

# Plato Among and Against the Post-Modernists

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“One day I heard someone reading, as he said, from a book of Anaxagoras, and saying that it is Mind that directs and is the cause of everything.”<sup>[1]</sup> With moments to expire before Athens would execute him, Plato’s Socrates was exploring the meaning of a few lines by another philosopher. To the last minute of Socrates’ dramatic life, Plato has him making important criticism on vital literary texts. Textual criticism is found throughout Plato’s works, making it his main philosophical methodology. His literary approach destroys the image of Plato as a logician working systematically from proven axioms or definitions toward a conclusion. In fact, Plato never makes a systematic exposition of just one philosophical issue, nor moves from a stated central topic or thesis to work out the numerous details, as Aristotle would do shortly thereafter. Plato’s selective, spontaneous, and unsystematic approach links him with a much later tradition: post-modernism. The purposes of this paper are two: to establish that Plato’s productive methodology was literary criticism; and to explore the implications of the post-modern revival of Plato’s approach.

## On the Elenchus: Its Negative Nature

In his fundamental work on what is Socrates’ and what is Plato’s thought, Gregory Vlastos put a chronological order to Plato’s writing of the dialogues.<sup>[2]</sup> According to him, the Theory of Forms, considered the heart of Plato’s metaphysical ideas, appears seventeen dialogues into Plato’s career. But the dialectic, which supposedly finds its logical grounding in the Theory of Forms,<sup>[3]</sup> surfaces in Plato’s very first dialogues. As the early dialogues express Socratic philosophy, their use of the elenchus proves it to be Socrates’ method. Hence, it is the elenchus that leads Plato to the Forms, not the Forms that lead Plato to the elenchus. Vlastos’ ordering of the dialogues demonstrates this point, establishing a history of early questions and explorations that only eventually became philosophical theorizing and propounding.

It has been strongly argued that the earliest dialogues do not belong to Plato’s thought, but that they rather represent Socrates’ philosophies. Vlastos explains that, among other differences, “Socrates<sub>M</sub> [Socrates of the middle dialogues] had a grandiose metaphysical theory of ‘separately existing’ Forms,” while “Socrates<sub>E</sub> [Socrates of the early dialogues] has no such theory.”<sup>[4]</sup> Essentially, the early dialogues produce questions about particular moral or ethical doctrines. The heart of the *Euthyphro*, for example, is Socrates’ question: “Tell me then, what is the pious, and what the impious, do you say?”<sup>[5]</sup> In the *Laches*, Socrates says, “Then let us undertake first of all, Laches, to state what courage is.”<sup>[6]</sup> In

the *Charmides*, Socrates tells the young man, “Well, to help us decide whether it resides in you or not, say what, in your opinion, temperance is.”<sup>[7]</sup> The early dialogues are unique in the history of philosophy, however, for answers are never forthcoming. Though Socrates continually asks questions, he never arrives at anything but *aporia*, confusion. The endless quest becomes perfectly frustrating when Socrates ultimately avows in the *Apology* that he is “conscious of knowing practically nothing,”<sup>[8]</sup> thereby claiming no authority in ethics. This profound ignorance creates a famous paradox, because Socrates feels secure enough to claim sure knowledge about “the God.”<sup>[9]</sup> This paradox, that the elenchus does and does not provide knowledge, is what seems to have ironically filled Plato with the desire to seek truth, as pointed out above. Plato hardly threw himself prostrate before the Socratic altar! Rather, Socratic *aporia* drove Plato away from Socrates and toward the Forms and other theories he later espoused.

Hence, Socratic methodology did not lead to knowledge for Plato, except that it filled him with an insatiable desire for truth. Evidence suggests that Plato realized slowly that there was a source of higher knowledge. This evidence emerges in Vlastos’ division of the early dialogues into “Elenctic dialogues” and “Transitional dialogues.”<sup>[10]</sup> The transitional dialogues display Plato questioning Socratic doctrines, such as in the *Protagoras*, where Socrates shames, and is shamed in turn by, a sophist.<sup>[11]</sup> As the “transitional dialogues” fade into Plato’s middle period, Socratic influences atrophy, while Plato’s new methodologies take center stage. Though the elenchus appears in both the *Meno* and the *Republic*, Plato uses it cleverly, driving away the rabble so that metaphysics can enter the scene in a more perfect philosophical setting.<sup>[12]</sup> In these works, Plato introduces other sources of knowledge because the elenchus fails to produce any higher knowledge in his characters. In leaving Socrates behind, in seeking the answers Socrates never found, and in developing philosophies above and beyond Socratic ideas, Plato employs a methodology unfamiliar to the Socratic dialogues. Hence, the famous Theory of Forms does not derive from the elenchus, but from the methodology that Plato replaces the elenchus with. The inherent contradiction in Socratic methodology brought Plato the desire to find the Forms, but Plato’s positive methodology is fundamentally different from his teacher’s negative one.

