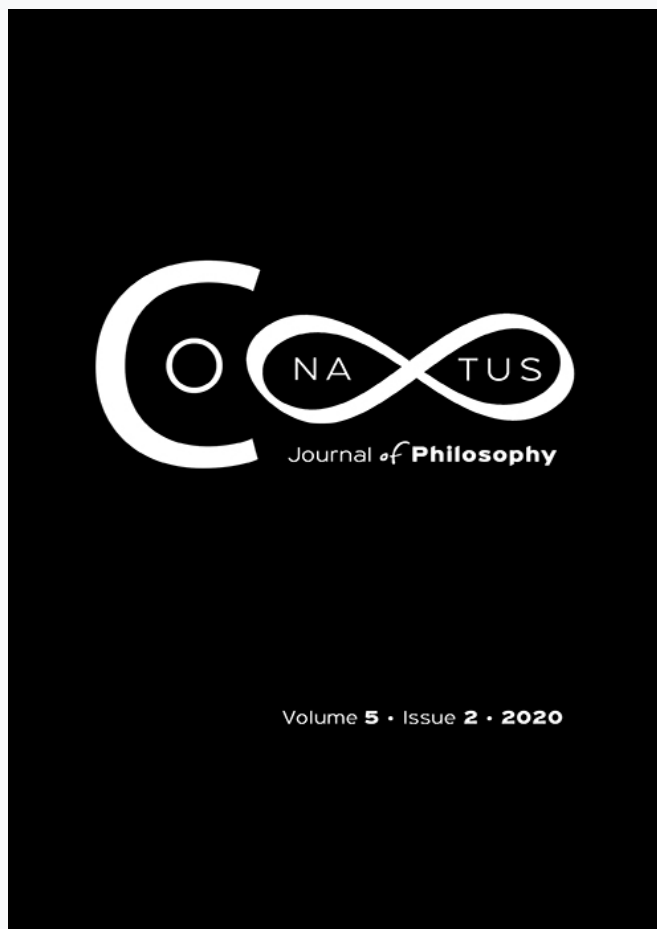


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From Writing to Philosophizing: A Lesson from Platonic Hermeneutics for the Methodology of the History of Philosophy

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Abstract

*In this paper, I exploit some lessons drawn from reading Plato in order to comment on the methodological ‘meta-level’ regarding the relation between philosophizing and writing. After all, it is due to the medium of written word that we come to know past philosophers. I do this on the occasion of the ostensible conclusion in Plato’s *Meno*. This example illuminates the ‘double-dialogue’ hermeneutics of Plato and helps to differentiate Plato’s dialogues from dialogical works written by other philosophers, such as Berkeley. As a result, it becomes clear that, like with Plato’s case, a historian of philosophy must not only have a philosophical training, but also a subtle philological background, when attempting to come into dialogue with dead philosophers.*

Keywords: *author; (double-)dialogue; interpretation; history (of philosophy); literature; self-consciousness; writing*

Time flows ceaselessly. What has always been a present moment has been eternally removed to the sphere of the past. How then can we communicate with history? There are various ways in which history can depict its former existence to the posterity. For instance, it has been proposed that Architecture and archaeological monuments form a kind of ‘fossilized’ history. The extant written works, then, should be regarded as another instance of ‘imprinted’ history. Despite their death, it is certain that

we can come into dialogue with the dead philosophers¹ via their writings. Even in the case of philosophers who did not write anything throughout their lives, like the notorious example of Socrates, we have other testimonies that can enable us to have at least an indirect contact with them.

