen Ideenlehre* (Leipzig, 1863–4).

<sup>10</sup> P. Friedlander, *Platon* (Berlin, 1954–60).

<sup>11</sup> E. Zeller, *Die philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Tubingen, 1844–52); P. Shorey, *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (Chicago, 1904); L. Robin, *Platon* (Paris, 1935).

<sup>12</sup> H. Gomperz, 'Platons philosophisches System', *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1930).

<sup>13</sup> H. J. Kramer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles* (Stuttgart, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> For an incisive discussion of the problem of interpreting Plato's dialogues, see E. N. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Uppsala, 1977); R. B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 1.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance: H. Cherniss, *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkeley, 1945); J. Angelo Corlett, 'A Dialectical Interpretation of the Concept of Art as *Mimesis* in the *Republic*', *Idealistic Studies*, 21 (1991), 155–69; M. Frede, 'Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form', in J. Klagge and N. D. Smith (edd.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy: Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 201–19; H.-G. Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato* (New Haven, 1980); F. Gonzalez, (ed.), *The Third Way* (Lanham, 1995); C. L. Griswold, Jr (ed.), *Platonic Writings: Platonic Readings* (New York, 1988), see especially chh. 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 15; L. A. Kosman, 'Silence and Imitation in the Platonic Dialogues', in Klagge and Smith, pp. 73–92; G. Press (ed.), *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Lanham, 1993), hereafter cited as *PD*; and J. H. Randall, *Plato: Dramatist of the Life of Reason* (New York, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> I say 'recent' because, as Julia Annas insightfully points out, certain historical figures have taken views of Plato's writings which are remarkably similar to the SI. See Julia Annas, 'Plato the Sceptic', in Klagge and Smith.

certain objections to these arguments for the TI are plausibly countered, one ought to give serious attention to an alternative interpretation of the Platonic corpus: the *Socratic Interpretation*.<sup>17</sup> The Socratic Interpretation (SI) serves as a sceptical challenge to the TI. It states that one ought to interpret Plato's works as the *dialogues* they (for the most part) are, and that Plato, whether dramatist or not, was deeply committed to the Socratic (dialogical or dialectical) method of philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it holds that Plato's commitment to philosophical dialectic is so strong that there is little or no way (given the extant manuscripts of the Platonic corpus) by which to non-accidentally extract from the Platonic corpus the actual views of Plato, whether or not these views independently amount to theories or doctrines. The implication is that, lacking sufficient reason to the contrary, we ought not to ascribe this or that view in a Platonic dialogue to Plato himself. As Michael Frede argues, 'Plato writes in such a way that it is not clear from the very form of his writing whether he endorses an argument or not.'<sup>19</sup> Rather, we ought to use the dialogues as the philosophically informative works that they are, recognizing Plato as, like his teacher Socrates, a master of the dialectic. Whereas Socrates is an expert at oral philosophical dialectic, Plato seeks to preserve his mentor's philosophical method in writing, even if it turns out that Plato and Socrates diverge on this point or that, philosophically speaking. But we have no way to discern the actual views of either Socrates or Plato, and ought to be more concerned with our own philosophical pursuits of truth rather than with what some interpretive tradition attributes to any single philosopher.<sup>20</sup> The basic reason why one ought to reject the TI is because of its lack of rational support, thereby leaving one with the alternative choice of accepting its denial: the SI.<sup>21</sup> At least, this is true unless and until arguments are brought to bear which establish the plausibility of the TI. Without plausible arguments in support of the TI, the *prima facie* evidence in favour of the SI (the dialogical style of the Platonic writings, the failure of Plato to 'authorize' any belief found therein, etc.) seems to outweigh the paucity of evidence for the TI.

It is of interest to note that there is common ground amongst theoretical and Socratic interpreters of Plato. Some of the general points of mutual agreement between them seem to be the following: (1) Plato writes dialogues, not treatises; (2) there are certain views propounded by certain dialogical characters in the Platonic corpus; (3) Plato writes dialogues for a purpose, or a set of purposes, one of which is to guide readers to philosophical and objective truths; (4) Plato indeed has philosophical views, held however tentatively; and (5) there are better and worse ways to read Plato's dialogues. But these points of agreement are insufficient to settle the

<sup>17</sup> Also see the distinction between these two competing interpretations of Plato's writings made in Klagge and Smith, p. 3. To the description found there I would point out that there seems to be nothing about the analytical philosophical method which precludes the adoption of the SI.

<sup>18</sup> For an incisive discussion of the complexities of the dialectic found in Plato's later dialogues, see C. Gill, 'Afterward: Dialectic and the Dialogue Form in Late Plato', in *FALP*, ch. 10. Gill construes Plato's later dialogues (in particular, the *Philebus* and *Sophist*) as containing a 'shared search' for truth about various issues and problems, a search which includes the author and the readers of the dialogues.

<sup>19</sup> Frede, 'Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form', 203. He goes on to state in the same passage that 'the form of a Platonic dialogue is such that the mere fact that an argument is advanced in the dialogue does not yet mean that it is endorsed by Plato'.

