

Look Who Is Talking Now: Plato or Socrates?

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In the introduction Lamb (1924a) wrote for his translation of Plato's dialogues, he, knowingly or unknowingly, moves from the discussion of Plato the author to Socrates the character in Plato's dramatic depictions, revealing the entangling relationship between the two in the representations of the master by his disciple. In such cases, it takes more effort than usual to figure out whom the pronoun "he" stands for in this introduction. This example is just a tip of the iceberg of this phenomenon which does have an influence on the study of Plato's works. The names of Plato and Socrates are interchangeable in most titles where the ethics of Plato is taken for that of Socrates or vice versa. This paper examines the difficulties that arise as a result and brings up four alternatives as possible perspectives from which one may look at the same issues.

Keywords: Plato, Socrates, education in philosophy, philosophical method, literary style

Introduction

In his introduction to Plato's dialogues *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Meno*, & *Euthydemus* by Plato (Lamb, Trans., 1924), the translator Lamb (1924b), aware of it or not, moves from the discussion of Plato the author to Socrates the character, who is pervasive in Plato's dramatic presentations. Here a phenomenon common in Plato's philosophical writings comes to the surface. It is difficult for the readers to decide to whom the pronoun "he" refers in such occasions. This example is just a tip of the iceberg; this phenomenon does have an influence on the study of Plato's works. The names of Plato and Socrates are interchangeable in most titles where the ethics of Plato is taken for that of Socrates or vice versa. This paper examines the difficulties that arise as a result and brings up four alternatives as possible perspectives from which these issues may be viewed. In the first place, these dialogues can be taken as a search for the truth rather than the hits; secondly, they can be viewed as a way of teaching in which teachers are trying to help their students; thirdly, from a historical point of view, they can be seen as a developing method of doing philosophy during an initial phase in the history of philosophy; and finally, they can be read as an invitation by the author that calls for readers' participation in philosophizing.

The Socratic *Elenchus*

The Socratic refutation, which is recognized as a touchstone for wisdom or knowledge by Socrates himself, is often referred to as "*elenchus*" (Morrison, 2006, p. 109), "*Socratic Elenchus*" (Brickhouse & Smith, 2003, p. 118; Vlastos, 2000, p. 39 ff.), or "*elenchos*" (Frede, 2013, p. 4). Socrates in Plato uses the *elenchos* both for criticism and for discovery (Irwin, 1977). His first task is critical, to expose the conflicts, but he does not stop

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there (Irwin, 1977). Plato's Socrates tests the principles by seeing whether an *elenchos* relying on them will work on someone's moral beliefs; the principles themselves are justified by the interlocutors' acceptance of them in the *elenchos*. Irwin (1977) regards Plato's Socrates' conviction of the value of the *elenchos* to be clear, yet he also acknowledges that, like other convictions of (Plato's) Socrates, it is not defended at length.¹ The historical Socrates was too devoted to oral discourse to have thought of writing down any of his own philosophical ideas of his own (Friedlander, 1969). Through his appropriation, or reception, by Plato, the historical Socrates is made accessible to later generations in Plato's Socrates, in spite of the fact that Plato is not the sole writer of "Socratic conversations" (Taylor, 1999a, p. 27).²