In relation, to the powerful medium of written word, however, we should constantly bear in mind that the task of interpretation of the past writings seems to be entrenched in a ‘circle of justification.’² Apart from the interpreter’s historical presuppositions and the secondary testimonies about a philosopher’s life and teaching, we get informed of the main views of a past philosopher by reading his/her writings. On the other hand, the already shaped view regarding the work of a dead philosopher (via his/her writings) forms the interpreter’s way of approaching that thinker’s written work. Whereas this is not necessarily a negative aspect, it can reveal the significance and the burden of the medium of writing for the philosophical understanding. That is, the way a philosopher writes can have a great impact on the reader’s understanding of a philosophical work. There are numerous examples of philosophers whom we remember due to their special and/or peculiar literary style, as well.³

A pre-eminent example among this group of philosophers is Plato. One of the most important conclusions of recent literature on Plato⁴ is that his philosophical positions should by no means be approached separately from his literary techniques, which are indeed innumerable. Of course, the problems concerning Platonic scholarship are manifold: “Why did Plato write dialogues? Did he have any specific aims for doing so? What is his attitude towards the written word?⁵ Which is the right dating of the dialogues? How to

¹ See also Edwin Curley, “Dialogues with the Dead,” *Synthese* 67, no. 1 (1986): 33-49.

² The term of the “hermeneutical vicious circle” has been used within the context of Hermeneutics influenced by Martin Heidegger. Cf. also Άννα Τζούμα, *Ερμηνευτική: Από τη Βεβαιότητα στην Υποψία* (Αθήνα: Μεταίχμιο, 2006), 136-137, as well as 132-133.

³ See e.g. Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Adorno and Derrida.

⁴ See Mary Margaret McCabe, “Form and the Platonic Dialogues,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson, 39-54 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), and Mary Margaret McCabe, “Plato’s Ways of Writing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. Gail Fine, 88-113 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Another interesting approach is that of Will Rasmussen, *The Enigma of Socratic Wisdom: Resolving Inconsistencies in Plato* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co, 2008).

⁵ Regarding the critique against the written word in the *Phaedrus* (274b6-278e3) see the combating suggestions of Thomas A. Szlezák, *Platon Lesen* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1993) and Christopher Gill, “Platonic Dialectic and the Truth-status of the Unwritten Doctrines,” *Méthexis* 6 (1993): 55-72. For some examples, which are admittedly scarce, of the reception of this problem in late antiquity see Alexei V. Zadorojnyi, “Transcribing Plato’s Voice: The Platonic Intertext between Writtleness and Orality,” in *Gods, Daimones, Rituals, Myths and History of Religions in Plutarch’s Works: Studies Devoted to Professor Frederick E. Brenk by the International Plutarch Society*, eds. Luc van der Stockt, Frances Titchener, Heinz Gerd Ingenkamp, and Aurelio Pérez Jiménez, 467-492 (Malaga, and Logan, UT: International Plutarch Society, 2010).

cope with the several doctrinal inconsistencies found throughout the Platonic corpus? Is ‘developmentalism’ the right response to the previous question, or ‘unitarianism’ is also plausible?⁶ What about the ‘aporetic’ works? Did Plato ever intend to impart fixed doctrines to his readers? Is Socrates Plato’s mouthpiece? Why is Plato absent from the frames of all dialogues?” All these are only some of the general problems that have preoccupied various Plato scholars throughout centuries, have triggered great conflicts, but still have not met any definite answer.

In any case, the above questions concern problems regarding the relationship between the philosophical and the literary aspects of Plato’s written works.⁷ Moreover, the controversy they have generated, owing

⁶ According to the ‘developmentalist’ thesis, Plato progresses to different philosophical understandings and positions along his writing career. Contrariwise, ‘unitarianism’ suggests that Plato presents a steady body of unaltered doctrines in his entire corpus, illuminating different aspects in each work.

