

Chapter 1

THE "SOCRATES" OF PLATO'S EARLY DIALOGUES

In the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates make the following remarks:

So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be truth. . . . If no true knowledge is possible in the company of the body, then either it is totally impossible to acquire knowledge or it is possible only after death. . . . It seems that so long as we are alive, we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all association with the body. . . . In fact the philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation of soul from body. (66b–67d, Tredenick trans.)

Socrates goes on to speak of his favorable prospects for gaining knowledge of courage and moderation after death (68c–e).

This text, often taken as a paradigm of Platonism, casts an extremely interesting light on the earlier dialogues: The failure of

Socrates and his interlocutors to arrive at adequate definitions of courage, moderation, piety, and so forth was, it would now seem, inevitable. Tied to his body and, thus, to sensible experience, Socrates was no more able than his interlocutors to attain knowledge of objects that are intrinsically nonsensible, objects that transcend sensible experience. It is precisely their transcendence, their separate existence, that renders forms indefinable *to us*. Plato's early dialogues were, it would now seem, inconclusive for a good reason.¹

Conversely, the inconclusive character of the early dialogues supports the *Phaedo's* claim that forms are separate. To put this point ironically, the very failures of the early dialogues to define the virtues amount to partial successes, for our apparent inability to define courage, moderation, and so forth, marks out their essential feature, their transcendence. So understood, the early dialogues not only provide support for the separation of forms that Plato asserts in the *Phaedo*: they argue, albeit inconclusively, for it.

This, I submit, is Plato's view of the early dialogues. The question that I want to pursue here is whether it is to be found in the early dialogues. Is it the perspective he held when he wrote those dialogues or is it the view of the mature Plato anxious to assimilate the work of his youth and the teachings of his master to a new scheme?

I

Before tackling this question, we need to raise another: what counts as evidence for ascribing any doctrine to the author of the early dialogues? The currently prevailing answer is that either the doctrine must be explicitly asserted in a text or some explicit argument must presuppose it as an implicit premise. Testimony from reliable contemporaries counts also, but it is thought less important than textual evidence. I shall call this view "evidentiary literalism."

Applying this standard to the question of "an early theory of forms," scholars acknowledge that no text in the dialogues usually dated early (on stylistic grounds) explicitly asserts the existence of separate forms. Consequently, the debate about an early theory of forms has centered on whether forms are assumed somewhere. Some have claimed that they are presupposed by "what is X?" questions or by the arguments answering them.² Others, however, have argued that these discussions can be given a good sense without supposing

an early theory and that such an interpretation is preferable because interlocutors in the dialogues would hardly agree to claims that assumed a theory of forms.³ This latter is today the most widely held view. We have it from Aristotle that, unlike others (Plato and the Academy, presumably), the historical Socrates never separated the forms (*Met.* XIII.4.1078b30–31). Since the early dialogues do not explicitly refer to separate forms and need not, it has seemed, presuppose their existence, most scholars have come to regard these dialogues as representations of the historical Socrates.⁴

Though it is my aim here to challenge this widely held view, I want to acknowledge that it is a formidable interpretation. Much of the credit for it belongs to Gregory Vlastos. His careful attention to detail and dogged insistence on finding what is really in the text have produced a clear, sane, and highly plausible interpretation.⁵ A token of its cogency is that to challenge it I need to introduce new standards of evidence.

To motivate this change let us suppose for the moment that Aristotle is right when he says that Socrates never separated the forms. Writing shortly after the death of Socrates, Plato might well have wished to retain the style and substance of Socrates' views, especially when part of his audience would have been familiar with the original. Nevertheless, he could have decided that these views support an inference that Socrates himself never drew, that the forms must be separate, and he could, accordingly, have written the dialogues so that readers would draw this conclusion even though it is never stated in the dialogues. Though I think this scenario is accurate, my point now is not its accuracy, but that if we insist that only what is said or assumed counts as evidence, we cannot even consider it seriously. Evidentiary literalism rules this hypothesis and others like it out of court without a hearing. Hence, relying only on what is stated in the text is not neutral. It would commit us to excluding certain interpretations.

Evidentiary literalism would make more sense if our subject were treatises, but we are dealing with dialogues. What is explicit here are the assumptions advanced or endorsed by interlocutors, the intermediary conclusions drawn from them and used, in turn, as premises in other arguments, and the absurd consequences drawn from both of these. Because Socrates is nearly always examining the interlocutors' views, it is questionable whether the intermediary or ultimate conclusions he states may be correctly ascribed to him; and,

anyway, it is uncertain that *he* always represents the view of the author. Moreover, early dialogues end without stating a satisfactory conclusion. For all these reasons, the early dialogues invite us to seek an implicit conclusion or purpose.

