

# Reclaiming the Canon

*Essays on Philosophy, Poetry, and History*

Herman L. Sinaiko

*Foreword by Joel Beck*

Yale University Press New Haven and London

For Susan and Joel in love and friendship

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Designed by Rebecca Gibb.

Set in Perpetua type by The Composing Room of Michigan, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America by Vail-Ballou Press, Binghamton, New York.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sinaiko, Herman L.

Reclaiming the canon : essays on philosophy, poetry, and history /

Herman L. Sinaiko ; foreword by Joel Beck.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-300-06529-9 (alk. paper)

1. Canon (Literature). 2. Literature—History and criticism.

I. Title.

PN81.S5274 1998

809—dc21

97-40723

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

1098765432

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## Foreword

The essays collected in this volume make the work of Herman L. Sinaiko available to a wider public. Twice awarded a prize by the University of Chicago for excellence in undergraduate teaching, he has inspired, prodded, and irritated generations of students. Douglas Unger, a former student, remembers how Sinaiko "paced a room, how he would fill almost every inch of a chalkboard with scatterings of ideas and notes and how he was constantly running his hands through his hair, teaching *at* us, using the Socratic method in a way that permitted, acknowledged, and honored a question."

The author of a highly regarded book on Plato, Sinaiko has devoted much of his teaching career to thinking about and lecturing on what, following Hume, he calls great art. Recently, in the so-called canon wars, we have heard much heated debate about how and why certain texts came to be known as great art. This is not the place to summarize that debate. Suffice it to say that the canon reclaimed by Sinaiko is broad enough to include Confucius, Chinese poetry, and Mary Shelley. But, for reasons that he specifies in Chapter 14, on Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste," he does not deviate too far from the standard canon.

More interesting is that Sinaiko reclaims the canon for philosophy and, in so doing, reclaims something vital about philosophy itself. Philosophy today exists almost exclusively within the confines of the university. Most people encounter it in the form of introductory college courses, which typically include a dialogue by Plato, a treatise by Descartes, a short work by Kant. A few pursue advanced studies in philosophy at a graduate department. Philosophy, in short, has become a profession with its own associations, journals, and conferences. In what follows I shall sketch Sinaiko's retrieval of Plato's conception of philosophy and indicate the use that he makes of the canon.

## I Socrates and Freud

### *Talk and Truth*

Socrates and Freud—a strange pair! The ancient Athenian philosopher and the modern medical scientist—what do they have in common? In what reasonable sense could they be said to be the joint subject of a lecture? Of course, in view of the modern mania for comparing and contrasting anything and everything, Socrates and Freud are as good a pair to examine as any other. Both are major figures in the intellectual history of the West. Both were great innovators, protean thinkers whose influence has been deep and pervasive far beyond the limits of the issues they explicitly addressed. Both were deeply interested in the human psyche. But as soon as I say that, as soon as I move from abstract points of comparison to concrete subjects, the profound differences between them begin to emerge. For Socrates *psyche* seems to mean “soul” in all its diverse theological, poetic, and even commonplace meanings, whereas for Freud *psyche* takes on its characteristic and definitive contemporary sense of something like “the inner self.”

Rather than detailing the differences between the two figures, what I want to do is focus on a single, central feature of their activity as thinkers, a feature that they share with each other and that distinguishes them from all—and I mean all—other major thinkers across the whole span of Western thought. I am referring to the peculiar emphasis both of them place upon talk, discourse, conversation, dialogue. The extraordinary focus both give to this everyday activity is well known but has been too little contemplated. Indeed, it is frequently the basis for sharp criticism of the thought of both men. You can read in many textbooks on the history of philosophy how Socrates naively thought that it was possible to arrive at true definitions of the virtues or to discover the

nature of moral principles simply by talking to people. Similarly, when Freud's method of psychotherapy is called the talking cure, that description is not always neutral or complimentary; it often contains a slight note of contempt and derision at the absurdly self-limiting discipline of psychoanalysis.

What is interesting and important to note is that both Socrates and Freud were well aware that the ends to which they devoted themselves were not usually achieved simply by talking. In Socrates' case, the pre-Socratic tradition of Greek thought included many thinkers who were profound observers of natural phenomena as well as of human social and political affairs. Freud, too, engaged in a great deal of scientific research, in the laboratory and clinical practice, in his early career as a neurologist and psychiatrist. The truth seems to be that both men, as they matured into the great thinkers we admire, deliberately restricted their respective pursuits of philosophy and psychoanalysis to the single activity of talking. It was Socrates who brought philosophy "down out of the heavens into the marketplace" and thus defined his method of philosophical investigation as *dialectic*—that is, as "conversation." It was Freud who rejected hypnosis, the laying-on of hands, and the empirical investigation of the objective facts of a case in favor of the rigorous and exclusive use of talk as the method of psychoanalysis.

Freud was so fanatical in his emphasis on talk, nothing but talk, that he invented the technique of having patients lie on a couch while the analyst sits behind them, so that they can't see the analyst's face and try to read its expression. In classical psychoanalysis, except for the unavoidable few seconds at the beginning and end of each session when the patient is in the process of lying down on or getting up from the couch, the analyst is essentially a disembodied voice. The effect is very similar to what many readers feel when they read Plato's *Dialogues*. Frequently a dialogue begins with a lively, highly dramatic scene; but as Socrates takes hold of the conversation the dramatic hustle and bustle fades away, and soon all that is left is the sound of two or more voices talking back and forth in a kind of temporal and spatial void.

Socrates and Freud both knew, without doubt, that in restricting philosophy and psychoanalysis to mere talk, by excluding the other possible resources available to them, they were paying a heavy price. They knew this, and yet they did it. So far as we know, neither of them ever regretted it or reversed himself.

In these remarks I want to follow their lead; I want to transform talk from a commonplace phenomenon that we take for granted into an open question to be seriously reflected on. I will do so by looking at what Socrates and Freud each discovered about talk and what each did with and through talk. I hope thereby to begin to explore the power of talk, the way it can become not

merely an important or even the primary technique but the sole instrument by which philosopher and psychoanalyst can pursue their ends.

For both Socrates and Freud the only end that counts, the end to which both of them bend their efforts, is the discovery of the truth—not a trivial truth about this or that but truth with a capital *T*, the truth about the nature of things.

Were they serious? Can mere talk be the privileged, the only, means to significant truth?

Let me begin with Socrates. He himself apparently wrote nothing; we know about him only through the reports of others, reports whose pictures of Socrates are not always consistent with each other. I will develop my account of his understanding of discourse primarily from a few well-known, noncontroversial facts about him.

He grew up in the fifth century B.C. during the heyday of the Athenian empire, in what used to be called the golden age of Greece. In his youth he earned his living as a stonemason, like his father, and he probably worked on the Parthenon. At some point, probably when he was quite young, he became fascinated with philosophy, and from then on he seems to have spent almost all his time talking in the agora, the marketplace, of Athens. He seems to have given up stonemasonry and, as a consequence, become poverty-stricken. We do not know how he supported himself, but it seems likely that he was partly supported by some of his wealthy friends and followers.

Socrates lived in this fashion for many years. He married a woman named Xanthippe, whom later tradition portrays as a thoroughly unpleasant shrew. (This may be an injustice, for the contemporary evidence tells us very little about her.) Socrates had three sons with her, the last of whom was still a nursing infant when Socrates was tried and executed at the age of seventy for impiety and for corrupting the young.

Socrates, like all other able-bodied Athenians of his day, served in the army during military campaigns, and we know he fought in at least three battles. Like many other Athenians, he was highly critical of the extreme democratic government of Athens. But when that government was briefly overthrown by a despotic junta of wealthy aristocrats, Socrates, at direct risk to his life, refused to comply with their attempts to involve him in their murderous regime.

A member of the intellectual and cultural elite of Athens, he was a personal friend of Euripides, the tragic poet, and an acquaintance of Aristophanes, the comic poet, who publicly ridiculed him in his play *The Clouds*. He was a friendly rival and colleague of all the philosophers and sophists of his time—Protagoras, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Gorgias. He may even have been a friend or an acquaintance of Pericles, the leader of the Athenian democracy at its height. He certainly knew intimately several members of Pericles' family, in-

cluding Alcibiades and Plato. Though impoverished, he seems to have been regularly invited to the homes and dinner parties of the rich and powerful. Apparently he also spent much time conversing with ordinary citizens and visitors to Athens—businessmen, artisans, politicians, performers, doctors.

A fascinating, compelling figure, he wrote nothing, established no schools or other institutions, engaged in no significant political activities, and associated himself with no particular intellectual or philosophical doctrine or movement. He was an interesting local figure, idiosyncratic, even eccentric, nothing more; like many other such figures throughout history, fated to be remembered for a while in amusing or sentimental anecdotes and then fade into obscurity.

