RE-READING PLATO: THE PROBLEM
OF PLATONIC CHRONOLOGY

JACOB HOWLAND

In memoriam
David R. Lachterman

IT HAS LONG BEEN a scholarly commonplace that we possess at least a rough knowledge of the chronology of the Platonic dialogues, and that this information is essential to our understanding of the philosophic significance of Plato's writings because it allows us to trace crucial changes in his thought. The assumptions and arguments that underlie our basic chronological distinctions, as well as our conviction of their fundamental interpretative importance, were introduced and defended during the nineteenth century. Perhaps inevitably, the passage of time has muffled old debates, while transforming what were once novel theses into the familiar sediment of our intellectual inheritance.

This paper urges that we re-examine our most basic presuppositions concerning the possibility and significance of a Platonic chronology.[1] My purpose is to awaken Plato scholarship from its dogmatic slumber. In what follows, I shall argue that the project of determining the chronology of the dialogues is, in general, and without regard to its particular variants, philologically and methodologically unsound in two crucial respects. First, any

---

The following works will be cited by author's name alone: Leonard Brandwood, *The Dating of Plato's Works by the Stylistic Method. A Historical and Critical Survey* (diss., University of London, London 1958); W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* 4 (Cambridge 1975); Gerard R. Ledger, *Re-Counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (Oxford 1989); W. Lutoslawski, *The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic* (New York 1897); T. M. Robinson, "Plato Oxoniensis," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (1967) 90–102; Sir David Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford 1951); E. N. Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Uppsala 1977).

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Greek are my own.

[1]This paper is the result of reflections stimulated by the recent revival of interest in Platonic chronology, both with respect to detailed results (see especially Holger Thesleff, "Platonic Chronology," *Phronesis* 34 [1989] 1–26) as well as to the assumptions underlying the methodology of chronological investigations (see Wolfgang Wieland, *Platon und die Formen des Wissens* [Göttingen 1982], esp. ch. 5: "Platons Entwicklung und die fiktive Chronologie der Dialoge"). Thesleff calls for a dialogue concerning "the premises and criteria of Platonic chronology" (2). Although he argues against traditional chronological arrangements of the dialogues (particularly with regard to the so-called "early" or "Socratic" period), Thesleff does not call into question the fundamental premises or criteria of Platonic chronological investigation *per se*. "Platonic Chronology" thus exemplifies the basic presuppositions I wish to examine critically in the present paper.

attempt to ascertain the relative dates of the dialogues must rely upon a se-
lective and arbitrary interpretation of the external ancient evidence, as well
as unfounded hypotheses about the relevance of the data extracted from the
dialogues. Second, the application of ostensive chronological distinctions to
the interpretation of the dialogues requires one to make assumptions that
are both intrinsically paradoxical and incongruous with the dialogues them-
selves. For these reasons, we can no longer afford to regard the "results"
of chronological investigations as keys to the understanding of Plato.

As a prelude to our exploration of contemporary interpretative commit-
ments, it will be useful to begin by considering representative ancient inter-
pretative approaches to the dialogues. This will not only set in relief cer-
tain critical features of contemporary Plato scholarship, but also, I hope,
help us to re-open ways of reading that are more faithful to the nature and
purpose of Plato's writings.

I

It is noteworthy that the ancients, who were schooled in the art of hunting
down hidden meanings, acknowledged that the Platonic dialogues present
both unusual enticements and unusual difficulties to their would-be inter-
preters. This doubly provocative character of the dialogues is fittingly em-
blematized in a story told by Olympiodorus:

When he [Plato] was about to die, he saw in a dream that he had become a swan
and was going from tree to tree, and in this manner he caused the greatest trouble
for the bird-catchers [τοῖς ἰξευταῖς]. Simmias the Socratic judged that Plato would
elude those after him who wished to interpret him. For the interpreters who
attempt to hunt out what the ancients had in mind are similar to bird-catchers,
but Plato is elusive because it is possible to hear and understand his words in
many ways, both physically, and ethically, and theologically, and literally, just
like those of Homer as well.[2]

A Platonic dialogue is a peculiar sort of artefact, for it is somehow also a
living unity. The dialogues, like swans, possess an alluring beauty but do

---

[2] *Olympiodorus: Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*, ed. L. G. Westerink
(Amsterdam 1956) 2.156–162 (henceforth cited as Ol. *Comm. Alc.*). Compare the version
of this story which appears in the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*,
ed. and trans. L. G. Westerink (Amsterdam 1962) 1.29–38 (henceforth *Anon. Prol.*).
On Olympiodorus' Neoplatonic interpretative commitments, see James Coulter, *The
Literary Microcosm* (Leiden 1976). In the present connection, however, one should
especially note that Olympiodorus' story is consistent with Coulter's observation that
allegorism, "the systematic interpretation of a text . . . on the assumption that the author
intended that the reader seek beneath the surface some second or indirect meaning,"
began in Greece before the time of Plato and was practised "by interpreters of the most
disparate religious and philosophical persuasions" (25, 23). Neoplatonic allegorism was
thus a relatively late development in a longstanding tradition of allegorization.

not stand still. This story warns, however, that attempts to capture and fix the dialogues' meaning are apt merely to fragment and distort it. Plato's dream invites us to seek an interpretative approach to his writings that is unlike the art of fowling.

Olympiodorus' story is suggestive when read in its original context. The sweet song of swans is prophetic, because swans belong to Apollo and so are endowed with prophetic powers.[3] The dream attributed to Plato thus seems to admonish us that the proper interpretative approach to the dialogues is more like prophecy than hunting, both because the dialogues themselves somehow speak prophetically, and because our ability to hear and understand their speech is connected with the preservation of their living, moving character. We may begin to flesh out the meaning of this admonition by observing that there are two obvious senses in which the dialogues do not stand still: first, they are dramatizations of impromptu conversations, and so are full of reversals, digressions, incomplete gestures, unfulfilled promises, and the like; and second, they are all at least implicitly aporetic, so that in them no inquiry is ever finally put to rest. To read the dialogues with the eyes and ears of a hunter, the dream story suggests, is to take aim at a kind of fixed and final meaning they do not in themselves possess, but that we ourselves produce when we abstract from the senses in which the dialogues, so to speak, wander about. Such a reading can grasp only still and silent images, as it were, of the living originals.

Socrates' comments on writing in the *Phaedrus* develop in similar terms the problem of how to read the Platonic dialogues. Socrates asserts that "it is necessary for every λόγος to be composed just like a living being [ζῷον], with it having some body of its own, so as to be neither headless nor feetless, but to have as its middle and outermost parts writings befitting one another and the whole" (*Phdr.* 264c2–5). Yet Socrates goes on to criticize the written word on the ground that its resemblance to a living being is no greater than that of a painting. For this reason, the written word is mute when questioned, repetitive, cannot keep silence when it ought to, and cannot defend itself against misinterpretation (*Phdr.* 275d4–e5). Plato's decision to write, however, suggests that his dialogues can at least partly overcome these deficiencies, and so are intrinsically more "alive" than paintings and other forms of writing. Viewed in the light of the *Phaedrus*, then, the interpretative decisions we make in approaching the dialogues are critical, since these decisions may just as easily obscure as disclose the distinctive living character of Plato's works.[4]

---

[3] Ol. *Comm. Alc.* 2.29–31; cf. *Phd.* 84e–85b. Plato's Apollonian nature is a theme of both the *Comm. Alc.* (see also 2.24–26; 2.164–167) and the *Anon. Prol.* (1.20–46; 2.16–18; 5.15–24; 6.1–16).

[4] Concerning these issues see especially Charles L. Griswold, Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's* Phaedrus (New Haven 1986) ch. 6.

How, then, can we understand the dialogues without "killing" them? And what kind of correctness would such a non-lethal understanding entail? Plato does not confine such questions to the *Phaedrus*. In the *Statesman*, the exegetic method of diaeresis—which, like fowling, is an art of "hunting," albeit one that uses speeches to immobilize (and dissect) its "prey"— produces laughably one-sided results because of its inability to discern the characteristic activities of its living quarry: man turns out to be either a featherless biped or the pig's two-footed cousin.[5] After setting forth these results, the Eleatic Stranger acknowledges that diaeresis, which purports to enumerate the elements of formal structures by way of a quasi-arithmetical process of division and collection, conveys a promise of correctness and precision that it is entirely unable to sustain in its present application, so that the λόγος threatens to end in disgrace (268b–d). It is therefore necessary, he maintains, "to proceed again from a different beginning on some other way" (268d5–6). This new beginning involves a turn to philosophic prophecy of the broadest sort: the myth of the reversed cosmos (269c–274e). This myth, which the Stranger introduces as an interpretation of a certain ancient portent (and related stories), ostensibly displays the fundamental motions of both the cosmos as a whole and the living beings within it. The myth provides a foundation for further divisions, except that, as the Stranger now insists, these divisions must reflect the dependence of statesmanship, and indeed all other arts (τέχναι), upon the possibility of *non-arithmetical* measurement "relative to the mean, the fitting, the opportune, and the needful, and everything settled toward the middle ground [τὸ μέσον] and away from the extremes" (284e6–8).