Plato and Socrates in Plato

Socrates appears in nearly every Platonic dialogue with the only exception of the *Law* (Taylor, 1999a).³ The reasons may be complex: On one hand, the choice of Socrates as the leading character may probably be in large part a direct consequence of Plato's attachment to Socrates the person and to his ideas and methods (Rowe, 1984). On the other, Friedlander (1969) thinks that Plato's Socrates, who enquires into the "teachability of virtue," the nature of the "virtues," and the nature of other vital forces such as friendship and knowledge, represents the ideal but not everything that Plato communicates to his readers (p. 132). Yet Plato's interest in the personality of Socrates as the ideal embodiment of philosophy is considered to have apparently changed in the course of his career as a writer: Socrates' importance gradually declines, and the figure of Socrates comes to assume the depersonalized role of spokesman for Plato's philosophy (Taylor, 1999a). Rowe (1984) also finds that, although it is certainly not without possibility that Plato sets up his actual view of Socrates as an ideal for humanity at large, there are a number of clear indications that Plato's portrait of Socrates is an idealized one constructed, at least in part, to serve his own purposes.⁴ Cain (2007) holds still another interpretation of Plato's use of the Socratic method: Plato not only recognized its flaws, implicitly criticized it, but also "abandoned it, or transformed it into the philosophically promising methods of hypothesis and division which have new metaphysical and epistemological groundings" (p. 11). For example, in two of the dialogues by Plato (Lamb, Trans., 1924), *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, the questioning stance gives way to a more authoritative tone. Here a change of his use of Socrates' method can be detected (Taylor, 1999b). Plato's departure from his master can further be seen, according to Hyslop (1903), in his absence of "the Socratic contempt for metaphysics" (p. 39), too. Socrates refuses to learn anything from nature or to look at the external order of the world for the moral ideal, but it is not so with Plato (Hyslop, 1903). The dialogue form of questions and answers are not used by Plato in exactly the same way Socrates does as a method of changing one's behavior or opinions, examining people's views, and moving towards conclusions not already prepared. Plato's dialogue form suits his purpose to "construct confrontations rather than conversations which show any real promise of positive results" (Rowe, 1984, p. 9). Furthermore, in Books II to X of the *Republic*, we are offered not only a Plato carrying forward in a

¹ Irwin (1977) wonders, if the good results of knowledge could be secured without the explicit understanding of moral beliefs required for a successful *elenchos*, whether the Socratic method would be superfluous or no better than some other method which might as well just do the same.

² At least nine of Socrates' associates were credited with the invention of the "Socratic conversation;" however, very little of such writings has survived complete apart from those by Plato and Xenophon (Taylor, 1999a).

³ According to Taylor (1999a), all of Plato's writings are, strictly speaking, Socratic dialogues with three exceptions of the *Law*, *Apology* (which is not a dialogue) and *the Letters* (whose authenticity is disputed).

⁴ For example, in *Gorgias*, Socrates is made to suggest that he is perhaps the only true statesman, superior to other accepted models of political excellence (Rowe, 1984).

new way many of the same ethical concerns as those of Socrates but also a Plato with preoccupations of his own (Penner, 2006).⁵ Lamb (1924a) also thinks that Plato in the *Republic* undertakes to show the master presenting Plato's own queries on education and politics after the latter gets more confident in himself as the successor of Socrates.⁶ Irwin (1977) also finds that the doctrines of Plato's middle dialogues suggest that he not only recognizes the conflict between Socrates' views and his own but also rejects them. Irwin (1992) considers that Book I of the *Republic* is deliberately written by Plato as an introduction of Socratic argument for comparison and contrast with the rest of the books. Though many people may agree with Irwin on that, most of the inference remains to be conjecture rather than with solid proof. Since Plato never speaks in his own name, conclusions can never be reached as to which parts of the *Republic* really stands for Plato's own views. Even scholars, who have found strong evidence for developmentalism in Plato, which is characterized as making a distinction between Socrates and Plato, are not willing to be committed to the view that the "Socrates" they speak of is the historical person by that name (Brickhouse & Smith, 2003). No matter how Socrates the historical man, along with his views and methods, are perceived, received, and rendered in Plato, it is Plato's Socrates that first asks and explores many essential questions in the history of philosophy (Brickhouse & Smith, 2003).

The Dialogical Form and the Aftermath

Socrates' questioning is thought to have been designed to undermine the traditional values rather than to develop a positive account of Plato's own (Frede, 2013). In most of Plato's dialogues, Socrates, professing his own ignorance and exposing that of others all the time, is a man of remarkable intellect capable of reducing even the proudest and most learnedmen to confusion and self-contradiction (Brickhouse & Smith, 2003). These dialogues are close to what Friedlander (1969) regards as "educational conversations and competitive debates" (p. 163). Yet in the analysis of Cain (2007), the Socratic method is used by Plato as a form of philosophical drama in which ambiguity plays a central role. In such a "maieutic" manner, Plato's discussion-leader, mostly Socrates, brings to light somebody else's thoughts (Szlezak, 1999, p. 19). There can be little doubt that the aftermath of this method is devastative and even leads directly or indirectly to the historical Socrates' own conviction and execution (Frede, 2013). With the Socratic method of refutation, Plato raises the so-called "What is X?" question, and tests answers by consistency of beliefs, searching for definitions of virtue and happiness with a view to discovering a firmer ground for ethical beliefs about how to live and how to act (Brickhouse & Smith, 2003). In Plato's early dialogues such questions asking for clarifications and definitions show up constantly, but what the victim offers as an answer is submitted to scrutiny subsequently; this Socratic method of scrutiny is further developed and named as "dialectic" by Plato (Hare, 1999b, p. 154). According to Hare (1999b), some modern commentators interpret by taking some unclear passage in the dialogues, suggesting various statements of what Plato might have meant with them, and drawing consequences from each of them.⁷ If these consequences are absurd or inconsistent, they either conclude that he is a bad philosopher or that he cannot have meant that. Hare (1999b) considers this unfair to Plato, for he is not there in person to answer back. The dialogical form includes informal discussions in which important ethical, political, and