<sup>20</sup> The most eloquent philosophical expression, endorsement, and defence of the SI, in this author's opinion, is found in Frede, 'Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form'. Also see J. Mittelstrass, 'On Socratic Dialogue', in Griswold, pp. 126–42; M. Schofield, 'Likeness and Likenesses in the *Parmenides*', in *FALP*, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Assuming, of course, that the SI is itself theoretically adequate.

gross differences between the TI and the SI.

For many interpreters of Plato's works, the TI is a *presupposition* which drives the doctrines they attribute to Plato. For others, however, there are *reasons* for their adopting the TI. As Charles Griswold insists, 'the time has now come for a full-fledged debate about the reading of Plato, and so also about the reasons for which Plato wrote dialogues'.<sup>22</sup> What are these reasons? And are they plausible? Let us consider some recent arguments in favour of the TI to see if the claims it makes above and beyond these shared with the SI are justified.

### ARGUMENTS FOR THE THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

An ensemble of arguments proffered by some highly respected contemporary scholars of Plato will be my focus here: those set forth by Richard Kraut, T. H. Irwin, Julia Annas, and Frede, respectively. It is not assumed that the arguments described and assessed herein exhaust those offered in favour of the TI, but the following arguments are indicative of the more popular and strongest ones used to defend it.

First, Kraut argues that the SI rests on the mistaken assumption that Plato is a dramatist. Were Plato a dramatist, the SI might make sense. Kraut avers, however, that:

Plato's works were not written to be entered into competition and performed at civic religious festivals, as were the plays of the Greek tragedians and comedians. . . . The dramatist does share this aim, and if it suits his purpose to have his main characters express views that differ from his own, he will do so. But if Plato's aim in writing is to create an instrument that can, if properly used, guide others to the truth and the improvement of their souls, then it may serve his purpose to create a leading speaker who represents the sincere convictions of Plato himself. . . . if Plato's aims differ from those of a dramatist, then he will have a reason that the dramatist lacks for using his main speakers as a mouthpiece for his own convictions.<sup>23</sup>

Kraut's comment addresses (2) and (3), above. For he is claiming that Plato not only has a purpose in writing the dialogues, but that he has a *specific purpose*, namely, to 'use the speakers as a mouthpiece for his own convictions'. This claim requires a special defence, since it is something not held (mutually) by the SI. However, though Kraut's proposed distinction between Plato and the dramatist is insightful,<sup>24</sup> his reason in favour of the TI begs the crucial question as to whether or not Plato's aims, in writing the dialogues, differ from those of the dramatist. Moreover, if guiding others to 'the truth' (3) is indeed Plato's aim in writing dialogues, then he can surely do this *without* infusing his own theories or doctrines into his writings. Are theoretical interpreters correct in assuming that Plato thinks that he himself possesses answers to some or all of the questions he puts in the mouths of the dialogical interlocutors? *Must* Plato have the answers to crucial philosophical questions he raises? And even if he must have the answers, is it so transparently obvious that he *must* share such beliefs with his readers in a way that readers would understand Plato's own views?

But even if the theoretical interpreter does *not* assume both that Plato thinks he has answers to the problems raised in the dialogues and that Plato wants to make his beliefs known to his readers, Plato's having a different aim from the dramatist does not

<sup>22</sup> Griswold, *Platonic Writings*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Kraut, 'Introduction to the Study of Plato', p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Gilbert Ryle points to a different construal of Plato and the dramatists when he writes: 'The dialogues were dramatic in form because they were composed for semi-dramatic recitation to lay and drama-loving audiences . . .' (Gilbert Ryle, 'Plato', in P. Edwards [ed.], *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 6, p. 319).

logically require his expressing his own 'convictions' in the dialogues as Kraut suggests. The theoretical interpreter needs a supporting argument for this argumentative move. Contrary to Kraut, whether or not Plato's aim in writing dialogues was similar to or different from that of the dramatist, there is insufficient reason to conclude that Plato's theories, doctrines, or views can be extracted from the dialogues. Thus the TI requires a better argument on its behalf if it is to neutralize the arguments which might lead one to take more seriously the SI.

Kraut provides another argument for the position that Plato's convictions are expressed in at least some of the dialogues. He states that 'Plato's dialogues cannot have been intended merely<sup>25</sup> to dramatize conflict between opposing characters and give expression to competing philosophical ideas' because 'many of Plato's dialogues in his middle and later periods exhibit a high degree of collaboration among the interlocutors . . .'.<sup>26</sup> The unity and development of philosophical ideas in the Platonic corpus leads Kraut to conclude that

. . . although the dialogue form might be used by a philosopher in order to reveal the deficiencies of the views expressed by all of the interlocutors, we have strong reason for thinking that this is not in fact what Plato is doing.<sup>27</sup>

However, for the unity and development of philosophical ideas in the Platonic corpus to count as evidence in favour of the conclusion Kraut reaches, the unity and development in the corpus cannot be reasonably construed as supportive of the SI. But surely Kraut's point about the high degree of collaboration among the dialogical interlocutors also supports (or, does not rule out, logically speaking) the view that Plato does *not* consciously infuse the dialogues with his own philosophical convictions. Thus nothing Kraut says discounts the SI, for it is clear that Plato can write dialogues the contents of which are highly collaborative in the way Kraut suggests, yet nevertheless refrain from expressing Plato's own views in them. It follows that Kraut's conclusion that

