

Working Papers in Philosophy:  
Registers of Philosophy

Szerkesztők: Kovács Gábor  
Paár Tamás

2018/3

# Literary form as philosophical message in the Platonic dialogue: some examples

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## About the author

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## Abstract

Argument and literary form, and how both relate to each other, is an important aspect for any interpreter of the Platonic dialogues, because Plato, the author, and Plato, the philosopher work hand in hand. Sometimes dramatic aspects of the dialogues kind of affirm or even contradict what is argued for in the dialogues. In my paper I shall argue, that this kind of relation between argument and literary form also might be of interest and help for a better understanding of some aspects of the dialogues. I shall argue that Plato, the author, kind of comments on the arguments or literary *topoi* that Plato, or rather, the protagonists in the dialogues propose.

**Michael Erler:**

*Literary form as philosophical message in the Platonic dialogue: some examples*<sup>1</sup>

*1. Introduction*

In the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, we are told that Plato dreamt before he died that he had become a swan which flew from tree to tree thereby causing much trouble to the fowler who wanted to catch him but was unable to do so. This was understood as meaning that many interpreters would try to understand Plato but each would interpret him according to his own view.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the beauty of the composition and language of the dialogues was admired by many but also regarded as a danger by some ancient interpreters who felt that the literary form of the dialogues, brilliant as it might be, might seduce readers away from their philosophical content.<sup>3</sup> But there were others who insisted that the literary form and the philosophical content of the Platonic dialogues are to be seen in close relation to each other. These interpreters do so in different ways and for different reasons; but they all are convinced of the fact that Plato, the author, and Plato, the philosopher, work hand in hand, and that the literary form of the dialogues forms part of his philosophical message.<sup>4</sup> They praise Plato as a creative author, turning a popular genre – the ‘*sokratikoi logoi*’ – into fine pieces of art, and even believe that the dialogues were created by Plato as a new form of poetry, in a way meant to replace traditional poetry which Plato criticised so heavily.<sup>5</sup> Plato himself – it is argued – illustrates this relationship by making use of motives, topics, or structures, which he takes

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the conference “Registers of Philosophy IV.,” May 26, 2018, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. I am grateful to the audience for encouragement and criticism and to Tamás Paár for concerting and improving the text. I also thank Péter Lautner very much for his most helpful critical comments on my paper.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Anon. Prol.* 1, 29ff. Westerink (*Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, ed. L. G. Westerink, Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co., 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Phld. *Index Acad.* Col. I Dorandi (Filodemo, *Storia dei Filosofi*, ed. Tiziano Dorandi, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Erler, “‘The Fox Knoweth Many Things, the Hedgehog one Great Thing’: The Relation of Philosophical Concepts and Historical Contexts in Plato’s Dialogues,” *Hermathena* 187, (2009): 5-26.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*, vol. 2, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1944, 188 vol. 3, 1947, 337. Konrad Gaiser, *Platone come scrittore filosofico*, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1984, 62ff. Michael Erler, *Platon bei Werner Jaeger*, in: Michael Erler – Ada Neschke-Hentschke (eds.), *Argumenta in dialogos Platonis, Teil 2: Platoninterpretation und ihre Hermeneutik vom 19. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert*, Basel: Schwabe, 2012, 265-283.

from poetry and transforms and integrates into the dialogues.<sup>6</sup> In doing so he stresses the close relationship between form and content. For in the *Phaedo*, the narrator Phaedo is asked by Socrates's friends to tell them both what was said and what was done by Socrates.<sup>7</sup> Now, to present the dialectical pursuit of truth and to describe the performance of the personnel: this is exactly what Plato's dialogues are all about. Plato himself, it seems, suggests that one should not separate both aspects.

In what follows, I would like to take seriously this suggestion and to add (as a little footnote to observations which others already have made in this context) some examples of how Plato, the author, makes use of the historical settings in the dialogues and the performance of the personnel in order to turn them into a part of his philosophical rhetoric, thereby disclosing their philosophical relevance and providing cues and comments on philosophical problems that arise in the dialogues.