In sum, the *Statesman*'s methodological reversals reflect the Eleatic Stranger's perception that certain domains of inquiry require what one could call "prophetic" correctness.[6] In particular, neither a living being nor an art—and specifically, neither man nor the art of ruling men—can

---

[5] *Pol.* 266b–e; laughter and the laughable are mentioned at 266b10 and 266c10. On diaeresis as hunting, see *Soph.* 235a10–c6. Diaeresis produces a "net" in speeches: *Soph.* 235b1. On the image of dissection, see especially *Pol.* 266a1–2, where the Eleatic Stranger speaks of "animal, as much as is tame and gregarious," as "having been chopped up into pieces" (κατακεκερμάτισται), and cf. 261a8–9, b11, 262b6.

[6] Compare the *Republic*, in which the verb Socrates uses to describe our access to the good, "that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything," is "to divine" (ἀπομαντεύεσθαι, *Resp.* 505e1). Socrates goes on to divine (μαντεύομαι) that our knowledge of the just and noble things depend upon being sufficiently acquainted with the good (*Resp.* 506a6–7; cf. 506a8. Concerning prophecy in the *Republic*, see Jacob Howland, "The Cave Image and the Problem of Place: The Poet, the Sophist, and the Philosopher," *Dionysius* 10 [1986] 21–55, esp. 39–55). On the uncertainty associated with non-arithmetical measurement, see the distinction Socrates draws at *Euthyphro* 7b–d between disputes about the greater and the less and the heavier and the lighter, and those about the just and the unjust, the noble and the base, and the good and the bad. Put roughly, non-arithmetical correctness is "prophetic" in that judgments

be grasped philosophically without a unifying perception of that which is appropriate to the relevant whole.[7] The *Statesman* thus indirectly supports the implication of both the *Phaedrus* and Olympiodorus' story: taking the measure of the dialogues involves finding fitting responses to the peculiar unity they possess in virtue of their artful animation.

Ancient scholars seem to have been especially impressed by Plato's artfulness, and attentive to the problem of doing justice to the living unity of the dialogues. In particular, their understanding of the nature of the dialogues was inseparable from a conception of the way in which Plato designed them, as Socratically provocative instruments, to fit the souls of his readers. To begin with, it was widely acknowledged that the dialogues are philosophic dramas, or discourses, as Diogenes Laertius puts it, "composed of questioning and answering concerning some philosophical or political matter, together with the fitting delineation of the dispositions of the dramatic characters who are introduced and the rendition of diction" (3.48).[8] Diogenes recognized that the dialogues mimic the complex form and vitality characteristic of actual conversations. To understand a dialogue, then, one must understand the conversation as a whole. This means that one must in some sense enter into the souls of its participants, in order to see how each speech fits the nature of the speaker and responds (or fails to respond) to the speeches, deeds, and dispositions of the other participants. A developed statement of this interpretative attitude is to be found in the reflections of the author of the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* concerning Plato's selection of the dialogue form:

He chose it, we say, because the dialogue is a kind of cosmos. For in the same way as a dialogue has different personages each speaking in character, so does the universe comprise existences of various natures expressing themselves in various ways; for the utterance of each is according to its nature. It was in imitation, then, of God's creation, the cosmos, that he did this. Either this is the reason, or it is that the cosmos is a kind of dialogue. For just as in the world there are superior and inferior existences and the soul during her stay in the world sometimes conforms to the superior, sometimes to the inferior, so the dialogue also has its characters, the questioners and the questioned, and our soul, sitting in judgment, now sides with the questioners, now with the questioned.[9]

---

concerning the fitting, the opportune, and the needful lack the evident certainty enjoyed by arithmetical measurements.

[7] Among the arts, the "prophetic" character of measurement according to the non-arithmetical mean is minimal in shoemaking (since it is relatively easy to tell if a shoe fits and otherwise suits one's foot), but especially evident in the case of statesmanship, which involves knowledge of what is opportune, fitting, and needful in relation to a community of human souls.

[8] Cf. *Anon. Prol.* 14.3–8. The anonymous author stresses that the dialogues must be said to be "without meter" to distinguish them from tragic and comic λόγοι.

[9] *Anon. Prol.* 15.2–13 (I have used Westerink's English translation, 28).

This passage speaks of questions, but not answers; it stresses the aporetic, provocative character of the dialogues.[10] While the dialogues are meant to draw the reader into an imaginative rehearsal of the movement of inquiry (and do so, in part, by playing upon the pleasure we take in μίμησις),[11] it is important to observe that this movement is never more than superficially completed. Elsewhere, the anonymous author suggests that the arguments (ἀποδείξεις) of each dialogue "circle around" a central problem; it is up to the reader himself to negotiate the transition from dianoetic periphery to noetic core (17.25–31). Each inquiry, then, can be completed only by the reader's synoptic reflection upon the variety of perspectives from which, having entered the dialogues as an active participant, he has investigated the issue at hand.

There was also a tradition that the dialogues as a whole constituted a well-ordered arrangement, or cosmos, of interconnected conversations. Diogenes states that according to Thrasyllus of Alexandria (whose Platonic canon was recognized as authoritative for almost two millenia), Plato set out his dialogues in tetralogies, like those of the tragic dramatists, who competed at the festivals with three tragedies and a satyr play. Before Thrasyllus, Aristophanes, the Alexandrian librarian, had grouped the dialogues in trilogies (3.56–62). These distinct arrangements suggest that the ligatures connecting the dialogues are many and varied. To begin with, they help to emphasize that certain dialogues unmistakably refer to one another and fit together in sequences that unfold in dramatic time, specifically, the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*; the *Laws* and *Epinomis*; and the *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*.[12] Thrasyllus also proposed an arrangement by philosophic and pedagogic style as well as subject matter. Diogenes prefers the latter scheme, which proceeds "philosophically" rather than "tragically" (3.50).[13] Yet it is worth noting that Thrasyllus' tetralogies appear to be organized according to substantive and stylistic connections as well as purely dramatic clues: thus the *Cleitophon* provides an appropriate introduction to the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias* in the eighth tetralogy, and the *Minos* to the *Laws* and the *Epinomis* in the ninth.[14]

---

[10]Cf. *Anon. Prol.* 16.15–17: ". . . in the definition of the dialogue we said that the dialogue is composed of a number of dramatic characters asking questions and being questioned."

[11]*Anon. Prol.* 15.17–20.

[12]Compare the anonymous author's distinction between the chronology of authorship and the chronology of the characters (*Anon. Prol.* 24.6–19).

[13]Cf. the arrangement proposed at *Anon. Prol.* 26.18–45.

[14]Similarly, Thrasyllus' first tetralogy groups the *Euthyphro* with the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, and the *Theaetetus* with the *Sophist* and *Statesman* (to form a trilogy that is introduced by the *Cratylus*). Diogenes notes that the first tetralogy possesses

Implicit in the ancient interpretative schemes noted above is the assumption that the chronological order of Plato's writings, if it is relevant at all, has no special claim to interpretative significance. One could object that Plato's ancient readers did not understand the notion of "development," but this assumption is unwarranted. More likely, the ancients recognized that issues of development are irrelevant to the interpretation of a literary cosmos. The idea of a literary cosmos, in turn, implies a nexus of interpretative interrelationships far richer than the linear connections suggested by developmentalist schemes. Considered as a cosmos of representative conversations, each of which incorporates, within familiar horizons, a variety of enduring (because characteristically human) perspectives upon the same issues, the dialogues suggest *many* illuminating combinations and comparisons. To understand the unity of each dialogue as a living conversation is also to understand its necessary incompleteness, and so to appreciate the ways in which it points beyond itself toward other dialogues that can help to complete it, not because these other dialogues are any more complete, but because their horizons are different. Indeed, it may well be that every dialogue in some way implicates every other dialogue in this manner.[15]

II

I have sketched certain features of an important ancient interpretative tradition in order to highlight the peculiarity of contemporary Plato scholarship, the main body of which rests upon a decisive rejection of this ancient sensibility, and more specifically, I shall argue, upon the interpretative equivalent of hunting or fowling. The great majority of Plato scholars, both in Europe and North America, now accepts a set of tenets that first gained currency during the nineteenth century, namely, that Plato wrote and completed the dialogues, one after another, over the course of his philosophical career, that they therefore reflect different stages in his thought, and that it is possible to distinguish Plato's latest dialogues from

a common plan or plot (ὑπόθεσις), "for he [Thrasyllus] wishes to exhibit the sort of life that would belong to the philosopher" (3.57).

