CHAPTER 1

Democratic Discourse and Socratic Discourse

THE DISCURSIVE TURN IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL THEORY

Increasingly, democratic politics is being characterized as discursive politics. From one vantage point, this development is continuous with the liberal tradition of democratic theory which begins with the work of John Locke. According to this view, the only legitimate political structures are those which would be chosen by rational individuals who agree discursively to secure their civil interests by creating a government whose broad decisions and priorities are subject to their own consent.[1] Writing within the same broad paradigm, the most influential empirical democratic theorist of this century, Robert Dahl, contends that the possibility of public contestation is the definitive mark of polyarchal, nonhegemonic regimes.[2] Yet from another perspective, the discursive turn in democratic theory is more innovative, signalling a rejection of what have come to be called foundational arguments in political philosophy. For Jurgen Habermas, implausible metaphysical modes of thought, such as Aristotle's attempted discovery of a perfection associated with a human *telos*, should be replaced by the intersubjective practice of communicative autonomy.[3] Similarly, the later John Rawls sees the priorities of a discursive liberal culture as providing the only foundations needed for democratic political institutions.[4]

For all of these authors, growing democratization can be interpreted as the extension of political discourse. Consequently, the quality of democracy would seem to depend decisively on the qual-

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ity of its discourses. This sort of reflection seems essential as long as history has not ended, for a variety of democratic directions, discursively guided, are possible. Authentically democratic societies, those in which power is exercised by majorities rather than by elites, are not, for example, bound to respond to ethnic or religious minorities in determinate ways. Nor are their attitudes toward weaker, nondemocratic states or toward the natural environment simply to be taken for granted. Not surprisingly, then, the theorists of discursive democracy differ significantly over the very nature and scope of democracy's discourse, perhaps most basically over the extent to which a healthy democratic society needs to exclude certain issues from its public conversations. Rawls's view of democracy as an overlapping consensus among parties with radically divergent conceptions of the good requires that views which might shatter consensus be excluded from public scrutiny,[5] implying that the main project of democratic discourse is to determine how already settled goals should be achieved. By contrast, strong participatory democrats such as Benjamin Barber contend that, because democratic talk is capable of making and remaking the world, the full variety of human questions should fall within its purview.[6] Thus, the nature of the personal virtues (Alasdair MacIntyre)[7] and even the extent of acceptable expressions of sexuality (Michael Sandel)[8] are appropriately, indeed necessarily, placed under discursive democratic scrutiny.

Yet each of these strikingly divergent conceptions of democratic discourse also courts significant difficulties. Rawls's insistence that the public realm of liberal discourse confine itself to the treatment of strategic questions, in the presence of a consensus about basic priorities, seems unrealistic even as a prescription for the developed West, let alone for the diverse variety of non-Western cultures with serious democratic aspirations.[9] And strong democracy's reliance on the shared meanings which arise from the contingency of language gives no assurance that democratic societies will continue to respect liberal priorities, nor even that discursive societies will continue to respect democratic priorities. Habermas's prospective solution, that all concerns be subject to discursive scrutiny as long as the participants suspend every affective commitment save that of reaching agreement,[10] seems more to underscore the severity of the problem than to argue for the availability of a solution.

Identifying the extent of and the limits to public discourse by discursive means may also be more difficult than adherents to these two broad positions suppose, for in subtle ways each view seems to undercut the effectiveness of discourse in the face of a certain sort of

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cultural practice or collective action. Initially, Rawls's view implies that discourse is a powerful political force, for it is only the exclusion of certain values, such as competing conceptions of the good, from discursive public attention which offers protection both to those values and to the public realm itself. Yet because Rawls also believes that the basic priorities of our public culture must remain unassailable, any liberal discursive criticism of those priorities is dismissed as a possibility from the outset. Rawls's assessment of the power of public culture thus easily accommodates Richard Rorty's view that our public commitments can be identified by the common sense of an historically contingent community.[11] And because Barber sees strong democratic talk as making and remaking the world, the strength of that discourse comes at least as much from the active performance of making and remaking as from the rational conduct of democratic deliberation.[12] Accordingly, the appropriate remedy to the potential damages of collective action is not Habermas's critique but Foucault's contestation and democratic politics becomes agonistic politics.[13] The problem which each of these visions of democracy raises, then, is how democratic discourse can be enriched so as to make it meaningful as a much needed source of guidance for democratic citizens without empowering, to the point of distorting, its rationality.

It is my suggestion that such a model of or, better, such an attitude toward, democratic discourse is to be found in the Platonic dialogues. Briefly put, Socrates' democratic conversations are conducted in such a way as to be neither vitiated by exclusions nor corrupted by empowerments. Through these conversations, Socrates articulates criticisms of and alternatives to, not only democratic politics, but also politics in general. Yet these critical and alternative views are also voiced within, and to a certain extent enabled by, a democratic culture. More generally, Socratic discourse seems also characterized by a particular posture toward the relation between speech—*logos*—and action or deed—*ergon*. Socratic *logos* points by implication not only to the rational solution of the political problems faced by human beings but also to the inevitable involvement of those problems with our deepest human concerns, including those concerns which take us beyond the human in the ordinary sense. Yet Socrates' *ergon*, his behavior within practical discursive contexts, shows the need to temper the discovery of those discursive solutions with an awareness of the limitations which restrict the degree to which those solutions may be practically effected. Alternatives to democratic political institutions are thus articulated within a demo-