This, however, literalists refuse to do. Richard Robinson, for example, identifies drawing inferences from what is written as one of five common ways of misinterpreting Plato.⁶ Lacking overall doctrinal conclusions, evidentiary literalists must focus on the assumptions or the intermediary conclusions that serve as assumptions for later arguments. They identify as Socratic those that are methodological or recurring, and they pay much attention to arguments for certain intermediary conclusions. But just what is the significance of these latter if they lead inevitably into contradiction? If, on the other hand, there is some non-contradictory, ultimate conclusion that could be derived from them, it would be unstated and, so, necessarily outside the bounds of what literalists take to be the proper subject of consideration. Thus, literalism has led scholars to focus attention on the dialogues' assumptions and on claims that, though inferred from these assumptions, function as premises. Yet what is most significant and interesting about the dialogues is what, if anything, they might prove. Ironically, despite their close attention to arguments, literalists undermine the overall argument of a dialogue by focusing on its assumptions.

My aim in criticizing the literalists is not to endorse the literary approach that is often counterposed to close study of arguments.⁷ Rather, I propose that there are other types of evidence that are important for understanding the arguments, namely, structural and contextual evidence. The sequence in which arguments appear could be philosophically significant if it supports a conclusion. Likewise, a single argument, read in the context of a dialogue, could support a conclusion left to the reader to infer. It is widely recognized that the dialogues are carefully constructed; there is no good reason not to consider structure and context as philosophical evidence.

In this chapter I shall sketch how such evidence could be brought to bear on the question of an "early theory of forms." I shall be arguing that the view Plato espouses in the *Phaedo* does motivate the early dialogues. There are two main arguments supporting this conclusion. First, there are structural features common to many of the early dialogues that, when considered together, constitute a type of argument for separate forms. Second, one of these common features,

the unity of virtue argument, read in the context of the dialogues, leads by itself to separate forms. Each will be treated in turn in the next two sections.

To consider all the early dialogues and to respond adequately to the literature is beyond the scope of this brief treatment. I can only hope to set out my interpretation, to show something of what supports it, and to show that it is worth considering. Besides their value in interpreting the early dialogues, the arguments to be presented are philosophically interesting in their own right.

II

Typically the early dialogues relate a conversation that is principally between Socrates and one or two other interlocutors. Usually an interlocutor has made, implicitly or explicitly, a knowledge claim that Socrates challenges with a request for a definition. Anyone who is just courageous, or moderate or who knows how to teach these or how to acquire them must know what they are. To know is to be able to give a definition. But the definitions advanced turn out, upon examination, to be inadequate, and the knowledge claim of the interlocutor is thereby discredited. The bulk of most dialogues is given over to the examination and refutation of definitions of individual virtues.

Each dialogue is unique and examines a particular set of definitions, but there are structural features that can be identified in many early dialogues. Often the definitions advanced number three or fall into three groups. The first definition is usually trivially wrong. The second seems promising, receives careful attention, and is often reformulated in the course of discussion. The third definition seems to overshoot the mark; it apparently includes too much. With all definitions refuted, the dialogue ends in *aporia*.

The *Laches* could serve as a paradigm. Laches first proposes as a definition of courage that the courageous man is someone who stands and fights (190e). Clearly, he has mentioned a behavior that would be courageous only in some situations; in others, the courageous man would do something else. The second definition Laches gives for courage is endurance (*karteria*—192b); this he quickly revises to endurance with knowledge (192d). The revised definition is rejected on the ground that someone who acted without the benefit of knowledge of an art would be more brave than someone who acted with

knowledge of the art. The third definition, now given by Nicias, is that courage is wisdom or knowledge (194d–e). The most striking difficulty with this later definition is that someone possessing the knowledge which would make him courageous would have all the other virtues as well—a contradiction because it is assumed that courage is a mere part of virtue.

As a rule, the first definition is merely an example (*Hippias Major* 287e [see also 289e, 291d–e]; *Charmides* 159b,⁸ *Euthyphro* 5d; *Meno* 71e; see also *Republic* I.331c–d). To us it seems like a category mistake, but Socrates does not simply dismiss the example. He treats it as a legitimate response to his question and proceeds to refute it. To do so he usually supplies circumstances in which this particular thing or act would not be desirable or good. Since the interlocutors assume that a virtue is always good or beneficial, and since there are situations in which the example would not be beneficial, the example cannot define the virtue.

The second definition is substantial and interesting, but it fails to be adequate because it misses something important. What it misses is the connection of the particular moral virtue under discussion with knowledge or with the good. To define courage as endurance, as Laches does (192b), is inadequate because endurance in a bad enterprise is not good. Since courage is always good, whatever defines courage must also always be good. To avoid the problem, Laches revises the second definition to “endurance accompanied by knowledge.” But this, too, is inadequate because it does not spell out the pertinent type of knowledge. Socrates suggests that the knowledge is a military art like horsemanship or slinging. But someone who showed endurance in battle because he was skilled in the art of horsemanship would be less courageous than someone who endured without expert knowledge of this art (193a–d). So knowledge—or, at least, a certain type of knowledge—is not necessary for courage, as previously argued, but antithetical to it. In sum, knowledge is both necessary and unnecessary for endurance to be good (beneficial). The problem here is how to integrate knowledge and goodness (benefit) into the definition of courage offered by Laches. Interlocutors in other dialogues face parallel difficulties in working goodness and knowledge into their accounts.