⁵ Rowe (1984) also finds the *Republic* as a whole is demonstrably non-Socratic, in the strict sense.

⁶ In his introduction to the *Euthydemus*, Lamb (1924b) also points out that Plato, treading in the steps of Socrates, develops for his own ends his departed master's views on rhetoric and politics.

⁷ For example, Smith (1999) in his master's thesis says that if "good" and "happy" are interchangeable, then one consequence comes to light: There are times when Plato discusses the good of a person without indicating that person's happiness (p. 7).

psychological questions are mutually implicated with one another, intertwining with metaphysical, methodological, and epistemological considerations; as a result, there are no central texts on Plato's ethical doctrines (Frede, 2013). Even if there are conceptual inquiries and analytic truths in his dialogues, inquiries of Plato's Socrates are not conceptual, and his definitions do not always yield analytic truths (Irwin, 1977). A certain aftermath is ensued due to this drawback: The style of interrogation employing cross-examinations among interlocutors produces some difficulties for Plato's readers as well as writers.⁸ It is an intriguing phenomenon that writers often have to apologize for using the name of "Plato" when they think literal accuracy would require "Socrates" (For example, see White, 2006, pp. 356-357). In these Platonic dialogues, it looks as if all that has been discovered is a contradiction among various propositions, though a specific proposition is singled out for rejection (Fine, 2000). The fact of contradiction shows that not all the claims made by the interlocutors are true; but it does not, by itself, show us which propositions are to be rejected (Fine, 2000). Sometimes, agreement on a certain point is not reached by the interlocutors.⁹ The early works, for instance, don't provide a coherent picture of supposed views of Socrates but present disputes over the question with no conclusive arguments for particular resolutions (White, 2013). At other times, the Socratic dialogues just did not explicitly or implicitly endorse an argument.¹⁰ We have to suppose that Plato wants us to ascribe a certain views to him even though he does not support them against counterarguments (White, 2013). There are times when the judgments accepted in the *elenchos* are not always accepted by the interlocutors before the *elenchos*; in other words, Socrates overrides some of the common beliefs (Irwin, 1977). In still other occasions, as Gadamer (1986) finds out, when the conversation turns to the highest and ultimate object of "the good," the speaker in Plato "begs off, saying that it would be unnecessary at that moment to go into it and perhaps even beyond his abilities" (p. 27). Even beliefs of Plato's Socrates' are stable enough to survive the *elenchos*, he cannot show that they are true (Irwin, 1977). It is also tricky that, when one interlocutor might be wrong to agree, still his "answers can be confirmed by other people's agreement" (Irwin, 1977, p. 68). What is worse is that each dialogue has different groups of interlocutors and, therefore, makes a new start; information from different dialogues does not always fit together well (Frede, 2013). For example, a constant theme of the dialogues, the over-estimation of non-moral goods such as wealth, health, and honor as well as under-estimation of the relative importance of virtue seems to be delivered differently in different dialogues; at least nine different views on this can be attributed to Plato (Irwin, 2003).¹¹ Some views can be accredited to Plato himself but not every. Some can be traced back to Socrates, whereas later Plato rejects those by Socrates (Irwin, 2003). As Plato's approaches in different dialogues are not the same, the readers have to fit together what appears to be disparate pieces of information, looking for answers among mountains of reconstructions of his intentions in secondary literature that are widely varied (Frede, 2013). Some think what is meant can be inferred from the exchange of opinions.¹² Others find these opinions to be a starting point for considering Plato's thinking about ethic and his way of engaging in it rather than secure information on Socrates' views

⁸ This is, in fact, not the only difficulty in reading Plato. For example, Frede (2013) considers Plato's conception of happiness especially that in the *Republic* to be seemingly elusive in that he treats happiness as a state of perfection and also in that Plato's crucial texts of moral ideals appear both unyielding and self-renouncing.