[15] Joseph Cropsey makes a similar suggestion in "The Dramatic End of Plato's Socrates," *Interpretation* 14 (1986) 155–175, at 157. Compare the following remark by Charles F. Griswold, Jr., "Unifying Plato: Charles Kahn on Platonic Prolepsis," *Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1990) 243–263, at 257: "Each dialogue might be seen as open to all the others, and to the whole sphere of Plato's work, but from its own individual perspective. Interpretation would necessarily begin from that perspective; correspondingly, the individual dialogue would enjoy a methodological primacy relative to the *corpus*, and the proleptic aspects of a dialogue would be methodologically secondary." As Griswold indicates, one should not expect that "answers" to the questions raised in a given dialogue are to be found in some other dialogue. The dialogues are aporetic and provocative. In the most fundamental sense they point toward the reader, and must, both individually and as a whole, be completed by the reader's reflective activity.

the rest, and, with less certainty, his middle dialogues from his earliest works.[16] Furthermore, most of these scholars believe that chronological distinctions provide an essential interpretive key to the dialogues, either because Plato's thought changed in fundamental respects as he matured (the "development" hypothesis)[17] or because later dialogues presuppose earlier ones for other reasons.[18] The validity of specific chronological distinctions, in turn, ultimately depends (as I shall argue) upon stylometry,

[16] F. M. Cornford, "The Athenian Philosophical Schools," *CAH* 6 (Cambridge 1927) 310–332; A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his Work* (London 1929) 18–22; Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago 1933) 58–59; Ross 1–10; Brandwood 397–405; Holger Thesleff, *Studies in the Style of Plato* (Helsinki 1967) 8–26; Guthrie 48–52; Tigerstedt 25; T. M. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford 1977) 291–293 (n. 33); Ledger. See now also Leonard Brandwood's revision of his doctoral dissertation, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge 1990), which was unavailable at the time the present paper was completed. A number of questions remain unresolved, even where the "later" dialogues are concerned: consider especially the debate between G. E. L. Owen, "The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Later Dialogues," *CQ* NS 3 (1953) 79–95 and Harold Cherniss, "The Relation of the *Timaeus* to Plato's Later Dialogues," *AJP* 78 (1957) 225–266, and see also Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Late Ontology: A Riddle Resolved* (Princeton 1983) 256–267 (Appendix B). Robinson places the Owen-Cherniss debate about the relative dates of the *Parmenides* and the *Timaeus* within the context of the attempts of "analytic" philosophers to show that Plato's "mature" thought involved a rejection of the theory of Ideas and a turn toward linguistic analysis.

[17] The most notable challenge to the development hypothesis was set forth by Paul Shorey in *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (Chicago 1904). Shorey nonetheless accepted the chronological division of the dialogues into three general groups (129). As already noted, the development hypothesis gained strength when it was embraced by analytical philosophers (who still make up the orthodox core of Plato scholarship in English), and, at least in its most general form, requires no defense in current scholarship (consider, for example, Sayre's *Plato's Late Ontology* [above, n. 16]). Although Robinson pokes fun at the tendency of Oxford scholars (like Owen) to see Plato as progressing towards "the Light which is Analysis," he calls Shorey's attempt to defend the essential unity of Plato's thought a "dubious task" (91). Similarly, William J. Prior regards the positions of Owen and the unitarians as extremes between which his "moderate" conception of Plato's development falls, and maintains that "the majority of Plato scholars in this century have held some version of the view I put forth" (*Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics* [La Salle 1985] 4).

[18] Charles Kahn, for example, has recently argued that what he calls the "pre-middle" dialogues anticipate the philosophic views expressed in the middle dialogues. According to this "proleptic" reading, which uses chronological distinctions as an interpretative key to the substantive unity of the dialogues, the pre-middle dialogues are meant to prepare Plato's original readers for the understanding of later doctrines. See C. Kahn, "Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?," *CQ* NS 31 (1981) 305–320; *id.*, "On the Relative Date of the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1988) 69–102; *id.*, "Plato's *Charmides* and the Proleptic Reading of the Socratic Dialogues," *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988) 541–549. For a critical assessment of Kahn's views see Griswold (above, n. 15). George Klosko, who claims to stand "in the development camp," also takes a proleptic view of the early dialogues, in defense of which he quotes Jaeger (*The Development of Plato's Political Theory* [New York 1986] 19–21).

or the statistical analysis of Plato's style, a subject to which we shall soon return.

In *Plato: The Man and His Work*, A. E. Taylor introduced the importance of chronological considerations in the following manner (16):

> To understand a great thinker is, of course, impossible unless we know something of the relative order of his works, and of the actual period of his life to which they belong. What, for example, could we make of Kant if we did not know whether the *Critique of Pure Reason* was the work of ambitious youth or of ripe middle age, whether it was written before or after the discourse on the *Only Possible Demonstration of the Being of a God* or the *Dreams of a Ghost-seer*? We cannot, then, even make a beginning with the study of Plato until we have found some trustworthy indication of the order in which his works, or at least the most significant of them, were written.

Unlike the works of Kant, Plato's dialogues lack introductions, prefaces, or any other direct advice on what they intend or how they are to be understood. Plato's silence on this subject, as we have seen, makes for interpretative difficulties now legendary. Chronological investigation is attractive because it promises to bring order out of what looks like chaos by providing an authoritative framework for interpreting the dialogues. This framework, it should be noted, is from Taylor's perspective rooted in the general form of a human life, which is composed of distinct and distinguishable developmental periods. We thus need to know not only when Plato's dialogues were written in relation to one another, but also in relation to the psychological intervals and formative episodes of his life.

Taylor's conception of what is required to begin the study of Plato has been endorsed by successive generations of influential scholars.[19] It has its roots, however, in the scholarship of the nineteenth century. In this connection, Taylor's mention of Kant does not seem fortuitous. George Grote, writing in 1865, observed that "the Platonic Canon established by Thrasyllus maintained its authority until the close of the last century .... But the powerful impulse, given by Kant to the speculative mind of Europe during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, materially affected the point of view from which Plato was regarded."[20] This impulse was especially apparent in the work of Wincenty Lutoslawski, whose *Origin and Growth of*

---

[19]In 1951, Ross found it appropriate to begin his study of the theory of Ideas with a consideration of the possibility of tracing "the history of the theory of Ideas" (1). Similarly, in the course of introducing the dialogues in his *History of Greek Philosophy*, Guthrie, writing in 1975, moved directly from a consideration of the Platonic canon to a consideration of chronology, since "it is obviously important for students of his [Plato's] thought to determine, at least approximately, the chronological order of his writings if not their absolute dates" (41).

[20]G. Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Socrates* 1 (London 1865) 170, 171. The German Plato scholarship of the first half of the nineteenth century is briefly but

Plato's Logic is, in Leonard Brandwood's words, "the most extensive, the most well-known and the most maligned stylistic investigation of all."[21] Lutoslawski cites Kant in support of the notion that "we may understand a philosopher better than he understood himself" (30).[22] He goes on to compare the understanding at which he aims with the scientific knowledge of the development and interdependence of the chief properties of a plant or an animal. "To learn what the philosopher thought"—the stated goal of Lutoslawski's study—is thus equivalent to "get[ting] an insight into the psychological evolution of our philosopher, though he nowhere mentions his evolution—though he disregarded his change of convictions and perhaps even attempted to conceal such changes" (29, 30).[23]

Like Taylor, Lutoslawski assumed that Plato's writings reflect a teleological evolution, so that his later works contain his "definitive teaching" (33–34).[24] While the orthodox notion that the study of Plato requires a trustworthy chronology of the dialogues (which I shall call the "standard view") does not strictly entail the assumption that Plato progresses (rather than regresses), it is crucial to observe that this view is rooted in the supposition that the dialogues, like Kantian treatises, (1) contain a philosophic teaching that (2) changes over time. With regard to (1), it is assumed that Plato's writings, like those of almost all philosophers in

---

ably summarized in this work, 170–211. For later German scholarship, see Brandwood's detailed review of stylistic analyses from 1867 to 1935.

[21]Brandwood 223. Although Brandwood confirms that the bulk of Lutoslawski's research is unreliable, Ross calls Lutoslawski one "of five leading students" of the chronology of the dialogues and makes use of his results in a table (1, 2).

[22]Lutoslawski quotes the following passage from 370 of the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "I need only remark that it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in ordinary conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him better than he has understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept (*Begriff*), he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention" (Norman Kemp Smith's translation, from *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* [New York 1965]). Kant makes these remarks within the context of a discussion of Plato.