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cratic political context. Movements toward those things which go beyond the human are always made by persons permanently bounded by humanity. In this sense, the Platonic Socrates does not adopt the sort of foundationalism that is criticized by Mark Warren. Although nonpolitical and even suprapolitical questions inevitably present themselves to politically situated human beings, the quest for some prepolitical or prediscursive vantage from which such questions are to be addressed turns out to be both fruitless and dangerous.[14] Socrates' *logos* and *ergon* thus reinforce and limit one another in complex ways, condensing in what has come to be called Socratic irony. A reappreciation of the form of Socrates' democratic discourse should, furthermore, encourage us to reconsider his most important substantive suggestions concerning the problems which continually beset people attempting to live together decently.

PLATONIC FOUNDATIONALISM AND SOCRATIC DISCOURSE

However, these suggestions are likely to seem woefully misdirected to the many observers who see the Platonic Socrates' attitude toward democracy or practical politics, generally, as resolutely foundational in form and relentlessly hostile in content. This is the Plato characterized by John Stuart Mill. In partial defense of the sophists against Plato's criticisms, Mill contends that Plato "judged them from the superior elevation of a great moral and social reformer: from that height he looked down contemptuously enough, not on them alone, but on . . . the whole practical life of the period . . . demanding a reconstitution of society from its foundations and a complete renovation of the human mind."[15] Put in more analytic terms, this assessment suggests that Plato's moral or political project is not so much to identify discursively the priorities which fallible human beings ought to respect and the questions which they should ask in dealing with practical challenges. Rather, the goal is to state theoretically those conditions under which such problems would simply disappear or not arise. Concerning political institutions, for example, C. D. C. Reeve's recent work apparently takes its bearings from a strict construction of Socrates' controversial antidemocratic statement of the *Republic*, book 5. "Unless . . . the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place . . . there is no rest from ills for the

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cities my dear Glaucon, nor I think for humankind."[16] Under this formulation, the goal for political philosophy is to paint, in Reeve's terms, a "politically heartening picture of a community based on cooperation, universal maximal happiness and as full a share of political awareness as nature allows."[17]

Commentators such as Reeve who are sympathetic to Plato's project often endorse his apparent effort to guide lives and institutions according to the direction of a perfecting rationality. However, such support is often eclipsed by the more widely held criticism that Plato eventually replaces democratic political discourse, indeed human discourse, generally, with a utopianism which radically reconfigures every aspect of human existence. As regards the treatment of political questions, narrowly understood, Sheldon Wolin's reaction is not atypical. Wolin claims that, for Plato "[p]olitical knowledge, like all true knowledge, was essentially a science of order, one that traced the proper relationship between men, indicated the causes of evil in the community, and prescribed the overarching pattern for the whole. It aimed not at describing political phenomena, but at transfiguring them in the light of a vision of the Good. . . . Thus, the Platonic conception of political philosophy and ruling was founded on a paradox: the science as well as the art of creating order were sworn to an eternal hostility toward politics, toward those phenomena, in other words, that made such an art and science meaningful and necessary."[18] As stated, this objection is epistemic. Plato's model of the highest political cognition is in sharp disjuncture with the nature of political reality. For those who believe that Plato's Socrates is absolutely serious about the need to institute philosophic kingship, however, this epistemic objection easily becomes a normative one. In attempting to found a theoretically adequate regime amidst practically deficient material, the rule of the philosopher king may easily degenerate into the worst form of tyranny. Thus, in George Klosko's view, "[s]ince ordinary lives are devoted to the pursuit of illusory goals, Plato shows little hesitancy in wiping them away."[19] And even those who accept Leo Strauss's claim that Socrates' endorsement of philosophic kingship is ironic, a searching critique of political idealism, have strong doubts about the practical value of Plato's political philosophy. For them, the problem is not the artificial proximity of philosophy and politics, but the incredible distance between them. How can any existing city appear praiseworthy in comparison with that regime which promises a cessation of evils?[20]

Similar reservations can be expressed about Plato's treatment of political matters, more broadly understood, beginning with his moral

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philosophy. Strictly interpreted, the claim that virtue is knowledge suggests that a certain kind of cognitive excellence is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition for right action; Plato maintains what Terence Irwin calls the "KSV" thesis.[21] Insofar as this *is* the Platonic position, it would appear to have effects on moral psychology which closely parallel the consequences for political theory diagnosed by Wolin. We are apparently compelled to reinterpret actions and responses which seem integrally and essentially moral as masked exhibitions of knowledge—or ignorance. One must, likewise, reassess what the many perceive as moral weakness—*akrasia*, looking beyond apparent guilt and regret to the fundamental ignorance which truly explains "morally weak" acts.[22] Thus, in Martha Nussbaum's eyes, we are shown a "goodness without fragility," a morality which leaves such emotions as love and fear behind.[23]

It is hardly surprising, then, that objections to Plato's political philosophy necessarily open on to criticisms of his theory of knowledge. One side of this criticism, of course, claims that, whatever one may think of the validity of Plato's epistemology, it would be inappropriate to apply it to ethics or politics. But this critique cannot proceed any distance without also challenging the validity of Plato's epistemological claims. As seen by Gregory Vlastos, for example, while Plato's teaching on knowledge recognizes the need to *begin* with opinions and perceptions, it ultimately aims at their transcendence.[24] For critics such as Habermas and Rorty, what they see as the Platonic quest for the holy[25] errs fundamentally in turning "us away from the relations between beings and beings," from the perceptions and opinions which *constitute* the realm wherein that which can be known is known.[26]