Though it conforms to no single dialogue, we can give the problem of the second definition the following general formulation: Whatever else we are to say about courage, piety, or any other particular

virtue, each must always be good and each seems to require knowledge to be such. Suppose that *X* is offered as a definition of a virtue; if there are circumstances in which possession of *X* would not be good, then *X* cannot define the virtue. To be the virtue *X* must always be good or beneficial, and what would insure this is the knowledge of how and when to use *X*. Consequently, we should include knowledge with whatever else characterizes the virtue. But knowledge of how to use *X* presupposes other types of knowledge: we cannot know when *X* will be beneficial unless we know what counts as benefit. Benefit is not always the achievement of what we desire; for sometimes the things we desire will, in the long run, do us harm. Possession of the virtue must somehow involve knowledge of what is good. However, those who know what is good in any particular area are those who possess the art that has that area as its subject matter. These specialists are not necessarily more virtuous than nonspecialists—indeed, they seem less virtuous just because they can rely on their knowledge. Thus, knowledge is necessary for virtue but also, in some cases, antithetical to virtue. In short, virtue requires knowledge in addition to *X*, but it is unclear what this knowledge is knowledge of and how it relates to *X*.

Considering this reasoning, we can see that the difficulty arises from identifying the knowledge necessary for a virtue with the specialist knowledge possessed by the craftsman. Since the knowledge that would be required for *X* always to be beneficial is just the knowledge of benefit, that is, knowledge of the good, it seems plausible simply to identify the virtue with this knowledge. So it is that the third definition often identifies virtue as a kind of knowledge. The problem is that the knowledge that would enable someone to know whether some *X* is beneficial is just knowledge of benefit in general, and this would be the same no matter what the *X* is. Thus, the knowledge required for some particular virtue would turn out to be just the knowledge required for any virtue and to have one virtue would be to have them all. Knowledge of courage, piety or any other particular good would be knowledge of the whole good. Indeed, this knowledge would have to include virtually everything that could be known.⁹ Such a knowledge seems impossible for us. Besides the conclusion that virtue is one conflicts with the interlocutors' assumption that a particular virtue is—to use the language of mathematics—a proper part of the whole of virtue.

In the early dialogues all the definitions fail, but often there is, at or near the end, an ironic remark that indicates that the dialogue has not been for nought. In the *Lysis*, for example, the interlocutors are declared to have become friends in their unsuccessful inquiry into friendship (223b), an inquiry whose operating assumption is that knowledge of what friendship is is necessary in order to be friends.

These same structural elements are present, with some variations, in the *Euthyphro*, for example. The first definition of piety is an example (5d). The second definition, what is loved by the gods (7a), is modified (9e) and, then, in a difficult argument, rejected because it does not explain what sort of nature piety would have to have to cause the gods to love it (10e–11b). That piety is loved by the gods is a character (*pathos*) that belongs to it, not its nature (*ousia*). It would be necessary to know what the nature is before we could know why the gods love it, and the gods themselves must know this nature. Though the text does not speak of knowledge, it assumes that the gods know the nature of piety; that is why they love it. Once this nature comes into the discussion, it renders love inessential, a mere consequence of knowing the nature. The third definition identifies piety as just (11e), and then tries unsuccessfully to find a proper part of justice to equate it with. If piety is just but no part of justice, must we not conclude that piety is simply justice? It would seem to follow that “care of the gods” would, like other instances of justice, be much like a business transaction; but the gods have no need of anything we could give them (14c–15a). It follows that piety could not be justice, and this, in effect, refutes the third definition. Finally, at the very end of the dialogue Socrates remarks that his failure to acquire knowledge of the divine from Euthyphro will leave him unable to defend himself against Meletus’ indictment (16a). But to be ignorant of divine wisdom and to recognize that ignorance would seem precisely to constitute piety. Though the differences are significant, we can recognize the same structural components we saw in the *Laches*: the example, the weak definition that is initially formulated without knowledge but turns out to include it, and the strong definition that identifies the virtue with other virtues or, here, another virtue.

This picture is, of course, too simple. Emphasizing their common structure cannot do justice to the richness of the dialogues, and even the lengthy and detailed analysis of each dialogue that would be necessary to sustain its imposition would have to acknowledge many variations and exceptions. Structure is not a universal form for the

dialogues; at best we can speak of their family resemblance. But why would we want to? Part of the enduring genius of the dialogues is that they are not slave to a single, rigidly conceived paradigm. Why should we even look for common components?