[23]In commenting on K. F. Hermann's *Geschichte und System der platonischen Philosophie* (Heidelberg 1839), which Lutoslawski summarizes with approval, Tigerstedt notes that Hermann's work was "immensely influential" due to "his having voiced 'the spirit of the age.' 'Evolution' (Entwicklung) and 'Personality' (Persönlichkeit) were great contemporary slogans. When Hermann declared that 'das Ganze der platonischen Schriften das Bild einer lebendigen organischen Entwicklung gewähre' and that Plato's writings must be regarded 'als den treuen Abdruck seines Geistes,' his declaration found a ready echo in the minds of his readers" (29). We shall return to the theme of evolution below, in Sections III and IV.

[24]Compare Robinson's remark about the Oxford scholars: "Succumbing (very understandably) to the temptation to consider their own brand of philosophizing 'mature' (by contrast with that of most of their predecessors), they conclude that when Plato treads similar ground we see his 'mature' thought" (93).

the Western tradition, are philosophically significant insofar as they supply answers to philosophic questions by offering arguments in defense of some position. When (2) is added, one can make a good case for the importance of an accurate chronology. The significance of each dialogue within Plato's thought as a whole, one could argue, would be clear only in the light of its fixed place within the entire sequence of dialogues, since each philosophic position would reveal its ultimate significance only in the light of previous or later positions. But what if the dialogues, for all the arguments contained within them, do not themselves contain a philosophic teaching in the specified sense—if Plato, in this crucial respect, stands apart from the History of Western Philosophy? If in fact the dialogues are Socratically provocative documents that are essentially intended to solicit reflection (not to spell out answers) and that do so, in part, by virtue of their fluidity and incompleteness, we need not be concerned with ascertaining the order in which they were written.[25] I repeat: chronological questions are philosophically relevant only if one assumes that the dialogues occupy fixed positions and do not "wander about."[26] Without reviewing the ground we have already covered, we may observe that the interpretative approach we

[25]With regard to this point, one should consider the work of Wolfgang Wieland (above, n. 1). Wieland notes that the chronological results of stylometric research have, perhaps most significantly, been viewed as confirmation of the widely held belief that Plato's development involved the formulation and later the rejection (signalled decisively in the Parmenides) of the theory of Ideas. This "genetic schema" wrongly presupposes, however, that the dialogues contain such a "theory." Instead, Wieland argues, one finds in the dialogues "Fragen, Behauptungen, Andeutungen, Erwähnungen, Gleichnisse, Hinweise auf scheinbare Selbstverständlichkeiten. Es mag sein, dass diese Dinge der Sache nach nur auf der Basis einer umfassenden Theorie verständlich gemacht werden können. Doch eine solche Theorie wäre ihrem Status nach in jedem Fall eine Rekonstruktion des Interpreten" (86). Concerning Wieland's approach to the Parmenides, see below, n. 58.

[26]It has long been argued that Plato's "later" dialogues are vehicles for the presentation of positive doctrine which retain only a pale and flat dramatic exterior. In fact, Lutoslawski (86–87) lists as the 13th, 14th, and 15th of his 500 "peculiarities of style" Lewis Campbell's observations that in the "later" works "Socrates is not the principal figure in the conversation," "the exposition . . . is chiefly didactic," and we are presented with "scientific exactness and compression" accompanied by "the decline of poetical grace and power"; cf. the "General Introduction" to Campbell's The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato [Oxford 1867], esp. xv–xxiii.) One should compare the comments of Benjamin Jowett and A. E. Taylor on the Sophist and the Statesman. Of the Statesman, Jowett writes "The Eleatic Stranger, here, as in the Sophist, has no appropriate character, and appears only as the expositor of a political ideal" (The Dialogues of Plato [Boston] 3.514). Taylor concurs: "the clash of mind with mind . . . is abandoned for the delivery of a lesson by master to pupil" (Plato: The Sophist and the Statesman [London 1961] 5). Mitchell Miller, however, has argued convincingly in both The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman (The Hague 1980) and Plato's Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul (Princeton 1986) that the "later" dialogues are no less essentially dialogic and dramatic (and therefore open-ended and intrinsically aporetic) than "earlier" works. Miller also observes that "the tendency to neglect the interplay of form, content, and function

are now considering requires us to abstract from certain basic features of the dialogue form. This act of abstraction, in turn, presupposes that, prior to having determined the proper order of the dialogues, which we require to understand their philosophic significance, we already know that certain dimensions of the dialogue form possess little or no philosophic significance. Proponents of the standard view are obliged to show that this decisive presupposition is not arbitrary.[27]

Assumption (2) is, if anything, more seriously problematic than (1). No doubt Plato's thought did evolve over the course of his life, but the crucial question concerns his practice as a writer. In supposing that it is possible to find within the dialogues a teaching that changes over time, the standard view on the subject of chronology assumes that Plato, like Kant, wrote and completed one philosophical work after another, without thoroughly or substantially revising his dialogues. It would, after all, be meaningless to speak of "early," "middle," and "late" dialogues if, for example, Plato were actually in the habit of continually reworking his whole literary corpus. Yet on balance the ancient evidence inclines toward the view that this was in fact Plato's habit.

The dialogues themselves do not settle this question (a point to which we shall return).[28] There are, however, three pieces of ancient evidence that bear on this issue. The first two, provided by Aristotle and Diogenes Laertius, have traditionally been interpreted as lending crucial support to chronological investigations. The third, a remark by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, has been almost universally ignored by contemporary Plato scholars.[29] Let us examine each passage in turn.

At *Politics* 1264b26, Aristotle mentions, within the context of a discussion of the ἀπορίαι contained within the *Republic*, that "the case is almost the same concerning the *Laws*, which was written later . . . ." Aristotle does not mention when these two dialogues were written, nor does he assert that the *Laws* was Plato's last work. Furthermore, we cannot on the basis of

---

[in the Platonic dialogues] is most especially characteristic of the mainstream English and American scholarship" (*The Philosopher in Plato's* Statesman, 119, n. 6).

[27] Section III, below, contains some further reflections on the dialogue form.

[28] Guthrie's assumption (52–53) that relative dates can be established on the basis of internal references, like that of the *Theaetetus* to the *Sophist* and the *Sophist* to the *Statesman*, is question-begging: how do we know, for example, that the entire trilogy was not rewritten and revised many times?

[29] Guthrie cites the passage but asserts: "It does not amount to much" (51). Gilbert Ryle also cites the passage, but argues that "what Dionysius says could not have been true of the majority of Plato's dialogues, for their texts were released to the copyists soon after their oral delivery" (*Plato's Progress* [Cambridge 1966] 298). Ryle's rather eccentric view of the preparation and dissemination of the dialogues (*ibid.* 21–54) involves a number of very controversial assumptions. (The problem of "publication" is touched upon below, n. 33.)

this passage rule out the possibility that the *Republic* was revised in the light of the *Laws*. In this connection, it should be noted that Aristotle here emphasizes the similarity between these two dialogues. "The greatest part of the *Laws*," he writes, "happens to consist of laws, but he [Plato] has said a few things about the republic [or 'regime': τῆς πολιτείας], and although he wishes to make this share more in common with the cities, he brings it around little by little back toward the other *Republic* [Πολιτείαν]" (1265a1–5).

Diogenes Laertius mentions both the *Laws* and the *Republic* in the following passage:

Some assert that Phillip of Opus transcribed his [Plato's] *Laws*, which were in wax .... And Euphorion and Panaetius say that the beginning of the *Republic* was discovered many times revised ... (3.37)

Plato scholars have regarded these quotations from Aristotle and Diogenes as the best external evidence available concerning the chronological order of the dialogues—although they often speak as if such evidence is hardly necessary.[30] Analysts of Plato's style, in particular, have fastened upon Diogenes' remark as evidence that the *Laws* was the last dialogue Plato wrote, since stylistic investigations require an independently fixed point with reference to which the relative dates of the other dialogues may be established.[31] Yet neither of the passages quoted above support such a conclusion. As Owen has correctly observed,

There is no external or internal evidence which proves that the *Laws* or even some section of it was later than any other work .... Diogenes' remark that it was left on the wax does not certify even that it occupied Plato to his death, much less that nothing else was written at the same time. (Who would argue that the works which Descartes or Leibniz left in manuscript must have been their last?)[32]

[30] It is only near the end of his study of Plato's logic that Lutoslawski mentions the "almost universal agreement as to the final stage of Plato's philosophy." "All critics have unanimously recognized the *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and *Laws* as the latest works of Plato," in part, he says, because of the "direct testimonies of Aristotle and other witnesses as to the very late date of the *Laws*" (472). According to Taylor (above, n. 16), the quoted passages from Aristotle and Diogenes support "what could in any case never have been doubted, that the *Laws* is later than the *Republic* .... [it is a] well-authenticated fact that the *Laws* is a composition of old age" (17, 18). Ross states that Diogenes reports a "tradition" that "Plato left the *Laws* unpublished," and speaks of "the universally accepted view that it is the latest of Plato's works (unless the *Epinomis* be accepted as his and dated later)" (1). Guthrie cites both Aristotle and Diogenes, and asserts that the *Laws* is "indisputably the latest of all his [Plato's] writings" (49).