. . . unless we have good evidence to the contrary, we should take Plato to be using the content of his interlocutor's speeches, the circumstances of their meeting, and whatever other material he has at his disposal, to state conclusions he believes for reasons he accepts<sup>28</sup>

is unwarranted both in that Kraut fails to provide reasons for the TI which do not also support the SI, and because 'unless we have good reasons to the contrary' assumes that the TI is 'innocent until proven guilty', not requiring the satisfying of an independent standard of plausibility.<sup>29</sup> This is especially true since the SI can also accommodate Kraut's point that 'reading Plato in this way allows us to make use of whatever material we have in the dialogues to contribute to our understanding of them . . .'.<sup>30</sup>

Thus neither of the main reasons offered by Kraut against the SI, and for the TI, succeed. What the TI needs is an argument which rules out, on interpretive and logical grounds, the plausibility of the SI of the Platonic corpus.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Kraut's use of 'merely' here is disingenuous to the extent that it minimizes the SI's commitment to (3), above.

<sup>26</sup> Kraut, 'Introduction to the Study of Plato', pp. 25–6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 29–30.

<sup>29</sup> For it might turn out that even if there are no such reasons to the contrary, Kraut's method of interpreting the Platonic corpus is still inadequate. After all, the best interpretative strategy is not always adequate.

<sup>30</sup> Kraut, 'Introduction to the Study of Plato', p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> This is not an argument in favour of the 'innocent until proven guilty' status of the SI. Rather, it is a point about the superior plausibility status of the SI over that of the TI.

Are there other arguments for the TI? Irwin insists that

It is legitimate to point out that Plato never speaks in his own person in the dialogues, and legitimate to wonder whether this is a device for dissociating or detaching himself from the arguments or conclusions attributed to the main speaker (usually Socrates). The ancient evidence, however, offers no sound basis for doubting that Plato is presenting his own philosophical views.<sup>32</sup>

What is this 'ancient evidence' to which Irwin refers? It is none other than Aristotle, 'our most important external witness'.<sup>33</sup> 'Since Aristotle was in a position to know much more than we can ever know about Plato's life, we ought to accept his estimate of Plato's intentions unless we find strong reasons in the dialogues themselves for believing that Aristotle must be wrong.'<sup>34</sup> Not unlike Kraut, Irwin appeals to the 'innocent until proven guilty' style of argument in relation to the TI. But again, just as with Kraut's appeal to this argumentative strategy, one must point out that the only or even strongest evidence in favour of a belief may be, and often is, insufficient to justify that belief. So it simply will not do for Irwin to set forth the 'Aristotle-as-the-external-guide-to-interpreting-Plato's-dialogues' doctrine as if somehow it stands on its own strength or is self-evident. The appeal to Aristotle as the interpretive guide to Plato's dialogues constitutes an appeal to external or secondary evidence. But unless such evidence is coupled with internal or primary evidence (from Plato himself), it is unconvincing. Otherwise, the absence of primary or internal evidence in favour of the TI speaks loudly against the TI.

However, there is an even deeper reason why Irwin's reasoning is problematic. Irwin states that one ought to accept Aristotle's estimate of Plato's views unless we find strong reasons in the dialogues themselves to the contrary. But why does not the *dialogue form itself* (constituting internal and primary evidence) stand as strong evidence *against* the appeal to Aristotle's interpretation of Plato (constituting external or secondary evidence) in bolstering the TI? After all, Aristotle, the master of the philosophical treatise, is not obviously in a position to interpret Plato's dialogues even though he was a former student of Plato's. Aristotle often disagrees with Plato, and this fact, coupled with the fact that he does not always understand Plato's meaning,<sup>35</sup> cautions against the appeal to Aristotle as an unproblematic authority on the interpretation of Plato. Moreover, as W. K. C. Guthrie points out,<sup>36</sup> Aristotle has a tendency to interpret Plato in light of a linear progression of philosophical doctrines from the predecessors of Plato, as if Plato shared the same philosophical assumptions and interests as they. While Irwin is correct in stating that 'we cannot sensibly decide how to read the dialogues by our views of what they suggest or hint without considering Aristotle's views of them',<sup>37</sup> a serious consideration of Aristotle's attri-

<sup>32</sup> T. Irwin, 'Plato: The Intellectual Background', in Kraut, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, p. 77. <sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; 'Reply to David L. Roochnik', in Kraut, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, p. 199.

<sup>35</sup> For example, in his discussion of substance in *De Generatione*, Aristotle asserts that it is unclear what is meant in the *Timaeus* by an 'omnirecipient'. This is queer because Aristotle is a student of Plato's during the time in which the *Timaeus* is in circulation. And, as Harold Cherniss queries of Aristotle, 'If he was uncertain about Plato's meaning, did it ever occur to him to ask the master for an explanation? Or did he ask and receive no answer? And, if so, why did Plato keep silent when he must have known that he was inviting misinterpretation of his opinions and misinterpretation of his theories?' (See Harold Cherniss, *The Riddle of the Early Academy*, pp. 71–2).

<sup>36</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy V: The Later Plato and the Academy* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 421.

<sup>37</sup> Irwin, 'Reply to David L. Roochnik', in Kraut, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, p. 199.

butions of convictions to Plato may be overridden by the information just provided. So it is not simply that the dialogues are silent in support of the TI, it is also that the dialogue form itself provides internal evidence against it.