The major difference between the two methodologies is obvious enough: Socrates never comes up with knowledge, but Plato delivers truth for those pregnant with its seed.<sup>[13]</sup> The elenchus only applies negatively to individual propositions. Socrates makes this obvious in the *Gorgias*, where he continually reminds his companions that they must state their own opinions or the discussion must halt. In fact, this is something of a Socratic theme. The elenchus is only a test for the belief system of an individual, a sort of consistency meter, and by it Plato never intended to discover universal truth. At least he never succeeded. Dialectic, as such, was a tool to apply to the diverse opinions of others, but it could produce no knowledge of itself. Hence, the elenchus is fundamentally negative, only breaking the would-be philosopher from his chains in the cave.

## Plato's Productive Methodology: Literary Criticism

The methodology that Plato applies positively, the one that brought him to a knowledge of eternal truths, ushers him into the realm of our pondering and wandering post-modernists. Plato spends a great deal of time in textual criticism and philosophical interpretation, and these become the methodology that provides Plato with sure knowledge, freeing him from the darkness of the cave and its elenchus. Some examples illustrate the point. The first good example of literary criticism in Plato's corpus appears in the *Protagoras*, though the knowledge it provides is not quite to the point for Socrates' argument.

Protagoras, the great sophist, brings up the subject of poetry.<sup>[14]</sup> He explores the meaning of a few lines by Simonides, after which Socrates responds with an interpretation that is superior: "Then Hippias said, 'I am favorably impressed by your analysis of this ode, Socrates.'"<sup>[15]</sup> Perhaps more fundamentally, every book of Homer's *Iliad* is quoted or alluded to somewhere in Plato's writings except for Book XIII.<sup>[16]</sup> Hesiod is also a popular source of discussion.<sup>[17]</sup> Other allusions include Apollo's written sayings at Delphi,<sup>[18]</sup> mythology, the sophists,<sup>[19]</sup> and the pre-Socratics.<sup>[20]</sup> Keeping with his lack of systematicity, Plato never writes an entire dialogue of interpretation or criticism, as, say, Philo of Alexandria later would. Rather, Plato simply criticizes and interprets continually, interweaving his positive methodology into texts with other "purposes."

Though it might be argued that it is simply the "Greek way," Plato's approach goes well beyond the *Symposium's* lighthearted discussion about the nature of love. Plato's exploration includes word studies, like the *Cratylus*, which reads about like a dictionary. The Socratic dialogues present other interesting examples of in-depth word study. In the *Euthyphro*, Plato explores the meaning of the term 'piety,' the Greek meaning adherence to the cult, but his discussion develops the simple term much farther than that.<sup>[21]</sup> Further, ritual and religious hints in the *Republic* suggest that Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave is really a commentary on Athenian and Pythagorean initiation rites.<sup>[22]</sup> The settings of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* also show Plato's interest in religious festivals,<sup>[23]</sup> while the late *Laws* prove that he still sought to interpret Greek religion towards the end of his life.<sup>[24]</sup> More directly, the *Apology* is essentially a long interpretation of the Pythian's answer to Chaerophon, and, as mentioned before, Homer and Hesiod continually appear in Plato's pages as sources of interpretation and criticism. Hence, Plato's literary criticism and post-modern methodology lead him well beyond the safe realms of Greek leisure.

These numerous references suggest a re-evaluation of Plato's methodology is in order. Plato arrived at his philosophical opinions through literary criticism and careful interpretation, not through the vehicle of the elenchus. Interestingly, his approach does not show up after Middle Platonism, Augustine's allegorical interpretations being little more than forced sophistry. Even through scholasticism and epistemology, Plato's methodology was missing. It was not until Hegel returned to the more mantic view of history that literary criticism appeared in philosophy again.

## Similarities and Differences: Plato Among and Against the Post-Modernists

Plato's literary approach aligns him with the current methodology of post-modernism. At the very birth of the post-modern period, textual interpretation took center stage in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. His quasi-history develops eventually into a lengthy interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Nietzsche followed close on his heels in *The Birth of Tragedy*, urging a rebirth of German spirit by making criticism on the greats of the Greek poets. In the early twentieth century, Heidegger was writing papers on German Romantic poetry, while opening *Being and Time* with a quote from Plato's *The Sophist*. At the same time, Wittgenstein began his *Philosophical Investigations* with a lengthy literary criticism of a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*. Since then, Derrida has been called a literary critic more than he has been called a philosopher. There really is no contention that literary criticism is not the methodology of post-modernism. This brief survey clearly sets Plato comfortably at home in the post-modern tradition.