Identifying a family structure is important for two reasons. First, it shows the literary hand of the author, Plato. If these conversations are not spontaneous but artfully constructed, my contention that Plato aims at a conclusion is much more probable. Second—an application of the first point—the structural components of the dialogue serve as constituents of a larger implicit argument, what I shall call the "super-argument." What is this larger argument? Let us consider the components in turn. Why is the first definition always an example? Each interlocutor, no matter how sophisticated, makes the same trivial mistake of offering an example when asked for a definition. Even literary artifice would seem to call for variation—unless, that is, the example serves some philosophical purpose. In offering the example, the interlocutor asserts that some act is an instance of moral virtue X. He affirms that (1) X exists and belongs to some individual. Of course, the interlocutor should agree to this because he typically thinks that he himself has the virtue in question. I submit that the claim that some people possess the virtue is crucial for the larger argument. The second definition typically identifies the moral virtue with some character, such as endurance or being loved; let's call it A. The refutation of this definition shows that the virtue cannot be simply A, but that (2) the virtue X ought somehow to be knowledge. However, as we saw, identifying the virtue with knowledge makes it indistinguishable from other virtues. The refutation of the third definition shows that (3) the virtue cannot be knowledge or, at least, that it cannot be a knowledge that the interlocutor or, apparently, anyone else has. In short, what emerges from the structure are a group of contradictory claims:

1. The moral virtue X exists and can be ascribed to individuals.
2. X is knowledge.
3. No one has such knowledge.

It follows from 2. and 3. that:

4. No one has X.

The last claim is clearly inconsistent with the first. A contradiction like this one may not seem like an argument, but think of indirect proofs in mathematics: we assume the contrary of what we wish to prove and show that it leads to a contradiction. The structure I have identified contains a contradiction. Is there some hypothesis that gives rise to this contradiction, some hypothesis whose negation Plato wishes to prove? In such case, if the dialogues do contain the contradictory structure that I ascribe to them, they would be enthymematic indirect proofs. That is to say, the dialogues are not just inconclusive, but inconsistent; hence, they indirectly support the negation of some assumption. What, then, is the conclusion that the dialogues support?

What makes the contradictory structure that I have uncovered in the dialogues especially interesting is that a way out of the contradiction is indicated by the *Phaedo* passage quoted at the beginning. It is possible for virtue to be knowledge and yet not be a knowledge that anyone has if the knowledge that is the virtue is transcendent, if, that is, virtue is a knowledge that exists separately because its object exists separately. In other words, the second and third claims can both be true if we reject part of the first. There is no doubt that the moral virtue exists, but what seemed at first to be an example of it cannot be. Indeed, no action could be a perfect example of the moral virtue because no one has the knowledge requisite for possession of the virtue. If, though, no human action could exemplify the virtue, and if the virtue exists, then it must be separate from human experience. Hence, in rejecting the first claim, the super-argument supports separation.

But why should we reject the first claim? We need not rely on the authority of the *Phaedo*. The reasons for rejecting the assumption that someone has the virtue are explicit and pervasive: Socrates frequently disavows having any knowledge himself, and he questions people who seem—to themselves and to others—to have a knowledge of virtue only to find that they do not. Since whoever had the virtue could give an account of it, neither he nor his interlocutors apparently have the virtue. The spectacle of refutation depicted so often in the dialogues serves to expose pretensions to knowledge and—given the assumption that the virtuous have knowledge—pretensions to virtue. Occasionally, an interlocutor mentions someone else as possessing a particular virtue: Meno speaks of Pericles, Themistocles, and Thucydides as virtuous (*Meno* 93d-94e); Hippias speaks of a beautiful girl as beautiful (*kalon*) (*Hippias Major* 287e). But

such claims are explicitly or subtly undermined. Socrates emphasizes to Meno that "you" think these men exemplars of virtue; the beautiful girl is also, in comparison with a goddess, ugly (289b-c); and in the *Gorgias* he denies that Pericles, Cimon, Miltiades, or Themistocles was virtuous (515d-516e) and concludes that "we do not know of any man who has proved a good statesman in this city" (517a, Woodhead trans.).

This passage from the *Gorgias* provides strong support for a claim that, at first glance, may seem absurd. The problem is that the method of the early dialogues is often taken to be inductive. Socrates starts with examples of a particular moral virtue and aims to find what they have in common. However, since Socrates supposes that knowledge of justice would make its possessor a good statesman, the *Gorgias'* denial that there are any good statesmen is tantamount to the denial that there are any just men in the city. It is as if in the midst of examining what a set of examples of justice have in common, we were to declare that the examples were not examples of justice at all. Questions about the validity of an example set would undermine an inductive method. Thus, so as long as we stick to the inductive picture, the denial of (1) seems absurd. But this inductive picture is not rich enough to account for what occurs in the dialogues. What we find, first of all, is that it is not Socrates but his interlocutors who propose examples of virtues and they do so in response to "What is X?" questions.¹⁰ Typically, the example that each proposes is himself or what he is doing (e.g. *Euthyphro* 5d-e). Whether his action is indeed an example of this virtue is at issue: this is why a Socratic conversation makes interlocutors examine their own lives. In other words, in examining what X is, interlocutors are examining their own lives because each considers whether his own action is truly an instance of X. Now we cannot judge whether the action is an instance of X until we know what X is: we cannot arrive at a set of examples of X without a standard for judging them to be such (e.g. *Meno* 81e). This is the reasoning that motivates the inquiries into the virtues. On the other hand, though, it is difficult if not impossible to speak of the nature of a virtue without some examples before us, and this is why the dialogues begin with examples. We have a kind of circle here, and what we see is the dialogues playing off the supposed examples of a virtue with proposed definitions, constantly revising each in light of changes to the other. The final view should not be sought in remarks