## 2. Socrates's performance as an affirmative 'dramatic' commentary

Let me first give you a little example of what it means to say that the dramatic aspect of a dialogue could or even should be regarded as a comment on its philosophical content.<sup>8</sup> In order to do so, I would like to remind you of the storyline of the dialogue *Phaedo*. One feature of the discussion in that dialogue is the trust and distrust in the *logos* expressed by the interlocutors, i.e. the arguments offered by Socrates to prove the immortality of the soul. Although Socrates's partners, Simmias and Cebes, accept that most of his arguments are coherent, they cannot bring themselves to believe in their conclusions: the immortality of the soul.<sup>9</sup> Small wonder – one should say – because the thesis that the soul of man is immortal was not common currency in Plato's time, as Socrates himself confesses.<sup>10</sup> Therefore it is understandable that Cebes and Simmias have difficulties in accepting the results of the arguments offered by Socrates although they cannot refute them really. In this context, the figure of Socrates and his performance can be understood as evidence of the fact that, despite the distrust regarding the argumentation, its conclusion – the proof of the immortality of the soul – should be accepted as true. For all participants of the conversation agree on the fact that

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Michael Erler, "Platon," Platon, in: Hellmut Flashar (ed.), *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie. Begründet von Friedrich Ueberweg. Völlig neu bearbeitete Ausgabe. Die Philosophie der Antike*, 2/2, Basel 2007, 75-82.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 58c.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Michael Erler, "Argument and Context: Adaption and Recasting of Positions in Plato's Dialogues," in: Debra Nails – Harold Tarrant (eds.), *Second Sailing: Alternative Perspectives on Plato*, Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 2015, 91-105.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 88ef. 107af.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Republic.* 608d; see Arist. *SE* 176 b 16f.

to them Socrates seems to be a happy person – *eudaimon* – even though he is awaiting the death penalty. They also all agree that the reason for Socrates’s positive disposition is his confidence that after his death his soul will enjoy a pleasant existence, i.e. that he is convinced that his soul is immortal. Obviously it is the dramatic aspect of the dialogue which persuades Socrates’s partners and – hopefully – the reader as well that the philosophical arguments put forward by Socrates about the immortality of the soul must be valid. For otherwise, his partners believe, he would not behave as he does. Apparently, the historical setting and the performance of Socrates as described by Plato, the author, function as a kind of comment on the philosophical discourse.<sup>11</sup> Thus, what is told in the frame-story of the dialogue serves as a means *to persuade the participants* and the readers of the dialogue where the arguments might disappoint them. Obviously the pragmatic aspect of the dialogue offers a justification of what the philosophical argument cannot persuade the partners of the discussion of – and perhaps also the readers of the dialogue.

### 3. *Performative contradiction*

It is thus the dialogue form, which allows for a pragmatic justification, i.e. confirmation, of a philosophical argument which seems to be hard to accept. On the other hand, sometimes the pragmatic or dramatic aspect of the dialogues is used not to affirm, but to question or even to contradict what is being argued for. Sometimes Plato, the author, uses the literary aspect of the dialogues to comment negatively on what is being said, i.e. he construes a performative contradiction in both words and deeds. I shall give you just one example.<sup>12</sup>

In the *Euthydemus*, both the eristics, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, present themselves as teachers of the eristic art and try to win over young people to be their pupils. They illustrate their art by posing questions and discussing problems with young Ctesippus. In a first round of discussion, they aim at proving the fact that learning and teaching are impossible, and they seem to succeed.<sup>13</sup> Of course, in doing so they refute the basis of what they are trying to do, namely to win a young man as pupil – after all, it is him they are planning to teach and it is him who is going to learn. Thus, in order to advertise what they have to offer they prove that this offer is an impossible task. We see that Plato, the author,

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Erler, “‘The Fox Knoweth Many Things, the Hedgehog one Great Thing’,” 25.

<sup>12</sup> Gregor Damschen, “Das Prinzip des performativen Widerspruchs. Zur epistemologischen Bedeutung der Dialogform in Platons *Euthydemus*,” *Méthexis* 12, (1999): 89-101.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Euthd.* 275d-277c; see Michael Erler, *Euthydemus*, Platon Werke. Übersetzung und Kommentar, Band VI 1 (Göttingen 2017) 125-130.

construed a performative contradiction in order to disavow the business of the eristics. Again the dramatic aspect of the dialogue is used to comment on the philosophical one.

