

Referential Opacity and Hermeneutics in Plato's Dialogue Form

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Abstract

The paper argues that Plato's dialogue form creates a Quinean "opaque context" that segregates the assertions by Plato's characters in the dialogues from both Plato and the real world with the result that the dialogues require a hermeneutical interpretation. Sec. I argues that since the assertions in the dialogues are located inside an opaque context, the forms of life of the characters in the dialogues acquires primary philosophical importance for Plato. The second section argues that the thesis of Sec. I coheres with the claim in Plato's *Seventh Letter* that since philosophical truth is incommunicable by means of language it is of primary importance for philosophers to develop proper "schemes of living" (forms of life). Sec. III argues since the forms of life of the characters portrayed in the dialogues is of primary philosophical importance for Plato, and since hermeneutical methods are required to interpret emerging forms of life, Plato's dialogues are positively crafted to be read hermeneutically. Sec IV argues that Heidegger, who is famous for seeing Plato's views as antithetical to his own hermeneutical approach, is mistaken, and that Plato's real views are, in principle, more akin to Heidegger's views than he thinks.

Keywords: Plato, opaque contexts, hermeneutics, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dilthey, Lessing, *Seventh Letter*, life-world, limits of thought

It is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed. That is why I have never written about [my real views], and why there is not and will not be any written work of Plato's own.

Plato, *Letter II*, 314c-d

Plato... manifests the hermeneutic phenomenon in a specific way. (...) The literary form of the dialogue places language and concept back within the original movement of the conversation ... [which] protects the word from all dogmatic abuse.

Gadamer 1975, 332

There has been much debate about the significance of the fact that Plato wrote dialogues as opposed to straightforward essays (Griswold 1988). Some commentators take the significance of this to be that, like the Pythagoreans, Plato had one view for the public (his dialogues) and secret teachings reserved for his inner circle.¹ Nevertheless, some scholars have claimed to have discovered Plato's "real views" in the dialogues². But this is problematic. Not only is Plato himself not present in his dialogues, with his place, on some views, taken by his "mouthpiece", Socrates,³ but, worse, Socrates makes numerous inconsistent statements throughout the dialogues.⁴ Furthermore, many of Plato's dialogues are artistic masterpieces that employ a variety of literary techniques, irony, myth, allegory, narration of remembered events, the dramatic setting, etc., that make interpretation difficult at best (Randall 1970, xii-xiii).⁵ Some hold that these problems can be resolved by appeal to the fact that Plato's views developed over time. On this view, there may be difficulties discerning Plato's real views, but these are, in principle, no greater than those in understanding other philosophers, and they are resolved for Plato as they are for others—by discovering patterns of development in the texts. Plato's dialogue form may make matters a bit messier, but it does not fundamentally alter the situation. One may not find such patterns in the texts, but if one does, one can discern Plato's views.⁶

In opposition to this, the present paper argues that Plato's dialogue form possesses a logical feature that adds a new dimension to the debate over the significance of the fact that Plato wrote in dialogues. Specifically, every assertion made in the dialogues is presented to the reader, either explicitly or implicitly, in the form: "S says (or believes) that *p*." But such

constructions constitute an “opaque” context,” which means that it can be true that S says (or believes) that B loves C, and true that that C = D, but it is not true that S says (or believes) that B loves D.⁷ This places a specific kind of logical barrier between the views expressed in the dialogues and Plato himself, which means that the assertions made by Plato's characters offer *no logical grounds* for attributing any of his character's views to Plato himself. One may be justified in believing that the dialogues express Plato's views, perhaps because of what he expresses in his letters, remarks about Plato's views by his associates, facts about his life, etc.⁸ But the case of Plato's dialogues is qualitatively different from that of Berkeley's (1969) and Hume's (1955) dialogues because the latter also expressed their views in essays. Against this background, the paper argues that the dialogues must be read hermeneutically.

Sec. I argues that since all the views in Plato's dialogues occur inside an opaque context, the dialogues provide no *logical* basis for attributing those views to Plato. Sec. II argues that Plato's apparent view in *Letter VII* that philosophical truth is incommunicable explains why Plato chooses the opacity of the dialogue form.⁹ Sec. III argues that as the logical opacity of Plato's dialogues relegates brackets¹⁰ the real world truth or falsity of the assertions in the dialogues, it elevates the portrait of the ways of living and questioning of the characters in the dialogues to the fore—providing a fertile ground for a hermeneutical reading of the dialogues. Sec. IV argues that Heidegger's failure to appreciate the logical opacity of Plato's dialogues made him fail to show just how sympathetic Plato is to his own views.

I. The Referential Opacity of the Platonic Dialogues

Plato was following Socrates in rejecting the earlier idea of a philosopher as a wise man who hands down the truth to other mortals for their grateful acceptance. (...) It is important to realize that whatever is stated in his works is stated by one or another of his characters, not by Plato the author.

Cooper 1997, xix

Quotation is the referentially opaque context *par excellence*.