But even if one assumes that Irwin and others are correct in asserting that Aristotle is a reliable and adequate guide to our understanding of Plato's life and interpreting the specific points made in Plato's dialogues, it still does not logically follow that 'in deciding how to take the dialogues, our most important external witness is Aristotle'.<sup>38</sup> For even if Aristotle interpreted the specific contents of each Platonic dialogue correctly, this would not warrant the conclusion that Aristotle is a reliable and adequate guide to the *theories or doctrines of Plato*. And this holds for at least two reasons. First, it might none the less be true that Plato never expresses his own views in the dialogues, in which case, Aristotle could not, in interpreting them 'correctly', thereby know what Plato believes. Secondly, how would Aristotle be able to discern *which* beliefs articulated in the dialogues are *Plato's* own? Of course, Theoretical Interpreters are quick to point out that Aristotle was under Plato's mentorship in the Academy, and that surely it is reasonable to think that Aristotle learned much about his teacher's beliefs under such circumstances. This is a reasonable assumption. But it is unclear precisely what it permits us to infer from it, logically speaking. For if Plato was strongly Socratic, it is reasonable to think that Plato taught in such a way that the contents of his own convictions were not evident to his own students. This is reasonable to infer especially given the method of Socratic elenchus Plato employs so consistently in so many of the dialogues. Could not have Plato taught (even lectured) without infusing his own beliefs into his teaching in the Academy? More precisely, could not Plato have taught in such a way that it was not obvious at all what his own convictions were, even to his closest students? Could not have Plato, like his teacher before him, have so respected the Socratic method that he refused to teach his own beliefs, but rather sought to enable students to become their own philosophical selves without the intrusion of Plato's own personal convictions? Why is it that theoretical interpreters of Plato often appeal to authority when it pertains to the use of *Aristotle's* writings in support of the TI, but seem to place less importance on *Socrates'* pedagogical and philosophical influences on Plato? Would it not be more or just as reasonable to think that the influence of Plato's *teacher* was in fact *greater* on the composition of the dialogues and should carry *more* interpretive weight than the interpretive authority given by many scholars to a *student* of Plato's? Of course, even if this second point can be neutralized by theoretical interpreters, the first claim is plausible and is sufficient to neutralize the TI's appeal to Aristotle as a reliable and adequate guide to the theories or doctrines of Plato.

Irwin makes another claim about Aristotle and interpreting Plato. He argues,

We would have good reasons for disagreeing with Aristotle, and detaching Plato from the views expressed by the leading speakers in the dialogues, if we found that the views did not display enough unity, consistency, and coherence to be the views of 'one philosopher'.<sup>39</sup>

But is Irwin implying that textual inconsistency among the dialogues is the only reason to deny that they contain Plato's views? For the dialogue form itself is sufficient to do so, as I have argued. Is Irwin implying that the facts of unity, consistency, and coherence among the dialogues is sufficient to justify the claim that Plato's views are expressed therein? Precisely how does the latter claim (that Plato's

<sup>38</sup> Irwin, 'Plato: The Intellectual Background', in Kraut, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

views are enumerated in the dialogues) logically follow from the former one (that there is unity, consistency and coherence among the dialogues)? Thus it is not clear that Irwin has provided a sufficiently strong argument for the TI. That is, he has not given us an argument which either cannot be turned against itself or used at the same time to support the SI.

Annas argues that the SI makes Plato out to be a sceptic. In her critique of Cicero's 'third argument' in favour of the claim that the dialogical nature of the Platonic corpus means that they are 'not reports of conclusions argued for and arrived at by Plato', Annas states,

This is in general true; Plato is certainly different in this regard from Epicurus, say. But it is not so clearly true of some of the late dialogues; and it has certainly not stopped generations of scholars and philosophers, from the Middle Platonists to Shorey, from finding in Plato a system of doctrines. This kind of consideration, then, cannot be decisive.<sup>40</sup>

But there are some difficulties with Annas' reasoning here. First, Annas' claim that the earlier dialogues are inconclusive and that this is not 'so' clearly the case in the later dialogues is ambiguous, and Annas does nothing to explain *how much* incongruity ought to exist in this regard between the sets of dialogues in question to justify the TI. Secondly, Annas begs the question when she appeals to the capabilities of 'the Middle Platonists and Shorey' (Theoretical Interpreters) to attribute to Plato a system of 'doctrines'. For the very problem at issue is whether such an interpretation is *sound*, not whether or not someone is capable of construing Plato's writings in a doctrinal manner. Besides, one can, if one wanted simply to appeal to authority, mention respected philosophers who disagree with those mentioned by Annas.<sup>41</sup> Thus Annas has provided one with insufficient reason to think that the SI is implausible and that the TI is sound. She seems to *assume* that the construal of Plato according to the SI makes Plato a sceptic.<sup>42</sup> But Plato might have views as a *non-sceptic* but elect not to reveal them in the dialogues. This logical and textual possibility undermines Annas' arguments. Moreover, Plato can be a sceptic under either the TI or the SI. For under the former view, Plato would express his scepticism in the dialogues, while under the latter view he would simply refrain from doing so. But neither interpretation rules out that Plato might be a philosophical sceptic.