There are more comments like this in the *Euthydemus*. For instance, when the eristics argue that contradiction is impossible<sup>14</sup> because according to them everything, which is said, must be true since there is only one *logos*;<sup>15</sup> nevertheless, they do not hesitate to time and again try to refute others. Again, the performance of the eristics contradicts what they argue for philosophically.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Laches*, Plato formulates the rule that there should be consistency between deeds and words.<sup>17</sup> Laches hails Dorian harmony between words and deeds and suggests that *andreia* should be understood as endurance or rather wise endurance. Yet, at the same time Laches fails to prove and exemplify steadfastness of endurance in the enquiry led by Socrates on what bravery (*ἀνδρεία*) really is.

In the *Gorgias*, Callicles propagates frank speech but behaves like one who wishes to please his audience at any moment – there is a Callicles within Callicles, as Socrates describes it – and thus contradicts himself in words and deeds.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Socrates is proven a hero because he always shows harmony between words and deeds.

Many more examples of such dramatic comments on philosophical arguments are to be discovered in other dialogues as well.<sup>19</sup> Suffice it to say for the moment that scenes like the ones referred to show that Plato, the author, often uses the pragmatic aspect of a dialogue not only to illustrate, but even to comment on what the argument is about. They are made possible by the dialogue form of Plato's writings. Often this performative contradiction invokes laughter. The performance of the personnel becomes part of the philosophical message. Without giving it a name, Plato obviously is familiar with the difference between semantic and performative contradiction.<sup>20</sup> Passages like these illustrate that, and how, Plato, the philosopher, and Plato, the author, work hand in hand, and they confirm the observation that to separate both would impede a correct interpretation.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Euthd.* 285d-288a; see Erler, *Euthydemus*, 165-173.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Euthd.* 286c.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Euthd.*, 286e-287b. 287bc.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *La.* 180ce. 194a.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Grg.* 482b.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Cra.* 433ab; *Grg.* 482bc; *Prt.* 338e-339e.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Vittorio Hösle, *Der philosophische Dialog*, München: C.H. Beck, 2006, 404.

#### 4. Literary frames and irritating results of discussions

In what follows, I would like to give some more examples, which show how the dramatic aspects of some dialogues serve as a comment on the argumentative aspects and even offer clues to the reader that make him understand better, for instance, whether the aporetic ending of an argument should be regarded as the last word on the matter.<sup>21</sup> As examples, the dialogues *Euthyphro* and *Protagoras* are helpful. Both dialogues illustrate conversations about moral issues – piety and the question of the unity of virtues – which seem to lead to an aporetic, or at least puzzling, end. Indeed, when reading, let’s say, the *Euthyphro*, the reader will be sure to feel disappointment. Although one will realise that in this aporetic dialogue Plato’s power of expression and skill of composition are at work, one’s hope of gaining some information about, for instance, what piety – *to hosion* – really is, will be frustrated.

A close interpretation, however, especially of the framing scenes of the dialogues and in particular of their endings will reveal that Plato, the author, offers cues to the reader, pointing at the possibility that it might be useful to continue the discussion. He rather suggests that dialogues like the *Euthyphro* do end, but do not conclude<sup>22</sup>: instead their endings open up to a variety of perspectives. The frame signals that more could be said on a problem, which seems to be closed at the end of a discussion. I shall argue that the literary frames of both the *Euthyphro* and the *Protagoras* have even more to offer and explain as to what openness really means. For in the frames of both the *Euthyphro* and the *Protagoras*, Plato, the author, also indicates that it is worthwhile not only to pursue the discussion further, but also to reconsider the arguments which are proposed in the dialogues.

##### 4.1 *Protagoras*

Let me therefore turn to the *Protagoras* first. In this dialogue, Socrates’s conversation with Protagoras ends up in confusion. At the end of the dialogue, the narrative given by Socrates closes with one sentence: “Saying and hearing these things *we* departed” (ἀπῆμεν).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This thesis has been developed more fully in Michael Erler, *Elenctic aporia and performative euporia* (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Diskin Clay, *Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher*, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2000, 165.