So many similarities in methodology, however, do not suggest a similarity in metaphysical doctrines. Post-modernists themselves emphasize important differences between Platonic and post-modern metaphysics. For example, Nietzsche's philosophy was one continual argument against Plato, from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *Twilight of the Idols*. Heidegger focused on the pre-Socratics, especially in his *Parmenides*, finding more truth in thinkers previous to Plato. In the analytic tradition, there is no more common theme than the war against Platonic idealism. Post-modernism is categorically the most thorough and direct rejection of Platonic philosophy in history. This metaphysical division stands in contrast to the unity above identified, presenting a serious difficulty to be discussed and analyzed below.

## Hegelian Synthesis: Life in the Cave

Stuart Barnett noted in his work, *Hegel After Derrida*, that Hegel's work "occupies a unique and strangely ambivalent position in the history of Western philosophy. It is both the culmination of the Western philosophical tradition and the beginning of its dissolution."<sup>[25]</sup> Hegel's philosophy certainly appears as a turning point in the history of thought. His work, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, introduced the philosophy of history at the very time he claimed to bring history to its end. His approach set the rules for the continental tradition after him, and the analytic tradition grew out of his influence in Britain, and as a result, no post-modern philosophy quite exhibits the feel of pre-Hegelian philosophy. In 1807, history came up against a wall with one door only: Hegel's Romanticism. If Barnett is right, what went into that door is fundamentally different than what came out: the Western philosophical tradition had given up the ghost.

The change that occurred with Hegel is rather simple. Hegel himself summarizes it in the introduction to *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There he explains that he intended to attack directly the distinction between

the noumenal and the phenomenal, initiated by Descartes, but taken to extremes by Kant.<sup>[26]</sup> Hegel claimed that there is no distinction between the world of experience and the world of reality.<sup>[27]</sup> This claim alone ended Western philosophy: philosophy had been, since Plato, hypothesis of another realm, a truer realm, whether approached in theology or in naturalism. Barnett explains that Hegel historically finished what began with the *logos*, and ever since, philosophers have seen themselves as historians of empirical data.<sup>[28]</sup> With the last steps of his historical interpretation, Hegel claimed that his philosophy discovered that mankind is God Himself: “*History... is a conscious, self-mediating process,*”<sup>[29]</sup> nothing outside being applicable. With that step, the history of philosophy before him became a necessary history, but completely untrue and unhelpful nonetheless. Simply put, Hegel redefined philosophy’s god as mankind collectively.

This “discovered” union of earth and heaven is in clear contrast to Plato’s philosophy. At the heart of Plato’s metaphysics is the Allegory of the Cave. There the philosopher (and every lover of truth) seeks to leave the cave to escape into the light of the Forms, but in Hegel, the cave has no exit, and those within are told that philosophers will henceforward explore the cave only, nothing outside. As all post-modernism follows Hegel’s metaphysical premise, Plato’s metaphysics are very out of place after 1807; the Forms are now found inside the cave itself. Hegel lopped off the upper half of the Divided Line, walled up the cave, and extinguished the Sun itself.<sup>[30]</sup>

Science has since become the study of the human condition, something like spelunking in Plato’s hell. It was only with Hegelian influence that disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and history gained legitimate grounding. Mankind is since obsessed with discovering what really goes on inside the cave: mankind has become the mystery that replaced God. A brief look at Peter Berger’s *Invitation to Sociology* demonstrates the point. After an aesthetic chapter on the joy of sociology, Berger characterizes the discipline as “a form of consciousness.”<sup>[31]</sup> He suggests that the sociologically aware person has woken up, ironically calling to mind the same image of Plato’s cave. Berger goes on to present sociology as a drama that floats back and forth between society confined to a man and man confined to a society, and so he confirms that the lover of truth (his conscious sociologist) is confined to the dark recesses of Hegel’s inescapable, underground cavern. Finally, he reduces ethics to: “How to Acquire Scruples and Keep On Cheating.”<sup>[32]</sup> Essentially, post-modernism provides one with a closed system; mankind must decide what is to be done with it. Utopia is left to social construction, Plato’s divine realm eliminated.