Annas goes on to admit the attractiveness of the SI.<sup>43</sup> However, she argues that 'it cannot on its own persuade us to read Plato this way'.<sup>44</sup> Her support for this conclusion is remarkably *ad hominem*:

We can see how the sceptical Academy, especially when it had established a long tradition of non-doctrinal philosophical activity, would read Plato in this way, to bring him into their own tradition. . . . But we, with no such motive, are not likely to find this the best reading of the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.<sup>45</sup>

However, whether or not one shares a similar interpretive or philosophical 'motive' with a predecessor is irrelevant to the question of which interpretation of the writings of Plato is more plausible. This being the case, Annas' arguments are

<sup>40</sup> Annas, 'Plato the Sceptic', p. 64.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, Frede argues the following in regards to Plato and his primary dialogical interlocutors: 'it is by no means clear, so clear as not to require an argument, that he fully identifies himself with them' (Frede, 'Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form', p. 204).

<sup>42</sup> Annas seems to ignore or is unaware of arguments which are aimed at showing that the interpretation of Plato as a sceptic or a dogmatist is problematic. See Alan Bowen, 'On Interpreting Plato', in Griswold, *Platonic Writings*, pp.49–65.

<sup>43</sup> Annas, 'Plato the Sceptic', p. 70.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



neutralized and she is unwarranted in drawing the conclusion that 'the arguments in Cicero and Anonymous are too weak or inconclusive to make it plausible to read Plato as a sceptic'.<sup>46</sup> Her remaining defence appears to be an appeal to authority which contains both an unjustified shift of the burden of argument and an argument from silence:

... the [Socratic] interpretation is just not plausible as an attempt to show that Plato is never dogmatic, never wants us to accept doctrines that he has argued for. Here Sextus appears to be right (*PH* I. 221-3): to show that Plato is a sceptic one has to show that he never puts forward doctrines, and that is an implausible position.<sup>47</sup>

Note that Annas uses Sextus as her support for the previous claim that the SI is implausible to 'show that Plato is never dogmatic'. So here we have an appeal to authority, rather than an argument justifying the TI which would hold that Plato is a dogmatist.

But even if we permit Annas' appeal to Sextus as being in some way informative, her argument contains a shift of the burden of proof as well as an argument from silence. Ignoring for the moment the previously made point about Annas' confusion of Plato's being a sceptic with the SI, it is the TI which makes the claim [above and beyond (3), above] that Plato is a dogmatist and that he seeks to express his dogmas through the dialogues. All that is needed to establish the *prima facie* plausibility of the SI is for the TI to have its arguments neutralized or undermined. This alone would begin to lend plausibility to the SI, given that it constitutes the denial of the TI and shares in common with the TI (1)–(5), above. Given the neutralization of the arguments set forth by Annas in favour of the TI, it seems that she fails to satisfy the burden of argument for the TI, and it is not legitimate for her to attempt to shift the burden of proof to the SI until the explanatory power of arguments in favor of the TI *themselves* shift such a burden.

Furthermore, to require, as Annas does, that the SI 'show' that Plato 'never puts forward doctrines' presupposes, without supporting argument, that the dialogues (which are the primary source of evidence for either general interpretation) are legitimate sources of such evidence! But this just is the issue in question, as argued by the SI. And it is the SI which questions whether the dialogues are the sources of such evidence at all. Thus Annas (not unlike Kraut and Irwin) begs crucial questions which are raised about the philosophical foundations of the TI.

Most recently, Frede argues that the *Sophist* is the most 'dogmatic' of Plato's dialogues.<sup>48</sup> He points out that, among other things, the Eleatic Stranger has not come to subject the reader to the Socratic *elenchus* (*Sophist* 216b). Moreover, there is an unmistakably dogmatic tone to what the Stranger says about false statements in the dialogue. Frede argues that it is characteristic of the dialogue that it attempts systematically to integrate its *aporetic* element into a positive, constructive account of false statements. Furthermore, Frede argues that the reason why Plato wrote about false statements in dialogue form was because he did not consider himself to be an authority on anything, and also because the dialogue form had not taken hold in his day. This point is intended to counter the Socratic interpreter's worry about why Plato would not have simply addressed the topic of false statements in a treatise:

So Plato did not write a treatise on the philosopher. But the reason for this, I suggest, perhaps is not that such arcana cannot be adequately communicated in language, or that they should not be divulged to the uninitiated. Obviously, to judge from the *Sophist*, Plato thinks that a lot can

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Frede, 'The Literary Form of the *Sophist*', pp. 135–51.

usefully be said about the philosopher. But, for the reasons indicated earlier, he would not write a treatise about this, or any other philosophical subject. In this particular case of the philosopher or philosophy, it seems, he prefers not even to write a dialogue about it. The dialogue form offers him a much subtler and, presumably, more effective way to achieve this end by writing a dialogue about the sophist . . .<sup>49</sup>

Frede concludes, however tentatively, that the *Sophist*, more than any other dialogue of Plato's, contains Plato's own philosophical convictions.