<sup>23</sup> *Prt.* 362a; Cf. Joachim Dalfen, “Literarische Techniken Platons. Beispiele aus dem Protagoras,” *Bolletino dell’Istituto di Filologia Greca dell’ Università di Padova* 5, (1979/80): 41-60 (repr. in Joachim Dalfen, *Parmenides, Protagoras, Platon, Marc Aurel. Kleine Schriften zur griechischen Philosophie, Politik, Religion und Wissenschaft*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012, 151-170, esp. 158).

When reading this last sentence carefully, the reader should be surprised by one single word: he or she might ask themselves who is meant by ‘we’. The reader might recall that Socrates tells us how he met Hippokrates and how ‘we’ went to the house of Kallias, how ‘we’ stopped in front of the house and had a conversation, how ‘we’ knocked at the door and how ‘we’ met with Protagoras. Seen in this context, it becomes clear: the ‘we’ at the end of Socrates’s narrative and at the end of the dialogue must stand for Socrates and Hippokrates. The last sentence of the dialogue informs us about the fact that Socrates and Hippokrates left Kallias’s house together, which means that Socrates and Hippokrates left Protagoras. Now, this comes as a surprise, indeed, because at the beginning of the dialogue we learnt that Hippokrates was determined to become a pupil of Protagoras and therefore asked Socrates to introduce him to the sophist. On their way to Kallias’s house, Socrates and Hippokrates discussed what it means to be a pupil of a sophist. And Hippokrates’s desire to learn from Protagoras stimulated Socrates’s discussion with Protagoras about the teachability and the unity of virtues in the presence of Hippokrates. Although Hippokrates does not contribute anything to the discussion but rather functions as a ‘*prosopon kophon*’ (a person who does not speak on stage) – as it can be observed in ancient tragedy (for instance Electra in Sophocles’s play) –, the reader is reminded by Socrates that Hippokrates is still present.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Plato, the author, does everything he can to help the reader understand that the expression ‘we’ in Socrates’s last remark of his narrative refers to Hippokrates besides himself and thus realise that Hippokrates indicates by his behaviour that he has changed his mind – he obviously has decided *not* to become a pupil of Protagoras. Plato wants the reader to wonder why this is the case and to speculate whether the arguments given by Socrates must have had some effect on Hippokrates, despite their apparent failure. Maybe they are more valid than it seems at first sight. The reader will realise that Plato, the author, wishes to suggest to the reader that it might be worthwhile to reconsider what already has been said – i.e. to read the dialogue again. The frame of the dialogue and the *topoi* applied suggest that this might be rewarding.

#### 4.2. *Euthyphro*

A similar observation could be made in the *Euthyphro* if one focuses again on what Euthyphro has to say at the end of the dialogue.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the conversation, Euthyphro excuses himself: “Right now I must hurry somewhere [σπεύδω ποί] and I am already late”, he

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Prt.* 328d.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Michael Erler, “Platon,” 128-132. Maximilian Forschner (ed.), *Euthyphron. Platon Werke. Übersetzung und Kommentar*, Band I, 1, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.