Quine 1966, 159

Plato's dialogues are based on a kind of *mimesis* (imitation) (Amis 1992, 346-359; Golden 1975, 118–131). But Plato imitates Socrates (and others) in a specific way—not by dressing up like him or by wearing disguises. Plato's form of *mimesis* is to write dialogues in which everything that is asserted is, either explicitly or implicitly, of the form "S says that p" or "S says 'p'" (where S is not himself but one of his characters). But "S says that p" has unique logical properties: it contains a referentially opaque context. Quine defines an opaque context as "one in which you cannot in general supplant a singular term by a *codesignative* term ... without disturbing the truth of the containing sentence." (Quine 1960, 151) Other examples of opaque contexts are "S believes that p", "Necessarily, a is F", etc.¹¹ Plato's sentence "Socrates says that p" constitutes an opaque context because it could be true that Socrates says that Homer is a great poet, and that Homer is the man from Smyrna, but Socrates does not say that Homer is the man from Smyrna.

Consider this point in connection with one of the perennial interpretative problems concerning Plato—whether he holds that the Forms are *separate* from perceptible particulars. On one common view, Plato's "middle dialogues" hold that Forms are separable from perceptible particulars, but that the later *Parmenides* undermines this (Prior 1985, 75-82, 89 and note 12).¹² Although many commentators take such facts about the differences between the "middle" and the "later" dialogues to show that Plato changed his views over time, there is no *logical* basis for this such an inference. If Socrates' states in the *Republic* that Forms are separate from perceptible things, while Socrates accepts Parmenides' view in the *Parmenides* (133a) that the Forms are *not* separable from perceptible particulars, Plato has *not* stated incompatible views. In the *Republic*, one gets, roughly, "Socrates says that

the Forms are separate from perceptible things.” In the *Parmenides*, one gets, roughly, “Socrates agrees with Parmenides that the Forms are not separate from perceptible particulars”. But these two sentences can be true together. There is not even an incompatibility between “Socrates says that p” and “Socrates says that not-p.”¹³ Propositions “p” and “not-p” contradict each other, but “Socrates says that p” and “Socrates says that not-p” can be true together. Politicians, among others, state inconsistent beliefs all the time. Since Socrates’ apparently inconsistent stated are made within an opaque context, the most that one can say is that Socrates (specifically, the Socrates of the dialogues, not necessarily the flesh and blood Socrates¹⁴) states different views in different contexts. One cannot even infer that Plato’s views have changed between the *Republic* and the *Parmenides*. Given that the dialogues are descriptions of conversations by others, it could be true that Plato says at t_1 that Socrates holds that the Forms are separate from perceptible particulars and that Plato says at t_2 that Socrates says that that Forms are not separable from perceptible particulars, but that Plato himself does not hold *any* of these views. What Socrates (or any of Plato’s characters) asserts in the dialogues has no *logical* bearing whatsoever (deductive or inductive) on what, if anything, Plato believes about the matter.

One might think that the case would be different if Plato had put himself in the dialogues. In fact, this makes no *logical* difference. Suppose, for example, that the legendary dialogue, *The Philosopher* (Cooper 1997, 235) were found in some Greek basement and that Plato himself is the main spokesperson. Suppose further that the character named “Plato” sums up his views in the dialogue with the speech: “It’s time to put an end to all this bickering. Some say I hold that the Forms are separable from perceptible things. Others say I hold that Forms are not separable from perceptible things. Here’s my answer. The Forms *are* separable from perceptible particulars. By the dog, I hope that settles it and we can finally move on!”

Unfortunately, even if this unlikely event were to come to pass, it would not settle the matter. All this would mean is that Plato had written a dialogue which contains or implies (something like) the sentence, “Plato says that the Forms are separate from perceptible things”. But this is altogether *logically different* from what would be the case if Plato had written a book titled, *The Theory of Forms*, in which, in *propria persona*, he *asserts* that the Forms are separable from perceptible particulars. In that latter case, Plato asserts a sentence about the Forms. In the former case, all he has done is write a sentence *which is not even about the Forms but which is only about what some character named “Plato” says about the Forms*—and that latter sentence can be true no matter what, *if anything*, the real Plato holds about the Forms. The opaque context created by the dramatic form of the dialogues (logically) changes everything. Thus, scholars who emphasize that it is crucial to take the dramatic form of Plato’s dialogues philosophically seriously are correct, but, in the present case, it is not the dramatic form *per se* that is the key. The crucial point is that Plato’s dramatic form produces an opaque context that separates the assertions in the dialogues from Plato’s own assertions in the real world by an impenetrable logical barrier. Scholars are correct to emphasize the philosophical importance of these aspects of Plato’s writing. But it is a separate *logical* point that *these myths, allegories, etc., also occur within an opaque context*. If one frames the point as one about dramatic form, the use of myth, etc., the issue may appear as a dispute over whether certain scholars take Plato’s dramatic artistry seriously, and, if challenged, they will reply that they do (Irwin 1988, 194). The key point is that Plato’s dialogical form creates an opaque context that puts a logical barrier between the views of Plato’s characters and Plato himself, irrespective of whether the characters’ views are expressed literally or mythically.