But Socrates did not fade into obscurity. He became one of the most influential figures in ancient Greek thought, then Roman thought, then medieval Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thought, and finally modern thought. Every single school of philosophy in the ancient world directly or indirectly traced its origins to Socrates. Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, Skeptics—all claimed Socrates as their founder. In the generation before Socrates and during his lifetime there was a flourishing group of thinkers in Greece called sophists. Socrates opposed them (although, through one of those ironies so common in the world, many of his fellow citizens in Athens apparently thought he himself was a sophist). By the time of his death Sophism as a distinctive intellectual movement had more or less disappeared—apparently because of Socrates' critique.

Already in antiquity, Greek thought was conventionally divided into two periods: pre-Socratic and post-Socratic. Unfortunately, we know very little about the pre-Socratic thinkers—Heracleitus, Parmenides, Democritus, among others. The impact of Socrates' thought upon his contemporaries and succeeding generations was so powerful that they seem to have stopped reading the works of his predecessors. The result was that their works became exceedingly rare within a few generations, and many disappeared altogether. Today we know the works of the pre-Socratics only in fragments, in odd passages quoted by later authors whose works did survive. Students of ancient Greek thought, myself included, mourn the loss of those pre-Socratic works. But I believe we must take seriously the judgment of those who knew Socrates that he effected a fundamental revolution in thought, a revolution so compelling that it rendered those earlier thinkers obsolete and established the intellectual tradition within which we still live today.

What did Socrates do or discover that so impressed his friends and followers? He is a mysterious, puzzling, even paradoxical figure, hard to grasp not because his thought was so complicated but because it was so simple, not because it was hidden or esoteric but because it was so obvious, so public. The greatness, the profundity, of his thought lies in his discovery of what Alfred

North Whitehead describes as "first principles almost too obvious to need expression, and almost too general to be capable of expression. In each period there is a general form of the forms of thought; and, like the air we breathe, such a form is so translucent, and so pervading, and so seemingly necessary, that only by extreme effort can we become aware of it" (*Adventures of Ideas*, p. 14). We still live in the period of thought initiated by Socrates, and that is why he remains so hard to perceive.

Scattered through Plato's *Dialogues* there are a number of images of Socrates that help to catch the extraordinary quality of the man and his thought. In the *Meno*, Meno, a young Thessalian aristocrat—sophisticated, well educated, thoroughly lazy, stupid, and thoughtless—likenes Socrates to a stingray, which paralyzes everything it touches (80a). Until he talked to Socrates, Meno says, he had always thought of himself as an articulate, knowledgeable, self-confident young man. After half an hour's conversation with Socrates he finds himself tongue-tied, confused, frustrated, unsure of himself and of his opinions. Socrates, he says, paralyzed his mind the way the stingray paralyzes the body.

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes himself to Theaetetus, a young mathematician, as an intellectual midwife, analogous to his own mother, a physical midwife. The ordinary midwife, he says, has two functions: to preside at the birth of a child or, if the woman is suffering from a false pregnancy, to relieve her of the illusion that she is going to have a child. Socrates says that he performs the same function for ideas, helping those whose souls are pregnant with ideas to give birth to those ideas or, if they are not pregnant, showing them that there are no ideas ready to emerge. And like the midwives who help with the birth of babies but are themselves infertile, Socrates says that he can help others give birth to their ideas even though he himself is intellectually sterile, with no ideas of his own (149a–151d).

In the *Apology*, in which he unsuccessfully defends himself against the capital charges of impiety and corrupting the young, Socrates likens the city of Athens to a noble horse, very beautiful but a little stupid and slow-moving. He describes himself as a gadfly, sent by God to irritate and rouse the city from its mindless slumbers (302e). An intellectually paralyzing stingray, a midwife for the offspring of the soul, a stinging gadfly for his community—these catch something of what it meant to encounter Socrates.

But there is a fourth image of Socrates in Plato's writings. It occurs in the *Symposium*, an account of a dinner party at which the host and his guests give speeches in praise of love. Alcibiades, perhaps the most brilliant and talented of Socrates' young men (with the exception of Plato himself), comes late to the party, and he comes drunk. He gives the last speech of the evening, and he discusses, not love, but Socrates. Socrates, he says, is like the figurines of the satyr Marsyas that are sold in the shops of Athens. Outwardly these are statues of a

short, potbellied, bulging-eyed, ugly little man, but, says Alcibiades, they are cleverly hinged so that they can be opened, and inside there are beautiful images of divinity. Socrates and his words are like these statues: outwardly ugly and ordinary; inwardly, containing rare treasures and images of the divine (215a–215c). I think Alcibiades' image of Socrates best captures the quality of the man and his talk that I am trying to evoke.

What were Socrates' words like? What did Socrates say that was so compelling to those who could see beyond the prosaic surface? What was there in those conversations with local politicians, artisans, poets, visiting philosophers, and wealthy young men that revolutionized Western thought?

In the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero described Socrates as "the first to call philosophy down from the heavens, establish her in the cities of men, and introduce her even into private houses, and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil" (V.4.10). The remark has been repeated so often that it has become a cliché, but what did Cicero mean?

The great task for the so-called pre-Socratic thinkers was to find the fundamental ground and principle of all things. Typically, those thinkers asked questions about the nature of the cosmos, what we call the universe—the whole of everything that is. They wanted to understand being itself, to grasp with their minds the nature of things; and they called their enterprise philosophy.

According to Cicero, Socrates was interested in the same thing, engaged in the same enterprise, but he decisively shifted the locus of investigation. He sought knowledge of the nature of things, not in the universe around us, but in the opinions of men. Or, to put it differently, he apparently thought that the key to understanding the nature of things lay, not in the external world of material things, but in that world as it includes human beings and as it appears to the human soul. More precisely, Socrates seems to have argued that the key to understanding the nature of things lies in the world as it appears to the one particular soul that is most important to each of us—our own. He never tired of quoting the injunction of the god Apollo that was inscribed in stone over the entrance of his temple at Delphi: "Know thyself." Socrates said many times that everything he did was devoted to fulfilling that single task—gaining self-knowledge—and until he had done so, he had no time for any other pursuit or activity.

What does it mean to know thyself? And why does every other human activity pale to insignificance beside it? To begin with, self-knowledge is different in kind from all other knowledge. In the search for self-knowledge we are both the object of the search and the one who does the investigating. But can we fail to know ourselves? Are we not more intimately knowledgeable about

ourselves than about anything else in the world? Is not the very notion of seeking knowledge of the self intrinsically absurd or at least paradoxical?

This Socratic quest for self-knowledge is perhaps the single most difficult and problematic of all human endeavors. Probably the most difficult aspect of the enterprise is to understand that, appearances to the contrary, we are not knowledgeable but profoundly ignorant of ourselves. It is this profound ignorance of ourselves that was Socrates' great discovery.

When the god Apollo said "Know thyself" to those humans who came to ask questions of the oracle at Delphi, he originally meant something specific and achievable. The wise and immortal god says to each of us, "Know yourself as a mortal, finite, limited human being; know yourself to be ignorant of what the future will bring, to be forgetful of the past, to be weak and more or less incompetent to deal with the demands of the present. Most of all, know yourself to be a human being and not a god. Know that you are an actor in a drama of which you are not the author or director, a drama that is sometimes tragic and more frequently comic, and that the best you can achieve in life is to understand and accept your fundamental limitations." Fully articulated, this understanding of human existence is the one embodied in classical pre-Socratic Greek culture, in the statues of the gods, in the serene and harmoniously ordered architecture of the great temples, and, most of all, in the lucid and brilliant writings of the poets—Homer and the Attic tragedians.

What Socrates discovered in his search for self-knowledge goes far beyond this traditional Greek understanding of what it means to be human. In our everyday lives, in our actions and reactions, and especially in our deeply held beliefs about the world, Socrates discovered that we are in touch with things whose existence we absolutely take for granted but whose nature remains mysterious. Let me illustrate what I mean. If I ask you, "Is it true that two plus two equals four?" you will undoubtedly answer, "Of course, Everyone knows that." But if I then ask you, "Since you are so sure it is true to say that two plus two equals four, perhaps you would be so good as to tell me what truth is?" You will not, I think, answer this question without some hesitation and uncertainty. If you are sophisticated and learned in these matters, you may be able to tell me what Aristotle or Heidegger or Descartes said about truth, but whether you are sophisticated or not, if I continue this line of questioning, you will eventually fall into confusion.

This problem—and it is a problem—is not confined to questions about truth; it holds equally for such notions as beauty, goodness, justice, and knowledge and even for such seemingly obvious terms as *equal*, *like*, and *one*. Every general term that we use in ordinary conversation becomes opaque when we stop using it as if we understood it and instead subject it to direct examination.

Not only does each of us use these terms all the time, in whatever language we happen to speak, but when we use these terms we mostly seem to understand one another. It is by the use of these mysterious but commonplace terms that we articulate our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live.