says.<sup>26</sup> This little word ‘*poi*’ is remarkable indeed, because we remember: the dramatic setting of the conversation in the *Euthyphro* is the hall of the king-archon, who was the magistrate responsible for religious matters.<sup>27</sup> Socrates is summoned there in order to oppose the indictment of Meletus, which he then refutes in his defence speech (*Apology*). *Euthyphro* was heading for the office of the *archaon basileus*, because – as he tells Socrates – he decided to indict his own father for the murder of a day-labourer<sup>28</sup>. For he believes that his position as a priest qualifies him to know what piety is and justifies his behaviour. This belief of Euthyphro starts the discussion about piety in the dialogue. Thus, Euthyphro already has arrived where he wanted to be. Now, this understanding of the closing words of the *Euthyphro*, of course, presupposes that the conversation takes place *before* he enters the hall to make the indictment. And this is how, for instance, Diogenes Laertius<sup>29</sup> and some modern interpreters understand the situation.<sup>30</sup> Others,<sup>31</sup> however, argue that there is no signal in the text which allows for this interpretation. I agree that no clear signal is given by Plato that Euthyphro had not yet entered the hall. But, I would claim, there is no strong signal that the conversation takes place after Euthyphro left the hall *either*. Plato just does not make himself clear as to how he wishes the passage to be understood. Obviously, he leaves the decision to the reader. In view of what we have observed in the *Protagoras*, I therefore suggest that it makes sense to understand the ending as Diogenes Laertius did: Euthyphro has changed his mind. Just as in the *Protagoras*, the reader will wonder and feel invited to read the dialogue again. And indeed, the reader will realise that important problems are addressed and that Plato the author offers cues that are hidden in the frame of the dialogue. The reader who takes note of them will be rewarded, as for instance a glimpse at the *Apology* shows. For when in the dialogue named after himself, Euthyphro defines piety as the part of doing the right thing, which means a kind of service to the gods and to men,<sup>32</sup> he fails. But in the *Apology*, Plato describes Socrates’s *pragma* as “service to the god”, as *latreia*. Socrates helps the god and his philosophical practice (*ergon*) consists in making the soul of a man good with the help of dialectic.<sup>33</sup> The description of the dialectician in the *Phaedrus* almost literally matches the words Euthyphro uses in his last

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Euthyphr.* 15e; transl. R.E. Allen, *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Gorgias, Menexenus, New Haven: Yale, 1984, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Euthyphr.* 2a.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Euthyphr.* 4af..

<sup>29</sup> Cf. D. L. 2, 29.

<sup>30</sup> R.E. Allen, *Plato’s “Euthyphro” and the earlier theory of forms*, London: Routledge, 1970, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hugh G. Benson, “The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 8, (1990): 19-65. Forschner, *Euthyphron*, 172.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Euthyphr.* 12e.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Ap.* 30a; 33c, see Cf. Michael Erler, “Hilfe der Götter und Erkenntnis des Selbst. Sokrates als Göttergeschenk bei Platon und den Platonikern,” in: Thomas Kobusch – Michael Erler (eds.), *Metaphysik und Religion. Zur Signatur spätantiken Denkens*, München – Leipzig: k.G. Saur, 2002, 387-414.

attempt to define the behaviour of the pious man. Piety manifests itself in Socratic-Platonic ‘care for the soul’.<sup>34</sup> This shows that Euthyphro indeed came close to the point by claiming that piety is a service to the gods in terms of helping them in their *ergon*.<sup>35</sup> Obviously Plato, the philosopher, wishes to suggest that some philosophically important aspects were touched on by Euthyphro but something important might be missing. As we have seen, Plato, the author, uses dramatic devices. More than that: Plato, the author, even has connected both the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology* quite closely. For the *Euthyphro* belongs to a series of four dialogues, which when taken together (as suggested by their fictive chronology) constitute a kind of dramatic tetralogy that describes the history of the last days of Socrates. The dialogues *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Kriton*, and *Phaedo* illustrate Socrates’s way from the *archon basileus* to the court case and his final days in jail. Now, seen in this context, Socrates’s performance in the *Apology* functions as a framing scene that comments on what happens in the *Euthyphro* philosophically. The pragmatic aspect of the *Euthyphro* therefore suggests that the *aporia* might not be Plato’s last word on the matter, and the fictitious chronology confirms what the way out might be like.

In fact, there are more cases where the fictitious chronology functions as a kind of support by Plato, the author, for what Plato, the philosopher, wishes to argue. Think, for instance, of the *Parmenides* again, which – according to the fictitious chronology – is supposed to be the first of all the dialogues. For it is young Socrates who unsuccessfully seeks to defend the theory of forms against Parmenides’s criticism. Now, in the *Phaedo*, which, dramatically speaking, is the last of the dialogues, it is old Socrates who uses the theory of forms to prove the immortality of the soul, the theory which appears to be the reason why he feels happy even though facing the death penalty. Just like Munk has done already in 1857,<sup>36</sup> I doubt that Plato, the author, who always weighs his words so carefully, had nodded off here. I rather think that here again Plato uses the fictitious chronology as a dramatic cue to the fact that the theory of forms remains valid despite all the criticisms and problems it receives.