⁷ On this issue, see also the following variety of approaches (all with further bibliography): Gerald A. Press, ed., *Plato’s Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1993); James A. Arieti, *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991); Harvey Yunis, “Writing for Reading: Thucydides, Plato, and the Emergence of the Critical Reader,” in *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, ed. Harvey Yunis, 189-212 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Christopher Rowe, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Christopher Gill, and François Renaud, eds., *Hermeneutic Philosophy and Plato: Gadamer’s Response to the Philebus* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2010); Nikos G. Charalabopoulos, *Platonic Drama and its Ancient Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Andrea Nightingale, “The Orphaned Word: The Pharmakon of Forgetfulness in Plato’s *Laws*,” in *Performance and Culture in Plato’s Laws*, ed. Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi, 243-264 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Dimitrios A. Vasilakis, “Platonic Hermeneutics from the Socratic View-point in Plato’s *Meno*,” *Πλάτων. Περιοδικό της Έταιρείας Ελλήνων Φιλολόγων* 59 (2013-2014): 156-166; Debra Nails, “Platonic Interpretive Strategies, and the History of Philosophy, with a Comment on Renaud,” *Plato Journal* 16 (2017): 109-122; Alessandro Stavru, and Christopher Moore, eds., *Socrates and the Socratic Dialogue* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017); Dominic J. O’Meara, *Cosmology and Politics in Plato’s Later Works* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1-10; Sara Ahbel-Rappe, *Socratic Ignorance and Platonic Knowledge in the Dialogues of Plato* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018); Monique Dixsaut, *Plato-Nietzsche: Philosophy the Other Way*, trans. Kenneth Quandt (London, and Washington, DC: Academica Press, 2018); Lloyd P. Gerson, “Plato, Platonism and the History of Philosophy,” in *What Makes a Philosopher Great? Thirteen Arguments for Twelve Philosophers*, ed. Stephen Hetherington, 12-29 (New York, London: Routledge, 2018); Gerald A. Press, “The State of the Question in the Study of Plato: 20-year Update,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 56, no. 1 (2018): 9-35; Eleni Kaklamanou, Maria Pavlou, and Antonis Tsakmakis, eds., *Framing the Dialogues: How to Read Openings and Closures in Plato* (Leiden, and Boston: Brill, 2020). See also Michael Erler, “Plato’s Religious Voice: Socrates as Godsent, in Plato and the Platonists,” in *The Author’s Voice in Classical and Late Antiquity*, eds. Anna Marmodoro, and Jonathan Hill, 313-340 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Adrian Pirtea, Review of *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Plato in Antiquity*, by Harold Tarrant, Danielle A. Layne, Dirk Baltzly, and François Renaud, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, June 31, 2019; Jonathan Greig, “Plato’s Open Philosophy,” in *Moses Atticizing*, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://mosesatticizing.com/blog/platos-open-philosophy>, and

to Plato's abundant possibilities of interpretation, can partly account for the immense influence that the Athenian philosopher has had throughout the history of humankind.⁸ In this paper, I want to make some comments on the occasion of *Meno's* final conclusion. Because I have dealt with the hermeneutics of the *Meno* elsewhere, here I will only give a synopsis, so that I directly come to the point I want to raise.⁹

According to *Meno's* opening question the dialogue is a survey concerning the nature of excellence (or virtue: ἀρετή) and the possibility of its being teachable. In response, Socrates expounds the theory of Recollection. The discussion leads to the following assumption: if excellence is knowledge, then it must be teachable. Still, Socrates claims not being able to find any teacher of virtue. Hence, in order to account for the existence of virtuous personalities, Socrates suggests that these do not possess knowledge, but 'true opinion' (ἀληθῆς δόξα), due to divine dispensation (θεία μοίρα). Still, in the end Socrates thinks he and *Meno* should begin a new survey without hypotheses. My question is the following: do they really need to begin the enquiry again? It is worth citing Cornford's thorough answer given on the occasion of the 'recalcitrant' interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides*:

The device occurs again in the *Meno*, where the Socratic definition of Virtue as knowledge is actually reached about half-way through (89a), and yet the conversation ends with the remark that we shall never be sure how virtue is acquired until we have found out what virtue is. The concealment is so cunningly effected that many readers of the *Meno* do not realize that we have found out what virtue is, and that by reflection on the difference between teaching in the ordinary sense and recollection we can infer how it is acquired. In all these cases Plato's object is to compel the reader to think, and think hard, for himself, instead of presenting him with conclusions which he might indolently accept without making them his own. If he does not make this effort, he will at least have gained the consciousness of his own ignorance.¹⁰

fr. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *A Polygraph on Plato* (forthcoming).