Without these terms and the uses we put them to, we would instantly revert to the condition of the mute beasts; we would lose our humanity. "Man," says Aristotle, a spiritual grandson of Socrates, "is the animal who talks," but by "talk" Aristotle doesn't mean the grunts or barks with which animals communicate fear or desire or other information. By "talk"—the Greek word is *logos*—Aristotle means the words, the statements, the arguments about our opinions—opinions about what we should do, why we should do it, what the true facts in a situation are, and so forth. Talking is what we humans are doing when we use these mysterious terms that we understand and do not understand. Socrates seems to have investigated these terms, to have tried to explore with his interlocutors what they meant by them.

Let me be very clear here. I do not mean to suggest, as many scholars have done, that Socrates was only interested in finding definitions for general terms, particularly the terms of moral discourse, such as *goodness*, *courage*, *moderation*, and *virtue*. He was primarily concerned with the realities they point to, the phenomena they articulate. That is, he explored those terms as they are used by human beings in the contexts of their lives. Socrates talks about truth and knowledge, for example, with Theaetetus, who has just made a significant mathematical discovery. He talks about the teachability of virtue—that is, human excellence—with Protagoras, a famous sophist who claims to be able to educate young men and to make them better people. He talks about justice with the jurors at his trial—jurors who will shortly be making a decision about whether he, Socrates, has committed an injustice.

Hence, a Socratic conversation is never idle talk about ideas or concepts; it is always deeply serious, though frequently laced with wit and humor. The talk is serious because it is about issues central in the lives of the people with whom he is talking. Socrates engages us in conversation in the context of the fundamental concerns and commitments of our lives and, through conversation, undertakes his investigation of himself and helps his interlocutors, if they are willing, to investigate their own lives—that is, to seek jointly with Socrates for self-knowledge.

And what comes of this investigation of the self? What is the result of this lifelong search for who and what we are, for what we are doing and why, for what we should be doing and how we should do it? Throughout his career, up to the very last day of his life, if Plato's testimony is accepted, Socrates made only one substantial claim to knowledge of himself. "I know," he said, "that I know nothing." This claim in all its arrogance and modesty, with its perfect

irony, embodies the whole of Socrates' wisdom—a wisdom, he himself suggests, that is the most we humans can attain.

I wish we had the space to explore the full ironic meaning and import of this claim to wisdom. But let me mention some of its implications for Socrates' relationships with his friends and students. He denied having any substantial knowledge, so he clearly had nothing to teach and therefore could hardly be said to have students. All that he had, all that he could have, were associates, friends, fellow travelers on the journey toward self-knowledge.

Notice, too, that the Socratic enterprise is essentially communal—conversational, dialogical, if you will. The image of Socrates engaged in the search for wisdom is not that of the solitary thinker meditating alone in his study or on a mountaintop; it is that of a man living in a human community passionately engaged in conversation with his fellow men. Even that most solitary and silent of human activities—thinking—is defined by Socrates in one of Plato's *Dialogues* as "the dialogue of the soul with itself." So Socrates' friends and associates are not there with him simply because they want to be or because he allows them to be present; they are with him because his enterprise is communal. He needs them as much as they need him. The plurality of voices, the clash of opinions, the attempt to persuade others of what you think you really know, the rigorous and unstinting scrutiny of every opinion, the common search for fallacies, weaknesses, ambiguities, self-deceptions, unfounded certainties—all these and more are essential to that search for self-knowledge.

The young men who followed Socrates about, listening to and conversing with him, were not his students but his associates, and it is as such that he deals with them. The respect that Socrates displays toward his young friends is genuine, not a matter of technique or a form of etiquette; he takes his fellow conversationalists seriously because they are, in the face of the profound ignorance of all of us, his genuine equals in the search for self-knowledge.

This does not mean that Socrates treats them with kid gloves. The gravity of their common enterprise requires that the truth, the knowledge they are all seeking and all need, must take precedence over feelings of inferiority and embarrassment. To engage in the quest for self-knowledge with Socrates may be exciting, but it is not always pleasant or fun, for the questors have to be prepared to admit error publicly, to accept correction from anyone, and to follow the argument wherever it leads, regardless of personal wishes or felt needs. The self-discipline required for participation in the Socratic quest for self-knowledge is exacting and unyielding. Failure to accept and obey that discipline entails the failure of the whole enterprise. Thus, if Socrates is respectful of his friends, he is also extremely demanding of them, both for his sake and for theirs.

Along with offering respect and making demands, Socrates allows his fel-



low participants complete freedom within their common activity. There is a stringent discipline to observe, but no rules or regulations are laid down in advance to govern the relationship between the parties to the conversation. Both Socrates and his fellow discussants are free to do what they will, to set such rules as they agree on, and to mutually enforce them until they agree to change or ignore them. They jointly decide what is and is not relevant to the conversation as they proceed. Even the question of what is and is not a valid argument is open to discussion. In short, participation in a Socratic conversation is an exercise in freedom.

With this last point I have begun to shift my focus from what Socrates does to and for his interlocutors to what those interlocutors acquire for themselves from participating in that search for wisdom. What they emphatically do not get from him are any definitive answers to their questions, not because he withholds what he knows but because he genuinely does not know. Of course, many of those who talk with Socrates are convinced that he does know the answers but for some reason refuses to impart them.

It takes considerable insight and maturity to see that Socrates' professions of ignorance are the literal truth. But if his interlocutors don't get answers, what do they gain from talking with him? As interlocutors come to see that Socrates, for all his irony, always means what he says, they come to see that they themselves are participating as equals with Socrates in a genuine quest for knowledge. To realize that is to begin to discover one's own power—to ask, to answer, to judge the adequacy of an answer, to admit error, to rethink a position, to search for the necessary but elusive new insight.

In short, in talking to Socrates one may discover one's own power to do what Socrates does—that is, to think for oneself. This is perhaps the greatest gift Socrates or any genuine teacher can offer, although it is only in part a gift. Necessarily, the discovery of our own freedom and power as thinking beings must be one we make for ourselves. And this, I think, is the secret of Socrates' extraordinary authority and influence, the reason so many of his young friends went on to become eminent and powerful thinkers in their own right, the reason he has served as a source of inspiration to generation after generation of thinkers, the reason we still live in the Socratic era two thousand years after he died.

Before I conclude my remarks about Socrates, let me interject a word about terminology. Socrates generally called his enterprise philosophy. The word, which may have existed before him but which he probably was the first to use with any regularity, means "the love of wisdom." He uses it in part to distinguish himself from the sophists, whose name means "wise ones." Socrates wished to emphasize that he did not claim to have wisdom, as they did; he claimed only to desire it.

But he had another name for his enterprise, a name that he may also have originated. In several of Plato's *Dialogues*, Socrates likens his activity to the work of doctors. But whereas doctors treat the body, correcting its deficiencies and malfunctions, Socrates wishes to treat the soul and correct its disorders. The Greek phrase he used is *psyche therapein*, literally, "therapy for the soul." For Socrates the sickness of the soul that psychotherapy was designed to cure was ignorance—not ignorance of this fact or that body of information, but the essential ignorance from which we all suffer, ignorance of ourselves. This ignorance, this sickness, in its most common and virulent form is so deep that we do not know how ignorant we are; we do not even know that we are ignorant. We may not be able to overcome our ignorance of ourselves, but we can overcome our ignorance of our ignorance. That is, we can come to understand that we do not know most, perhaps all, of what we think we know.

Thus, although we may never be able to achieve full knowledge of ourselves, we can be released from the shackles of false knowledge. The discovery of our ignorance of ourselves is identical with the discovery of our freedom. The possibility of human wisdom, according to Socrates, may indeed be severely limited, but from Socratic psychotherapy we can at least learn just how ignorant and free we are.

It is no accident that I concluded my remarks about Socratic discourse with a reference to Socratic psychotherapy. In shifting our attention to Freud and his version of psychotherapy, we shift from a metaphorical to a literal use of the term. Freud was trained as a physician, and it was as a physician that he made his discoveries, developed his ideas, gathered a group of followers and disciples around himself, and organized the international psychoanalytic movement.

If Socrates had no discernible profession, Freud, by contrast, is in large measure defined by his relation to the profession of modern scientific medicine. If Socrates wrote nothing, Freud, by contrast, must have spent a very large proportion of his adult life writing. The standard English translation of his collected works runs to twenty-four sizable volumes, and his correspondence with various figures, if it were ever collected and published, might bulk as large or larger than the published works.

If Socrates founded no single school of thought, Freud explicitly, deliberately, and with enormous success spent years organizing and establishing the international psychoanalytic movement. If Socrates claimed to know nothing, Freud at times seems to claim to know everything, or at least everything important, or, to put it more modestly, to have discovered a method and founded a science that makes it possible to discover everything worth knowing that can be known. If Socrates is noted for his ironic modesty in admitting his ignorance, Freud, by contrast, proudly places his discovery of psychoanalysis alongside Copernicus' heliocentric theory and Darwin's theory of evolution—

the three great fundamental discoveries that, Freud says several times in his writings, define our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our place in it.