made in the course of a dialogue, but in what is reached through it. And what is reached through it? Lack of certainty about the standard and, thus, no ability to decisively determine the sample set. The supposed examples of the virtue either are not examples of it or could not be known to be such.

My contention that the first claim of the super-argument is rejected might also be challenged in at least two other ways. First, it might be asked, what is the point of Socrates' inquiry into virtue if no one has what he seeks nor likely could have it? Second, there are places where he does seem to ascribe virtues to people. For example, at the end of the *Lysis*, in a passage mentioned earlier, Socrates remarks that the interlocutors have become friends through their unsuccessful search for a definition of friendship, a search that has shown the necessity for friends to have this knowledge. Similarly, arriving at a definition of courage will, Socrates suggests in the *Laches*, require the courage to pursue an argument (194b). Again, it is suggested by Critias at the end of the *Charmides* that one could become moderate by regularly submitting to Socrates' charm, that is, to dialectic (176b).¹¹ Ironically, in inquiring into friendship, in seeking the knowledge necessary to be a friend and in failing to secure that knowledge, the interlocutors have become friends; in seeking an account of courage that would allow someone to become courageous, and in failing to secure such knowledge, the interlocutors have manifested courage; in the act of inquiring into moderation, interlocutors engage in an activity that could make them moderate. Is this not proof that the virtues can indeed be ascribed to people and thus a refutation of my contention that the first claim is denied? We need to look closely at the apparent ascription of virtues in these passages. What the text claims is actually, in the *Lysis*, "We believe we are friends with each other" (223b), and in the *Laches*, "In action, it is likely, someone might say we partake of courage, but not, I think, in words if he would now hear us discoursing" (193e). Socrates continues in the latter to encourage the interlocutor, Laches, to show courage or at least endurance in pursuing the argument (194a). The passage from the *Charmides* speaks indirectly of the importance of practicing dialectic for becoming moderate, even if the dialectic fails to define moderation; it acknowledges that the interlocutors do not have the virtue. Thus, these passages do not ascribe friendship and courage to the interlocutors without qualification. Interlocutors merely seem or appear to possess a virtue.

These ascriptions are tentative and ironic, for how could the interlocutors be friends when they lack the knowledge of friendship requisite for friendship, how can Laches be courageous when he lacks the knowledge of courage requisite for possession of this virtue? It is not the virtue itself that is ascribed but a semblance. At issue are derivative sorts of courage, moderation, and friendship that manifest themselves in the activity of dialectic. I propose that these apparent ascriptions of virtues are parallel to Socrates' claim in the *Apology* to possess human wisdom. (I shall have more to say about this disavowal of knowledge later.) Just as Socrates has a kind of wisdom, human wisdom, because he knows that he does not have genuine or divine wisdom, so too he and his interlocutors have a kind of virtue—I call it "human virtue"—through their inquiries into genuine or divine virtue. In the course of inquiring into courage, friendship and so forth, in the course of failing to arrive at them, one acquires something like them, human versions of the virtues. These are dialectical substitutes; they result not from knowledge of virtue but from ignorance of virtue and the consequent inquiry into it. That *human* virtue can come from inquiry is, I suggest, the positive lesson of the early dialogues. Acquisition of human virtue makes dialogue worthwhile even if its divine objective must remain elusive. This distinction between the human and the divine knowledge and between human and divine virtue is readily intelligible in terms of the *Phaedo* passage. It would be hard to make sense of it any other way.

Again, I acknowledge that the structure I have presented here is not found in all the early dialogues. The *Crito* and *Euthydemus* are obvious exceptions. Each of Plato's inquiries contains its own particular difficulties, its own particular version of the super-argument, and it is always instructive to explore their individual details. In this brief discussion, though, we must content ourselves with identifying structural features common to many. What I have called the "super-argument" appears in enough of the early dialogues to confirm that it is a product of their author rather than an artifact of the interpreter. The only way I see to make sense of the claims I have collected under the heading "super-argument" is that they constitute an indirect proof for the separation of the virtue, as it truly is, from human experience, precisely the doctrine asserted in the *Phaedo*.