When Plato writes a dialogue, he creates an “opaque context” populated by his characters, and it is not possible logically to infer from assertions inside that opaque context to Plato’s (or to anyone else’s) real world views. Indeed, the

opaque context formed by the Platonic dialogues is analogous to the Platonic cosmos itself, i.e., it is a *limited (closed) self-sufficient whole* (Carone 2005, 55, 58-9, 155).¹⁵ The referential opacity of Plato's dialogues separates Plato's fictitious dialogic world from the real world, needing no more support from an external creator (Plato), than the Platonic cosmos itself needs support from the *Demiurge* once it is created. Since Plato separates the *fictitious* world of the dialogues from the real world by the logical barrier of an opaque context, the philosophical importance of Plato's dialogues *must lie within the dialogues themselves*, irrespective of whether Plato believed the views articulated therein.¹⁶ It is important that the present point is *not* the epistemological claim that one cannot *discover* Plato's real views by reading the dialogues. The present point is the logical point that, because the claims in the dialogues occur within an opaque context, one cannot derive Plato's views from the dialogues *by means of logical inference*.

One might object that the case is different for the "narrative" dialogues, like the *Republic*, and the "dramatic" dialogues, like the *Gorgias*. But this is incorrect. The *Gorgias* begins:

Callicles: "This is how they say you should take part in warfare and battle, Socrates".

The *Republic* begins with Socrates' remark,

Down I went to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, son of Ariston...

In the former, the quotation marks create an explicit opaque context. But the quotation marks, though not explicitly present in the latter, are implicit. Although it was Plato who wrote the sentence, "Down I went..." he did not thereby assert the sentence, "Down I went..." any more than Shakespeare asserted "Men shut their doors against a setting sun" (*Timon of Athens*, Act 1, Scene 2). That sentence is asserted by Apemantus, one of Shakespeare's characters, not Shakespeare,

and though no quotation marks are present on the page, they are implicitly present. Since the sentences in the *Republic* are not asserted by Plato, the wording of the first line in narrative of the *Republic* is shorthand for, Socrates said: “Down I went...,” and that constitutes an opaque context. Thus, despite the lack of *explicit* quotation marks in the narrative dialogues, it could be true that Socrates said, “Down I went to the Piraeus yesterday...” where the Piraeus is, in fact, the place where Jimmy Hoffa is buried, but it is not true that Socrates said, “Down I went to the place where Jimmy Hoffa is buried...”

This brings one to a second objection. Is it really necessary to bring in the tedious logical device of opaque contexts to make this point? We already knew that one cannot derive “Plato believes that p” from “Socrates believes that p”. Since this point has been made by a multitude of scholars, it was already clear that one cannot derive Plato’s views from Socrates’ assertions in the dialogues. What is added by the point about opaque contexts?

Since an opaque context is one in which one may not substitute co-referential terms without possible change of truth values, this means that the *reference* of the terms in the opaque context is irrelevant to the truth of the whole proposition. Let S stand for the proposition: “Socrates believes that the Form of Beauty is separate from perceptible things” and let P stand for “The Form of Beauty is separate from perceptible things.” Note that S can be true whether there is a Form of Beauty or not and whether it is separable from perceptible things or not. That is, given the referential opacity of Plato’s dialogue form, whether the expression “the Form of Beauty” in S refers to something and whether P is true are both *irrelevant* to the truth of S. Derrida is famous for saying that “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida 1976, 158). One need not go that far. But the effect of Plato’s putting all of his theses inside the opaque contexts of the dialogues makes reference of the key terms in the dialogues irrelevant to the truth of the (opaque) sentences Plato actually wrote. Further, as the references of these key terms drops out as irrelevant, so too the truth of those

assertions, such as P, become irrelevant to the truth of the sentences that Plato actually wrote. In plain terms, Plato's dialogues are not about other-worldly metaphysical entities referenced by Plato's characters—and this brings one to the key point of the present section: As the reference and truth of the theses in the dialogues is bracketed off by the referential opacity of the dialogues, *the life* of the characters on phenomenological display in the dialogues, becomes the primary philosophical datum of the dialogues.¹⁷

The situation would be quite different if Plato had, in *propria persona*, outside an opaque context, stated his views. The closest he comes to doing so are the thirteen alleged Platonic letters. Further, *Letter VII*, which has been *believed* by many scholars to be authentic (Cooper 1997, 1635), undermines the claim that Plato states his views in the dialogues.

II. *Letter VII* and the Incommunicability of Philosophical Truth

One statement ... I can make in regard to all who ... may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself ... Such writers can in my opinion have no knowledge of it. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies.

Plato, *Letter VII*, 341b-c

In *Letter II* (314c) where Plato states that he has not and will not put his own deepest philosophical views into words for fear they will be disclosed. This implies that it is possible to put these views into words—otherwise, why fear their disclosure? Plato there seems to resemble the Pythagoreans who reserved one doctrine for the inner circle and another doctrine for the outsiders.¹⁸ But he goes much farther in *Letter VII* where he implies that there is no reason to fear that “the subjects to which I devote myself” will be disclosed because they *cannot* be “put into words” in the way other subjects can¹⁹. Assuming that the subjects to which he “devotes” himself are his core philosophical views, it would seem to be his view that these core views *cannot* be communicated in words as other subjects can.