Freud was not tried and executed by his community as Socrates was, but he was and remains a no less controversial figure. He openly attacks all religious belief as basically neurotic or childish, and he is notorious for finding sex and sexual significance in every aspect of human life, even the most seemingly innocent—one might almost say, *especially* the most seemingly innocent. On the one hand, he defends all sorts of despised perversions as more or less natural, and, on the other hand, he argues that much of our morality is perverse and that most of our claims to rationality, integrity, disinterestedness, and objectivity are self-serving and false. He feels free to dismiss most philosophy as insignificant; to interpret art, literature, politics, anthropology, and economics in his own terms; to attack those of his followers who disagree with him as knaves and fools. He changes his mind and then denies that he has done so. And he is often ambiguous; he sometimes talks as if psychoanalysis might someday be reduced to the neurology and physiology of the brain and central nervous system, and at other times he talks as if every condition of our bodies, even death, is to be understood as a psychological phenomenon. Yet Freud's influence is enormous; we live in a world definitively marked by Freud's thought.

I do not want to enter into the controversies about Freud or to question his stature as one of the foundational thinkers of our time. Instead I want to take his influence for granted and remind you that all of Freud's thought has its source in a single peculiar activity, that activity in which the patient comes into the doctor's office, lies down on a couch in front of the seated doctor, and begins to follow the first and only law of psychoanalysis: to say whatever comes into your mind. Freud's discoveries about dreams, slips of the tongue, neurotic behavior, the several structures of the mind, the existence of the dynamic unconscious—all these and more emerged from his observations of his patients when they engaged with him in that strange conversational activity of free association.

Paradoxically, although everything significant in psychoanalytic thought flows from that process, Freud himself has told us very little about it beyond a few generalities and a large number of anecdotes. Even his famous case studies tell very little about what goes on in a psychoanalytic session. Furthermore, Freud's general discussions of psychoanalytic theory and practice often provide a misleading picture of what such a session is like. I am not going to present such a picture here, but I would like to discuss several features of psychoanalytic discourse.

In the first place, as is generally known, psychoanalysis is very long, very expensive, very time and energy consuming, and very, very difficult for the patient. Freud was quite clear that unless patients were in considerable pain, un-

less their lives were more or less intolerable, they would not be willing to invest the money, time, and energy and accept the pain that psychoanalysis requires. Why should this be so? Why should saying whatever comes into your mind be so difficult and painful? To make a long story very short, it is because we conceal a great deal that we think and feel, not only from others but from ourselves. For one reason or another, we do not want to admit to ourselves that we have such thoughts or feelings.

In effect, Freud discovered that the range of thought, action, and passion in the human psyche is far larger and far more difficult to get at than was previously understood. He found, further, that much human misery was due to conflicts within the psyche, although sufferers usually failed to realize this and normally thought their unhappiness was due to an external cause they could not control. Like Socrates, Freud found that we are far more ignorant of ourselves than we realize.

Psychoanalysis, then, is the slow, painful process that Freud discovered by which patients, with the help of the analyst, come to understand themselves better. What is important for my purposes is that for Freud this process of self-discovery is essentially dialogical, a conversation between the analyst and the analysand. We cannot discover the truth about ourselves by ourselves; we need to do it with someone else.

This dialogical necessity is built into the human situation. If we could admit to ourselves what we really felt and thought about ourselves and the people around us, we wouldn't be so conflicted that we needed to suppress and hide significant portions of ourselves from ourselves. The very structure of the human psyche is such that the truth about ourselves is accessible only with the direct aid and support of someone we trust more than we trust ourselves. Such people are very hard to find. In fact, Freud thinks that such people cannot be found; they must be made through the long, arduous process of analytic training. What is interesting from my point of view is that the central, irreplaceable element in the training of a psychoanalyst is the training analysis: every psychoanalyst, in order to become one, has to go through the analytic process as a patient.

As I noted earlier, in a conversation with Socrates the discussion always tends to grow less and less private and particular and more and more generic. The idiosyncratic concerns of the interlocutor tend to drop away as the more fundamental features of the problem under discussion come into view. In psychoanalysis almost the exact opposite tends to happen. When patients start talking about themselves and their problems, they usually talk in generalized, cliché-ridden terms that reflect common opinion, not their actual experiences. It takes a long time of allowing oneself to reflect on one's feelings to be able to feel and describe them accurately in all their highly individualized reality. Al-

most always in this process the analysand discovers that a given feeling, which might be named embarrassment or guilt or anger, is based on very specific experiences, frequently from the early years of his or her life. Not until these original experiences are recovered in memory can many of the idiosyncratic, strange, or puzzling features of the general feeling make sense to the person on the couch. In effect, the psychoanalytic dialogue becomes more gossip as it proceeds, not less so.

Socrates almost never engaged in gossip, in that endless iteration of who did what to whom, when, where, how, and why. For Freud, the gossip we tell about ourselves is not an indulgence but the key to discovering the fundamental features of who and what we are. It is, I think, one of Freud's great discoveries that there is a proper use of gossip that can lead to the perception of significant general truths about what it means to be human.

The truths that emerge from psychoanalytic discourse are discoveries as much for the analyst as they are for the analysand. This point is an important one and is not always appreciated, even by those sympathetic to psychoanalysis. Freud himself is largely responsible for the misunderstanding because he frequently writes as if the analyst understands everything about the patient on the couch and has only to determine the strategy by which the analyst will, step by step, always at exactly the right moment, bring the patient to see the truth.

This image of the all-knowing, all-competent psychoanalyst also feeds conveniently into the fantasies of many analysands, who need, or prefer, to think that their analyst has all the answers. The reality is quite different. Analysts do have at their command a great deal of psychoanalytic theory and experience; they know all about the Oedipus complex and pre-Oedipal object relations, about repression and regression, about transference and countertransference, about dream theory and parapraxes, and the rest. But when confronted by a particular analysand describing a particular painful experience, the analyst must set aside all that acquired knowledge and simply listen to what is being said. Otherwise the analyst, like the patient, runs the risk of mishearing what is being said and of assimilating it to concepts and categories that are inappropriate and inaccurate.

Analysts, like patients or anybody else, can jump to wrong conclusions, can systematically distort evidence, unintentionally suppress essential data, and so forth. And there are analysts who do these things, who listen for a few minutes and then are completely confident that they know exactly what is wrong with the patient and exactly what needs to be done. There is even a certain understandable tendency among analysts who do not act this way to talk as if they did.

The true situation is an uncomfortable one for analysts as well as their patients. For all their training (or perhaps because of it) psychoanalysts do not know what is wrong with their patients or what to do about it. They don't even

know whether the analytic theory and practice are right, whether this patient might not be the one who tests the rule, the patient to whom the theory doesn't apply, the patient for whom the theory needs to be rethought, reexamined, reformulated. In the reality of a psychoanalytic encounter, the analyst is quite ignorant and needs, with the analysand, to rediscover and work out the theory all over again from the beginning. Anything less is likely to result in a less than satisfactory analysis.

What I am arguing here is that every psychoanalysis is a genuine voyage of discovery for both the analyst and for the analysand. But this voyage is not merely an exploration of analytic theory for the analyst; it is and must be a voyage of self-discovery as well. After all, if analysts cannot simply rely on theory to guide and shape the discourse with analysands, because that theory is always—and must always be—uncertain and unreliable, they must fall back on nontheoretical resources. This means, I think, that analysts must rely on their own personal responses to the people with whom they are dealing. The more effectively analysts can individualize their patients, the more personalized their responses will be to each one. In that intimate encounter between two unique individuals, the analyst, like the patient, must encounter himself or herself, as well as the other, in new and surprising ways.

This brings me to a final point about the psychoanalytic process that I find difficult to express accurately and without distortion. A number of features of psychoanalytic practice were thoroughly fixed in analytic dogma for many years. Analysis required that the patient recline on a couch with the analyst sitting out of sight. Analysis required at least three or four or five sessions a week. Analytic sessions all had to be forty-five or fifty minutes long. The patient had to establish a transference neurosis toward the analyst, and so on.

There has been much argument in the psychoanalytic community in recent years about the relative importance of these various doctrines and how they are to be understood. There have also been many changes in theory and in practice. Specifically, serious attention has been given to the nonverbal dimensions of the analytic process and the analytic relationship. But even here, the desired therapeutic outcome of treatment requires that the nonverbal components eventually be reflected, and at least partially articulated, in discourse between analyst and analysand.

If I have been accurate in my sketch of the psychoanalytic process, then the essence of psychoanalysis lies in the character of the talk between the analyst and the analysand. That talk, as I have argued, is difficult to achieve and to sustain, but it is what psychoanalysis is all about. Everything else, all those practices, beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas, are just means to achieve that extraordinary conversation. There is considerable evidence that Freud himself constantly broke the rules—that he had his patients over for dinner, took them on

vacations with him, and behaved in all kinds of seemingly unanalytic ways. My point is simply that because these customary practices and doctrines of psychoanalysis are means to an end, they can and should be violated if they do not serve the purpose for which they were intended.