⁹ For example, in *Gorgias*, no agreed conception of the final good is given (Irwin, 1977, p. 131).

¹⁰ For example, see Irwin (1977, p. 138).

¹¹ They are The Conditional Thesis, The Sufficiency Thesis, The Non-Instrumental Thesis, The Stability Thesis, the Comparative Thesis, the Composite Thesis, The Comprehensive Thesis, the Dominance Thesis, and the Eudaimonist Thesis. See Irwin (2003) for further information.

¹² For example, see Szlezak (1999, p. 127, note 104).

(White, 2013). Still others find it easy to make out fallacies and to correct them, but such corrections remain incomplete without information about Plato's own conception of the good life and its moral presuppositions (Frede, 2013). Since Plato never speaks in his own name, it is difficult to assess to which extent he agrees with his figures' proclamations even if the speaker is Socrates (Frede, 2013). The difficulties remain when we take the controversial step of assuming the character Socrates to represent Plato's own views: Plato's Socrates seems to defend different views in different dialogues. Moreover, in some dialogues Socrates expresses doubt and puzzlement on questions which he seems to answer firmly in other dialogues (Irwin, 1999). Penner (1992) thinks that in a group of earlier "Socratic" dialogues the character Socrates speaks more or less for the historical Socrates and that in a grouping of middle and later dialogues, where the protagonist is not always Socrates, the main character speaks rather for Plato. Nevertheless, it is still hard to decide whether Socrates is now speaking for himself or for Plato. Since the focus is almost entirely on the exposure of inconsistencies, one cannot help wondering if Plato himself knows the answer to his questions with some card up his sleeve that he chooses not to play for the time being (Frede, 2013). However, Crombie (1964), without telling us the reasons why, finds it foolish to suggest that Plato must have held consciously from the very beginning the conception of his philosophical methods which he eventually came to. Then there is no exact way in which we may assert how and why Plato ends up philosophizing in this way. Whether Plato presents these interrogations as puzzles for his audience to figure out for themselves is a matter of continuing debate in itself among scholars (Brickhouse & Smith, 2003). There are two perspectives with the major point of distinction between those who see Plato the author as one with a clear and determinate view about the intended conclusion of the readers' reflection and others who, rather, emphasize the openness of the outcome (Gill, 2006). For instance, among scholars whose approach is broadly literary-philosophical, there are those whose focus is on the implications of the anonymity of the Platonic dialogue form and of Plato's life-long presentation of philosophy as inseparable from shared dialectical enquiry (Gill, 2006). These scholars have taken the intended result of interpretation or reflection to be less pre-determined.¹³ Corlett (2005) divides the two ways of approaching Plato's dialogues as the "mouthpiece interpretation" and the "anti-mouthpiece interpretation." The former construes Plato's works as conveying what is in Plato's mind about a variety of issues, and the latter holds that "the question of how to read the Platonic dialogues is intimately bound up with the even more evasive question of why Plato employed the dialogue format in his philosophical writing" (p. 10). Corlett (2005) says that, though there is no formalized Socratic Method, it is nonetheless helpful to take a look at how Socrates is portrayed doing philosophy in Plato's dialogues, because, in doing so, "we might gain a better understanding into the nature and value of philosophy itself, and better appreciate what is truly fundamental to it" (p. 47).