The view of *Letter VII* is, arguably, stronger than the analogous doctrine in the final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1966, prop. 7). The German word for Wittgenstein's "must" is "*müssen*," which is a "modal" verb that means *permission* as opposed to logical necessity (Traupman 1981, 189). One says, "You must (*müssen*) not cheat on exams," not because it is logically impossible to do so but because it *is* possible—and wrong. When Wittgenstein says one must not speak of certain subjects, he means that though one *can* speak of them, one *should* not speak of them (McDonough 1989). By contrast, *Letter VII* states that even if Plato were to give his permission to convey his views to others, it is *not possible* to do so. Plato is certain no one can have knowledge of his views, not because he hasn't told anyone, but because it is impossible to convey such subjects by words to another human being in the way it *is* possible to communicate other subjects by means of language.

There are, however, several places in his letters where Plato endorses views akin to views in the dialogues, e.g., in *Letter VII* (326a-b), he endorses a view very similar to the view in the *Republic* (473c-d) that human beings will not be well-governed until philosophers become Kings or Kings become philosophers. So there are cases where one can take the assertions of some characters in the dialogues as representative of Plato's views—but one must be clear about the logic in such cases. One cannot derive "p" from "S says that p", and one cannot derive a proposition about Plato's views from the fact that some character in his dialogues says "p".²⁰ The fact that, in special cases, one can ascribe certain views that are internal to the opaque context of the dialogues to Plato gives no *general* license to make such ascriptions. One always requires, in such cases, some *additional statement of fact* taken from some transparent context (Plato's letters, reports by Aristotle, etc.) to do so justifiably.²¹

Second, if Plato accepts the doctrine from *Letter VII* that philosophical truth is incommunicable, then, since Plato does

communicate the doctrine concerning the philosopher King in *Letter VII*, one must conclude that this cannot be one of those subjects about which Plato “concerns” himself. One must distinguish between a primary and a secondary sense of philosophical truth, where the communicable doctrine of the philosopher King falls into the latter class. What sort of subjects fall into the former class? Although Plato does not specify those subjects in *Letter VII* one can fairly assume that these are a subset of those topics at which Plato's dialogues resort to myth and allegory (Roochnik 1990, 125-6). Perhaps the best example of these is “the greatest study” of all, the study of “the idea of the Good” (*Republic* 504e-505a). Socrates there indicates that he is unable to communicate the idea of the Good, but is “willing to tell what looks like a child [“offspring”] of the Good”, the Sun (506e-507a, 508b-c). Plato uses the physical Sun as the perceptible image of the imperceptible Form of the Good, but apart from the kind of communicability afforded by such *analogies*, Plato's “greatest study of all” is, apparently, incommunicable in the way other subjects are. If *Letter VII* is taken at its word, then the perceptible image of the Good, the image of the Sun, and the associated story about the sun's causal powers, is *not* a placeholder for a *bona fide* theory to be provided later.²² Rather, such images and metaphors are the best one can achieve in such cases.

In brief, Plato holds that there are some fairly concrete subjects, politics, education, etc., that *can* be “put into words like other subjects”, but his core philosophical subjects cannot be “put into words” in that way. It is these “greatest studies” with which Plato really “concerns” himself. Plato's fear is that there may be those who confuse the views expressed by various characters in his dialogues with his own views on these deepest subjects. How can he protect himself from such misrepresentation? How can he put some “lock” on his public writings to insure that such deluded commentators cannot claim to know his deepest views?

Wittgenstein shared Plato's fear,

If you have a room which you do not want certain people to get into, put a lock on it for which they do not have the key. But there is no point talking to them about it, unless of course you want them to admire it from the outside (Wittgenstein 1980, 7).

The fact that Plato puts his characteristic Platonic theses inside the opaque context of the dialogues constitutes just such a lock. In contrast with Plato, Socrates did speak, in *propria persona*, in the marketplace. Many who heard Socrates' public speeches thought they understood him. For this Socrates was rewarded with a death sentence. Even more troubling is that many of his disciples did *not* really understand him. This is the point of the exchange with Crito at the beginning of the *Crito* (43a-46c), the exchange with his friends at the end of the *Phaedo* (116d-117e), and many other exchanges in other dialogues. Socrates, speaking in *propria persona*, could not protect his words from misinterpretation. He could, of course, be evasive or obscure, but then he could not express his views in the way he wishes. So he spoke his mind freely and transparently. Unfortunately, once one's remarks are put out into the world, people can read the most astonishing fancies into them, and when some of Socrates' disciples, such as Alcibiades, turned bad, the blame was reflected back on Socrates (Taylor 1968, 84, 95-6, 100).