Socrates, too, did many things that seem strange or inappropriate for a philosopher—unless you hold on to the central fact that his aim was to initiate and sustain that extraordinary conversation that constituted his search for self-knowledge. If he had to use bad arguments, tell outrageous stories, and act in strange ways to serve his ends, so be it. Only an arrogant fool who believed he knew the answers beforehand would have been so foolish as to limit the means used to achieve an end he did not yet know how to reach.

With this last remark I have pushed these reflections to the point of suggesting that the strange kinds of talk that Socrates and Freud discovered and pursued with such single-minded devotion were not, finally, merely means to the end of self-knowledge but were intrinsic to the end they pursued. This, in turn, suggests that the end—self-knowledge—is already present in the activity.

The tradition of Western philosophy as we know it begins with Socrates and his discovery that the search for wisdom entails a certain kind of discourse. The tradition started by Socrates has largely ignored his discovery, and for the past twenty-five hundred years philosophers have pursued wisdom in a wide variety of ways, but none that I can think of has attempted to follow the Socratic example by rigorously engaging in Socratic conversation. Maybe the enterprise has not been understood, maybe it is too difficult, or maybe even the philosophers could not bring themselves to believe that Socrates meant what he said.

Whatever the reason, Freud may well be the first thinker since Socrates to take talk as seriously as Socrates did. And that recognition poses both a challenge and an opportunity for us. With Freud as a model, we may be the first thinkers since antiquity who are able to grasp the experience of discourse with which Socrates initiated philosophy. Philosophy, the desire and the search for wisdom, is, in the end, the desire and the search for self-knowledge. We might, I suggest, rediscover philosophy for ourselves. That is the opportunity. The challenge is to accept the opportunity.

## 2 Plato's *Laches*

### *Psychotherapy and the Search for Wisdom*

The *Dialogues* written by Plato in the fourth century B.C. are for the most part narrative or dramatic accounts of conversations of Socrates, who was tried and executed in Athens for impiety and corruption of the young when he was seventy and Plato about twenty-seven. After Socrates' death it became quite the fashion for philosophers to write "Socratic" dialogues. Almost all of these writings have been lost through the centuries; only the dialogues of Plato and his contemporary Xenophon have survived intact, and much of what we know about the intellectual life of Athens at the time we know only from their works.

I want to make several points here. First, it seems clear that Socrates was an original thinker of enormous importance for the whole history of Western thought, although we know very little about him apart from what Plato wrote. Second, Plato's *Dialogues* have been recognized since antiquity as philosophical and literary masterpieces of the highest order: Plato is to philosophy what Shakespeare is to drama and what Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are to fiction. He is the master whose works set the standard against which other works are judged. Third, Plato's *Dialogues* are rooted in the history of a particular time and place, the city of Athens in the last quarter of the fifth century B.C.

With perhaps one or two exceptions, every character in the *Dialogues* seems to have been a real historical figure, but we have no evidence on whether any of the dialogues occurred or whether Plato's literary accounts are historically accurate. My private judgment is that none of the dialogues could be a fully accurate rendering of a historical event; they are too perfect as literary works to be historically accurate. No event in the real world is so well formed or devoid of irrelevancy and accident as a Platonic dialogue. It must be said,

the possibility of philosophy. We affirm with him that becoming, not being, is the ultimate reality.

Homer is not the only thinker who denies the reality of being and insists that becoming is all there is. An entire school of thinkers, the sophists, advocated exactly this view. But Thrasyarchus is a weak exponent of the sophistic position. To see that position in all its power we must go to its finest spokesmen, the traditional poets, and finally to the first and greatest sophist of them all—Homer. Sophistry, the affirmation of the ultimate reality of becoming, can receive its full due only in imitative poetry, in stories that present a temporal sequence of events and claim that the temporal sequence has significance. Only in imitative poetry is this basic premise of sophistry built into the very structure of the argument.

We have come full circle; we can say with Socrates that there is indeed an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, and a present and future quarrel as well. The grounds of the quarrel, now apparent, are not trivial, shoddy, or absurd. They touch the heart of both poetry and philosophy. Yet the quarrel is peculiarly one-sided, for the poets have no interest in it; they ignore philosophy and go about their business of presenting human reality as they see it. Philosophers, on the other hand, do not and cannot ignore the poets except at the peril of the philosophical endeavor, for the poets are the great enemies. They are the ones to overcome if the philosophical way of life is to have any meaning.

As Socrates and Plato realize, the poets have the weight of human experience on their side. Their account of reality is immediately persuasive to everyone, whereas philosophers must constantly struggle to make their case, even to themselves. The poets, furthermore, claim wisdom, and the philosophers claim only to be seeking wisdom—they admit their own ignorance. True philosophers even recognize that they cannot even attempt to make their case without becoming poets themselves.

If philosophy deliberately picks a quarrel with poetry, it does so knowing that its opponent has everything in its favor. Thus, philosophy cannot do without Homer and the other poets, for the poets present with immense power the eternal problems that make philosophy possible and necessary. Here, then, is our response to Socrates' invitation to step forward in defense of poetry and its inclusion in the just city: we admit the validity of his charges against poetry but add that without poetry philosophy itself would be trivial, if not altogether impossible.

## 20 Dialogue and Dialectic

### *The Limitations on Human Wisdom*

Plato's *Dialogues* occupy a peculiar position in the Western philosophical tradition. On the one hand, they are the earliest complete set of philosophical writings that has come down to us. Occurring as they do so close to the dawn of philosophical thought, the *Dialogues* still retain much of the freshness, delight, and sense of discovery that often mark the first stages of a great intellectual adventure. In the *Dialogues*, philosophy is not yet a recognized profession; there are no learned professors of philosophy and no earnest graduate students, no carefully defined and well-established schools and isms; and the discipline itself has not been sufficiently institutionalized to take its place among the well-established and respectable professional disciplines. Philosophy, as Plato represents it in the *Dialogues*, is completely open: anyone can participate in the quest for wisdom—old or young, foolish or wise, naive or sophisticated—and the quester can address any interesting question or problem without worrying about trespassing on the preserves of another discipline. Any theory, any proposition, no matter how half-baked, can be investigated with the utmost seriousness, and no one ever suggests in the *Dialogues* that the person who raises an issue should read all the books and technical articles on the problem before attempting to work out a solution. This sense of the openness of philosophy has given the *Dialogues* the reputation of being the perfect text for introducing philosophy to beginners.

Yet the *Dialogues* have been and remain of great interest to professional philosophers of the first rank. The study of philosophy in the Western tradition may well begin with Plato, but it never seems to leave him behind. Starting with the first generation after him—with Aristotle—philosophers have been prais-

ing Plato for his magnificent insights while at the same time they undertake to refute him, showing that his system is unclear, his arguments weak, and his conclusions fallacious. This ambivalent attitude toward Plato is as prevalent today as ever, to wit, such diverse thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Alfred North Whitehead, and the modern linguistic analysts.

It would not be far-fetched to suggest that the *Dialogues* play a role in our philosophical tradition similar to that assigned to Socrates within the dramatic world of the *Dialogues* themselves. In Chapter 1, I referred to four striking images of Socrates. He likens himself to a gadfly in the *Apology* because he insists on asking simple and obvious questions, which, unfortunately, no one can answer. In the *Theaetetus* he speaks of himself as a philosophical midwife, one who, though barren of ideas himself, is able to help others bring their ideas to birth. Meno, speaking for all those who, thinking they have the answers to Socrates' questions, have the misfortune to fall into his hands, likens Socrates to a stingray, which numbs and paralyzes everything it touches. A fourth image of Socrates, in the *Symposium*, applies even better to Plato's writings than these three and expresses perfectly the major theme to which I shall direct my remarks. I refer to Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates to the little figurines of Marsyas, the semidivine satyr, that can be bought in the shops of Athens. These images, like Socrates, are outwardly grotesque, but they are cleverly hinged, and opening them, one finds images of the divine within. Socrates, continues Alcibiades, is like Marsyas not only in appearance but also in person. Socrates, too, enchants and charms men, not with a flute but with words, words that seem obvious, even trivial, but conceal beauty and even divinity.

As with the commonplace figurines of Marsyas, Socrates offers more than meets the eye. But Alcibiades is right in suggesting that it is one thing to catch a momentary glimpse of the beauties concealed within Socrates' words and quite another to see those divine images revealed in all their purity and power. He is also right in hinting that much of Socrates' attraction lies precisely in his ability to provide those momentary glimpses with their promise of future revelations. Surely, much of the appeal of the *Dialogues*, both for beginners and for mature thinkers, is based on that ability. Plato's *Dialogues* hold out to the reader the promise of knowledge, of insight, of wisdom. The promise is never made openly, but it lurks just beneath the surface of the discussion, enticing the reader to look a little closer, to think a little harder. But, like Alcibiades in his relationship with Socrates, the reader is always frustrated by the dialogue, for it fails to deliver on its promise: the true nature of justice and other virtues is never quite revealed, the secret of successful rhetoric remains hidden, the immortality of the soul is never firmly established.