[31] See esp. Brandwood 1–2, 397. Diogenes' story is repeated by later authors, e.g., *Anon. Prol.* 24.10–15.

[32] Owen (above, n. 16) 79, n. 4 and 93, n. 3. Of course, Owen does not doubt that the *Laws* belongs among the "late" dialogues: his point is that the *Laws* may have

As Owen points out, Diogenes does not claim that the *Laws* was Plato's last
dialogue. Nor can we be certain that the *Laws* was the only dialogue Plato
left on wax tablets (although Diogenes may be taken to imply as much).
Indeed, Diogenes' anecdote about the beginning of the *Republic* may be a
clue of sorts: an author used to making extensive revisions would naturally
prefer to work in wax, which is malleable and thus easily erasable. Even
if we suppose that the *Laws* alone was left untranscribed, we do not know
when the other dialogues were transcribed. Plato may have postponed the
process of copying the dialogues in their final form until his old age.[33]

   This brings us to the third major piece of ancient evidence. Dionysius of
Halicarnassus writes (*On Literary Composition*, 25):

Plato did not leave off combing and curling and in every manner replaiting his
dialogues, even at eighty years of age. Doubtless the stories about the man's
love of labor are familiar to every lover of speeches [φιλολόγοις], especially, among
others, the ones about the tablet which they say was discovered when he died,
with the beginning of the *Republic* set down in manifold ways ("I went down to
the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston").

In this passage, Dionysius not only maintains that Plato was in the habit
of repeatedly reworking his dialogues, but also assumes that Plato's prac-
tice in this regard is common knowledge among serious readers. While
"combing and curling" might be taken to suggest merely cosmetic changes,
"in every manner replaiting" implies comprehensive alterations that go be-
yond superficial elements of style and concern the very warp and woof of
the dialogues. Seen in this light, the image of a very old Plato tinkering
with the beginning of the *Republic* hints at his deep, lifelong concern with
rewriting. Notice also that Dionysius' statement is not inconsistent with
the quotations from Aristotle and Diogenes. The story Diogenes relates
about the *Laws* is consistent with Dionysius' claim about Plato's habit of
reworking his dialogues. Furthermore, both Dionysius and Diogenes give
evidence that suggests Plato was working on the *Republic* and the *Laws*

---

been written concurrently with the other "late" dialogues and its final revision and
transcription postponed until too late.
   [33] As Griswold points out in his response to Kahn's "proleptic reading" of the dia-
logues, assumptions about how the dialogues were originally disseminated and in what
sense they were "published" are necessarily highly speculative ("Unifying Plato" [above,
n. 15] 248). Grote supposes that publication was constituted by reading a manuscript
aloud (*Plato* [above, n. 20] 137). Similarly, the anonymous author claims that the dia-
logues were read aloud at festivals (*Anon Prol.* 16.35–41). Unless we accept Ryle's guess
that the dialogues were copied out and distributed soon after their oral presentation
(see above, n. 29), this manner of "publication" would certainly not preclude making
changes in the text, or reading aloud the revised manuscript on later occasions. In this
connection, consider the complex account of revision and dissemination Thesleff offers
(above, n. 1) 10 ff.

simultaneously. This, in turn, harmonizes with Aristotle's perception that the *Laws* in an essential respect comes round by degrees to the *Republic*.

Obviously, one cannot make an airtight case out of the three brief passages we have just reviewed. Yet on balance, these passages—the best external evidence available to us—suggest that Plato revised and rewrote his dialogues throughout his active years. Unfortunately, and remarkably, it would appear that Plato scholars have almost uniformly failed to examine these passages with care.

<p style="text-align:center">III</p>

Defenders of the standard view are obliged to answer the following question: If the dialogues cannot be adequately understood without a proper chronology, why did Plato neglect to provide us with this crucial interpretative key? Lutoslawski points out the possible answers to this question when he asserts that we must study "the psychological evolution of our philosopher, though he nowhere mentions his evolution—though he disregarded his change of convictions and perhaps even attempted to conceal such changes" (30). Plato's oversight was either intentional or unintentional. If Plato *intentionally* attempted to conceal the changes in his thought, and in particular deliberately failed to provide us with the chronological information necessary for an adequate understanding of the dialogues, then either he did not wish his dialogues to be understood, or he was unaware of what was required to understand his writings. If the former, then we surely have little hope of ever understanding the dialogues—nor can we explain why Plato wrote them in the first place. If the latter, we must assume that Plato was an unusually unselfconscious, unreflective philosopher. The same assumption would be necessary if we suppose that Plato *unintentionally* overlooked his "evolution."

For two reasons, however, it is not satisfactory to claim that Plato was an unreflective writer. First, he excluded himself from the dialogues (and made a point of doing so), which implies that, in his own estimation, readers could appreciate the philosophic significance of his writings without knowledge of their author's intellectual history.[34] Second, as we have seen, he wove into the fabric of the dialogues manifold dramatic and thematic linkages. These two deliberate decisions with regard to his writings indicate that Plato himself would have rejected the interpretative significance of an accurate chronology, and suggest that in his view the interpretative key sought by contemporary scholars is actually constituted (albeit in a far more complex

---

[34] Plato merely allows himself to be mentioned a total of three times in the dialogues: Socrates refers to his presence twice in the *Apology* (34a1, 38b6), while Phaedo notes his absence once in the *Phaedo* (59b10). Diogenes Laertius makes the same observation at 3.37.

form than the standard view envisions) by the multiple internal ligatures connecting the dialogues.[35] If the standard view is correct, then, Plato was not merely an unselfconscious writer; more than this, he was fundamentally mistaken about what he was doing. It seems Lutoslawski's comparison of the study of Plato with the study of a plant or animal was apt: chronological investigations do not make sense unless the key to Plato's philosophy lies not in what he knew, but in what he did not know, that is, in his unconscious evolution.

We must not overlook the deeply problematic character of the standard view. In the first place, it depends upon the a priori assumption that a certain modern conception of the psychology of the philosopher, the nature of philosophic writing, and the relationship between the two may be fittingly applied to the interpretation of the dialogues.[36] While we cannot here explore the intrinsic plausibility of this conception of the psyche (including the "unconscious") and psychological evolution, we may note that defenders of the standard view are obliged to undertake just such an exploration. I submit, however, that it seems both ungenerous and self-defeating to begin one's study of a philosophical text (or any text considered to be worth studying) by assuming that the author fundamentally misunderstood the nature of his own writings. No one could suppose that the work of such an author might be of the highest interest: his thought must be defective to the extent that he lacks self-knowledge.[37] This raises a special difficulty

---

[35]In this connection, Grote (above, n. 20) writes: "I must remark that if Plato had conceived and predetermined the dialogues, so as to be read in one natural peremptory order, he would never have left that order so dubious and imperceptible, as to be first divined by critics of the nineteenth century, and understood by them too in several different ways. If there were any peremptory and intentional sequence, we may reasonably presume that Plato would have made it as clearly understood as he has determined the sequence of the ten books of his Republic" (192). I note in passing that in considering the work of other thinkers Plato does not seem interested in their historical development. Consider in this regard Giovanni Ferrari's argument that Plato was aware that it was likely to prove impossible for his readers to determine the authenticity of the speech of Lysias in the Phaedrus. Ferrari asserts that those who nonetheless concern themselves with this problem fall victim to Platonic irony, for they resemble the scholarly "demythologizers" who attempt "to trace the tales of Boreas and his like back to their origin in historical fact—an effort from which Socrates was at pains to distance himself .... would it not be better to follow Socrates' example and turn from undue emphasis on the truth of events to concern for the truth about ourselves (see [Phaedrus] 229e4–6)?," G. Ferrari, Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus (Cambridge 1987) 210–211.

[36]Regarding what he calls "genetic interpretations" of the dialogues, Tigerstedt aptly comments: "Greatly though they may differ, they all share the conviction that Plato's works mirror a development of his mind, which is usually conceived as implying an emancipation from Socrates" (30).

[37]Thus, Cherniss sees in Owen the tendency of the Oxford "analysts" to view what they regard as the most important Platonic dialogues as merely "primitive essays in their

with regard to the Platonic dialogues. Much of Plato is concerned with the problem of the nature and achievement of self-knowledge. According to the hermeneutical principle we are now considering, must we not conclude that much of Plato is pretty worthless—or, alternatively, that Plato was an exotic kind of idiot-savant?