In contrast, by writing in dialogues, and never, except possibly in the thirteen letters to private individuals, in *propria persona*, Plato has placed the *logical lock* of an opaque context around his public works. Some people will not see the lock, or fail to grasp its significance, and will hastily ascribe the views in the dialogues to Plato, or misinterpret them in some other way. There is no way to prevent *that* kind of misuse of the dialogues. But the fact that he locks the views inside the opaque context of the dialogues means that whenever anyone does misinterpret or misuse them, it is always be possible to point out that Plato never said those things. Socrates²³, Meno, Phaedrus, etc., said them, and Plato is separated from their

assertions by an opaque context that, as a matter of logic, cannot be breached.

Wittgenstein's remark also suggests that one might leave a way to "unlock" his works and get inside. Is there a way to "unlock" Plato's dialogues and "get inside" them—and if so, what it would mean to understand the dialogues from the inside?

III. Philosophy as a Form of Life

[A]s soon as [those who want to become philosophers] see how many subjects there are to study, how much hard work they involve, and how indispensable it is for the project to adopt a well ordered scheme of living, they decide the plan is difficult if not impossible for them, and so they really do not prove capable of practicing philosophy.

Plato, *Letter VII*, 340d-341a

[It is the task of understanding to confer] an inside [to what is initially encountered as] a complex of external sensory signs.

Dilthey 1996, 236

Although the main aim of the present paper is to outline the consequences of the fact that all of the assertions in the Platonic dialogues occur within the opaque context, the paper is *not* skeptical about assigning philosophical significance to the dialogues.²⁴ The negative part of the paper only argues that one cannot justifiably attribute philosophical views to Plato *by virtue of logical inference* from what his characters state in the dialogues. So what is the positive philosophical significance of the dialogues? To sharpen this question, suppose one only has the dialogues, none of Plato's letters, no testimony by Aristotle or other personal acquaintances, and no solid facts about Plato's life. What would be the philosophical significance of the dialogues under these austere circumstances?

One of the themes in *Letter VII* is that achieving philosophical truth requires that the philosopher pursues a

certain rigorous “scheme of living.” At *Letter VII* (344a) Plato connects this with good “morals.” Plato’s emphasizes the need for certain “schemes of living and good morals. But why should a rigorous scheme of moral living be necessary for participating in the search for philosophical truth?

Part of the answer is provided in the *Republic* 518c-d, where, describing the prisoner’s escape from the cave, Socrates remarks,

[T]he present argument indicates that this power is in the soul of each, and that the instrument with which each learns—just as the eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body—must be turned around from that which is coming into being together with the whole soul until it is able to endure that which is and the brightest part of that which is. [W]e claim that this is the good, don’t we?

This passage portrays the achievement of philosophical truth, not as a purely intellectual task, but as a *journey* that essentially involves the *whole person* (which, in the *Republic*, requires each of reason, spirit, and desire).²⁵ Plato’s model of the philosopher is not that of pure Reason existing in sublime detachment from existence, but that of a *healthy wholly formed human being in the world*. This may seem incongruous for the philosopher who is often portrayed as one of the chief founders of the rationalist tradition²⁶ (Markie 2008).

The argument of the present paper suggests that it is not the *propositions* asserted in the dialogues, locked as they are inside an opaque context, that are the primary import of the dialogues. If one must live *the right sort of life* in order to acquire philosophical truth (*Letter VII*), *why would Plato disseminate philosophical propositions as if they were a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace?* As Alcibiades, unfortunately, demonstrated, one can be given all the right theses, but still choose the wrong sort of life (Taylor 1968, 100). Is it possible that, with Wittgenstein, Plato holds that philosophical propositions and arguments *per se* are not

really the most important ingredient in the pursuit of philosophical wisdom?

Since philosophical propositions can only bear genuine fruit if they fall into the right sort of “soil”, “a well ordered scheme of living”, would not the cultivation of such schemes of living would have to be a prior concern to Plato²⁷? In fact, these schemes of life are precisely what is portrayed in the dialogues—and these “schemes of living” are *not* locked away inside the opaque context of the dialogues. An opaque context provides a *very specific* restriction on what is contained therein. If Socrates says in the *Republic* that he went down to the Piraeus yesterday, where the *Piraeus* is in fact the location of Jimmy Hoffa's body, it is not true that Socrates said he went to the place where Jimmy Hoffa is buried. That is, the impossibility of substituting co-referential expressions without possible change of truth value has *nothing* to do with what is on display within the dialogues themselves.

The Platonic dialogues are, in the first instance, not assertions of philosophical theses but, rather, are portraits of various *ways of living* (*within which* the examination of philosophical theses, the “theory” of Forms, etc., play an important role). The philosophical theses in Plato's dialogues are *presented as embedded in emerging life*.²⁸ Some of these ways of living, such as Socrates', are portrayed as conducive to the pursuit of wisdom, and others, like Alcibiades', as incompatible with it. Thus, Plato's dialogues are, in the first instance, *a portrait of various pre-reflective ways of life in their pursuit of wisdom or in their fleeing from it* (Owensby 1994, 130; Heidegger 1962, § 75 and § 81). To understand Plato's dialogues, one must, therefore, following Dilthey, confer “an inside” to the complex portraits of life portrayed in such memorable images in Plato's dialogues.