### 5. *Motifs, metaphors, and their philosophical meaning*

Up until now, we observed that Plato, the author, uses the performative aspects of his dialogues as comments on what happens in his work philosophically. I would like to remind

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Phdr.* 273e; *Republic* 500d.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Ap.* 28e. Michael Erler, *Der Sinn der Aporien in den Dialogen Platons*, Berlin – New York: de Gruyter, 1987, 164f.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. E. Munk, *Die natürliche Ordnung der platonischen Schriften*, Berlin: Dümmler, 1857. Wolfgang Wieland, *Platon und die Formen des Wissens*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999, 89.

us now of the fact that he also follows the practice of early poets who used and even created motifs and metaphors which describe situations while at the same time having a poetic function, and can and should be read as hermeneutical cues for a better understanding of what happens in the text. My first example once again is taken from the *Euthyphro*.

### 5.1 'Running away'

As we have seen in *Euthyphro*, one's hope to gain information about, for instance, what piety – *to hosion* – really is will necessarily be frustrated. Just as it happens in other aporetic dialogues as well: while trying to follow the argument of the conversation the reader at the end will face a situation, which Plato describes in the *Euthydemus*. Here Socrates himself comments on the helplessness he and Kleinias experience at the end of their dispute which ended without any positive result: "When we thought we had come to the end, we turned around again and reappeared practically at the beginning of our search in just as much trouble as when we started out."<sup>37</sup>

'Trying to catch the knowledge and failing to get hold of it' – time and again this occurs as a motif in the aporetic dialogues, most prominently in the *Euthyphro*, where Euthyphro offers a definition of what piety is but is refuted time and again. Euthyphro is extremely puzzled and complains that his proposals 'go around in circles' and 'do not stand still'. Socrates does not accept the charge of being guilty of making those *logoi* move around as Daedalus did. He insists that the *logos* itself ran away. He himself would rather prefer a stable *logos* that would not run away all the time.<sup>38</sup>

Now the motif that the opinions which are defended by Socrates's partners are instable or 'run away' are common features in the aporetic dialogues like the *Laches*.<sup>39</sup> Plato, however, does not want us to understand them only as literary motifs but also as hints to the reader and comments on what is going on in the discussions philosophically since, according to Socrates, they have some philosophical connotations. The *Meno* is helpful here. In the *Meno*,<sup>40</sup> Socrates deals at length with the question of what opinions, *doxai*, are and what their relationship to knowledge is. In this context, Socrates explains that the literary motif of opinions 'running away' indeed has a philosophical connotation. Opinions, Plato's Socrates

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Euthd.* 291bc; transl. by Rosamond Kent Sprague, *The Euthydemus*. Translated with an introduction, in: Plato, Complete Works. Edited, with introduction and notes, by John Cooper, Indianapolis 1997; see Erler, *Euthydemus*, 187f.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Euthphr.* 6af. 11c. 15b.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *La.* 194a; *Th.* 203d.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Men.* 97d.

explains, are not necessarily wrong; but unlike knowledge, they are unstable. One has to fasten them with the tie of the cause (*logismou aitiai*). Plato demands that one must think the problem over and over again, and claims that the process of fastening them is nothing other than recollection. When they are fastened, opinions become knowledge and gain more value (*timioteron*). What interests us is the fact that the motif – the “running away of opinions” – often occurs in connection with opinions proposed by Socrates’s partners who fail to defend them.

I would like to remind you of Euthyphro’s definition of piety as a service to the gods. We have pointed to the fact that this definition is not false; for it is used positively in different contexts by Socrates himself. The definition therefore indeed is not yet knowledge, which is stable, but an unstable opinion and is characterised by the literary motif as such. This literary motif of ‘running away’ therefore functions as a signal, it appeals to the reader to philosophically consider the possibilities of how to fasten the unstable opinion about piety. In fact, in the *Republic* Plato clearly states that this is what one should do whenever an opinion is brought forward that seems to be right, yet needs further consideration.<sup>41</sup> The metaphor ‘running away’ therefore has a hermeneutical value – and again the pragmatic aspect of the dialogues helps to overcome philosophical problems that are discussed in them. It turns out that there are passages, carefully designed, which are meant to be hints to the reader in that they invite him to defend positions which might appeal to him as not being wrong even from a Plato’s own point of view.