Irwin (1999) points out the three different ways of interpreting Plato's dialogues. The first view was held in antiquity by those who took Plato to be sympathetic to Scepticism, including Plato's successors in the Academy. They tend to view the dialogues as primarily critical and exploratory and do not contain a systematic philosophical position; then there is no reason to suppose that one dialogue will reach conclusions consistent with those of another, or that any of their conclusions state Plato's views. The second view begins from the observation that the dialogues share more positive conclusions than just a critical interpretation can explain; Platonists of late antiquity even find a positive systematic view present in the dialogues and explain the differences among them in ways that fit this general systematic interpretation. For expository and didactic

¹³ See Gill (2006, p. 139, footnote 3).

purposes, for example, some dialogues refrain from going into further details given in others, or they are restrained so as not to raise puzzles that are already answered in other dialogues. The third line of interpretation agrees with the systematic view in taking the dialogues to express Plato's positive doctrines but rejects some of the devices they adapted to explain away apparent conflicts among different dialogues. This line of interpretation view the differences as developments during fifty years of Plato's philosophical thinking by taking the early dialogues as intended to present the views of the historical Socrates and the middle and late dialogues to be Plato's own views, which are not necessarily those of the historical Socrates. Nevertheless, Irwin (1999) cannot deny the probability that the early dialogues may still be Plato's own views.

An Attempt or Testing: A Search for Truth Rather than End Results

As for the researcher, she thinks Vlastos (2000, p. 41) has a good reason when he says that the Greek word "*elenchus*" is first and last "*search*" [sic.]: The adversary refutation procedure may also mean "censure" by the Greek word. In this sense, the exchange of questions and answers makes up a process of "testing" (Vlastos, 2000, p. 41), not to be taken as an end product in itself. The researcher agrees with White (2013) when he says that one should read the *Republic* as well as Plato's early dialogues mainly with an eye to its discussion of questions rather than to its proclamation of doctrines. Michael Frede (1996) argues from an analytic viewpoint that Plato's constant use of the dialogical form throughout his writing career may signify a disclaiming of philosophical authority. Gill (1993) also discusses the view that both Plato's written teachings and the ideas in his dialogues were presented merely as a provisional attempt to formulate knowledge of truth rather than an authoritative system.¹⁴ The researcher does think Fiedlander (1969) is right in pointing out that what philosophical analysts of Plato prefer to leave to the literary and historical interpreters is the way to expound his works in the existentialist context: "For the frame action is not constructed accidentally, especially since Plato's works do not belong to a naturalistic, but to a classical form of art" (p. 161). Although the dialogues are not meant to be the complete presentation of Plato's entire philosophy, what they reveal is something infinitely valuable, paving ways for philosophy "which can be sought out and trodden by individual people, afflicted with mistakes and limitations like ours" (Szelezak, 1999, pp. 117-118).

As for the different approaches and pieces of information that do not always fit together well with one another, the researcher would rather consider Plato to be a truth seeker than an answer giver.¹⁵ Just like the rest of us, he is on his way to the truth everyone is, consciously or unconsciously, seeking. The diverging approaches represent his multiple attempts in fumbling for the truth from various standpoints; each new start brings about another try toward the end. Though not every of these efforts seems quite successful, there is one thing that remains unchanged nonetheless. As Frede (2013) points out, Plato never loses interest in the conditions of the good human life.

A Way of Teaching: Teachers Trying to Help Their Students

Here the researcher would like to borrow the interpretation of Socrates' "puzzling pedagogy" presented by Rudebusch (2009, pp. 88-100) to express one of her own views on Plato's method and style. Rudebusch (2009) raises the question why such a serious moral philosopher as Socrates, who takes righteousness and bravery as of value, seems to amuse himself at the expense of others by telling only part of the truth as he challenges his

¹⁴ See Gill (2006, pp. 139-140) where Rafael Ferber was quoted.

¹⁵ See also Weiss (2006).