The capstone of this broad critique of Plato's political philosophy concerns the eventual fate of *erōs* in the dialogues. While Thomas Gould sees the Platonic transcendence of earthly loves as a portrait of the truly happy human being, Nussbaum and Laszlo Versenyi interpret the path up Diotima's ladder of love in the *Symposium* as a course which ends in the eventual overcoming and destruction of immanent loves. In Nussbaum's assessment, "[a] central feature of the [philosophic lover's] ascent is that the lover escapes, gradually from his bondage to luck. . . . Speeches and thoughts are always in our powers to a degree that emotional and physical intercourse with loved individuals is not. And if one instance of worldly beauty fades away or proves recalcitrant, there remains a boundless sea: he will feel the loss of the droplet hardly at

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all."[27] The Plato who emerges as a result of these assessments seems not only an enemy of democracy in a narrow political sense, but also an enemy of discourse in a much broader human sense.

This is the general view of Plato which this book attempts to revise. I do not wish to deny that Platonic practical philosophy clearly demands engagement with such "foundational" questions as "What is human perfection?"; "What is the simply best form of political arrangement?"; "What is knowledge?"; and even "What is being (or existence)?" Indeed, the dialogues seem to convey the implicit message that an encounter with these questions is simply unavoidable within serious attempts to make sense of and to derive guidance for human practice. In this respect, Plato emerges, not surprisingly, as someone whom Rorty would call a metaphysician, rather than an ironist, a person obsessed with articulating universalist theories purporting to discover essences, rather than someone who continually offers challenges to seemingly settled conclusions in the hope of stimulating a certain kind of self renovation.[28] However, I also want to identify within the dialogues a companion insight, namely that reflections on individual and political perfection and even on the nature of being itself need not turn us away from the imperfect and concrete world of becoming, the world which is engaged interactively through discourse and reflected politically in democracy. One consideration which prevents this turning away is the recognition that perfection and being become serious issues for us, though they do not thereby come under our personal or collective control, in the course of practical interactions and challenges. It is no accident that in a dialogue primarily concerned with the human good of justice, the highest "object" of contemplation, that which is beyond humanity, the cosmos, and even being itself, is called the idea of the good. While this insight initially encapsulates only the formal posture of Plato's dialogues toward these issues, the substance of Plato's teaching, I will argue, also follows suit. By responding to what Nussbaum sees as a human need to transcend[29] within a more broadly human perspective, Plato endorses a practical life not of asceticism, but of a certain complex kind of intelligent moderation.[30] Similarly, Platonic political philosophy, narrowly construed, is recuperative, rather than condemnatory, of imperfect regimes, including most especially the democracy. His teaching on knowledge stresses the value of inquiry, rather than simply the prospect of closure, and thus values perceptions and, particularly, opinions as having continual value. Finally, Platonic *erōs* copes with rather than transcends the competing demands of a variety of immanent loves. If

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an ironist is one who *notices* the complexity of the world in a way that matters for her, then Plato is every bit as much ironist as metaphysician.

I will be at pains to distiguish my own interpretation from those of such commentators as Nussbaum, Reeve, and Klosko, who construe Socrates' most dogmatic, architectonic, and ascetic comments as literal expressions of some sort of grand Platonic theory. However, I will also resist the urge to adopt completely the views of scholars such as Strauss and Mary Nichols who, in different ways, regard these Socratic speeches as warnings against the dangers of dogma, control, and asceticism.[31] Instead, I want to suggest that each group focuses on a part of the truth. Strauss and Nichols are surely right to say that Plato takes seriously the dangers inherent in those visions of morality, politics, philosophy, and *erōs* which effectively exclude fragility. He is, then, neither oblivious to such dangers, as commentators such as Reeve and Richard Patterson imply,[32] nor dismissive of their importance, as Nussbaum suggests.[33] Yet at the same time we must also go beyond Strauss and Nichols to see Plato's ironic treatment of the foundations of practical philosophy as more than cautionary warnings. Thus, in a way, Reeve (for example) is also correct to see a certain positive content in those foundational presentations, offering constructive and essential contributions to a Platonic account of and posture toward the human and the political world.

It seems to me that critics who find excessive closure and abstraction in Plato's work do so because they focus only on part of his dialectic, privileging the metaphysics while diminishing the irony. Like so many interpretations of Plato, this partiality is interwoven with a particular way of reading the dialogues. It is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that the dramatic context or action of a dialogue is simply incidental to its philosophical importance. In political philosophy, the focus on the dramatic elements of the dialogues is a particular hallmark of the work of Leo Strauss. But this orientation has also informed significant earlier work, such as the studies of Schleiermacher, Shorey, and Friedlander, and it has come to be shared by a community of contemporary scholars whose membership includes many more individuals than simply those who call themselves "Straussians."[34] To the extent that the dramatic character of the dialogues is emphasized, theses concerning the supposed development of Plato's political philosophy (including a change from Socratic to Platonic priorities)[35] must be temporarily suspended in favor of the possibility that the Platonic corpus must be understood as a single, complex dramatic and philosophical whole.[36]