III

A second type of evidence for ascribing separate forms to the author of the early dialogues lies—as a box within a box—in one of the common features of early dialogues, the arguments for the unity of virtue. The best-known and most frequently discussed of these arguments appear in the *Protagoras*, but if the preceding section is correct, unity arguments appear in most early dialogues. Some of these dialogues identify a virtue with the possession of a character such as knowledge and then show that the same character would enable someone to have all the virtues. Thus, the *Laches* shows knowledge of good and evil to be not only sufficient for courage but for all the virtues (198d–199e), and the *Gorgias* argues that a well-ordered man is not merely moderate but also pious, just courageous, and wise (506e–508a).¹² A second group of unity arguments define one virtue by another; for example, the argument from the *Euthyphro* discussed earlier, that defines piety as part of justice.¹³

The difference between other dialogues and the *Protagoras* is that in the latter Socrates clearly endorses unity arguments, while in the former he usually advances them as if they were unlikely consequences of an opponent's position. It is probably the rhetorical surroundings of these latter arguments that has sometimes prevented commentators from seeing fully how closely akin they are to the unity arguments in the *Protagoras*.¹⁴ Moreover, commentators have usually taken unity arguments in dialogues other than the *Protagoras* to be simply elenctic. Just as interlocutors, faced with the conflict between unity conclusions and the assumption that a particular virtue is a mere part of all virtues, choose to preserve the latter, so too scholars have supposed that unity conclusions just could not be correct.¹⁵ There is no compelling argument for this path. A contradiction reached in a *reductio* argument shows only that some premise must be mistaken; it does not show which one. It is more plausible for at least three reasons to suppose that Socrates looks instead for his interlocutors to affirm unity and reject the part hypothesis. First, the arguments of the *Protagoras* provide strong evidence that Socrates or the author of the dialogue does endorse the unity of virtues. If other early dialogues did reject unity, then we would need to charge their author with inconsistency. Second, the unity of virtue arguments are often the last arguments in a dialogue, as the preceding section maintains;

and the interlocutor's rejection of them leaves the discussion in hopeless *aporia*. Given the typical structure of early dialogues, it is likely that the interlocutors' wrong turn lies in their rejection of unity. Third, if the unity of virtue arguments support Socrates' own view, then the early dialogues are more benign and, even, positive than usually thought, for they show Socrates not merely refuting interlocutors but leading them toward what he regards as the truth. Socrates' own description of himself as a benefactor of Athens (*Apology* 36d–e) would be apt. For these reasons, it is likely that Socrates or, at least, the author of the early dialogues does endorse the unity of virtue arguments.

What sort of unity do these arguments ascribe to virtue, and what is their significance? These questions are debated widely in the literature, though attention is focused on the *Protagoras*. There Socrates asks Protagoras whether the parts of virtue are one as the parts of a face or one as the parts of gold (329d). Protagoras endorses the former unity, and he continues, "many [people] are courageous but unjust or just but not wise." Socrates argues against this type of unity by arguing that whoever has one virtue must have all the others. It is clear that he takes the different virtues to have more in common than parts of the face, but it is unclear precisely what that would be. Does unity of virtue mean only that whoever has one has the others (the extensional or referential view) or also that the virtues somehow have the same definition. Vlastos argues that the unity of virtues consists of the identity of their references.¹⁶ Terry Penner has proposed that the virtues are one in the stronger (strict identity) sense that all virtuous actions spring from the same psychological state.¹⁷

The chief argument for the referential interpretation is that the alternative makes no sense; for if the virtues are a single thing, then what is said about any one of them could be said of any other.¹⁸ Such an identity would seem to make hash of the Socratic claim that piety is a standard of pious actions because piety would also be a standard of just actions, and justice would be a standard of pious actions, etc. On the other hand, the drawback to the referential interpretation is that the text treats virtue as if it were itself a thing; Socrates speaks of it as a thing with different names (e.g., 349b).¹⁹ Since one of these names is knowledge, and since knowledge is apparently what would make its possessor virtuous in all respects (361b), the unity of virtues must be more than referential. Moreover, if the same knowledge is

responsible for all the virtues, then it makes perfectly good sense to say that the standard of piety is at once the standard of justice and all the other virtues.

For these reasons the referential interpretation should be set aside. This is not to deny identity of reference, but to recognize it as a consequence of a stronger identity. However, Penner's alternative is little better. It is conceivable that virtue is a psychic state, as he supposes, but it need not be, and there is no need to think that Socrates assumes it is. Instead, the question of the nature of virtue remains open. Why should Socrates prejudice the inquiry by assuming at the start that virtue must be a psychic state? Again, looking for assumptions implicit in the question is the wrong approach. If the inquiry is worth anything, it must assume little or nothing about the sort of entity virtue is. More important is what emerges from the inquiry. What does emerge from the *Protagoras* is that virtue is one, namely, knowledge. But there is no necessity to take knowledge as a psychic state. To be sure, if someone had this knowledge he would be virtuous, and knowledge would then be in his psyche, but there is nothing here to indicate that this antecedent is ever met: there is nothing that compels us to conclude that anyone actually possesses the knowledge that constitutes virtue.