<div align="center">IV</div>

The putative distinction between the conscious and unconscious dimensions of Plato's writings plays an important role in the stylometric analysis of the dialogues. Other methods of drawing chronological distinctions, including literary criticism, philosophical considerations, and references to actual historical events, are of little or no use. In general, investigations conducted in accordance with the first two of these three methods rest upon highly controversial assumptions and tend to produce conflicting results.[38] Literary considerations such as "maturity of style" and "artistic power" are excessively impressionistic and provide no solid basis for chronological distinctions, since, as Guthrie notes, "the one literary characteristic which can be attributed to Plato without qualification is versatility" (43). While philosophical considerations have recently found favor in the work of Charles Kahn, Kahn's arguments illustrate the circularity to which this method of chronological inquiry is prone. In particular, claims about the proper philosophic sequence of the dialogues cannot be used to establish a correct chronology if such claims themselves rest upon chronological assumptions.[39] Finally, references in the dialogues to datable historical events are irrelevant to the relative chronology of the dialogues. Such references tell us only that Plato worked on a certain dialogue after a certain date. They do not tell us when Plato began to write the dialogue in question, nor do they tell us anything about the relative dates of dialogues that happen to contain no references to datable historical events.

Since other methods of chronological inquiry are unreliable, it remains to examine the statistical analysis of Plato's style. Stylometric analysis

---

own philosophical method" (above, n. 16, 234). For an example of this assumption, see R. Robinson's *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*[2] ([Oxford 1953], esp. 1–6), and Tigerstedt's remarks (22–23) on Robinson.

Concerning the relationship between Platonic writing and self-knowledge, see Charles Griswold's defense of the claim that the dialogues present "the core meaning of philosophy as questioning directed to self-knowledge" (above, n. 4, 223; see esp. 219–226).

[38] Consider, for example, the menagerie of discordant arrangements of the dialogues assembled by Grote (above, n. 20) 170–211.

[39] Kahn's recent attempts to establish a "proleptic reading" of the dialogues (see above, n. 18) are vitiated by his failure to appreciate this point. Concerning the circularity of Kahn's argument, Griswold observes that "the proleptic sequence assumes a given chronology; yet the requirements of the proleptic sequence are appealed to by Kahn as part of the basis for establishing chronology" ([above, n. 15] 248 and n. 18).

arrives at "raw" statistical data, which in itself establishes (or is supposed to establish) only stylistic differences between different texts. These stylistic differences, one should note, are relevant to the dating of the dialogues only on the assumption that they are indicative of temporal differences. As a tool in chronological investigation, stylometric analysis thus rests upon the hypothesis of stylistic evolution, which Guthrie describes as "the assumption that over a sufficiently long period the style and language of an author will be subject to changes, some deliberate ... some unconscious" (48). Beyond this general assumption, stylometry requires more specific hypotheses about the particular nature of an author's stylistic evolution. It must be stressed that all of these "developmental" hypotheses are anterior to, and not themselves produced by, the data they govern. Other explanations of the same data are possible. Hence it is crucial for practitioners of stylometry to show that their hypotheses are more plausible than rival explanations of the data in question.[40]

In particular, stylometric analysis must satisfy two requirements if it is to succeed: (1) it must be possible *independently* to establish a chronological reference point with respect to which stylistic data may be evaluated; (2) it must be possible to isolate context-independent elements of Plato's style, because elements that are context-sensitive may reflect the stylistic demands of a particular text rather than long-term patterns of stylistic evolution. Failure to satisfy either one of these requirements is fatal to the project of establishing the Platonic chronology. Yet stylometry evidently fails on both counts.

(1) There is no internal evidence that allows us to establish a chronological reference point for stylometric investigation. This leaves only the ancient external evidence, of which there is very little. Stylometrists have selected as their reference point the *Laws*, and have justified this selection by appealing to the ancient evidence reviewed above in Section II. Yet as I have shown above, it is philologically impossible to establish on the basis of this evidence that the *Laws* was the last dialogue Plato wrote.

(2) Stylometrists have failed to isolate context-independent elements of Plato's style in a fashion that is not open to the charge of circularity. The most important candidates for the status of context-independence are Plato's use of hiatus, sentence rhythm, "small" common words, and individual letters. Let us examine each of these in turn.

Brandwood concluded his comprehensive survey of stylometric investigations with the warning that "with the exception of hiatus and clausula

---

[40]For an extensive critical examination of the interpretative schema of "development" as applied to ancient philosophical texts, see David R. Lachterman, "Did Aristotle 'Develop'? Reflections on Werner Jaeger's Thesis," *Revue de philosophie ancienne* 8 (1990) 3–40.

rhythm the material under examination has both lacked universal applica-
tion and produced comparatively meagre statistics," a judgment that has
recently been confirmed by R. E. Allen's emphasis on the special significance
of hiatus and sentence rhythm in determining the Platonic chronology.[41] In
the view of these and other authors, Plato's use of hiatus and sentence
rhythm, at least, are stylistic traits of sufficient stability and universality
to be considered context-independent.

Let us first consider the argument that measurements of the occurrence
of hiatus provide an adequate criterion for determining which of Plato's di-
alogues are latest. In the *Timaeus, Critias, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus,*
and *Laws,* Plato is supposed to have adopted Isocrates' "rule" or "prin-
ciple" of avoiding hiatus.[42] It is important that this be a fixed *princi-
ple* of composition, since if this cannot be established, Plato's avoidance
of hiatus is presumably context-dependent and hence is chronologically ir-
relevant. Yet there is striking evidence within the *Laws* itself, the stan-
dard with respect to which the other dialogues are to be measured, that
Plato's decisions with regard to hiatus depend upon the specifics of context:
in the legislative formulas in the *Laws* Plato makes no attempt to avoid
hiatus.[43] A similarly context-dependent decision is evident in the avoid-
ance of hiatus in Socrates' speeches in the *Phaedrus,* a dialogue "nearly
all stylometrists ... [date] before the *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides* even
though the former already shows, as the latter do not, a 'striking rarity
of hiatus'."[44] Furthermore, in the *Laws* Plato is by no means concerned
to avoid every avoidable or "illegitimate" occurrence of hiatus: Constantin
Ritter finds an average of "less than 6.0" such occurrences per page of text
in the *Laws.*[45] This kind of data led G. Janell to formulate a distinction
between "objectionable" and "unobjectionable" instances of hiatus. On the
basis of this distinction, Janell concluded that Plato was concerned with
the issue of hiatus only in his "last" six dialogues (the ones listed above),
in which, "[in accordance with] his new 'Isocratean' style of writing he
carefully avoided certain hiatus, namely, those defined as 'objectionable'"
(Brandwood 272). I mention these aspects of Janell's work because they
bring to light a telling circularity of method. Janell's investigation, Brand-
wood tells us, began "with the dialogues which Blass had shown to contain

---

[41]Brandwood 397; *The Dialogues of Plato* 1, tr. R. E. Allen (New Haven 1984) 12–13.

[42]Brandwood 18; Paul Friedländer, *Plato* 3, tr. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton 1969) 447.

[43]Brandwood notes in passing this observation of G. Janell's in his discussion of Janell,
Quaestiones Platonicae, Neue Jahrbücher für Philologie, Supp. 26, 1901. He goes on to
observe that "since this is a disadvantage to those books in which these formulas are
most frequent (especially VIII, IX, XI, XII), Janell withdrew them from his material"
(271, n. 1).

[44]Owen (above, n. 16) 80, quoting from F. Blass, *Die Attische Beredsamkeit* 2 (Leipzig
1874) 458.

[45]Quoted in Allen (above, n. 41) 12.

the fewest hiatus, *Soph. Pol. Phil. Tim. Crit. Laws.* If, he argued, certain hiatus appear considerably more often than the rest in these dialogues where Plato avoids hiatus, then obviously these [kinds of] hiatus are considered unobjectionable by Plato" (271). This argument, however, presupposes Janell's conclusion, namely, that after a certain date Plato adopted as a stylistic principle the avoidance of hiatus. Although this presupposition is open to serious challenge, it is shared by F. Blass, so much so that Blass uses the avoidance of hiatus as test of the accuracy of Platonic manuscripts![46]

In a well-known exchange centering on the status of the *Timaeus*, Owen defended the chronological significance of clausulae, and Harold Cherniss challenged the neutrality as well as other aspects of the data Owen cited.[47] Without going into the intricacies of this debate, we may observe that the same kinds of issues confront us here as in the case of hiatus. Plato's decisions regarding prose-rhythms and hiatus are deliberate. The data assembled by stylometrists concerning these elements indicated differences in relative frequency, but these data are silent regarding the explanation of these differences. The investigator who wishes to draw chronological conclusions from these data must subscribe to the general hypothesis of stylistic evolution, and is obliged in addition to presuppose the existence of a specific rule or principle sufficient to explain these differences. Yet such presuppositions are always vulnerable to the counter-argument that these differences arise from the particular requirements of context, rather than from Plato's developing adherence to certain stylistic principles.