A multitude of reasons are given for this failure of the *Dialogues*. Some scholars argue that Plato had no final answers to these problems, that he merely

explored the questions and suggested a variety of possible solutions. Others assert that Plato believed that he had answers but could not adequately demonstrate them. Still others insist that the failure is the reader's, not Plato's, and that if we look long enough and hard enough, the *Dialogues* will reveal their treasures. All of these views have something to recommend them, but each is insufficient by itself. My own conception of Plato's writing and thought is that for Plato, too, there are no final or complete answers to any humanly significant questions. Philosophy for Plato means the desire for wisdom, and the search for wisdom constitutes the supreme human activity. Yet we can never achieve wisdom, at least not the wisdom of the gods, if they exist at all.

If Plato denies that man can ever become fully wise, his *Dialogues* do hold out the possibility of a lesser kind of wisdom that is humanly attainable. The mark of this lesser wisdom is an acute sense of the radical limitations of human understanding. I propose, therefore, to discuss Plato's philosophy, not by examining his answers to various problems, but by indicating the ways his answers are limited and problematic. That is to say, I shall try to articulate Plato's philosophy through a consideration of several problems that the *Dialogues* do not resolve because of the intrinsic limitations of human wisdom.

The most obvious limitation of Plato's philosophy can be seen in his use of the dialogue form. Philosophers have always argued for the superiority of the philosophical life, for the unalloyed happiness that comes to those who devote themselves to the search for knowledge. By adopting the dialogue form, Plato has been able to portray this life concretely. By dramatizing the life and death of Socrates, the *Dialogues* depict the philosophical existence better than any argument or description. The delight that Socrates takes in disinterested conversation, the eagerness with which he takes up all questions and seeks for answers wherever the argument may lead, and the unwavering conviction with which he faces his trial and execution present an unparalleled picture of the claims of the philosophical life. The historical Socrates may have been a unique figure, and the Socrates portrayed in the *Dialogues* may be, in large part, a creation of Plato's imagination, but as long as the *Dialogues* are read, our conception of human greatness must include the quiet life of the philosopher as well as the more passionate lives of the tragic hero, the creative artist, the all-conquering general, and the dedicated statesman.

To praise Plato for the artistic genius with which he has rendered the philosophical life is, at best, a backhanded compliment. It implies that philosophy, as he understood it, is incapable of making its own case, that it needs the help of art. I do not mean that the *Dialogues* are to be understood as philosophy with a sugarcoating of drama. Plato was far too suspicious of art itself and had too much poetic and philosophical integrity to practice a cheap combination of the two. Plato did not refrain from writing straightforward philosophical treatises

because he felt that dramas would be more palatable and more rhetorically effective to a general audience. He wrote the *Dialogues* as dramas because he had no other way to make his case.

In a famous passage in the *Seventh Letter*, Plato attacks those who have written or will write about his philosophy. He says that philosophy is unlike all other subjects and disciplines in that it cannot be put into words. He implies that putting it into words would, in any case, do no good, because philosophy cannot be taught to anyone, only learned. Philosophy, he says, "comes from constant association with the subject itself and constant living with it; it is like a light which is kindled from a leaping flame in the soul of the knower and then supports itself."

Thus philosophy is intrinsically incommunicable for Plato, and the *Dialogues*, whatever else they may be, cannot be viewed in any simple sense as expressive of Plato's own philosophy. When a man writes a philosophical treatise, he necessarily assumes that he knows what he is talking about and that he can teach what he knows to his reader. By writing dialogues Plato avoids both assumptions. He himself is never present in the *Dialogues*, so he never talks directly to his readers. Only his characters talk, and they never speak directly to readers but only to each other. Plato remains invisible behind the facade of his dramas, and it is useless for readers to try to penetrate that facade to grasp the philosophical opinions and beliefs of the author.

Some have argued that Plato adopted the dialogue form in order to stimulate readers to engage in the kind of intensive and prolonged thought that might generate that self-sustaining spark of philosophy in their souls. The *Dialogues* can quite adequately be seen as a set of texts for a home study course entitled "How to Teach Yourself Philosophy." But writing about learning to love wisdom presents its own problems. Plato's adoption of the dialogue form implies that wisdom is radically incapable of being communicated from one person to another.

Plato does not enjoy a reputation among philosophers for being a moderate or cautious thinker. Yet in his entire career as a writer, a career that probably lasted for more than fifty years, only once, so far as we know, did he depart from the dialogue form to write in his own person, unequivocally stating his opinions directly to the reader. That exception is his collection of thirteen letters.

Much more could be said about the formal characteristics of Plato's writings in relation to his conception of philosophy. I think, however, these few general remarks are sufficient to show that Plato's refusal to express himself openly on philosophical issues by writing treatises is not based on personal idiosyncrasy, nor on esoteric doctrine, nor on an inability to come to firm conclu-

sions. It derives directly from his awareness of his human limitations as a writer, a teacher, and a thinker.

If we accept the notion that the dialogue form of writing was self-imposed by Plato because of his belief in the incommunicability of philosophy, we might naturally ask why philosophy, perhaps alone among human activities, should be mute. Plato is not unique among philosophers in insisting on this point. Some have said that wisdom is achieved through a mystical experience of union with God or some other transcendent reality. Others have spoken of philosophy as culminating in contemplation, in that silent and solitary activity in which the soul at last stands face to face with the objects of its search and sees them as they are. Still others, especially in recent times, have argued that wisdom, if it is possible to attain, is accessible only through action, through the engagement of the whole person in the formless, unpredictable, but fully real world in which we live.

Plato's reason for denying that philosophy can be put into words has elements of mysticism, of contemplation, and of existential commitment. But it is not based primarily on any one of these three. It derives, rather, from his understanding of the human condition and of the place of philosophy in the world. We must, therefore, go beyond the purely formal characteristics of his writings and look more closely at the substance of his dramas.

I have said that the *Dialogues* are not philosophy because, according to Plato, philosophy cannot be expressed in words. Yet the *Dialogues* are deeply philosophical in content and intention. I suggest that the *Dialogues* can most accurately be viewed as imitations of philosophy, dramatic representations of the search for wisdom. The *Dialogues* show who may participate in this search and under what conditions, how the search begins, what it involves, the direction it takes, and so forth. Considered in this way, the *Dialogues* do not so much tell Plato's answers to the problems of politics, ethics, psychology, epistemology, and cosmology as show in images what it means to ask these questions and to look for answers. The *Dialogues* may not be philosophy as Plato understood it, but they do provide glimpses of what he thought the search for wisdom was like.

From this point of view, the most striking aspect of Plato's dramas is the degree to which he has anchored the abstract speculations of the participants in reality. The speakers themselves are not cardboard figures. The character of a man always corresponds to the opinions that he expresses in the *Dialogues*. That correspondence, however, is never perfect or exhaustive. The man is always bigger, richer in possibilities, and more interesting than his explicit statements.

Old Cephalus is present at the beginning of the *Republic* for only a few

pages, during the course of which he makes some suggestive remarks about old age, money, and the way a man ought to live. Those remarks do far more than provide a starting point for the subsequent discussion of justice. They establish Cephalus as a three-dimensional character. His presence is felt throughout the dialogue, not only when the conversation explicitly takes up questions relating to money, old age, and businessmen but throughout the discussion of justice. Cephalus, more through his personality than through his few remarks, suggests that justice, in addition to having political and interpersonal dimensions, is concerned with the inner health and ultimate fate of the individual human soul. Socrates' prolonged conversation with Glaucon and Adeimantus, two talented and thoughtful young men, gives shape and substance to the analysis of justice in the *Republic*. But that analysis would have been very different if it had been initiated by anyone other than the old Cephalus. What is true of Cephalus holds for all the speakers in the *Dialogues*. Every character has an effect on the subject, scope, direction, and outcome of the conversation in which he participates.

Plato further concretizes his dialogues by giving them settings. They take place early in the morning in the house of Callias, one of the richest men in Athens, or in prison on the day when Socrates is to be executed, or on the grassy, secluded banks of a stream outside the city walls. To sense the degree to which the setting affects the substance of a dialogue, we need only compare the *Phaedrus* with the *Symposium*. Both dialogues are about love, both are initiated by Phaedrus, and both reach their high point in a speech by Socrates in praise of love. Yet these dialogues by no means cover the same ground, and both stand in sharp contrast to the *Lysis*, which is also about love. A sophisticated dinner party celebrating the victory of a tragic poet is very different from a leisurely walk in the country taken by two friends. They are as different as the myth of the surreptitious begetting of love during the birthday party of Aphrodite is from the mythical journey of the soul to the place "beyond the heavens." There is no myth in the *Lysis*, but then the crowded courtyard of a school for adolescent boys hardly seems appropriate for that sort of conversation, apart from the innocence and naïveté of Lysis and his friends.