victims. In such occasions his behavior appears to be misleading. Rudebusch (2009) offers an answer to his own question: Misleading behavior is a way, often the best possible way, to lead human beings from the lowest to the middle level of wisdom (Rudebusch, 2009). In *Apology* (West & West, Trans., 1998), Socrates distinguishes three levels of wisdom: The highest level is the wisdom of God (23a, p. 71), who is really wise; the middle level is the property of the wisest among men who, like Socrates, “has become cognizant that in truth he is worth nothing with respect to wisdom” (23b, p. 72); the lowest level belongs to the man who seems to be wise, both to many other human beings and most of all to himself but not really so (21c, p. 70).¹⁶ The highest level is the divine wisdom, the real wisdom of God, beyond human reach in Rudebusch’s classification and is not taken into consideration when it comes to teaching and/or learning. The rest of the three, the middle and the lowest levels, are the arenas where education in philosophy is able to exert its influence. According to this categorization, it is not too excessive to say that what a teacher of philosophy is capable of is help his or her students to get from the lowest level, thinking he or she to be wise while she or he is actually not, to the middle level, where he or she is wise enough to admit that she or he does not actually know of anything of value. The researcher considers that it is on these two levels where Plato and/or the historical Socrates work hard to help their audience or disciples. Plato, speaking in Socrates’ name, seems to be trying to help his pupils get out of the lowest level of wisdom and elevate them to the middle level of wisdom. These questions and answers make up a way Plato, just as Socrates, helps his readers as well as the parties involved in the discussions understand the situations along with all their complications¹⁷. Taking exactly the identical strategy that the historical Socrates philosophizes, Plato, likewise, develops his own literary style and philosophical methods in order to help his readers as well as his students figure out the truth on their own by means of discussion or reading. The cross-examination process is like an adventure, a procedure of getting closer to the truth. This way, his readers, who are never offered a straightforward answer or definition by Plato himself in his own name, have to go through the discovery procedure step by step all by themselves. Through the revelations disclosed one after the other in the dialogues, the core of the truth is being approached by degrees like an onion being peeled. His readers peel off one layer after another of blindfolds until they finally get to the center of the discussion after following each step all the way through. With no definite answers given, the questions remain open while the readers are left with the right to make their own final decisions. After all, it is their own lives that matter to themselves; they have to make their own choices for their own sake. The researcher thinks Plato would rather have the readers gather for themselves possible answers from the discussions than directly telling them the right things to do or the right choices to make. For, when the readers have a dialogue with themselves in their thinking procedure, the conclusions reached are drawn on their own, not told by anybody else. It empowers them to willingly act out the decisions made thereby.

A Developing Method of Philosophy: From A Historical Viewpoint

The researcher also thinks that, from the historical perspective, the difficulty of understanding Plato and his Socrates can be interpreted as a part of the preliminary attempt in the early history of philosophy. As Hare (1999a) points out, the main difficulty is one about Plato’s situation in time: He comes in at the initial phase of

¹⁶ See also Mills (1775) for an older version of translation.

¹⁷ But Irwin (1977, p. 65) thinks (Plato’s) Socrates is not concerned with learning but with justification, for instance, in the use of terms such as “just” or “pious” as virtues. Weiss (2006) considers the refutation to be inquiry rather than teaching, too: To be a teacher one has to be an expert, yet no one who regards himself or herself ignorant can call herself or himself an expert. Nevertheless, the researcher thinks that both Plato and Socrates, by nature as well as in reality, are teachers in philosophy.

history of philosophy and, therefore, has to invent the method and the terminology as he goes along. The researcher agrees with Hare (1999a) when he says that it is historically sounder not to force one answer or another upon the addressee. Hare (1999a) thinks that Plato intentionally leaves the questions unanswered and the doctrines indeterminate with expectation for somebody who is to be creating a whole new branch of inquiry. Viewed from this stance, Plato does just what his stage of development in philosophy history demands. In his time, the philosophical treatise had not become a particularly common and settled genre yet (Frede, 1996). He duly sorts out, so the researcher thinks, where the real issues are and possible ways to look at the same things from different perspectives. In the context of his own personal research, Plato can be regarded as conducting his investigations in an experimental stage or seeing each dialogue as a piece of a mosaic with a view to making up a complete whole at last (Frede, 2013). The researcher regards what White (2013) comes up with can be a possible reason why Plato deals with philosophy in his manner: In Plato's time, "doing philosophy means realizing how ubiquitous such problems are and it also means thinking over these problems without taking hints and suggestions for solutions" (p. 23). Gill (1995) observes in Plato's *Republic* a pattern of ethical development of Greek thought in which "reflective debate" (p. 30) leads ultimately to objective ethical knowledge, of a kind which can reshape a person's character and life. He thinks that the debate about human happiness is a dominant feature in Greek thought, in which human beings are situated in three interconnected types of dialogue or discourse: reflective debate, interactive exchange, and the "dialogue" (p. 29) between the parts of the personality. Gill (1995) finds what Plato does to be concurrent with his contemporary thinkers and is even echoed in certain strands of Stoic theory. From the researcher's stand point, Plato, who is good at pinpointing where the real issues are, is not ambitious to offer straightforward answers. Though Plato plays a leading role in the history of philosophy and raises upon the birth of ethics essential questions which are still in focus today, the disappointing facts remain that the only straightforward answer to all these puzzles we can get is that Socrates in Plato does not say how he knows his truths and, therefore, leaves us at sea about how Plato's Socrates gets to know the particular moral truths which he claims he knows (Taylor, 1999b).