As Robinson cautions in the course of criticizing the work of Lewis Campbell, Lutoslawski, and other scholars,

What they failed to see is that examination of an author's use of hiatus or compilation of his *hapax legomena* is the *least* likely way to produce worthwhile results. For hiatus and rare word usage are clearly within the *conscious* control of any author worth his salt, and can be manipulated at will to suit the context . . . . If we are going to talk about style at all, we surely mean those unconscious or semi-conscious traits which are so integral to a man's style that they are seldom, if ever, noticed, even by the author himself. What is more, to be called traits or

---

[46]F. M. Cornford notes, for instance, that Blass regards "with suspicion" illegitimate occurrences of hiatus in the *Timaeus*, if they cannot be removed by adopting other manuscript readings or "by conjecture" (*Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* [London 1937] 12, n. 3). In this connection, one should heed Jebb's warning against the principle that when in the writings of Isocrates a hiatus remains, the passage is corrupt, or not Isocratic: "Such logic is dangerously rigid. And when, on the other hand, a general conception of the writer's style is made to overbear the mss., the process becomes dangerously lax." R. C. Jebb, *Selections from the Attic Orators*[2] (London 1888, reprint ed., New Rochelle 1983) 103.

[47]See the articles by Owen and Cherniss cited above, n. 16.

habits at all they will have to remain fairly stable for reasonable lengths of time and within reasonable changes of literary genre.[48]

In order to locate stylistic traits that are capable of withstanding the kind of critical scrutiny proposed by Robinson, stylometrists have since the time of Brandwood's study turned to other sorts of data. Two analysts of Classical Greek writings have argued that every author "has a pattern of unconscious choices of words," in particular "small words .... such words as καί ('and'), δὲ ('and' or 'but'), the verb 'to be,' the personal pronouns, etc."[49] Most recently, Ledger has extended the analysis of unconscious elements of Plato's style to include an examination of the relative frequency of individual letters in different texts.

Let us again consider in turn each of these routes of stylometric inquiry. A growing chorus of scholars has challenged the notion that it is possible to find any stylistically relevant patterns of unconscious choices of words in the Platonic dialogues. A few examples follow. J. D. Denniston states that variations in Plato's employment of particles—words like καί and δέ—are not "due to Plato's adoption of new usages which were coming into existence during his lifetime .... Rather, they seem due to a personal, stylistic preference on his part." Denniston goes on to mention a few examples of Plato's "purely individual" employment of particles, and of his "growing predilection for poetical or Ionic idioms," and at least one commentator has seen in these remarks support for the view that "Plato's deliberate and highly individual choice of words extends even to particles."[50] Similarly, Seth Benardete has shown that formulas of response, like καλῶς ("fine"), ὀρθῶς ("right"), and ἀληθῆ ("true"), are by no means "as arbitrary and interchangeable as Homeric formulae ... [but are] dependent on and prompted by the form the previous question takes."[51] Benardete adds that his results "put out of court the possibility of accident and randomness. They show Plato's ability even in small things to imitate and sharpen the distinctions of ordinary speech" (ibid. 62). Elsewhere, Benardete argues for the context-dependence in the Platonic dialogues of two impersonal expressions of necessity, χρή and δεῖ.[52] Leonardo Tarán has argued that a related study by K. Vretska refutes the stylometrists' "easy" assumption "that they could

[48]Robinson 97. Cf. the warning of G. J. De Vries that "[stylometric] evidence should be handled with extreme caution, especially with an author like Plato who deliberately changes his style not only from one work to another but within the same work" (A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato [Amsterdam 1969] 10).

[49]A. Q. Morton and A. D. Winspear, "The Computer and Plato's Seventh Letter," Computers and the Humanities 1 (1966–67) 72–73, at 72.

[50]J. D. Denniston, The Greek Particles² (Oxford 1954) lxix; Thesleff (above, n. 16) 8, n. 1.

[51]Seth Benardete, "The Right, the True, and the Beautiful," Glotta 41 (1963) 54–62.

[52]See Seth Benardete, "XPH and ΔΕΙ in Plato and Others," Glotta 43 (1965) 285–298.

detect the 'unconscious' variations in Plato's style," a judgment that M. M. Mackenzie has recently echoed.[53] Finally, Ledger (4–5, with notes 1 and 2) argues against the validity of using measurements of frequently occurring words to gauge stylistic differences.

The most recent contribution to the literature on stylometry has the great virtue of pointing out a decisive flaw in all previous stylometric studies. In *Re-Counting Plato*, Ledger notes that "underlying all this [stylometric] work is the assumption of linearity, the belief, usually unstated, that a shift in value of the linguistic feature measured is a direct representation of an exactly proportionate shift in the date of composition" (175). As Ledger observes, however, "the fact is that we do not know, for any given author, or for authors in general, how linguistic usage changes with the passage of time." Ledger concludes that "this hypothesis [of linearity] is difficult to sustain and there is little evidence to support it" (174, 175). He adds that there are no good *a priori* reasons to deny that the linguistic features he has observed in the Platonic texts "might best be modelled as cyclical or exponential functions, or based on cubic or higher powers than ... simple linear or quadratic functions" (174).

While Ledger raises new and weighty objections to previous stylometric studies, his book also exemplifies the circularity typical of stylometric analysis as well as other methods of chronological investigation. Ledger uses the computer to produce a statistical comparison of the relative frequency in the dialogues of all the Greek letters, both absolutely and insofar as certain of them appear as the ultimate and penultimate letters in words. His hypothesis is that in some cases differences in the frequency of letter variables will indicate stylistic differences, while in other cases such differences will be irrelevant. Here is where his procedure becomes circular. To determine which variables are relevant, Ledger compares groups of dialogues "known" to be "early" with groups of dialogues "known" to be "late." He supposes that those variables whose frequencies display the greatest difference when these groups are compared are relevant markers of stylistic change. "This may appear to be begging the question," Ledger admits, "since we are presupposing that certain dialogues either post-date or pre-date others and this may constrain the subsequent analysis to mimic the paradigms" (178). In this at least he is correct. Ledger concedes that "there is a certain amount of truth in [this] criticism, but in selecting dialogues for the [early and late] groups we are only using such information

[53]Leonardo Tarán, *Academica: Plato, Phillip of Opus, and the Pseudo-Platonic Epinomis* (Philadelphia 1975) 16, n. 59; Mary Margaret Mackenzie, "Putting the *Cratylus* in its Place," *CQ* NS 36 (1986) 124–150, at 150, n. 67. Vretska's study is "Platonica III," *Wiener Studien* 71 (1958) 30–54. Benardete (above, n. 51) 62, n. 1, cites Vretska's article as providing further evidence of what Dionysius of Halicarnassus called Plato's φιλοπονία, or "love of labor."

as is universally acknowledged, such as that the *Laws* post-dates the *Republic*, or that the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* are earlier than the *Sophist* and *Politicus*" (178). In fact, Ledger's assumptions are far more sweeping than this concession suggests: the groups of dialogues "known" to be "early" include the *Phaedo, Symposium, Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Laches, Lysis,* and *Meno* as well as the *Republic, Protagoras,* and *Gorgias,* while those groups "known" to be "late" include the *Philebus, Statesman, Sophist,* and *Timaeus* as well as the *Laws.*[54] To make matters worse, Ledger does not hesitate to use still more specific presuppositions about the chronological order of the dialogues within these groups to test the reliability of his results.[55]

Stylometric analysis began as an attempt to bring chronological investigation out of the realm of unfounded speculation and once and for all to deck chronological distinctions in the mantle of science (Lutoslawski 64–66). As such, it is a failure. Karl Popper taught that a theory must be falsifiable by observation if it is to be distinguished from "metaphysical speculation" and to qualify as genuinely scientific and empirical.[56] Ledger's study, which incorporates the most highly sophisticated approach to chronological inquiry to date, raises a troubling Popperian question. If the relevance of stylometric data is to be determined by its conformity with the results one hopes to establish, as is Ledger's unstated procedure, how can chronological theories be falsified within a stylometric framework?

V

The issues at stake in this paper are of the greatest importance for our understanding of Plato, since the interpretative implications of stylometry are both comprehensive and profound. The most invidious aspect of stylometric analysis comes to light in comparison with the ancient approaches to Plato discussed above. Insofar as one uses stylometry as a key to understanding the dialogues, one also affirms the priority of arithmetical measurement to non-arithmetical correctness with regard to the fundamental question of how the dialogues are to be related to one another. Put succinctly, the advent of stylometry in Plato scholarship involves the subordination of our "prophetic" capacity to recognize the character and complexity of each dialogue as a living, incomplete conversation, and so to appreciate the multiple connections that bind these conversations together,

---

[54] See table 9.2 at Ledger 179.