Now let us grant the truth of Frede's point about the *Sophist* being Plato's most dogmatic dialogue. Let us also grant that the *Sophist* contains more than *aporia*, that it contains a positive and constructive account of false statements, or of anything else, for that matter! The question is whether or not such suppositions suffice to ground any version of the TI which would seek to attribute to *Plato* the informational content of any of the words found in the *Sophist*.

Now surely the Socratic interpreter can concur with Frede that there is a uniquely dogmatic tone to the *Sophist* which is lacking throughout the remainder of Plato's writings. The Socratic interpreter can also agree with Frede that whatever *aporetic* element is found in that dialogue is tied to a pervasive, constructive and positive account of false statements, and perhaps to other ideas as well. However, Frede's observation that the *Sophist* is the most dogmatic of Plato's dialogues is ambiguous. On the one hand, it might mean that *Plato* presents his own beliefs in a dogmatic way in the dialogue. On the other hand, it might mean that the *Eleatic Stranger* is presented as dogmatic in *his* making certain claims. This ambiguity, I suggest, must be clarified in order to get to the truth of the matter as to whether or not one is warranted in saying that the dogmatic tone of the *Sophist* is a good reason to attribute some of the contents of it to Plato.

There is little problem in one's saying that a *character* of a dialogue containing dogmatic language believes (as much as it can be said of a character that she believes) the words put into her mouth by the author. But does this suffice to ground the ascription of any of the ideas found in that dialogue to *Plato*? Is it not also plausible to infer that the same author who wrote *aporetic* dialogues, having little or no dogmatic tone, also composed the *Sophist* (having a dogmatic tone), and that in *neither* case did he express his own views? For the mere *tone* of a *dialogue* is insufficient evidence, internal as it is, for the claim that its author *believes* its contents. And surely the additional fact of the appearance of a positive and constructive account of an idea does not suffice for such an attribution. For the dialogue *form* itself makes it problematic to attribute to Plato some doctrine or another. This means that more than tone and constructive accounts are needed to attribute legitimately to him a belief about such and such. For it is all too possible that the writer of a dialogue can present a view with which he disagrees, yet with power, force and 'conviction'. Why would a writer do this? Perhaps, as Frede and others suggest, the reason is to express his own beliefs about such and such. Yet if that same author is wholeheartedly devoted to the Socratic method, he might very well put into the mouth of a dialogical interlocutor, and with emotion, words which are likely to drive the reader to pursue the *subject matter at hand* and to seek truth in regards to that subject matter. One would expect this to be true of the *Sophist*, especially since its subject matter is the false statement. There is hardly a more important topic in philosophy than truth. Would it not make sense for the author of a dialogue on falsehood to put into the mouth of an interlocutor a view which would likely stir up philosophical thinking on such an

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

important concept or line of thought? And must we, in such a case, insist that the author of the dialogue *believe* what he puts into the mouth of the interlocutor? Would we not, instead, agree with Frede that the author does *not* consider herself to be an authority on any matter philosophical? And if Frede's statement along these lines is correct about Plato, why *would* we want to take the leap of ascribing to such an author a belief found in that dialogue?

It appears, then, that even Frede's moderate proposal that the *Sophist* contains Plato's own beliefs is problematic. It seems that the form of written discourse Plato has chosen does not warrant, so far as the forgoing arguments for the TI go, the attribution of any of the ideas found in the Platonic corpus to Plato himself. If this is true, then how much less plausible is it for theoretical interpreters to ascribe to Plato certain theories or doctrines based on the contents of the dialogues?

### THE SOCRATIC INTERPRETATION

Having presented various criticisms of some arguments for the TI, I will distinguish the SI from other approaches to interpreting Plato's writings which differ from that of the TI.

One source of inspiration for the SI is Frede's claim that the form of Plato's dialogues makes it unclear whether or not he speaks to us in his own name in them. But there is a need for hermeneutical principles for the study of Plato's dialogues, especially if the TI is untenable. Gerald Press sets forth three such principles: holism, contextualism, and organicism. Holism means two things, according to Press: 'first, that the unit of study is the whole dialogue, not some one or a few arguments excerpted from the rest, nor the arguments abstracted from their dramatic settings, characters, ironies, and myths'.<sup>50</sup> Contextualism requires that Plato interpreters be sensitive to at least three types of context: language, culture, and politics relative to the era in which Plato wrote the dialogues. Organicism sets as an hermeneutical goal 'to see how, as in an organic body, all parts work together to a common end'.<sup>51</sup> Press's interpretive principles make the following assumptions. First, Plato wrote dialogues instead of treatises and they ought to be interpreted as dialogues. Secondly, Plato employed the dialogue form (instead of the treatise) voluntarily and for a specific purpose. Thirdly, 'each dialogue is thoroughly unified and essentially independent of all other dialogues . . . each of the genuine dialogues can be read sensibly without knowing anything about the content or action of any other dialogue'. Fourthly, the dialogues of Plato are works of literary art of the highest calibre.<sup>52</sup>

The SI agrees with Press's interpretation on some points. Both interpretations agree that Plato wrote dialogues and that they ought to be understood as such, not as doctrinal treatises. Moreover, both interpretations aver that historical or secondary evidence does not provide sufficient evidence for the attribution of this or that belief to Plato. They also concur on the idea that the dialogues are, among other things, dramatic devices, the purposes of which include enabling their readers to make philosophical progress on certain important issues.