⁸ Whitehead's statement is classic in its formulation: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology: Gifford Lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh during the Session 1927-28*, corr. ed. David Ray Griffin, and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 39.

⁹ See also the approach of Vasilakis, "Platonic Hermeneutics," 159-162.

¹⁰ Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides: Parmenides' Way of Truth and Plato's*

Even if stemming from an older generation, Cornford's remark about Plato's aim in the *Meno* can be compared to the so-called "double dialogue" method of interpreting the Platonic dialogues.¹¹ According to this model, in the Platonic corpus, where we read mainly about Socrates having discussions with other people, there underlies Plato's "challenge" or invitation to the reader to engage with him in the inquiry. In some cases, though, Plato seems not only to challenge, but also to put obstacles to the understanding of the reader! In this way, the reader who wants an answer to the problems posed in the dialogues is compelled to reflect on the whole unity of content and form of the work, e.g. find potential fallacies, hidden hints, or ambiguous uses of words, and therefore inevitably take part in the philosophical discussion, without relying on any authorial authority.¹²

Moreover, this literary strategy of presenting the reader with an ostensible conclusion serves Plato's purely philosophical aim of making his reader critical. As M. M. McCabe puts it, "views are indeed put forward in the dialogues, and for some of those views, the author must take responsibility. But in writing the way he does, he engages his readers, too, in active scrutiny of what is said: a large part of the philosophical work, therefore, is done by us, the readers of what Plato writes."¹³ Thus, the literary techniques of Plato, like the one used in the *Meno*, are not only the exoteric form/frame that accompanies a philosophical content/framed, but they are well integrated and interwoven with the philosophical enterprise itself, so that they can fertilize the reader's philosophical thinking. It is perhaps this observation that accounts for the difference in style between the dialogues of Plato and e.g. those of Berkeley.

There is no skepticism about the fact that Berkeley is a significant philosopher. It would be also unfair to discredit the literary techniques used in his well-known dialogues, because they differ from Plato's ones. In these works, the early modern philosopher presents positions and counter-positions in a literarily apt way. Nonetheless, the reader can relatively easily discern Berkeley's philosophical stance in Philonous' rejoinders to Hylas. It is exactly such a clarity that is frequently absent in the techniques of the Platonic dialogues, and therefore the reader's interpretive and philosophical task becomes much more arduous, but,

Parmenides Translated with an Introduction and Running Commentary (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964⁵), 244-245. Whereas nowadays scholars would be eager to agree with Cornford's conclusion, the scope of his specific application to the *Meno* (e.g. the insistence on the theory of Recollection as the only way to escape "Meno's paradox," or even "*Parmenides*' greatest difficulty") would not satisfy all of them, at least to the same extent.

¹¹ See Eugène Napoleon Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977), 96-101, and Rasmussen, esp. 104-110.

¹² Cf. also McCabe, "Plato's Ways," 94. Additionally, for her notion of "detachment," which characterizes Plato's literary techniques, see *ibid.*, 104-106.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

perhaps in the end, more beneficial for the philosophical self-consciousness of Plato's reader.¹⁴

There also remains a legitimate question concerning the aforementioned Platonic literary attitude, an aspect of which is expressed in the conclusion of the *Meno*.¹⁵ In the case of the Platonic philosophical theories and doctrines developmentalism seems to be a plausible account, due to the inconsistencies found in the whole Platonic corpus. Could we, then, say that his literary attitude remains one and the same, whereas its instantiations in the several dialogues differ, or b) we should talk about the middle and later periods of Plato as more 'dogmatic' and 'rigid,' i.e. less dialectical and dialogical, respectively? No consensus is to be found among various interpreters.¹⁶ Still, a reading of the whole Platonic corpus, of which I have presented here only one small example, tells in favor of the view that the internal and intimate relationship between the literary aspect and the philosophical one, as a means for inviting the reader to take part in the philosophical enquiry, remains salient in at least most of the works of Plato throughout his philosophical journey, even if the outcome is different among every single dialogue.