One might put it up this way: Plato presents his dialogues to the world with a curious double-aspect analogous to the double-aspect figures in perceptual psychology that can be seen in two completely different ways (Jastrow 2007, 291). Consider the “duck-rabbit” picture discussed in Part II of

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1973, § 194). Looking at it one way, it looks like a duck, in a different way, like a rabbit. Similarly, looking at Plato's dialogues in one way, they appear as a structure of propositions held together by some *philosophically inessential dramatic scaffolding*. But looking at those same dialogues in another way, they appear as *representations of ways of life* (within which certain philosophical propositions play an *existential* role). Those scholars who look at Plato's dialogues in the former way admit the dramatic structure is sometimes useful in helping to *discover* the *thesis* at issue, and though they can admire the dialogues as works of dramatic art, they hold that the dramatic context, is theoretically dispensable (Kraut 1988, 177-8). The "hermeneutical" commentators, by contrast, tend to see the dramatic context as essential to the *philosophical* significance of the dialogues²⁹. Hyland emphasizes that the Platonic dialogues portray human beings in the world discussing a kind of being that is not in the world and running up against the limits of their own language in doing so.³⁰ Whereas many traditional commentators see Plato's portrayal of the ways of living of his characters as a mere literary vehicle for the expression of philosophical propositions about timeless being, the "hermeneutical" commentators tend to see Plato's portrayal of the way his characters run up against the limits of their "being-in-the-world" in attempting to discuss timeless being as the central philosophical message of the dialogues.³¹ By his choice of the dialogue form, with its double-aspect, Plato presents his readers with an initial *choice*: Is the philosophical significance of the dialogues that they are a structure of propositions held together by some philosophically inessential dramatic scaffolding, or is their philosophical significance that they are a representation of certain philosophical and/or anti-philosophical "schemes of living". Most traditional scholars believe the answer is the former. The present author inclines to the latter. None of Plato's dialogues is named "The Form of the Good", "The Essence of Beauty", "Knowledge In Itself", etc. Most are named after individual flesh and blood human beings,

such as Meno, Phaedo, and Phaedrus, or types of human beings, such as statesmen or sophists. If the *title* of a work identifies its subject matter, then the primary subject matter of the *Phaedo* is Phaedo, and the way in which he is facing or fleeing the ultimate questions concerning the meaning and value of his life. The philosophical theses raised in the *Phaedo* are important, but they are subordinate, roughly, to the concerns of the *life-world* depicted in the dialogues, and this subordination is insured by the opaque context created by the dialogues. If this is correct, then to get “inside” the dialogues, as opposed to admiring them from outside, is not, in the first instance, to extract *theses* from them. It is, rather, to enter into *the life on display in the dialogues* as Plato's inherently limited characters find or flee the truth about their being in the world. According to *Letter VII*, without the right “schemes of living,” no amount of theoretical sophistication brings one an iota closer to authentic philosophical understanding and the good life.

This choice is the same one described so memorably by Lessing (1954-8, 505ff),

If God held all Truth in his right hand, and in his left, nothing but an ever-restless striving after Truth with the condition of forever erring, and told me to choose, I would reverently choose the left hand and say: ‘Father, give me this. Pure Truth is for Thee alone’.

Whereas most traditional scholars believe Plato chose the right hand, the present paper argues that by putting all the propositions which purport to express the “Pure Truth” inside an opaque context, Plato, anticipating Lessing, chooses the left hand—*because this is the only choice that self-consciously finite limited human beings can honestly make*.

One of Plato's main themes is that those with the genuinely philosophic natures, when they develop properly, become the best of persons, but when they fail to develop properly, they may become the worst of all,

I suppose that if the nature we set down for the philosopher chances on a suitable course of learning, it will necessarily grow and come to every sort of virtue; but if it isn't sown, planted, and nourished in what's suitable, it will come to the opposite; unless one of the God's chance to assist it (*Republic* 492a).

It would, therefore, be a fundamental mistake to try to produce philosophers before one has made the candidates into virtuous human beings. For the *same* reasons, it would be a mistake to disseminate treatises of philosophical propositions to just anybody (*Letter VII* 344d-e). When Socrates describes the "occupation" of the philosopher, he does not mention theoretical cognition, but, rather, Pythagorean "purification"³² of the soul: "[T]he occupation of the philosopher consists the freeing and separation of the soul from the body" (*Phaedo* 67c-e).

Since the representation of philosophical propositions and arguments, in the wrong hands, leads to the opposite of wisdom, Plato crafts his dialogues to address the *prior* task, the cultivation of the kind of persons who have the "moral" foundation to become "true philosophers" (*Phaedo* 67d-68b). That is why Socrates says that he is concerned, not with philosophy as a body of doctrine, but as a "practice" (*Apology* 29d; *Letter VII* 340d), and such *practices*, such "schemes of living," are what is, in the first instance, portrayed in Plato's dialogues. Plato writes dialogues as opposed to theoretical treatises because he wants to portray human beings engaged in the struggle for (or against) the kind of well-ordered scheme of "moral" living that can lead to "true philosophy." Plato's "message" in the dialogues is not embodied in doctrine, but in *a portrait of more and less authentic forms of life*, and that just raises the question: What is the proper way to interpret forms of life?