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DRAMA: THE DIALOGUE FORM AND READING ACROSS DIALOGUES

A methodological approach that takes the dialogue form seriously investigates substantive differences among dialogues without insisting that some sort of development occurs within "Plato's thought." However, the dramatic approach has its pitfalls. If the argument and the action of each dialogue are *so* intimately connected, then how is it possible to move confidently across dialogues to discover if not a teaching at least a perspective which one might reasonably characterize as Platonic? Would it not be more sensible to adopt George Grote's conclusion that each dialogue is largely "a separate work, manifesting its own point of view, affirmative or negative, consistent or inconsistent with the others as the case may be"?[37]

Any alternative to Grote's conclusion must proceed by showing that dramatic readings of doctrinally inconsistent works can provide insights which, together, add up to something. Some *suggestions* that this is possible can be developed through interpretations of what seem to be two contradictory claims offered in separate dialogues: the identification of the good with the pleasant in the *Protagoras* and the stated opposition between them in the *Gorgias*. The seemingly contradictory nature of these positions supplies what might be seen as the paradigm case for those who wish to argue for a developmental interpretation of Plato's moral philosophy.[38] Yet one can, first of all, identify dramatic consideratons within the two dialogues which help to explain Socrates' assertion of identity in one context and his emphasis of difference in the other. What can be offered here is simply a sketch which makes this interpretation plausible.

Protagoras initially seems to reject Socrates' *apparent* equation of the good and the pleasant in favor of a view which he (Protagoras) admits to sharing with the many, that some pleasures are good and others bad (351c1–4). This latter conclusion, of course, is the one *to which* Socrates drives Callicles in the *Gorgias* (499b5–10). What seems crucial within the *Protagoras*, though, is the criterion which Protagoras and the many see as separating good from bad pleasures. Under Socrates' interrogation (which blends very leading questions with opportunities for dissent or with qualifications that are often ignored), Protagoras concludes that pleasures which are only apparently good "end at last in pains and deprive us of other pleasures" (354a4–5). Such pains as those stemming from gymnas-

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tics, soldiery, or medical treatment "result at a later time in health, good bodily condition, the saving of cities, rule over others and wealth" (354b5–7). These things are good in turn because "they are completed at last with pleasures and the relief and riddance of pains" (354b3–6). Protagoras and the many, then, share the view that the good and the pleasant are ultimately the same but they do so thoughtlessly or self-deceivingly.[39] Accordingly, the salvation which an art (*technē*) taught by an expert such as Protagoras provides is the ability to measure (*metrein*) quantities of pleasures and pains (357a7–b4). This means, effectively, that although art or science (*epistēmē*) is able in some sense to allay our fears (*phoboi*), it is, insofar as it is seen as a tool for maximizing gratification, still "dragged about like a slave" by the emotions (*pathē*) (352c1). Protagoras, who begins as the champion of wisdom, ends by becoming the servant of desire. This progression apparently parallels Protagoras' emergence in the dialogue as one whose views are dependent upon the dominant opinions of those cities he visits (327e2–326b6).

In his responses to Socrates, Protagoras shows that he is at least as ignorant as Socrates claims to be about what virtue is. But, unlike Socrates, he fails to recognize his ignorance. He does not see virtue as problematic, even though his fundamental claims about its nature have been confounded. Consequently, he is not prepared to undertake its hunting (361e6–362a1). Protagoras' beliefs about the good seem, naturally enough, of great import here. Protagoras is not deeply troubled (though he is superficially annoyed) by the refutations of his opinions by Socrates. He does not experience his apparent ignorance about virtue as painful. But the hunt for virtue promises difficulty and strain; Socrates, after all, eventually compares himself to Prometheus (361d4–6). Moreover, Protagoras' relativist epistemology means that his painful hunting offers no clear prospects of ending at last with pleasures and the relief and riddance of pains, for individually defined goods and, thus, their appropriate virtues, are almost infinitely dispersed (334b8–c2). It may, then, be better, that is, far more pleasant, to take one's bearings from what the city says is good or virtuous, to avoid the Promethean exertion and suffering, the risk and confrontation, which the individual search for virtue might demand, and to teach a familiar and accepted skill while being paid handsomely for it. Protagoras' response to Socrates' really quite modest suggestion that pleasure is a good is perhaps a key to tracing the difference between their respective ways of teaching.

In the *Gorgias*, however, Socrates proceeds to attack even the modest pleasure supplied by good cooking. As an enjoyment of flat-