The specificity of character and setting in the *Dialogues* is not an artistic embellishment but an essential part of Plato's art and his conception of philosophy. The search for wisdom, as it is depicted in the *Dialogues*, may begin almost anywhere and under almost any circumstances. It may start casually with a chance encounter, as in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, and only gradually take on an air of urgency and seriousness. It may, as in the *Crito*, begin with the consideration of a practical situation that requires a hard choice between two mutually exclusive courses of action. (In this case, Socrates can either commit injustice by escaping from prison or suffer it by being executed for a crime of

which he is not guilty.) Or, as in the *Phaedo*, which describes Socrates' execution, it may start from a situation in which the outcome is perfectly clear but in which the human significance of that outcome is uncertain.

The precise circumstances and persons in any given dialogue are less important for my present purposes than the general fact that there are always several people involved and they are always in some particular problematic situation. The dramatic action of each dialogue has as its natural terminus the resolution of the problem faced by the participants—a terminus that may or may not be achieved. Theaetetus, for example, is a budding scientist; his whole life is bound up with the acquisition of knowledge. When he and Socrates discuss the nature of knowledge, they are investigating the fundamental issue of Theaetetus' vocation. Until Theaetetus is personally satisfied that he knows what knowledge is—within the context of the dialogue this means until he can withstand Socrates' friendly but relentless cross-examination—his life will remain problematic.

The need for wisdom thus emerges from the concrete phenomena of life as they are revealed and rendered dubious by the clash of conflicting opinions. Wisdom itself is achieved, if it ever is, when the opinions no longer conflict either with each other or with the phenomena. In sum, the search for wisdom is dramatically represented by Plato as a historically conditioned, communal enterprise of several individuals.

For Plato, philosophy cannot be written because there are no standard problems of philosophy that can be considered in abstraction from the individuals concerned and the situations in which they find themselves. There is, for Plato, no such thing as the problem of knowledge, which is the special subject matter of that branch of philosophy called epistemology. Knowledge is a problem for those who are in some way concerned with it. But because people are real individuals and not mere types, and because each person is in a unique existential situation, everyone has unique problems.

Theaetetus is concerned with knowledge, but so are Simmias and Cebes, so is Meno, so is Protagoras, so are Glaucon and Adeimantus. Precisely because they are dealing with the problem of knowledge from different points of view and in different contexts, the problem itself is different for each. If the problems are different, so are the solutions. What is satisfactory to Glaucon and Adeimantus would not necessarily be so to Theaetetus or Meno or anyone else.

In contrast, a philosophical treatise by its very nature purports to give valid answers to general problems. Plato, by the dramatic character of his writings, denies the reality of these general problems. What disturbs the author of a treatise may not disturb the reader; if by some chance both author and reader are bothered by the same problem, the solution that satisfies the author may not satisfy, or may be misunderstood by, the reader.



Near the end of the *Phaedrus* Socrates describes the difficulties of an author, who, ideally, should follow his written works about as they circulate through the world so that he can answer the questions of readers and clarify their confusions. In philosophy there is no substitute for the direct, personal relationship of two or more individuals engaged in conversation.

If this description of philosophy as a form of conversation accounts for Plato's refusal to write philosophical treatises, it does not explain his insistence on the incommunicability of wisdom. On the contrary, the identification of philosophy with conversation—the fact that Socrates, who devoted his life to the search for wisdom, spent his time talking to others, or, as his victims might put it, interrogating them—suggests that Socrates has something to learn from his interlocutors, just as they have a good deal to learn from him.

One can learn without being taught. This possibility makes conversation—dialogue—the human activity most suited to the growth of wisdom in the soul. The greatest block to learning is our ignorance of our own ignorance, our failure to realize, or to admit that we do not understand or even perceive, the problems we face. The block can be removed most effectively in a free, intimate conversation in which any participant can raise objections, demand clarification, or request further information.

Even so, the success of such a conversation is dubious at best, and in recognition of this likely lack of success, a large proportion of Plato's works end inconclusively, if not in outright failure. Some, such as the *Ion* and *Euthyphro*, end this way because the interlocutors do not perceive the magnitude of their own ignorance. In others, such as the *Protagoras*, the interlocutors seem to be aware of their difficulties but prefer not to continue the discussion for personal or professional reasons. In still others, such as the *Theaetetus*, the interlocutors have both the intelligence to grasp the problem and the desire to find a solution, but they run out of ideas with which to continue the conversation.

The failure to communicate wisdom in a discussion depends on much more than the personal limitations of the participants, however. It is, finally, an intrinsic limitation on discourse itself. Every dialogue starts with a particular group of men and a problem special to them, and they proceed to search for an adequate solution to that problem. The problem is always specific, but the search for a solution always seems to move away from concrete issues into realms of higher and higher abstraction. Thus the simple question of what the sophist Protagoras will teach Hippocrates is transformed almost immediately into a general discussion of the nature of virtue. This tendency of a Platonic dialogue to expand the scope of inquiry and to generate larger and larger abstractions is annoying to those whose taste in drama runs to neatly plotted stories, and in philosophy, to carefully developed sequential arguments.

The disorder and lack of unity so apparent in the *Dialogues* are, however,

merely apparent. Few, if any, writers have created works as tightly structured as Plato's *Dialogues*. The difficulty for us lies in perceiving the unity. To do that, the surface disorder of a dialogue must be understood in terms of its dramatic context. The context, in turn, includes the full range of intellectual issues embedded in the problem facing the interlocutors. The scope of that problem can be defined only by the man or men who face it. Normally, the problem is central to the discussant's life. As the discussion continues, everything relevant to the conduct of his life naturally becomes a topic of conversation. Any attempt to limit the scope of the discussion in advance would be arbitrary and would preclude the possibility of discovering a genuine solution.

The movement toward higher abstraction and greater generality parallels the tendency of every dialogue to become all-inclusive in content. Because each conversation is generated and dominated by a single existential problem, the significance of the problem is constantly enlarged as more and more topics are seen to be included within it. Every dialogue is, in principle, holistic in content and integral in structure. Put simply, this means that every dialogue is potentially an entire philosophical system, that the solution to any single significant existential issue necessarily involves the solution to all problems.

The cure for Charmides' recurrent headache requires an investigation of the health of the soul—that is, of temperance, and thus of virtue in general; but virtue involves knowledge, and knowledge is ultimately concerned with being. There is undoubtedly a certain amount of drollery in the way Socrates moves from a slight headache to the deepest problem of philosophy. But then there is more than a touch of absurdity in the human condition itself, and every dialogue has a strain of humor.

The point is that the participants, whether they know it or not, are always seeking for a vision of the whole of things, one comprehensive insight into the nature of reality. The concrete situation from which they begin and which they hope to resolve is always unique, but the grounds on which it may be resolved—that is, the wisdom they seek—are always the same. This in itself poses no particular problem—until one looks at the character of that insight. Then it becomes clear that whatever Plato thinks is the goal of philosophy, that thing is not subject to discursive reasoning. It cannot be grasped bit by bit, one point after another. The wisdom that is sought is a knowledge of the whole. Although that whole is articulated into parts, each part can be understood only within the context of the whole.

Here is the real basis for the incommunicability of wisdom. True discourse requires a dialogue in which each point is taken up, examined, and agreed to by the participants in the inquiry before the next point is raised. Not only is this procedure the only way by which the closed-mindedness and ignorance of the inquirers can be overcome, but it is unavoidable. Human discourse, like all

other human activities, takes place in time and is therefore necessarily discursive.

But this necessary commitment to the dialogue also means that the goal of the inquiry can never be adequately articulated because that goal is nondiscursive. It has no first step that can be examined and satisfactorily established before moving on to the next. The validity and meaning of each part are derived from the relation of the part to the whole. Thus, for Plato, wisdom is never partial in the sense that the possessor knows some things and not others. Wisdom is knowledge of the whole. A man may be more or less wise depending on the adequacy of his grasp of the whole, but until he sees the whole of being, any claim that he makes to wisdom is mere folly or deliberate fraud.

The gap between the means and the end of philosophy, between discursive conversation and a comprehensive grasp of reality is, in one sense, unbridgeable. It is a limitation that someone of intermediate wisdom recognizes and accepts. Yet for Plato, who in his *Dialogues* is attempting to show what philosophy is like, this limitation is also a challenge. To show the full limitation of human discourse, he has to provide at least a glimpse of the end, a vision of the whole—not once, but many times. It is to be found, among other places, in what scholars are fond of calling the myths of Plato.

The Platonic myths have been subjected to an immense amount of comment, criticism, and analysis. I do not wish to enter into the controversies about whether Plato believed in an immortal soul, postmortem judgment, and a life after death, whether he thought the universe was eternal or created. All such controversies miss the real point of the myths. They are not meant to present Plato's personal beliefs and convictions on these unknowable matters but to provide the interlocutors in a dialogue with a momentary glimpse of the whole of being.

