

The Third Way
New Directions in Platonic Studies

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V

**Between Unwritten Doctrines and
Written Dialogue**

The Choice between the Dialogues and the “Unwritten Teachings”: A Scylla and Charybdis for the Interpreter?

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The general alternatives posed by our panel¹ are these: *either* the dialogues are, at least primarily, bearers of doctrine or they are pieces of psychagogical rhetoric² aimed at eliciting an ethical-existential becoming³ centered in a decisively practical knowledge.⁴ My particular contribution is concerned with a different but related either/or. I am interested in “the so-called unwritten teachings,” *ta legomena agrapha dogmata*.⁵ In the context of our discussion,

1. This essay was originally presented as the last of four talks in one of the series of panels on “Plato: Dramatic and Non-Dogmatic” sponsored by the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy in New York in October 1992. The three preceding talks—by David Roochnik, Drew Hyland, and Francisco Gonzalez, respectively—are cited in n.s 2-4.

2. See David Roochnik, “Socrates’s Rhetorical Attack on Rhetoric,” included in this volume.

3. See Drew Hyland, “The Presence and Absence of Plato: On Heidegger’s Reading of Plato,” scheduled to appear in *The Sovereignty of Construction: Studies in the Thought of David Lachterman* (Rodopi, forthcoming).

4. See Francisco Gonzalez, “Self-Knowledge, Practical Knowledge and Insight: Plato’s Dialectic and the Dialogue Form,” included in this volume.

5. The whole phrase is Aristotle’s at *Physics* 209b14-15.

the issue of the “unwritten teachings” would seem to threaten the interpreter with this unpalatable choice: *either* one must go outside the dialogues to the “unwritten teachings,” reported as they are especially by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* A6, or, in order to stay within the dialogues, one must reject Aristotle’s testimony as, in some proportion, misinterpretation and fabrication. To many hermeneutically inclined readers of Plato, turning to the “unwritten teachings” seems like abandoning the dialogues. To borrow Homer’s glorious image, it is making one’s journey into Plato vulnerable to the sheerly external power of a Scylla, letting oneself be pulled up out of the stream altogether and devoured. On the other hand, to the advocates of the “unwritten teachings,” especially to the best-known champions of esotericism, the Tübingen school, to remain within the dialogues, searching out the Schleiermacherian interplay of form and content and exploring the bottomless depth of Socratic and Platonic irony, is to let oneself be sucked down into a Charybdis of “empty and endless”—and fundamentally disoriented—“questioning.”⁶

What to do? Given this all too familiar sense of the options, I invite you to share my surprise several years ago when, without any predisposition to do so, I found my own hermeneutically oriented readings of the *Parmenides*, on the one hand, and of the *Statesman*, on the other, leading me back *through* these dialogues to the “unwritten teachings.”⁷ I have been working on this issue for a while now, and as I do, the “unwritten teachings” that are *written* only grow deeper and richer for me.

With this discovery, the choice between the Scylla and Charybdis I have described has largely dissolved. To *find* “the unwritten teachings” in the dialogues is to be freed from the need to attack Aristotle’s reports: and to find them *in the dialogues* is to be freed from the need to abandon the dialogues

6. This phrase is Gonzalez’s accurate paraphrase (“Dialectic as Self-Knowledge, Practical Knowledge and Insight,” n. 36) of Krämer’s polemic against Wieland’s “nondoctrinal” reading of Plato. See especially Krämer’s sustained criticism of the Schleiermacherian approach to the dialogues in *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics*, trans. John R. Catan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990). That taking the “unwritten teachings” seriously can go hand in hand with a hermeneutically sensitive approach to the drama and irony of the dialogues is exhibited by Thomas Szlezák’s commentaries in *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1985).

7. K. M. Sayre’s *Plato’s Late Ontology: A Riddle Resolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) was a great help to me in this process. Though my own reading of the *Parmenides* (*Plato’s Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986; reprinted in paperback by Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991]) differs fundamentally from his, his ground-breaking effort to recognize the “unwritten teachings” in the *Parmenides* and the *Philebus* displays both the viability and excitement of the project.

and the task of interpretation. But how does this bear on the general alternatives that our panel is considering? If the "unwritten teachings" are, after all, written, if they form a deep (even if indirectly conveyed) content, then do the dialogues not become, after all, bearers of doctrine? And to the degree that this is so, does the work of discovering that content lead us away from the psychagogical and existential function of the dialogues?