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tery or pandering (*kolakeia*), it is similar to the stimulation experienced with—or by—a boy prostitute (*kinaidos*) (494e4–9). Yet Socrates' contempt for the kind of pleasure he attacks should not be equated too quickly with a condemnation of pleasure, simply. This dishonoring of pleasure occurs in response to a particular attitude about the nature of pleasure which dominates Callicles' life. Callicles agrees that our experiences of pleasure and pain can be captured in the image of the continued filling up and emptying of the receptacles of bodily desires (494b3–6). Socrates' criticism of this sort of pleasure culminates in his dwelling on the shameful satisfactions of the coward and the *kinaidos* (494e1 ff.). Moreover, he underscores the bodily risks and sufferings, that is, the pains, which threaten the person who practices injustice (521c10–d4). Insofar as he offers a positive affective alternative to Callicles' heights and depths, it is to be found in a steady, almost imperceptible contentment, the sentiment of bodily harmony or the quiet intellectual pleasures associated with the study of geometry (507e4–508a9). His frightening myth of the afterlife (like Rousseau's story of Poul-Serrho) implicitly points to the absence of intense pain as the affective reward of the just (525b8–c1). Precisely at the point where he might be able to provide a more positive account of pleasure, Socrates changes the discussion's direction (500a7–11). The condemnation of pleasure in the *Gorgias*, then, seems particularly *ad hominem*. It is also intertwined with the overarching theme of the dialogue, the apparent condemnation of rhetoric. Rhetoric's power lies in its capacity to please, apparently with no concern for the improvement of those whom it pleases. The success of the rhetorician is thus measurable by the rewards (or pleasures) which rhetorical success garners. These rewards—freedom and the rule over others (452d6–9)—seem closely related to the *Protagoras'* list of worthwhile pleasures in which the instrumental pains of gymnastics and soldiery end at last. Rhetoric's weakness, then, is shown by its subordination to an indiscriminate valuation of enjoyment.

Rhetoric's power, however, lies in its recognition of the strength of the affects or the emotions. Rhetoric would appear to be dispensable only under the humanly unattainable condition of the silence of desire. Accordingly, Socrates eventually rescues a rhetoric which is practiced with a view toward what is best (502e3–4). In the action of the dialogue, it becomes increasingly questionable whether Callicles' own brand of hedonism can be countered even partially by an argument which is not strongly rhetorical. Thus, the complaints against pleasure lodged in the dialogue may be part of a well-inten-

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tioned rhetorical strategy. But if rhetoric is salvageable, then so is pleasure. This strategy itself presupposes the implicit rescue of an influential sense of pleasure and pain which can play an effective role in motivating if not the pursuit of the greatest virtue at least the avoidance of the greatest vice.

These considerations offer plausible *suggestions* why the apparent shift in attitude toward the relation between the good and the pleasant which occur in these two dialogues should be construed dramatically rather than developmentally. But doesn't such a dramatic reading sharply undercut the possibility of discovering some sort of *Platonic* teaching about the good and the pleasant? Are we not left with Grote's philosophically unsatisfactory observation? In this context, any answer must be suggestive and illustrative rather than exhaustive.

The dishonoring of base pleasures in the *Gorgias* provides an illustration of why some pleasures might be called bad apart from their eventually painful consequences. This is a possibility *offered to* but not accepted by Protagoras (354d1–4). At the same time, the premise that pleasure is a good (radicalized illegitimately by Protagoras but not for that reason illegitimate in itself) is a clue that the condemnation of base pleasures in the *Gorgias* may not be simply generalizable into a condemnation of all pleasures. That pleasure is a human good is suggested at the outset of the discussion with Callicles when Socrates calls philosophy one of his loves (the other is Alcibiades) and his darling (*paidika*) (482a5–6). Socrates' attachment to philosophy is at a basic level affective. Thus, Protagoras' unwillingness to engage in the philosophic hunt for virtue may not simply evidence the failure of philosophic courage but also signal an absence of philosophic *erōs*, a condition in which the enjoyment of philosophic pleasure is impossible. Protagoras adds neither virtue nor wisdom to Socrates' more conventional list of the pleasures in which instrumental pains end at last. But the interactions in the *Gorgias*, thus construed, also provide us with grounds for seeing the very model of enjoyment implicit in the *Protagoras* as incomplete. Philosophy is not simply a satisfying pleasure which ends the pain of ignorance, nor is philosophy itself "a pain" which ends at last in the pleasure of wisdom (cf. *Phaedrus* 258e1–6). Philosophy, rather, seems to be at once pain and pleasure. Can Socrates' dissatisfaction with even the most apparently secure conclusions be seen as a continued emptying and replenishment of the psyche (cf. *Gorgias* 494a8–b6)? Does Callicles get less credit than he deserves for his insights about the nature of the most sublime enjoyment?[40]

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These dramatic readings of the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* thus provide us with a way of interpreting their differences which does not require us to rely on continually problematic assumptions about some sort of order of development within the dialogues. From this perspective, the various treatments of the same or related questions in different dialogues need not be read as Grote's disconnected individual points of view, nor as Irwin's progressive working out of emerging problems, nor, even, as Charles Kahn's proleptic anticipations of further inquiries and investigations.[41] Rather, individual dialogues seem grouped or centered around common themes, addressed from different, though complementary, points of view. This does not imply that Plato's alternative to the interpretation of Grote is a static system or a general collection of individual static treatments. We cannot come to a full understanding of Plato's position on the relationship between the good and the pleasant simply on the basis of the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*, even with the contributions of the *Republic* and the *Philebus*. The necessity of engaging this question on an ongoing and necessarily inconclusive, though not for these reasons an emotivist or relativist, basis is communicated by the dialectical structure which extends potentially across the dialogues.[42]