An Invitation: Calling for Readers' Participation

In fact, Plato the writer may be calling for his readers' participation in their reading process, expecting feedback on the readers' side. As Szlezak (1999) finds out, the "question of the correct way of reading Plato is ultimately a question of the ways in which the reader plays a part in what he or she is reading" (p. 5). As Szlezak (1999) says, "It is not just individuals that play a part in what they are reading but whole epochs" (p. 11). The researcher finds that what Szlezak (1999) sorts out may not be impossible: A hidden danger of superficial distorting reading of Plato may lead to a situation in which generations of readers may not have seen or noticed points in the text due to the fact that these points do not fit into the thoughts of their periods. A possible consequence is that each generation may have a different reading of Plato because of their own specific time or phase of development in the history of philosophy, both seeing and missing a certain points if such danger of distorting reading does arise. Belonging to different times and places, readers may not find it easy to grasp Plato's points, as what he means with his dialogues remain enigmatic in others' mouths, especially that of his Socrates. Szlezak (1999) takes into consideration and weighs the possibility that Plato the author supplies his text with a "lock" which from the outset is seen only by certain readers and then can also be opened by them, quoting the modern theory of the dialogues in which the indirect communication depends exclusively on the intellectual qualities of the readers. Its result is a point of view which can be described as

“esotericism inherent in the dialogue” (p. 31). Based on this theory, the dialogues can seek out their own readers by themselves, since they can automatically hold off inappropriate readers (Szlezak, 1999). With this, the Platonic dialogues can defend themselves from the attack of the non-comprehending, who do not reach their deeper level of meaning at all (Szlezak, 1999). However, Szlezak (1999) does not think so. He holds that Plato certainly wants as many people as possible to enter his “rooms” (p. 31) even the innermost ones, though not without appropriate prior training. The researcher agrees with him on that. In her view, if Plato were looking forward to future generations and withholding knowledge exclusively for his foreseen target audience, he might as well be awarded the title of a “prophet” rather than a “philosopher.” The researcher does not think that Plato’s Socrates intentionally withholds knowledge or that the motif of concealment exists in Plato’s dialogues. Szlezak (1999) does not think Plato uses the possibilities of the genre of drama to produce maximal ambivalence, either (Szlezak, 1999). Plato does not mean to hide behind the views of his fictitious characters trying to remain “anonymous” (Szlezak, 1999, p. 21), no matter how respected the scholars holding this view are.¹⁸ He simply does not have to. The researcher thinks, as Cooper (1999) puts it, he just “withholds his full commitment” (p. 29) and stands back from the words of his spokesmen. Just as Szlezak (1999) says, Plato never holds his view: The dialogues are to be read as fragments of Plato’s philosophy with a tendency to encourage the readers and at the same time to point beyond the dialogues themselves.

A Concluding Remark

In the opinion of the researcher, one possible reason why Plato never attaches his name to any speaker is that all the views are exposed in the dialogues for the readers to make their own choices, sharing in his attempt to search for an answer. It is the readers’ job to take their part in figuring out for themselves what is personally related to them. Plato does not merely impose his opinions on the readers; he wants them to construct their own. He does not hide his own opinions behind his characters, either. He just does not sign his name when he is brainstorming all the possibilities, trying to sort out the best possible solutions as he lays all these possibilities out through Socrates and his many other interlocutors. Although we never know whether it is exactly Plato himself behind Socrates as well as many other speakers, during his phase of development in the history of philosophy, Plato, as a philosopher, is in search of a philosophical method; as a teacher, of a way of teaching to elevate his students from the bottom level to the middle level; as a writer, of a literary style in which his readers may be invited to participate in the discussions and think for themselves; and ultimately, as a seeker, of the truth in the meantime.

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¹⁸ See also Szlezak (1999, p. 120, note 12).

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