However, the SI differs from Press's view in some important ways. Regarding Press's principle of holism, it might be argued that this principle can be followed by a theoretical or dogmatic interpreter of Plato just as it can by a Socratic interpreter. After all, a theoretical interpreter might insist on a holistic view of each dialogue *for the purpose of finding in each one some doctrine of Plato's*. For this reason, the SI

<sup>50</sup> G. Press, 'Principles of Dramatic and Non-dogmatic Plato Interpretation', in *PD*, p. 111.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109–110.

requires a stronger hermeneutical principle of holism, one which states that each dialogue of Plato must be construed in light of its dramatic contents and in light of the claim that, as far as we know, Plato never speaks in his own name in the dialogues. Furthermore, the SI does not agree with the statement that 'it is no more appropriate to interpret the arguments in abstraction from their full, actual linguistic setting than it would be to interpret Plato solely as a poet and playwright'.<sup>53</sup> For if the genuine and fundamental purpose of the dialogues is to enable readers to engage in philosophical discussion about important problems with the goal of their own philosophical enlightenment, then why rule out as being inappropriate the abstraction of arguments from their contexts as one way in which such problems might be discussed fruitfully? If the purpose of interpretation is to discover 'the' dramatic understanding of the dialogue, then there is really little difference between Press's view and the TI except that the former one is based on the dramatic content of the dialogues and the latter is not. The SI, in contrast, assumes that there is no specific view or way that the dialogues are to be read, except that they are to be taken as philosophical discussions engaging the readers in philosophical dialectic regarding various subjects. Thus the SI allows for a broader reading of each dialogue. For instance, the *Theaetetus* might be seen as the source of justified true belief theory and might be viewed as one historical source of contemporary analytical epistemology. But this might be done without paying attention to the context or 'original purpose' of the *Theaetetus*. Besides, if it is too hard to determine the beliefs of Plato for the reasons already enumerated, it is equally difficult to figure out what his intentions were in writing this dramatic dialogue or that one. Plato's purpose in writing the dialogues, according to the SI, is to assist in and to guide the reflection of readers to their own discoveries of objective truths about justice, knowledge, love, poetry, and the like.

The SI does *not* see the Platonic dialogues as communicating beliefs attributable to Plato. But it is dramatic in a somewhat weaker sense than Press's hermeneutic. For while the dialogues are dramatic works, they might still be used (fruitfully) to extract and analyse arguments from them, regardless of context and such, to allow the dialectic to lead the reader to philosophical insights on a particular subject matter. Thus the SI denies that the dialogues reveal, of the positions expressed therein, which ones are Plato's. It none the less allows for the possibility that philosophical enlightenment can be gained from either an historical or a non-historical mode of analysing certain passages. For the general purpose of the dialogues is to lead readers to philosophical enlightenment.

### OBJECTIONS TO THE SOCRATIC INTERPRETATION, AND REPLIES

Now it might be argued that the SI entails an unfalsifiable thesis about how one ought to interpret Plato's works. The thesis is, according to this objection, unfalsifiable in that it is not possible to produce evidence to refute it. Moreover, as an unfalsifiable claim, the SI ought to be rejected in favour of the TI. After all, the TI is a thesis for which textual evidence can be adduced.

However, this objection to the SI fails to understand that it *is* possible to refute the SI. It can be refuted by the following sorts of evidence: an unambiguous prose statement of Plato's to the effect that his own beliefs, theories, and doctrines are expressed in some dialogue, an unambiguous treatise of Plato's which sets out his beliefs, theories, doctrines, etc. Clearly it is possible for Plato to have written such

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

works. But no such evidence exists that he did so. However, even lacking such evidence, the burden of argument is on theoretical interpreters to support their claim that the *dialogues* express, unambiguously, Plato's beliefs, theories, and doctrines. Thus far, the arguments for the TI are weak, too weak to warrant that approach to the Platonic corpus.

Moreover, it might be argued that the SI makes reading Plato's dialogues a matter of subjective interpretation and that Plato himself had no ideas of his own. But the SI need not and should not take on a subjective tone. To hold, as the SI does, that the nature of the dialogues obscures our attempts to discover Plato's own philosophy or doctrines and that the reader of the Platonic corpus is to engage the dialogical interlocutors in a dynamic way in no sense rules out the possibility that, for instance, a student of the *Theaetetus* might discover the nature of human knowledge, or that the reader of the *Republic* might arrive at some objective truth about the moral status of poetry in the ideal state, etc. Nor does the SI necessarily deny that Plato *had* beliefs or ideas of his own [recall that both Socratic and theoretical interpreters agree on (4), above]. What the SI denies is that the primary source (the Platonic corpus) and secondary sources are able to provide sufficient and unproblematic evidence of Plato's thought. For trying to extract Plato's ideas from the dialogues is like trying to find the ideas of David Hume in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* without Hume's treatises against which to attempt to identify Hume's ideas on religion.