PHILOSOPHY: SOCRATIC *LOGOS* AND SOCRATIC *ERGON*

Recognizing the intrinsically dramatic character of Plato's philosophical expression still leaves room for considerable variation in how the dialogues are read, however. The most immediate impulse is surely to focus on what is *said*, especially on what is said by Socrates, paying special attention, as we have in the above analyses of the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*, to variations among the identities and abilities of the interlocutors, the nature and number of the silent or nearly silent witnesses, and the express or implied intentions of Socrates himself. In a way, this perspective counsels us to focus upon what the linguists might call Socrates' *pragmatics*, to see his speeches as speech *acts*. But what kinds of acts are they? If we follow the general guidance of such otherwise different commentators as Nussbaum, Richard Robinson and Gerasimos Santas, we would see the dialogic content as primarily intellectual, pursuing the answers to "What is X?" questions, dialectically examining others' opinions, or serving, more broadly, as a "theater" of the intellect.[43] Since Plato's dialogues are *philosophical*, this guidance has a

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certain obvious plausibility. Yet we should also remember Michael Stokes's cautionary remark that "a writer intending us to think about the truth or falsehood of propositions can equally well expound them in a systematic treatise."[44] Even if we construe propositional thinking broadly, as going beyond philosophical analysis to encompass dialectical examinations or even the encouragement of a questioning, "Socratic" attitude, seeing the speech acts of the dialogues as exclusively intending the communication of ideas may lead us to view the dialogue form as little more than a pleasing reinforcement of a point that could just as easily be expressed propositionally.

The perspective is altered, however, if we see the dialogic contexts for speech acts as being broadly moral. This goes beyond the simple fact that the subjects of Socrates' investigations are quite often (even in the so-called "later" dialogues) moral ones. Socrates' intent is not simply to find definitions of or to achieve clarifications about moral terms but to encourage moral behavior among those with whom he converses. This is his explicit claim about the nature of his own activities in the *Apology* (29d7–e3). To be sure, Socrates' moral purposes are pursued through intellectual means. But the continuing importance of those moral purposes suggests that it may be too simple to say that Plato quickly shifts from aporetic moral situations "onto the plane of intellect."[45] The achievement of the behavioral or motivational goal often seems *more* important than conceptual accuracy or closure. "But in our *logoi*, though the rest are refuted, one *logos* stands, that doing injustice is more to be feared than suffering it and more than anything a real man (*andri*) should have a care not to seem but to be good and in private as well as in public (*Gorgias* 527b3–8)."

However, even this recognition of Socrates' intentions may not do complete justice to the moral context of the dialogues, for Socrates' admonitions are not expressed theoretically to objective or docile audiences. He encounters people, mostly males, whose moral opinions are part, often a decidedly subordinate part, of affective psyches or identities. Broadly conceived, the psyche refers in this context to the qualities of character (Charmides' illusory moderation or Laches' very real courage), the motivations (Meno's puzzling concern for how virtue is acquired or Protagoras' apparent intent to outshine Prodicus and Hippias), and the passions (Socrates' self-confessed addiction to speeches or Alcibiades' self-confessed *erōs* for the inner Socrates) of those involved. That this approach to the dialogues must be dialectical rather than reductive is clear from

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the obvious fact that this psychology (*these* characteristics, *these* motivations, *these* passions) is principally accessible through the speeches of the persons in question. But this path avoids vicious circularity if we can distinguish, yet relate, propositional and characterological elements within a given set of expressions. Speeches can, on the one hand, reveal psyches, as when Protagoras' explanation of why he openly calls himself a sophist paradoxically shows his subservient attitude toward the cities or when Crito's worrying about his stature in the eyes of the many discloses a less than flattering contributory motive for his concern to rescue Socrates.[46] By the same token, the affective or appetitive features of an interlocutor's identity also support or diminish the overall plausibility of his propositional claims. From Callicles' answers to Socrates we can infer the vulgar character of his desires and his fundamental fearfulness; these psychic features in turn help to reveal the low purposes which guide those whom his *logoi* identify as naturally nobler and better.

Moreover, we do have access, even within the strict confines of the dialogues themselves, to information about the past and future actions, more commonly understood, of the individuals in question. The Aristoteles of the *Parmenides* afterwards becomes one of the Thirty; Theaetetus will die from wounds and disease after the battle of Corinth; Socrates was brave at Potidaea and Delium. These internal reports are legitimately supplemented by the historical information which Plato surely expected his readers to possess. A greedy Meno died ignobly; Alcibiades betrayed (and rejoined) the Athenians; Critias and Charmides led an oligarchic conspiracy. While Nussbaum is surely right that "the 'action' of the dialogue is not a working out of these events,"[47] the logistic action of the dialogues does occur in light of and is clearly intelligible in connection with them. Critias' eventual role within the Thirty helps us to understand his definition of *sōphrosynē* as promising a different sort of "control" than self-control.[48] The sudden introduction of the name of Euthyphro, with whom Socrates converses about piety immediately before his own indictment for impiety, into the *Cratylus* gives an entirely different and much darker cast to this seemingly playful if not downright silly treatment of the correctness of names.[49]

The intertwining of speech and psyche in the dialogues suggests that any interaction, any clash or harmony, between Socrates and his interlocutors occurs not simply on the level of thought, but also on the level of action. Socrates' moral purpose, however provisionally characterized at this point, is, thus, not an enterprise con-

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ducted simply through speech or *logos* narrowly understood. It is, rather, pursued as an activity—*to ergon*—which encompasses even as it extends beyond the articulation of various forms of *logoi*. Socrates does not simply place his speeches in conflict with those of Thrasymachus, Protagoras, or Callicles; he engages their identities with his own. That virtually all of these engagements occur within the city of Athens involves Socrates essentially with the culture of the democracy.

