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GADAMER’S PLATO

In Der Anfang der Philosophie Hans-Georg Gadamer attributed a constitutive trait of Plato’s philosophy to the literary qualities of the dialogues, and claimed that in the transition of Greek philosophy from mythological appreciation to conceptualization (from mythos to logos) fictionalization ranked high as a genuine structural element of philosophical speculation. Meanwhile Gadamer’s reconstruction of pre-Socratic philosophy in view of its Platonic reception seems to be subordinate to his conviction that Heidegger’s revolution was unprecedented in the history of philosophy.

“…Platon, der ein ganz großer Schriftsteller vom Range eines Sophokles beziehungsweise eines Shakespeare war…” (Gadamer: Der Anfang der Philosophie)


Plato’s oeuvre as we have it raises the problem of “literariness”, “literarization”, “poetization” or “fictionalization” in several ways. Any encounter with the traditional Platonic text-corps compels the student to posit a “whole” and this cannot be done without forming an idea of what a whole is and, consequently, without fictionalization. Any work attributed to Plato involves distinction between a canon of “authentic” works and the “apocrypha”.¹ Any discussion of Plato’s works involves conjectures on their sequence and chronology. Fiction One is the Canon of Authentic

¹ Works mentioned by Aristotle (Politeia, Timaios, Nomoi, Phaidon, Phaidros, Symposium, Gorgias, Menon, Hippias Minor, Theaitetos, Philebos, Sophistes, Politikos, Apology, Protagoras and Kriton) are accepted as authentic. Lysis, Charmides, Laches, Kratylos, Hippias Maior, Euthydemos, Menexenos are also approved generally as authentic. As to the rest opinions

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Text-Corps and *Fiction Two* is a Logic or System enabling the student to arrange the works in an acceptable sequential order and a tentative chronological scheme. A further fictional dimension (*Fiction Three*) is created when the student unravels a “Socrates” and a “Socratic philosophy” from the Platonic texts distinct from “Plato” as a reliable or unreliable narrator and from “Platonic philosophy”. *Fiction Three* engenders further *Fictions*. One of them is memorable: *the Fiction of Necessary Evolution*. Such is the inevitable supposition that Plato’s philosophy is more advanced than that of Socrates or their predecessors. (N. B. The word “predecessor” holds both temporal and evolutionary reference.) Another *Fiction* could be the (necessary) development of Plato’s philosophy with specific sequential and temporal phases. Further *Fictions* would appoint a place to Plato in the evolutionary phases from pre-Socratic to Aristotelian philosophy. Another dimension of eventual fictionalization is inherent in the historical evolution of philology and hermeneutics with a change or improvement of the methods of de- and re-fictionalization.

Attention is, as a rule, diverted from the paradoxical fact that Socrates’ philosophy, personality and biography are more or less fictional constructs. His philosophy was worded by Plato, and it is hard to determine how close his interpretations are to the original utterances. The rendering is certainly not verbatim, and the characterization of the historical person is a monument of Plato’s poetic talent.

Classical scholars, absorbed in the problem of the authenticity of Plato’s oeuvre, are cited by others as authorities on the subject. They certainly are, but what initially they stated hypothetically, would circulate on as a settled issue, a lasting solution. In the history of philosophy authority is double-rooted: it stems from the philological or the philosophical merits of the solution. Either will grant full authenticity. The rhetoric of age and authority confers convincing habitual authority to texts initially referred to with caution and reserve.

Certain assumptions seem to have no apparent need of evidence. Such is the idea that in his long career Plato performed a steady progress to full maturity. It is unthinkable that his mental progress was at times whimsical, contradictory, or that he advanced by haphazard itineraries or resorted to a game of hit or miss. Friedrich Schleiermacher was convinced that Plato followed a preconceived scheme right from the beginning in the array or evolvement of his philosophy. As a great teacher of mankind he drew up a didactic plan in which the elementary degree was followed by an intermediary degree and concluded in a constructive stage, displaying progress from a simple order to a complex system.

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vary. *Alkibiades I*, *Cleophon*, *Ion* and *Anteras* appear more acceptable than *Alkibiades II*, *Theages*, *Epinomis*, *Hipparchos* and *Minos*. Of the thirteen *Epistulae* the authenticity of *Epistulae VI–VIII* is less disputed.