Sociology is selected at random. Any current field of study could be likewise surveyed, but the point is clear. The question must now be addressed: why does Plato fall methodologically in with post-modernism? Ultimately, the truth about the god is in the texts. The texts Plato analyzed and interpreted were mantic in nature, derived from some heavenly source. Homer and Hesiod, accompanied by other poets and the pre-Socratic philosophers,<sup>[33]</sup> received their works as revelations from the gods. Plato’s mantic library supplied him with unlimited hints about the world outside the cave, because authors,

mankind, were the spokesmen for the gods. In the sophic interim, texts were set aside, simply because no god was sought. When Hegel united the phenomenal and the noumenal, texts again became the best source of knowledge of the god, but him redefined. The texts of history came to be revelatory as they had been for Plato, only the god they now revealed was the one Hegel had defined for post-modernism. Mankind could study mankind best by studying texts. Historians and textual critics were enthroned. Hegel restored an approach as he redefined an ideology, bringing methodological life out of metaphysical death.

## Conclusion

Playing off of Christ's death and resurrection, Hegel's last lines in his earth-shaking work are fitting: "Only from the chalice of this realm of spirits foams forth for Him his own infinitude."<sup>[34]</sup> Post-modernism is a life out of death: Hegel laid Plato's body in a dark, cave-like grave, but resurrected him in methodology by seeking a new god under an old name. Whether mankind should feel at home in this new world or yearn for the mantic past is left to the reader. Whether to find the answer, or because the answer has been found, the student must turn to the texts.

## Notes

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[1] *Phaedo* 97c. All works by Plato are cited in Stephanus notation, and all direct quotes are taken from Cooper's collection.

[2] Vlastos, Gregory, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 46-47.

[3] Plato implicitly promotes something called the dialectic in the *Republic* 509d-511e, just after describing the famous Divided Line. For this reason some believe that the Theory of Forms is the foundational justification for the dialectic or elenchus.

[4] *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* 48.

[5] *Euthyphro* 5d.

[6] *Laches* 190d-e.

[7] *Charmides* 159a.

[8] *Apology* 22d.

[9] *Crito* 54d-e. Apparently, the elenchus does lead to answers—providing particular solutions for real situations—for Socrates and Crito come to know that one should not break free from jail, and Socrates remains to suffer his sentence on that account.

[10] *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* 46-47.

[11] Interestingly, the *Protagoras* is one of the earliest dialogues with extensive literary criticism. This will be discussed below.

[12] These are the first half of the *Meno* and the entirety of Book I of the *Republic*. In both of these works, Plato compares the elenchus to Greek initiation ritual, likely suggesting a much more complicated understanding of its role, and likely a more positive understanding. To discuss the full implications of this is beyond the scope of the present work.

[13] *Theaetetus* 148e-151e.

[14] *Protagoras* 339a. The section of literary criticism extends from this point to 347b, including a rebuttal from Socrates.

[15] *Protagoras* 347b.

- [16] Cooper 1773.
- [17] Cooper 1772.
- [18] *Protagoras* 343b.
- [19] *Theaetetus* 152a.
- [20] *Timaeus* 49b-c and Graham, Daniel W., *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy* (Unpublished Manuscript, 2003) Testimony 3.6. This allusion to Anaximenes was pointed out to me by Dr. Graham.
- [21] It is my opinion that the heavy subject of this dialogue actually, and especially Plato's focus on ritual, places it later in Plato's career. Arguments for this must be presented elsewhere.
- [22] Michael Morgan in *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 100-157, interprets the *Republic* as a lengthy commentary on Greek education ritual, such as the Eleusinian mysteries. Further, Walter Burkert in *Greek Religion* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985) 280, mentions that Pythagoras was said to have descended into a cave to be initiated into the higher mysteries. Plato is likely making reference to these rituals in his allegory.
- [23] Morgan, Michael, "Plato and Greek Religion," in Richard Kraut, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). 232.
- [24] Burkert 332-337.
- [25] Barnett, Stuart, ed. *Hegel After Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 26; see also Robert Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 205.
- [26] Hegel, G.W.F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 47. Hegel suggests that this is the Cartesian project, but otherworldliness, as will be discussed below, is as old as Plato's Allegory of the Cave.
- [27] Consciousness is immediately acquainted with all of what is in-itself, according to Hegel, and the trail to absolute knowing is nothing more than the discovery and reconciliation of contradiction within consciousness. See Hegel 52-53.
- [28] *Hegel After Derrida* 9.
- [29] Hegel 492. Emphases are the translator's.
- [30] It is interesting that in the penultimate sentence of Hegel's lengthy work, he calls the last steps of history's process an "inwardizing." See Hegel 493.
- [31] Berger, Peter L., *Invitation to Sociology* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963) 25.
- [32] Berger 151.
- [33] Vlastos, Gregory, "Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought," in Daniel W. Graham, ed. *Studies in Greek Philosophy: The Presocratics*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 3.
- [34] Hegel 493.