IV. The Hermeneutical Significance of Plato's Dialogue Form

If [Plato's] ideas are understood as superrealities, then Plato's philosophy is diametrically opposed to Heidegger's. (...) On the

other hand, (...) if [Plato] used the [I]deas to reveal the complexity, not of the supersensory realm, but of the world in which we live, then the path to Heidegger's philosophy would (...) be left open.

Wolz 1981, 302

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes.)

Wittgenstein 1973, § 129

It is not possible in this brief space to discuss all the different things hermeneutics have meant to different thinkers. However, several recurrent themes are that understanding texts involve *interpretation*, that interpretation involves seeing the text *as an expression of life*, and, of course, the hermeneutical circle (the idea, closely connected with the elusive nature of life, that understanding a part of a whole requires a reference to the whole, which, in turn, requires reference to the part again) (Ramberg and Gjesdal 2005). It has seemed to Heidegger that Plato's philosophy, with its hyper-rationalism and other-worldliness, is fundamentally opposed to his own hermeneutical approach. Heidegger even traces the beginnings of the "oblivion of Being" to Plato (Wolz 1981, 302). But Heidegger is hasty here.

Ironically, Heidegger, who rails against traditional readings of the great philosophers, reads Plato too traditionally (Wolz 1981, 302). Heidegger fails to see that Plato's dialogues present two very different faces, one, the face of a certain set of Platonic theoretical propositions, and the other, the face of various living beings struggling with those theoretical propositions in order to understand the limits of their own being-in-the-world. Heidegger manages somehow to look straight past what is right before his eyes, the artfully designed opaque context of the dialogues, as if it is transparent, to the theoretical propositions contained therein. He manages to do this because the significance of Plato's choice of the dialogue

form (that it creates an opaque context) is hidden by its simplicity and familiarity.³³

Since the theoretical propositions are locked inside an opaque context, the dialogues are, in the first instance, and portrait of the life of the characters in finding or fleeing their being-in-the-world. Since the proper way to understand the movement of life in its historical development is to see that movement in relation to the developing whole of which it is a part, the understanding of the life on display in Plato's dialogues requires seeing the actions, including linguistic actions, of Plato's characters in terms of the emerging dialogue as a whole (Cooper 1997, xx-xxi). But that requires returning to the contributions of the parts, and from there to the whole again, and so on³⁴ (Cooper 1997, xx-xxi), and that is the "hermeneutic circle". The present paper attempts to bring this into focus by applying the familiar notion of logical opacity to Plato's dialogues, and by so doing, show that Heidegger failed to recognize how close to Plato he really is (Wolz 1981, 301). It could be said that Plato hides his philosophical message in plain sight—in the various portraits on display in his dialogues of finite human beings struggling through their life-world to find or flee the meaning of their being. Unfortunately, as Heidegger (1962, § 5) knew well enough in other contexts, this is the best place to hide it: "*Dasein* is ontically 'closest' to itself and ontologically farthest."

NOTES

¹ Zeller (2010, 87) claims that Plato only disclosed his real views to his confidential pupils. Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 987a30) states that Plato's secretive tendency may derive from his Pythagorean roots. Allen (1966, 7) notes that ancient sources say of the Pythagoreans that "their silence was of no ordinary kind". See also Findlay (1974) and Hyland (2008, 87). Vlastos (1981, 379-397) argues against some versions of the view that Plato had an esoteric doctrine. See also Rosemary Desjardins (1988, 113).

² Irwin (1996, 3) states that it is his aim to discover in the dialogues "views he really holds". Aristotle too refers to Plato's views, but Aristotle knew Plato personally and did not have to rely solely on the dialogues. Although Aristotle's credibility as an interpreter of Plato has often been attacked, it

cannot be denied that he was in a unique position to know Plato's views (Prior 1985, 172-3).

³Vlastos (1991, 117) holds that Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece to express his own views, and that if Socrates is absent, he uses someone else as mouthpiece. Luce (1992, 98) holds that the early dialogues are "thoroughly Socratic", the "Middle Dialogues" employ Socrates as a "mouthpiece" for Plato, and the later dialogues are "entirely Platonic." See also Allen (1966, 21), Brumbaugh (1981, 148), Penner (1992, 121-169), and Nails (2009, Sec. 2.2). For a critique of the "mouthpiece" view see Hyland (1995, 1ff).

⁴The apparent inconsistencies in the dialogues led Zeller to wonder whether Plato was really a philosopher (Bowen 1988, 52). See also White (1988, 255-6 and White's footnotes 13, 24, 37, 66, 68).

⁵Randall (1970, 6-7) notes that Diogenes Laertius reports that, even in antiquity, some hold that Plato's dialogues present positive doctrines and others vigorously deny it. Many contemporary scholars (Prior 1985, 9, 51, 78, etc.) refer confidently to "Plato's theory of Forms", while Hyland (1995, 170) denies that Plato "has anything like a 'theory' of Ideas". See also Roochink (1990, xii).