On the contrary, there are at least three features of the text of the *Protagoras* that indicate that no one possesses knowledge or, equivalently, virtue. First, there is the refutation of the apparently wise Protagoras. Socrates argues that virtue is knowledge and, thus, one; Protagoras maintains that the virtues are diverse. But only knowledge can be taught. If, then, Protagoras is right about diversity, he is wrong to say he can teach virtue. If, on the other hand, virtue is knowledge, then it could, in principle, be taught, but clearly not by Protagoras because he does not understand its nature. In either case, Protagoras' claim to be able to teach virtue must be wrong (361a–b). Socrates looks more promising as a teacher, but he denies he has this capacity, and there is no reason to think his denial disingenuous because he does not explain the content of what one would know to be virtuous. Since no one in the dialogue is shown to have the knowledge requisite for virtue, the reader is left to infer that *no* one has genuine virtue.

A second way the dialogue indicates the absence of genuine virtue lies in its arguments against common experience. The wise coward and the courageous but stupid athlete spring to mind as obvious counterexamples to the unity of virtue doctrine. Socrates himself

suggests the well-planned crime as an example of what the many might regard as an action of a moderate but unjust person (333d). Later in the dialogue, apparently accepting Socrates' earlier arguments, Protagoras claims that courage differs from the other virtues on the ground that "you can find many men who are quite unjust, unholy, intemperate, and ignorant, yet outstandingly courageous" (349d). However, in order to maintain the unity of virtue doctrine, Socrates must deny that the seemingly wise coward is truly wise, that the stupid athlete is truly courageous, and that the criminal can be moderate: our experience and our ordinary understanding of the virtues must be cast aside. Since the people we would ordinarily take to have one virtue do not manifest all of them, they cannot genuinely possess any of them. And if *they* are not virtuous, then no one would be. The virtue that is one is just not found in experience.

The third way the *Protagoras*, in particular, leads us to the conclusion that no one is truly virtuous is the analysis of Simonides' poem. According to Socrates' analysis, Simonides criticizes Pittacus for saying that to be noble is hard; to be noble is not hard, it is impossible for us. Only the gods can be noble (341e). We can become noble, at least for a time; it is *becoming* noble that can be hard. To be noble is to be virtuous, and this requires knowledge. It follows, then, that genuine virtue and knowledge belong only to the gods. They transcend our experience. We see here the key distinction of Plato's middle period, the distinction between being and becoming; and locating the human within becoming is implicit in the *Phaedo* passage quoted at the beginning. It might be proposed that this part of the literary analysis was written after the rest of the *Protagoras*.²⁰ This is unlikely: the distinction between being and becoming is fundamental to the entire literary analysis, and the latter is integrally related to the rest of the dialogue. (Though it would take us too far afield from our theme to defend here, I think that the connection between the literary analysis and the rest of the dialogue is much closer than has been noticed.) Rather, what we have in this literary analysis is the introduction of the Platonic doctrine of transcendence.

Poetic analysis cannot prove a claim about virtue, and this analysis, in particular, cannot be taken as a serious interpretation of the poem. Socrates is foisting an interpretation on it, just as he thinks Protagoras did; and his aim is to show that virtually any interpretation could be read into the poem. But is the interpretation his own view or just some view that his readers would realize is not

Simonides'? Either way, it is surprising that the doctrine of the *Phaedo* is present explicitly in the *Protagoras*. Can it be coincidental that just this doctrine—and nothing else explicit in the dialogue—provides a way out of the paradox of virtue's being knowledge but apparently unteachable?

That is to say, the literary analysis not only shows that no one has the knowledge that constitutes virtue, it also suggests a way to understand how virtue could still be knowledge even if it is not a knowledge that anyone has. Virtue is a knowledge that belongs to the gods; we can come to be virtuous and acquire knowledge, but only for a time. We have the semblance of knowledge and virtue, not the reality. Thus, Socrates is right to say that virtue cannot be taught—not because virtue itself is intrinsically unteachable, but because there is no person who actually possesses this knowledge. Since virtue is one, since no one can define it, and since anyone who did possess it could define it, it follows that no one is truly virtuous. Only the gods possess it. Again, the claim that virtue is one removes virtue from sensible experience. But if virtue exists apart from sense experience, if it makes possible our striving, then virtue is transcendent. In sum, the conclusion that virtue is one is tantamount to its transcendence.

How can we infer transcendence from the absence of virtue in sensible things? Does human ignorance or moral turpitude prove the existence of a nonhuman virtue? The unity of virtue argument does not deductively prove the transcendence of the forms. (Nor did the structural argument I presented earlier.) It proves only that virtue is one. Yet, because we do not experience such a unity, we are led to posit virtue as transcendent.