I believe that critics who have assailed Plato's supposed rejection of discursive practical life have done so, at least in part, because of an excessive focus on Socratic *logos* narrowly understood. I will suggest that these criticisms are softened considerably once we begin to focus on Socrates' broader existential activity (*ergon*) in the dialogues. The narrowly understood *logoi* of Socrates are articulated within the contexts of particular Socratic *erga* and cannot be interpreted without reference to those activities. However, doesn't this line of interpretation illegitimately diminish Socratic *logos*, narrowly understood? While it may be essential to see the speeches of Callicles and Alcibiades, and even those of Glaucon and Theaetetus, as being substantially conditioned and therefore limited by the *psychai* of the individuals involved, surely Socratic speech is different. Not only Socrates himself but also others in the dialogues seem to assign a particularly high intellectual status to his questions and affirmations. Socrates speaks in the *Gorgias* of the remarkable consistency of his "darling philosophy," which stands in sharp contrast to the wild swings which characterize the speeches and actions of his other love, Alcibiades. Concerning Socrates, it might be justly said, to a degree unimaginable for any other Platonic character, that he *is* his speeches in that his *erga* reflect the specific characteristics of his *logoi*.

However, even the special status of Socratic *logos*, narrowly understood, often owes a good deal to the broader Socratic *ergon* which surrounds it. Socrates' degree of precision about the idea of the good in the *Republic* is both elicited and limited by his attempt to influence Glaucon. His enduring love for his consistent darling offsets or counters but does not simply eclipse his more uncertain love for the turbulent Alcibiades.[50] Moreover, it would be at least shortsighted and perhaps even inaccurate to see even narrowly construed Socratic *logos* as being characterized primarily by consistency. The difference between Socrates' own particular sort of philosophy and a rigorous propositional philosophizing is dramatically addressed within the *Theaetetus*. There, Socrates praises the philosopher as

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one who does not know his way to the *agora*, one whose *logoi* are not tyrannized by the water clock and one, indeed, so immersed in pure *logoi* that he does not know whether the creature next to him is even a human being.[51] By contrast, Socrates not only knows that Theaetetus is a human being, but also exhibits a knowledge of his parentage before he begins his conversations with him.[52] Moreover, the conclusion of the dialogue points to Socrates' imminent indictment on a political charge for *his* philosophic activity. It seems that it is difficult for Socrates to find his way *out* of the *agora*, for him to cease being a democrat in favor of his being this kind of philosopher.

For all of this, though, there *is* a narrowly understood Socratic *logos* embedded within the broader Socratic *ergon*, and in its highest moments it appears to enjoy a special status. In Jacob Klein's view, the dialogues, thus, "contain a Platonic doctrine. . . . The dialogues not only embody the famous 'oracular' and 'paradoxical' statements emanating from Socrates . . . but they also discuss and state, more or less explicitly, the ultimate foundations on which those statements rest and the far-reaching consequences which flow from them."[53] This form of Socratic *logos*, narrowly understood, appears to support what I have identified earlier as the metaphysical insight arising within the Platonic dialogues, that reflection on foundational questions such as "What is human perfection?" and "What is being?" is indeed essential for a practical philosophy which aspires to satisfy fully the human need for moral guidance. Though the insights stemming from reflection on these concerns may be tentative and provisional, they serve in a way as the conditions or presuppositions for more practical deliberations. However, this sort of reflection can only occur within the context of a broader activity which makes that reflection an issue for human beings. Within the constructed world of the dialogues this context is philosophically discursive and practically democratic.

SERIOUS AND PLAYFUL SPEECHES IN THE *PHAEDRUS*

That this relation between Socratic *logos* and *ergon* holds in the dialogues and that it has the dramatic and philosophical significances which I have adumbrated are cases which must be made. But some provisional evidence for their plausibility can be found within Socrates' reflections on spoken and written expressions in the dia-

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logue *Phaedrus*. "You might opine that [writings] speak with intelligence, but if one questions them, wishing to inquire about their sayings, they always signify one and the same thing. When once it is written, every word is tossed about alike among those who understand, the same as among those who are not suitable, and it knows not to whom it should speak and to whom not. And when it is ill treated or unjustly abused, it always needs its father to help it" (275d8–e5). Many commentators have read this comparison of writing and speaking as a defense of the Platonic form or writing.[54] While not disputing this interpretation, others, for example Giovanni Ferrari, have suggested that this portion of the *Phaedrus* has even wider import—focusing on the proper form of philosophic inquiry itself.[55]

Support for the claim that the distinction between writing and speaking cannot be *the* compelling distinction within forms of human inquiry is shown in part by the dramatic fact that the writings which initiate this thematic inquiry come from the hand of the *speech* writer, Lysias. Socrates' complex response to Lysias is initiated, at least, in two set speeches which, while not based on any written text, possess, as narrowly delivered, the characteristics of spoken tracts. In essence, Socrates' comparison of writing and speaking turns into a comparison of two different modes of expression, generally. Not surprisingly, in light of the earlier focus in the dialogue on rhetoric and its deficiencies, these styles can be provisionally identified as *rhētorikē*—the written speech and the spoken tract—and *dialegesthai*—the (Platonic) dialogue and the inquiring, reflective conversation.