To conclude, I hope that Plato's case serves as an elucidating example of how powerful and peculiar the medium of writing is for the communication of a philosopher's ideas. According to the abovementioned 'hermeneutical circle of justification' it is true that, among other presuppositions, to a considerable extent one's initial readings of a philosopher's oeuvre can stipulate the way that (s)he is going to approach other works of the same philosopher. Nevertheless, we must be aware that in the shaping of such a picture it is not only the

¹⁴ Whether Berkeley, or for this matter all the post-Platonic philosophers who used the dialogue-form, aimed to imitate the specific techniques used in the Platonic dialogues is a matter of another consideration.

¹⁵ We remind the reader that the *Meno*, concerning some of its aspects, looks back to the 'early' works, whereas with respect to the positive doctrines it expounds it is directed towards the 'middle' dialogues (especially the *Republic*).

¹⁶ E.g. whereas Kahn, especially in the Preface of Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), seems to hold a 'flexible' unitarian view concerning the Platonic theories, his view about Plato's literary enterprise is that the so-called 'early' Socratic *Logoi* (apart from the even earlier *Apology* and the *Gorgias*) form a single unified group along with the 'middle'-period works. Cf. also Charles H. Kahn, "Did Plato write Socratic Dialogues?" *Classical Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1981): 305-320. In particular, the 'early' works are those that pave the way to Plato's audience for the elaboration of the 'middle' works. However, according to Kahn, such a literary stance starts to differ from the *Phaedrus* and onwards. Therefore, concerning the literary production of Plato, if it is not accurate to call Kahn a developmentalist, still he holds a non-unitarian view. On the other hand, whereas McCabe seems to hold a 'mild' developmentalistic view concerning Plato's thought, e.g. in the relevant Appendix of Mary Margaret McCabe, *Plato's Individuals* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), the abovementioned conclusion of her approach to Plato's innumerable ways of writing seems to be unitarian with respect to the philosophical aims that Plato's several literary techniques serve.

philosophical ideas themselves that are responsible, but also the literary style of each philosopher as an author, i.e. the specific way in which each philosopher presents his/her thought in their writings. Therefore, it becomes clear that every historian of philosophy or philosopher should possess developed philological sensitivity and skills, among others, even if (s)he does not study artistic works of 'pure' literature. The realization of this requisite can help at least every historian of philosophy to achieve more adequate approaches not only of Plato, where the philological approach is indispensable, but also of every other philosopher of the past,¹⁷ whether remote or not, whom we unavoidably know via his/her writings.¹⁸ The fact that the founder of the Athenian Academy assists us also in realizing this need to the highest degree is another reason which makes him not necessarily a dead philosopher whose writings we have to agree with, but rather an immortal interlocutor who, in late M. Burnyeat's words, is "good to think *with*."¹⁹

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¹⁷ Unfortunately, various philosophers and historians of philosophy especially of the analytic tradition have disregarded this important dimension in their approaches. Cf. also Williams' fair criticism in Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, ed. Adrian W. Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 181.

¹⁸ This is just one among many other methodological considerations about the enterprise of the history of philosophy. For an introduction to this field see Σωτήρης Μιτραλέξης, *Μεθοδολογία και Θεωρία της Ιστορίας της Φιλοσοφίας* (Αθήνα: Καρδαμίτσας, 2017).

¹⁹ As attested by Richard Sorabji, "Ideas Leap Barriers: The Value of Historical Studies to Philosophy," in *Maieusis: Essays on Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, ed. Dominic Scott, 374-390 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 384, despite Burnyeat's negative evaluation of Tigerstedt in Myles Burnyeat, review of *Interpreting Plato*, by Eugène N. Tigerstedt, *The Classical Review* 29 (1979): 161-162. Cf. also Δημήτριος Α. Βασιλάκης, «Περί των σχέσεων Φιλοσοφίας και Ιστορίας της Φιλοσοφίας με ιδιαίτερη αναφορά στην προβληματική του Β. Williams,» *Διά-Λογος* 3 (2013): 21, and n. 63.

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