This latter move is presupposed by an argument of the *Phaedo*: the soul is declared to be immortal because it most resembles what is "divine, immortal, intelligible, one (*monoeidēs*), indissoluble, and what is most like to itself because it is always in the same way and possesses the same character" in contrast with what has the opposite characters, namely, the body (80b). What is one and always the same must exist apart from sensibles because they are always in flux. What the unity of virtue argument shows is that virtue, too, is just such a unity. It, too, must be separate from sensible experience where we seem to find courage without knowledge and, in general, where virtue seems to be many. There must be some one standard in respect of which to judge all these manifestations as partial realizations of virtue. Virtue must be one, on just the ground that the *Parmenides* uses to prove the

existence of a form, that a plurality presupposes a unity (132a).²¹ Virtue is a "one [that stands] over many" types of virtues. To be sure, neither the *Protagoras* nor other early dialogues make these arguments. Little here indicates explicitly the philosophical significance that "one" would later have for Plato and the Academy, and recent scholars writing about the unity of virtue arguments have offered less metaphysically charged interpretations. Yet, when we consider how unity of virtue is argued and what is said about it, it seems likely that the author of the *Protagoras* is leading his readers to a form of virtue much like forms he espouses elsewhere. Recall the passage from the *Phaedo* that opened this chapter. After the direct quotation, Socrates speaks of his prospects for attaining virtue after death, prospects that he declares to be favorable because virtue is knowledge and the body poses an obstacle to knowledge. This separate knowledge "makes possible courage, moderation, justice and, in a word, true virtue" (69b). That is to say, genuine virtue is one and, like genuine knowledge, it can belong to us only when we cease to be sensible beings. This passage typifies the way results of earlier dialogues are summarized in later ones. Plato expresses here what is left implicit in the *Protagoras*: transcendence and the unity of virtue go hand in hand.

If all this is right, then Socrates' frequently stated denial of knowledge (e.g. *Apol.* 21b; *Gorgias* 509a) is not disingenuous, as has often been thought.²² It rather reflects just the conclusion intended to be drawn from the dialogues. If the forms are really transcendent, then how could anyone know them (cf. *Parm.* 133b–134e)? The most one could say of transcendent forms is that one understands that they must exist, but they are, strictly speaking, beyond human knowledge. Ironically, in saying that he does not know the forms, Socrates is expressing their nature. Indeed, the irony of Socrates' denial of knowledge is not that it is simply false, but that it is false just because it is true. This is exactly what we would expect him to say of transcendent objects of knowledge.

There are, of course, many other interpretations of Socrates' denial of knowledge. Vlastos, for example, distinguishes two types of knowledge, one elenctically supported, the other "divine" or certain.²³ According to Vlastos, Socrates denies only the latter; he affirms his possession of the former, "human" knowledge. Vlastos writes as though the two types of knowledge were distinguished solely by epistemological criteria. This is not the case. The knowledge that Socrates lacks is knowledge reputed to be possessed by statesmen

and poets (*Apol.* 21b–22c). This is the knowledge he sought (through dialectic) by asking them the questions he raises in early dialogues: what is courage? what is moderation? and so forth. Thus, the knowledge Socrates lacks is the knowledge of the virtues. In contrast, the knowledge Socrates claims to have consists of maxims; for example, “to do injustice and to disobey my superiors whether god or man, these I know to be bad and shameful” (29b). Just what does one know when he knows that to do injustice is evil? As much as he knows when he knows that to do justice is good: that is, virtually nothing. Without also knowing the content of injustice, knowing that injustice is evil does not help us to make ethical decisions. I think that the author of the *Laches* says as much when he has Nicias advance Socrates’ view of the definition of courage as a kind of wisdom (194c–d). Nicias is asked, a wisdom or knowledge about what? He replies: “knowledge of what is fearful and what is encouraging, both in wartime and in all other situations” (194e–195a). This “definition” tells us virtually nothing: the certainty that it is true would not *make* Socrates or anyone else courageous. Yet, in saying that courage is a kind of knowledge, Socrates does mean precisely that it would make someone who possessed it courageous. To become courageous we would need to learn what, in particular, ought to be feared and what ought to encourage us. Thus, the claim that virtue is knowledge, the various “definitions” advanced by Socrates, his unwillingness to fear what he does not know to be evil, the so-called paradoxes—all this he would put under human knowledge. Human knowledge concerns the virtues, but one who has only human knowledge does not grasp the nature of those virtues. On Vlastos’ interpretation, it remains mysterious why Socrates should be so dismissive of his human knowledge.²⁴ But if, as I maintain, the objects of divine knowledge are transcendent, Socrates’ attitude toward human knowledge is entirely appropriate. Moreover, characterizing the knowledge he lacks as “divine” is apt if its object is transcendent, correspondingly inapt if its object is anything else.²⁵ Divine knowledge is precisely that knowledge that Socrates and Protagoras so evidently lack at the end of the *Protagoras*.

My claim here is not that the *Phaedo* or other middle dialogues are necessary for us to understand the *Protagoras*, but that the *Phaedo* makes explicit conclusions that the reader is supposed to draw from the *Protagoras*, namely that virtue consists of a knowledge that transcends human experience. Perhaps it will be objected that the conclu-