Socrates' preference for speech is therefore an endorsement of a *kind* of speech that does not have the deficiencies which compromise spoken tracts. He wishes to praise a speech written "with intelligence" (*met epistēmēs*) in the soul of the learner, one able to defend itself and one which "knows to whom it should speak and before whom it should be silent" (276a6–8). Many commentators have traced connections between this sort of praiseworthy speech and the dialogues themselves, with Ronna Burger going so far as to see this portion of the *Phaedrus* as elevating Plato's written dialogues to a status above even the best of speeches.[56] However, it is important to note that Socrates himself sees neither the best writing nor the speech which it parallels as the best form of expression, simply. The best writing (and its parallel speeches) serve optimally as reminders, (*hypomnēmata*) and playful (*paidia*) ones at that, of that which can be better expressed seriously (*spoudē*) (276d3).[57] Of greater beauty and nobility (*polu kallion*) than these playful expressions, however,

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are those serious speeches which are dialectical and which plant "words of wisdom" (*epistēmēs logous*) in an appropriate soul (*psychēn prosēkousan*) allowing the "begetting" (*phyomenos*) to continue and the possessor to be happy (*eudaimonein*) (276e5–277a5). That the best writing and its parallel *logos* do not represent the best form of expression is also suggested by the similarities between playful expression and rhetoric. In the eyes of its apologists, rhetoric, too, is a speech capable of defending itself, though it would presumably not confine itself to opposing *unjust* attacks.[58] And have we not already been told in the *Phaedrus* itself that the rhetorician must know the several forms (*eidē*) of soul so as to know how to speak to different persons and, indeed, to know whether to speak at all (271c12ff.; 277b8–c7)?

However, the distance between serious and playful expressions does not signify that they are unrelated. Since the sort of seriousness which Socrates has in mind seems inevitably paralleled by remoteness, one must be *reminded* of its possibility by less serious but more accessible signs. Under this condition, it is highly questionable whether one can ever completely surpass or transcend the playful. Socrates himself suggests this when he observes that the knowledge of the truth of which the best writing reminds us can only be rescued (*boēthein*) by the interrogation (*elenchein*) of what is written. The need for writings or opinions to interrogate may be particularly crucial if we are to approach remote realities such as justice (*dikaiosynē*) or moderation (*sōphrosynē*) which, unlike beauty, have few reminders appealing to our senses (250b1–5). The value of the playful is reinforced when Socrates notes that the person who pursues these serious things is to be called a lover of wisdom rather than one who is simply wise (278d4–7).[59] Wisdom itself belongs only to the god (*sophon theō monō prepein*) (278d5). Thus, it seems humanly impossible to complete the movement from ignorance to knowledge, even as it seems humanly necessary to attempt to do so. From this perspective, these less serious things become in a way the most serious things for us but only on the paradoxical condition that we recognize that they are not the most serious things by nature. This recognition is encapsulated in the dialogues by Socrates' elenctic examination of even the seemingly most established opinions, a kind of examination which seems both particularly necessary and particularly possible in a democracy.

From this perspective, the possibility of serious speeches (or the articulation of wisdom) may be humanly valuable because it allows us to separate those valuable expressions which seem playful

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from those frivolous ones which seem serious. Socrates' continual harping on cobblers and cooks may, at bottom, be more serious than the practice of Gorgias' art which seems to deal with "the greatest of human affairs and the best" (451d8–9). Without the possibility of being reminded of what is truer or more remote, perhaps all speech becomes playful in the pejorative sense. Yet as compared with the vantage belonging to the playful human condition, even this understanding of the most serious speech has drawbacks. From the perspective of a completely serious speech, the only valuable playful speech may be that which leads to rational insight. But what of the more immediately human goals which do not conform to this purpose? A viewpoint which equates the city or human culture with a cave is likely to dismiss not only the forensic antics of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus but also Pericles' speech over the fallen,[60] Diodotus' rhetorical rescue of the Mytilineans, and Euryptolemus' appeal to legal procedure in the Arginusae trial[61] as philosophically trivial. Thus, perhaps there is a parallel, positive contribution of playful speech—to humanize the most serious speeches by reminding us of the perspective within which the need for them arises. Thus, even the account of serious speech in the *Phaedrus* reminds us why *we* should care that such speech be possible. It results not in a terminal *epistēmē* about the just, the beautiful and the good, but in an eternally deathless begetting which makes the possessor happy "as far as possible for a human being" (*hoson anthrōpō dynaton malista*) (277a4–5). The moderation of serious speeches by "remembering" their inevitably human context may also reinforce our attachments even to those human conventions which the simply serious speeches (articulating a wisdom about the whole) might dismiss as nonserious.

THE IRONIC INTERPLAY OF PLAYFUL AND SERIOUS SPEECHES

The prospective interplay between playful and serious speeches within Socrates' complex *ergon* is more tangibly manifest in the dialogues as a certain kind of irony. Because it involves both speeches and actions, this irony extends beyond that which is often detected in Socrates' immediate conversations (and which is criticized by characters as different as Thrasymachus and Adeimantus) to constitute a certain kind of identity. Yet as a description of Socrates' identity, this ironism is also very different in both content and con-

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