## 5.2 ‘Child in man’

My last example concerns a metaphor, which Plato not only used but even created – or so I think – in the dialogue *Phaedo* in order to describe, to comment on, and to explain what happens in that dialogue philosophically. The *Phaedo* is the first dialogue where Plato playfully considers the existence of something in man that is responsible for emotions, desires and fear, and that is distinct from both the body and the rational soul.<sup>42</sup> In the *Phaedo*, Plato even gives this source of emotions a name: he calls it the ‘child in man’ – and he illustrates how it should be treated by therapeutic arguments, in order to create a disposition that is

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Republic*. 611e.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. David Gallop, “Emotions in the *Phaedo*,” in: Ales Havlíček – Filip Karfík (eds.), *Plato’s Phaedo. Proceedings of the Second Symposium Platonicum Pragense*, Prague: Oikoymenh, 2001, 275-286.

amenable to rational thinking.<sup>43</sup> It might come as a surprise to find a source of emotions in the *Phaedo*. For in this dialogue, Socrates obviously wishes to illustrate the power of the *logos* or rational argument in helping Socrates to be brave and fearless in the face of death and enabling him to accept rational arguments in favour of the soul's immortality. But the *Phaedo* also illustrates what happens if emotions prevail and man is not able to subordinate these to reason. For emotions and affections, or so it seems, corrupt the process of reasoning in Socrates's partners Simmias and Cebes and prevent them from accepting the results of rational argumentation although both are used to arguments. They are well prepared to follow Socrates's arguments in favour of the soul's immortality and to accept the conclusions of rational thinking. Nevertheless, they do display insecurity and distrust while not being able to give a reason for this unease.<sup>44</sup> Something within them is out of control and prevents them from accepting the results of what, they agree, are coherent arguments. The pragmatic aspect of the dialogue therefore illustrates that in dealing with common men proper control of affections becomes essential in order to develop the right habits that provide the foundation for virtue and real knowledge. Now, it is interesting that in this context, Plato's Socrates does not locate Cebes's and Simmias's emotions in the body, but rather invents a metaphor in order to describe the source and explain the existence of the affections of Socrates's partners and the target of Socrates's therapeutic argumentation. At one point, Socrates suspects that Cebes and Simmias are afraid like children that wind might disperse the soul after death. Cebes points out that it is not he himself who is afraid but rather something within himself – a child within himself, as he calls it – is full of fear, like children are of a bogey. He therefore begs Socrates<sup>45</sup> to convince him on the assumption that he feels this way. This child should be persuaded to stop being afraid of death as if it were a bogeyman. And Socrates consents readily that Cebes should sing charms (*epodai*) to this child every day, until he has “charmed the fear out of him”.

It is useful at this point to remind ourselves that the metaphor the ‘child in man which needs persuasion in order to rid itself of the fear of death’ has a ‘*Sitz im Leben*’. It forms part of the *paideia* that tries to make children act properly. Plato wishes to remind us of the old wives’ tales that nurses told children in Greece, as people still do today, in order to frighten

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Michael Erler, “Socrates in the Cave? Argumentations as Therapy for Passions in *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*,” in: Maurizio Migliori – Linda M. Napolitano Valditara (ed.), *Plato Ethicus. Philosophy is Life. Proceedings of the International Colloquium Piacenza 2003*, St. Augustin: Academia, 2004, 107-120, esp. 115.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Ernst Heitsch, “Was Autor und Dialogpersonen des *Phaidon* von ihren Argumenten halten,” in: Ales Havlíček – Filip Karfík (eds.), *Plato's Phaedo*. 78-95.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 77d.

children into obedience: ‘If you don’t do such and such, a monster will come and eat you.’<sup>46</sup> Those traditional tales are meant to create fear in children and thereby a disposition to accept advice.