⁶Hyland (1995 3-4, 126, 169, 173-4, 195) points out the circularity in the view that a given view about Plato's development presupposes a view about the chronology of the dialogues—which, in turn, presupposes a view about Plato's development.

⁷Russell (1971, 225)

⁸Prior (1985, 172-8). See also Kraut 1992b, 20-4 for a balanced discussion of the utility of these sources.

⁹Although the authenticity of all of the Platonic letters has been challenged at one time or another, there are reasons for taking *Letter VII* seriously (Sayre 1988, 93-95). Cooper (1997, 1634-5) remarks that the *Letter VII* "is the least unlikely" to be inauthentic and that "if genuine", could be significant for determining his views. See also Levison, Morton, Winspear (1968, 307). Irwin (1992, 78) thinks all the letters are spurious. Although the present section begins with a quotation from *Letter II*, its authenticity is not crucial to the present argument since it merely affirms the manifest fact that Plato left no public statement of his own views.

¹⁰The allusion to Husserl's notion of bracketing is intentional. See Beyer 2013, Sec.'s 5-6.

¹¹At *Republic* (369a-b, 430c), Socrates is "looking for justice, and, in *some* usages, "S is looking for x," is an opaque construction" (Quine 1960, 154).

¹²For the record, Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 987a34-b1) claims that Plato never gave up the thesis of separation.

¹³Nor does it make any difference if one transforms Socrates' two assertions into "eternal sentences" ("Socrates says at t_1 that the Forms are," and "Socrates says at t_2 that the Forms are not...").

¹⁴It is important to be clear who the Socrates of the dialogues is. See Roochink (1988, 185) and Irwin (1988, 195 and note 51).

¹⁵ Bloom (1991, xvii-xviii) compares Plato's dialogues to a microcosm and states: "The Platonic Dialogues (...) are a cosmos in themselves".

¹⁶ See notes 15, 17, 23, 30, and 31 on the idea that the dialogues are self-sufficient.

¹⁷ Although it is doubtful that Merleau-Ponty (1964, 24) is alluding to the Quinean notion of logical opacity when he refers to language's "opaqueness, its obstinate reference to itself, its (...) folding back upon itself...", he makes a useful analogy between an opaque text and a phenomenology of textual interpretation. See Taylor (2011, 700-18)

¹⁸ See note 1 above.

¹⁹ Plato also discusses the idea that reality is incommunicable by language in the *Cratylus* (440a-d).

²⁰ One can no more do this than one can derive Shakespeare's views from Hamlet's assertions in *Hamlet*. This would still be true even if Hamlet had, in *Hamlet*, said, "My creator, Shakespeare, holds that philosophers must become Kings." One cannot *infer* from Hamlet's hypothetical remark to Shakespeare's views, but not because *Hamlet* is a work of art. There is no reason why works of art cannot state theses. It is because Hamlet's assertions are made inside an opaque context.

²¹ Some assertions by characters in the dialogues parallel Plato's remarks in his letters and as reported by Aristotle (Schleiermacher 1992, 12).

²² See note 5.

²³ By "Socrates" here is meant, not the real Socrates, but the character in Plato's dialogues. An analogous point holds for the Stranger, the anonymous Athenian in the *Laws*, etc. See note 32.

²⁴ See note 21.

²⁵ See the similar picture in the *Timaeus* (69e-72, 89e-90b) and *Laws* (863b). One can say "whole person" instead of "whole soul" because the lower parts of the soul are intimately tied to embodied life (*Timaeus* 90c).

²⁶ The opposing "mystical" tradition has also often traced its views to Plato (Hillar 2005).

²⁷ Socrates: "I really care to know which of (...) our young men here (...) are likely to distinguish themselves. That is what I am always on the lookout for..." (*Theaetetus* 143d).

²⁸ Etymologically, the "dramatic" is "full of action" and "striking display".

Online Etymological Dictionary: URL:

<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=dramatic&searchmode=none>

²⁹ White (1988, 247) remarks that Gadamer holds that the dramatic form of the dialogues has an "organic connection" with their philosophical content³⁰. On this view, irony is not something that one encounters in the dialogues here and there. Plato uses the dialogue form to portray the inherent irony in finite beings in the world attempting to characterize a kind of absolute being inherently beyond their ability to know or adequately describe.

³¹ Kierkegaard (1992, 52) sees a paradox in the speculative philosophers' claim to describe the eternal truth and sees Socratic *sophrosyne* as an antidote to the paradox: "From an eternal and divine point of view, there is no

paradox here (...) But whether or not the speculator is the eternal one who sees the eternal (...) is something else again. If [the speculative philosopher presses his claims] he (...) has not even comprehended the Socratic and even less found time to comprehend from that standpoint something that goes beyond it”.

³² See note 1.

³³ Even *Das Man*, who reads, thinks, and judges, as “they” read, think, and judge (Heidegger 1962, § 27 and § 51), knows that Plato is an artist who writes in dialogues.

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