Additionally, what if it is true, in light of the fact that the early and middle dialogues of Plato are elenctic, that, as Christopher Gill suggests,<sup>54</sup> later dialogues such as the *Philebus* and *Sophist* are Plato's way of engaging philosophically his contemporaries? Would this result prove embarrassing for the SI? Gill's rather helpful suggestion does *not* discount the SI. Rather, it seems to strengthen further the SI. For there is no logical inconsistency with the SI's maintaining that Gill is correct on this point, while it is none the less the case that there is no way of knowing whether Plato himself subscribes to a particular view expressed in any of the later dialogues. After all, Plato can engage his contemporaries in a 'shared search' for truth without himself having formulated his own views.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, even if it *were* justified to ascribe to Plato a certain *belief* found in one of his dialogues (even in a later one such as the *Philebus* or *Sophist*), it would hardly follow from this that such a belief amounts to either a *theory* or a *doctrine*, as is so often claimed by theoretical interpreters. Mere beliefs hardly amount to theories or doctrines. And a careful study of the Platonic corpus simply cannot support the attribution of theories or doctrines to Plato for the reason that there are no theories or doctrines to be found therein! At most, there are only beliefs and arguments that might be ascribed to Plato. However, no amount of textual analysis will justify the extraction of what can truly be referred to as a *theory* which might then be associated with Plato. For a theory would require at least an analysis or statement of the nature, function and purpose of, say, the concept of knowledge or forms, mimetic art, truth, and other key concepts discussed in the dialogues. Yet nothing of the sort is found in the Platonic corpus, rendering the TI dubious.

Finally, it might be argued that the SI *is*, contrary to the attempt to distinguish it from the TI, dogmatic. For it attributes to Plato a commitment to the Socratic method

<sup>54</sup> Gill, in *FALP*, pp. 292f.

<sup>55</sup> That Plato's later dialogues contain a certain level of philosophical sophistication might be explained, at least in part, by the possibility that Plato uses his dialogues, perhaps among other things, as a way of engaging philosophically his contemporaries. The assumption here is that conversing with others enhances the 'shared search' for answers to problems.

of doing philosophy as outlined above. In effect, this makes the SI a dogmatic one, albeit in a manner which ascribes a different set of beliefs to Plato from those ascribed by the TI.

However, this objection to the SI is not telling, and for the following reason. There is a significant difference between the SI's ascription of methodological beliefs to Plato (in particular, the Socratic method) and the TI's attributing to Plato, not only the methodology of the Socratic method, but an entire array of beliefs, doctrines, and theories concerning metaphysics, epistemology, politics, ethics, etc. At worst, the SI is 'dogmatic' in a minimal way, ascribing to Plato the beliefs entailed by a standard construal of the Socratic method, but nothing more. But this is a far cry from what is attributed to Plato by the TI. For in that hermeneutical tradition, Plato is ascribed not only the Socratic method, but everything from a theory of forms to an entire system of thought. Thus even *if* it makes sense to say that the SI's attribution of the Socratic method to Plato is dogmatic, it would still not follow that such methodological ascription to Plato is unjustified in the way that the TI's attribution of both the same methodological beliefs *and* a much wider range of beliefs to Plato is problematic.

### CONCLUSION

Perhaps there are other arguments which either support the TI or confound the SI. If so, the hope is that they carry with them a significantly greater degree of plausibility than those set forth and examined herein. The conclusion for which I argue is based on the sceptical concerns about the TI that I have raised throughout this paper. I do not conclude that one ought to accept the SI of the Platonic corpus until it is refuted. Rather, I argue that the SI deserves our increasing attention and respect, for it seems to suffer *none* of the problems (discussed herein) facing the TI.

Moreover, if the preceding discussion is on track, then Irwin's claim that

it would be a mistake for students of Plato to spend all their time worrying about how to read Plato; they may learn more about this by looking for what is philosophically interesting and provocative in him<sup>56</sup>

is problematic. For, though no student ought to spend *all*<sup>57</sup> of his or her time doing metaphilosophy when studying Plato's dialogues, a search for 'what is philosophically interesting' in Plato's dialogues depends on *how* the dialogues are interpreted. Thus the metaphilosophical issues pertaining to the reading of Plato are inescapable, or at least quite important, for an informed understanding of the contents of the dialogues themselves. In answer to Irwin's claim, it might be said that it is a mistake for one to spend too much time attributing this theory or that doctrine to Plato, especially if the fundamental purpose of the dialogues is *not* to discern Plato's theories, doctrines, or views, but to enable the reader to develop *her own* sense of the truth with respect to human knowledge (given the discussion in the *Theaetetus*), justice (given the discussions in, for example, the *Republic* and the *Laws*), the obligation to obey the law (given the discussions in, for example, the *Apology* and the *Crito*), art (given the discussions in the *Republic* and the *Ion*), love (given the speeches in the *Symposium*), etc. Even so, one ought to keep in mind Paul Woodruff's reminder that 'reading Plato is hard work and inevitably frustrating:

<sup>56</sup> Irwin, 'Reply to David L. Roochnik', in Kraut, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, p. 199.

<sup>57</sup> Irwin's use of 'all' here is disingenuous in that the SI does not hold that one ought to spend all one's time doing metaphilosophy in relation to the Platonic corpus.

total satisfaction in interpretation eludes us'.<sup>58</sup> This wisdom applies to both Socratic and theoretical interpreters alike.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> P. Woodruff, 'Reply to Ronald Polansky', in Griswold, *Platonic Writings*, p. 214.

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