[55] In commenting on a list of the "late" dialogues, Ledger writes (187): "only the set using all CLETs shows any deviation from this list by including *Cratylus* and *Crito,* but it is in other ways an impossibly unreliable list, with *Ion, Meno, Protagoras,* and *Phaedo* all being shown as post-dating the *Republic.*"

[56] Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York 1959), esp. 34–42.

to a calculative τέχνη that resembles diaeresis: the statistical division and collection of various stylistic features of the Platonic corpus.

Within the context of contemporary Plato scholarship, the results of stylometric τέχνη, spread over Plato's writings like a net, effectively forbid or invalidate whole ranges of fruitful inquiries and insights suggested by the texture of the dialogues themselves. The philosophic significance of the *Laches* is a case in point. In *Plato's Moral Theory*, Terence Irwin sets out to trace the development of Plato's moral theory through the "early, So-cratic" and the "middle" dialogues, culminating in the *Republic*. A central part of his argument is that Plato rejects certain of the "Socratic" doc-trines of the "early" dialogues. Implicit in this claim is the common devel-opmentalist assumption that the dialogues, when arranged chronologically, reflect Plato's growing independence from the historical Socrates. Irwin's entire approach depends upon discovering and adequately characterizing the theories espoused by the character of Socrates and later rejected by Plato (who supposedly speaks either through Socrates or some other characters). Irwin's interpretation should be compared with that of Charles Griswold, who finds issues of chronology irrelevant to the interpretation of the di-alogues and who approaches the *Laches* without the presuppositions of a developmentalist framework. Griswold is able to provide an account of the *Laches* that is richer and more internally coherent than Irwin's, and that places this dialogue in a reciprocally supporting relationship with some of the main works of the Platonic corpus, including the *Republic*.[57] In a simi-lar vein, Mitchell Miller has recently argued, on the basis of certain striking

---

[57]Irwin believes that Plato initially espoused and later rejected the craft-analogy (CA), "which argues from the character of specialized crafts to conclusions about the character of virtues." As evidence that "Socrates takes the CA seriously," Irwin relies heavily on the *Laches* (71–72, 102). Irwin goes on to argue that Plato ultimately rejects the craft-analogy. Plato's more mature moral theory is to be found in dialogues such as the *Republic*, which in this sense supersede "early" works like the *Laches* (196–199).

Griswold ("Philosophy, Education, and Courage in Plato's *Laches*," *Interpretation* 14 [1986] 177–193) demonstrates that although the *Laches* begins with a search for what Irwin calls "craft-knowledge," the dialogue's development undercuts the equation of ed-ucation and knowledge, and in particular the courageous man's "knowledge," with τέχνη (craft or skill). The key point at *Laches* 192e–193c is that the knowledge involved in courage—"knowledge of what is good and evil for a man and so of when life is worth living and when not"—is not analogous to instrumental τέχνη. Yet Griswold is able to show that the dialogue moves beyond the ἀπορία generated by the rejection of the craft analogy. The *Laches*, in which the desirability of harmony between λόγος and ἔργον (speech and deed) is explicitly mentioned more than once (188c–e, 193d–e), both dis-plays the nature of courage on the level of ἔργον and allows us to arrive at a definition of courage by retrospectively assembling unrefuted elements of the λόγος. In particular, the *Laches* both displays in deed and demands of the persevering reader philosophic courage, which consists in the enduring attempt to educate oneself. Finally, Griswold argues that the *Laches* fits together with and points us toward dialogues such as the *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Philebus* (all of which Irwin regards as "middle" or "late"). By

dramatic and thematic resemblances, that Plato presents the *Parmenides* and the *Republic* as "complementary, mutually necessary beginnings for the philosopher-to-be." In particular, "the action of the *Parmenides* points toward and anticipates the philosophical maturity that Socrates has achieved and displayed in the *Republic*" (Miller [above, note 26] 21, 20). The insights of Miller and Griswold, however, clearly contradict the standard view, because these authors overlook the basic distinctions in philosophical conception and purpose which must, *ex hypothesi*, separate the "early" dialogues from the "middle" and the "middle" from the "late."[58] To take one final example, Joseph Cropsey has recently suggested that the heptalogy *Theaetetus, Euthyphro, Sophist, Statesman, Apology, Crito,* and *Phaedo,* which is dramatically centered upon the last days of Socrates, presents "an enhanced version of the [public] trial of Socrates" (above, note 15, 156). Within the last fifteen years, several other authors have suggested a similar approach to the heptalogy.[59] According to the standard view, however, the dialogues of the heptalogy range from "early" (*Euthyphro*) to "late" (*Sophist, Statesman*). To attribute philosophic unity to this "enhanced" trial, we must either reject the division of the dialogues into "early," "middle," and "late" groups, or we must assume that such distinctions are, at least in the case of the heptalogy, philosophically insignificant. Either move would be rejected out of hand by proponents of the standard view.

---

showing that education is possible (since the dialogue gives us the grounds for formulating definitions of courage in general and of the philosopher's courage in particular), the *Laches* presupposes the sorts of accounts these dialogues set forth concerning "the connection between ἔρως and reason, soul and reality, and finally ... the 'goodness' in the sense of 'intelligibility,' 'harmony,' and 'measure' of the cosmos in itself and for us" (180).

[58] Most notable in this regard is Owen's influential attempt (above, n. 16) to show that the *Parmenides*, a "late, critical" dialogue, overturns the paradigmatic account of the relation between Ideas and particulars advanced in the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, both of which are "middle" dialogues. Indirect support for Miller's interpretation of the relation between the *Parmenides* and the *Republic* may be found in Wieland, who argues for the interpretative significance of the "fictive" or dramatic chronology of the dialogues, within which the *Parmenides* is the earliest and the *Phaedo* the latest (above, n. 1, 83–94). Wieland points out that Parmenides both criticizes Socrates' hypothesis of Ideas and warns him against renouncing it (135b–c). Socrates heeds his warning, as is clear from the way in which he adverts to this hypothesis in the *Phaedo*. Wieland notes that those who accept the standard view and regard the *Parmenides* as a turning-point in Plato's development must reject the attachment of philosophic significance to the dramatic chronology: "Es währe sehr befremdlich, gerade den ganz jungen Sokrates mit Argumenten gegen die Ideenannahme zu konfrontieren, wenn damit die Abkehr des Dialogautors von dieser Annahme dokumentiert werden sollte" (90).

[59] See Seth Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's* Theaetetus, Sophist, *and* Statesman (Chicago 1983); Jacob Klein, *Plato's Trilogy:* Theaetetus, *the* Sophist, *and the* Statesman (Chicago 1977); Miller (above, n. 26); and Stanley Rosen, *Plato's* Sophist: *The Drama of Original and Image* (New Haven 1983).

VI

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance in contemporary teaching and scholarship of the standard view of Platonic chronology. The very order in which English-speaking undergraduates have for the past 120 years confronted the dialogues, both in the Jowett edition and in the now more popular *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, reflects the commitments of the standard view.[60] One suspects that the main reason generations of leading ancient philosophers have failed to challenge the assumptions underlying this view is that a successful attack upon these assumptions would force us to rethink the great bulk of orthodox Plato scholarship from the ground up. This is precisely what I am urging in the present paper.

In this paper, I have argued on the basis of philological and methodological considerations that we reject the standard view. In the study of Platonic chronology, the wish has all too often been father to the thought. The most influential and widely accepted arguments pertaining to the chronology of the dialogues have proved unable to withstand close critical scrutiny. What is more, the standard view harmonizes neither with the ancient external evidence nor with the form and content of the dialogues themselves, whereas the ancient interpretative tradition outlined in the first Section of this paper, and contemporary approaches that are similarly attentive to Plato's literary artfulness and provocative, Socratic pedagogy, are in accord with both. Finally, the standard view militates against the assumption that we may learn anything profoundly worthwhile from the dialogues, because it requires us to assume that Plato misunderstood the nature and significance of his own writings. In sum, so long as we insist upon bringing chronological distinctions to the study of the dialogues, the texts we confront will continue to reflect the commitments of extrinsic interpretative schemes. In that case, we may do many things, but I do not believe that we shall be reading Plato.[61]

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITY OF TULSA
TULSA, OKLAHOMA 74104-3189

[60]Volumes 2–4 of the Jowett translation contain the *Republic, Timaeus, Critias, Gorgias, Philebus, Parmenides, Theatetus, Sophist, Statesman,* and *Laws. The Collected Dialogues of Plato,* ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton 1963), concludes with the *Republic, Theaetetus, Parmenides, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, Critias,* and *Laws.*