The myth is not the only device by which Socrates, or the other leaders of discussions, can achieve this end in the *Dialogues*. The myth is appropriate in some contexts but not in others. In the center of the *Republic*, for example, when the time has come to present Glaucon and Adeimantus with an insight into being, Socrates employs not a myth but an immensely complicated and extended image, which is often called the simile of light.

The whole that is dimly perceivable in the myths and the other nondiscursive passages in the *Dialogues* is not primarily cosmological; it is ontological. The wisdom sought by philosophers is not based on exhaustive knowledge of the universe and everything in it. It is not equivalent to a complete scientific understanding of the many aspects of the world. It is instead based on knowledge of one thing—on being; and being, in this emphatic sense, is present as a whole in everything that exists. Any problem, any topic, is as good a starting point for the investigation of being as any other.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates gives his great second speech on love to counter Phaedrus' misunderstanding of his first speech. In this second speech he proposes to tell the truth about love, and he casts his account in the form of a myth, likening the soul to a chariot drawn by two horses. For my present purposes two general points will suffice. First, love is defined in that myth as the movement of the human soul—a movement motivated by the overwhelming desire for beauty. In the myth of the *Phaedrus* love is the starting point from which to approach being, and a full understanding of love is identical with a full understanding of being.

In books VI and VII of the *Republic*, however, Socrates is not concerned with love but with the knowledge that the philosopher-kings must have in order to exercise their function as rulers of the just city. Through the related figures of the sun and the Good, the divided line, and the cave, Socrates sketches what these guardians need to know. What they require, he says, is a knowledge of the idea of the Good. But by the time he finishes his figurative account of the Good, it is nothing less than the principle of reality, and to know it is equivalent to possessing comprehensive knowledge of being. Thus, in the simile of light, being is seen not as an object of love but as an object of knowledge, and the articulation of being is set forth in terms of the knower and the known, not the lover and the beloved.

I have mentioned these two quite different but equally complete accounts of being in the *Dialogues* for two related reasons: first, to emphasize the holistic and integral character of each dialogue, the degree to which every true conversation can, in its own way and in its own terms, approach the understanding that is the goal of philosophy, and second, to emphasize that even here, at moments of wordless insight, Plato has indicated the limitations of achievable wisdom. The flash of comprehension that may come at the climax of a serious philosophical discussion is genuine enough. But it is not the end of the search, only the beginning. The fact that Plato could, in the different dialogues, present many different accounts of being implies that no one of them is fully adequate. It is possible and valid to see being as the object of love, but it is equally possible and valid to see it as, among other things, the object of knowledge. In each case, being itself looks different; as the human perspective shifts, so does the appearance of the object. The claim that each myth presents the whole truth is thus undercut by the identical claim on behalf of every other myth. The Platonic myths do provide us with glimpses of the true nature of things, but no more than glimpses.

One last limitation in the search for wisdom requires comment. All the nondiscursive portions of the *Dialogues* implicitly claim to offer some insight into reality. In every case that claim, and, in fact, the entire conception of philosophy depicted in the *Dialogues*, is based on a single notion, the so-called

theory of ideas or forms. Yet as every commentator from Aristotle on has complained, Plato never gave a satisfactory account of the theory. I will not presume to do in a few paragraphs what Plato never attempted. But I think I can indicate briefly why he never tried to do so and what the implications of his reticence are.

The forms, or ideas, are usually described both with reference to things and in contrast to them. Things exist in time and space; as such, they are mutable—they come to be and they pass away. In contrast, the forms exist beyond time and space. They are eternal and immutable; they do not become, they are. Yet if the many things of this world of becoming are totally different from the forms in the world of being, the two worlds are not unrelated. The things in the world of becoming are what they are by virtue of their participation in or imitation of forms. A work of art is beautiful because of its participation in the form of beauty. Just men, just cities, and just acts are just through their relation to the form of justice. Thus the forms serve as the ground of moral and aesthetic values, as the basis for all predication of general terms, as factors determining the character of things in the world of becoming, and so forth.

When the theory is stated in this bald and simplistic form, it is easy to demolish utterly with a dozen unanswerable objections. Later philosophers often wonder why Plato himself didn't see the flaws. He did see them, of course; and to the constant embarrassment of opponents of the theory of forms, as well as simpleminded Platonists, he went so far as to devote the first half of an entire dialogue, the *Parmenides*, to all the standard objections to the theory. The joke of the *Parmenides* is that Socrates, for the only time in all of Plato's writings, is represented as a bright young man who has recently discovered the theory of forms and is pleased with his own intelligence. Parmenides, an old and experienced philosopher, is interested in Socrates' theory and questions him about it. Socrates expounds his conception of the forms in much the way I have just done, and Parmenides, with great kindness and tact, proceeds to cut Socrates down to size as Socrates himself does to his interlocutors in most of the other *Dialogues*.

The classical objection to the theory of ideas, and the one that Parmenides employs with the greatest effect against Socrates, is that sharply distinguishing the forms from the things makes it impossible to establish any relation between them. Socrates, like many of the young men whom he later questions, responds to the attack on his views with exactly the wrong strategy. Instead of holding his ground and strengthening his position by reexamining it, he retreats in confusion. His major error seems to lie in not separating enough the transcendent forms from the mutable things of this world. It appears that the theory of forms can become viable only if one rigorously distinguishes forms and things and resolutely rejects any attempt to treat forms as if they were things. Parmenides

does exactly this for Socrates in the latter part of the dialogue: he shows him how to talk about forms without treating them as if they were things.

The consequences of such a de-reification of the forms are extraordinary and startling, and difficult to understand. In general terms, there emerges the outlines of a logic of being. As Kurt Riezler once described it to me, this logic is analogous to the relation between the axiomatic system of space of a geometry and all the particular geometrical figures in that space. The logic or geometry of being that the theory of forms expresses is not perfectly analogous to the axioms of Euclidian geometry, for there are many other geometries besides Euclid's. The theory of forms is analogous to the attempt to formulate an axiomatic system for all possible geometries. Thus the theory of forms is an attempt to articulate the axioms or principles that govern all phenomena—those that are, those that might be, those that should be. Ideally, the theory cannot fail to be exemplified by every phenomenon, including philosophy, which is the perennial human attempt to articulate the theory.

Plato's reticence about the crucial conception of this entire philosophy is now more understandable. In attempting to talk about the forms, language breaks down. Language is built to articulate the world of mutable things, not the necessary axioms governing the eternal structure of that world. In attempting to talk about the forms, we are in the impossible position of trying to employ discourse to articulate the necessary preconditions of discourse itself.

Thus, full and direct knowledge of the forms is, for Plato, beyond the limits of human understanding. The theory of forms must always remain a theory, a hypothesis framed by a fallible human mind. Philosophy is the movement of the human soul toward a direct and immediate perception of the forms. Since human beings are mortal creatures bound to the world of becoming, they can never know whether or not there is anything eternal to perceive.

The only alternative to the theory of forms for Plato was Sophism, the assertion that there is no being, only becoming, that human life has no essential meaning or direction. Plato constantly fought Sophism in all its forms, but that in itself is tantamount to an admission on his part that it might be true.

Even if the theory of forms is true, and knowledge of them is available to human beings, knowledge, or wisdom, would not constitute an infallible guide to action. Perfect knowledge of the forms would involve a full understanding of the intelligible necessities governing the world. Everything that comes to be must conform to the unbreakable and eternal structure of being at every moment of its existence.

But the world in which we live is not wholly intelligible; it is also and necessarily contingent and accidental. Hence the structure of being does not and cannot determine the particular things that occur. For example, everything that becomes must eventually pass away—this seems unquestionable. The human

craving for immortality is not simply a desire to overcome the limitations of the human condition. It is a desire for what is ontologically impossible. Yet if our mortality is determined by the very nature of being, when we die and, even more important, how we die are not. The particularities of existence are contingent. This is, I think, the ultimate limitation of wisdom: the insight that we seek and that we can never quite achieve is primarily a knowledge that the things of this world, including ourselves, are absolutely unknowable.

At each level—from the artistic form of Plato's writings, to the character of a philosophical conversation, to the nondiscursive accounts of being in the *Dialogues*, and finally to the core of philosophical thought, the theory of forms—Plato took considerable pains to indicate the narrow and modest boundaries within which human understanding must operate. As we penetrate deeper and deeper into his thought, the same unresolved problems constantly reappear. They remain unresolved, but we gradually comes to understand why that is so. At each step along the way Plato insists that we can go no further and simultaneously invites us to take the next step.

The reader who shares the foolish hope of Alcibiades that the ironic satyr figurine will one day open wide and reveal its hidden treasures is bound to be disappointed. The half-revealing, half-concealing glimpses of the truth are all there is to see. The full understanding and acceptance of this hard fact are the beginning and the end of human wisdom and moderation. Plato failed to write philosophy in a conventional manner and to produce a conventional system of philosophy not because he saw too little but because he saw so much.

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