Socrates’s philosophical enchantment song (*epode*), i.e. his philosophical arguments, indeed try *epode* indeed tries to create a disposition in his partners that is amenable to rational arguments and to correct behaviour. Socrates, however, does not wish to achieve this result by stirring up fears in his partners but by helping them to control those fears, or rather to get rid of them altogether. Socrates’s ‘charming’ arguments advocate the subordination of the emotions to reason, because emotions might subvert rational thinking. In the *Phaedo*, Plato locates the source of this emotional resistance neither in the body nor in the rational soul, but invents the metaphor ‘child in man’ – a metaphor that, it seems to me, foreshadows the soul’s irrational part, which Plato introduces in the *Republic*. In other words, the *Republic* – in my opinion – merely unfolds what the *Phaedo* seems to assume. As we have seen already, Plato uses metaphors in one place, and explains what they mean philosophically elsewhere in his dialogues. Of course, prior to the *Republic*, Plato does not refer to a tripartition of the soul. But I wish to argue that a metaphor like ‘child in man’ signals that Plato contemplates the possibility of an element within man’s soul that is responsible for irrational behaviour.<sup>47</sup>

So again, it becomes clear that a literary aspect of a dialogue – the metaphor of child in man – is more than an ornament. Rather, the metaphor is supposed to support what happens in the dialogue philosophically and therefore confirms that, and how, Plato, the author, and Plato, the philosopher, work hand in hand, in that Plato, the poet, uses or even creates motifs or metaphors the philosophical significance of which he underpins elsewhere in the dialogues.<sup>48</sup> His dialogues indeed follow, or rather replace, the tradition of early Greek poetry with respect to its self-referentiality as well. The performativity of the dialogues comments on what is going on philosophically.

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Theocritus, *Idyll*, 15, 40; Euripides, *Heracles*. 98-101; Callimachus, Hymnus in *Dianam*. 66-71; Alex Scobie, “Storytellers, Storytelling and the Novel in Greco-Roman Antiquity,” *Rheinisches Museum* 122, (1979): 229-259.

<sup>47</sup> In his response to my presentation, Péter Lautner stressed that in the *Republic* the appetitive part of the soul is depicted in a rather negative way, referring to 588c2-7. Of course, the metaphor which Plato used in the *Republic* indeed has very negative connotations. But the metaphor ‘Child in man’ is not positive either. For unlike the Christian concept, the ancient pagan concept of the child is the idea of inadequacy and of fearfulness (cf. Hans Herter, ‘Das unschuldige Kind’, in id., *Kleine Schriften*, München 1975, 598-619) and in the *Phaedo* indeed the child in man symbolizes the source of emotions which hinder him to accept the results of what he himself calls a coherent argument, which does not sound very positive.

<sup>48</sup> On the importance of the context in Plato’s dialogues, see Erler, “Argument and Context”.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude: in this paper I have argued for the importance dramatic elements which Plato uses in some of his dialogues have for their philosophical message. I suggested that Plato, the author, sometimes uses these literary devices to indicate some perspectives, which might contribute to a better understanding of the philosophical problems raised in the discussions as illustrated by the dialogues. I also suggested that Plato used literary strategies to organise the dialogues in a special way and at a time inspire a reading of the dialogues which considers both their literary and their philosophical aspects. This relation of the dialogues should be taken into account when discussing questions of a possible evolution in Plato's thought. One should take into account that Plato, the author, plays a role in that he wishes to invite the reader to reconsider problems. Plato, the author, and Plato, the philosopher, work hand in hand. Literary strategy sometimes supports, sometimes contradicts the philosophical content and adds persuasion and support to the philosophical arguments. Maybe this is one motif that persuaded Plato to compose the dialogues the way he did despite his critique of writing. For although – as written texts – they cannot replace dialectical oral conversation, because of their combination of pragmatic and argumentative aspects they might stimulate, support and even comment on such conversations. This is why I do agree with Jon Stewart<sup>49</sup> when he claims that questions of form, genre and style should be entertained by philosophers too. This – or so I would claim – is true not only with regard to Plato's dialogues but as far as most ancient philosophical texts are concerned. They all deserve to be read as literature *and* as texts which present philosophical arguments, both aspects form part of their philosophical messages.



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<sup>49</sup> Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.