In reply to these issues, I want to share, in highly compressed fashion, reflections on three questions:

- (1) What are the "unwritten teachings" that show up in the dialogues?
- (2) What is their basic force and character, their spiritual function?
- (3) What are the implications of the discovery of them *in* the dialogues for our conception of the basic character of the dialogue form and for our understanding of how to read and interpret Plato?

1.

In *Metaphysics* A6 Aristotle reports that Plato held, among others, these five teachings:

[1] The forms and the dyad, the Great and the Small, are conjointly responsible for the being of sensibles: forms are the "cause of what [a sensible thing] is," and the Great and the Small are "the underlying matter of which [forms] are predicated."

[2] The One (or what is here the same, Unity) and the dyad, the Great and the Small, are conjointly responsible for the being of the forms; the One is "cause of what [a form] is," and the Great and the Small are "the underlying matter of which [the One] is predicated."

[3] The One is cause of "good" (*to eu*); the Great and the Small, of "ill" (*to kakōs*).

[4] "Intermediate" (*metaxu*) between the timeless, unchanging, unique forms and the perishable, changing, many sensibles, there are "the mathematical" (*ta mathēmatika*); these are intermediate because they are eternal and unchanging like the forms but many like sensibles.

[5] The forms are—but in some qualified sense that preserves the distinction asserted in [4]—numbers.⁸

These teachings show up, I would argue, as the key moments of a comprehensive account of the participation of things in forms and of the interplay among the forms that participation implies. This account is the implicit content of Parmenides's treatment of participation in the third hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, of Socrates's presentation of the god-given method of dialectic at *Philebus* 16c-18d, and of two extended nonbifurcatory diaireses, Socrates' analyses of the kinds of pleasure and knowledge at *Philebus* 46b-52c and 55d-58a and the Eleatic Stranger's elaboration of the arts concerned with the city at *Statesman* 287b-291a and 303d-305e.⁹ To put this in the most summary fashion, these passages work together as follows. In the diaireses of the *Philebus* and the *Statesman*, Socrates and the Stranger put into practice and so exhibit concretely—but in each case without acknowledgment or explanation—the new “god-given” mode of dialectic that Socrates first introduces, then ostensibly abandons, in his highly schematic methodological reflections in *Philebus* 16c-18d. The type of eidetic order that this new, non-bifurcatory mode of dialectic is fit to disclose is implied by the analysis of participation that Parmenides offers in the third hypothesis of the *Parmenides*. Thus, the *Philebus* and the *Statesman*, in displaying the general principles and the concrete results of dialectical method, disclose the eidetic order implied by participation.

8. My inclusion of this thesis and, too, its qualified character require immediate comment before we step back to look at the whole assemblage of teachings. First, by contrast with [1]-[4], nowhere in A6 does Aristotle expressly assert that forms are numbers. Only later, e.g., 991b9-20, 1073a13f., 1080a11ff., do we find him explicitly (albeit with varying degrees of certainty and clarity) crediting Plato with this claim. Nonetheless, it is strongly implied in A6 when Aristotle uses virtually identical language to say first that *forms* are “causes of everything else” [*aitia ... tois allois*, 987b18-19] and then, only two sentences later, that *numbers* are “causes of the being of everything else” [*aitious ... tois allois tēs ousias*, 987b24-25]. At the same time, the identity needs to be qualified, for Aristotle has also just credited Plato, in thesis [4], with the distinction of forms from mathematical. Hence my open-ended “in some limited sense.” Even as we wonder if there are any traces of this teaching in the dialogues, we must also hope that such traces, should we find them, will show us how to understand just what the teaching means.

9. I select these texts only because the way they seem to fit together lets the “unwritten teachings” emerge as a whole account. But there are other texts as well in which one can find the “teachings” exhibited. Consider, most notably, the accounts of due measure and of temperaments and virtues in the *Statesman* (see Krämer's analysis of the latter in *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles* [Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1959], 148-168).

Needless to say, to work all this out here is impossible,¹⁰ For the distillation we require at present, I shall restrict myself to summary exegeses of the analysis of participation in the *Parmenides* and the elaboration of the arts in the *Statesman*.

In the third hypothesis, Parmenides reasons that "the one," which itself is simple and unique, is responsible for the whole-part structure that arises in "the others" that participate in it. These "others," in and of themselves indeterminate in magnitude and multitude and so not actually existent, receive internal and external "boundaries" from "the one" and are thereby constituted as a plurality of wholes of parts. If it is right, as I have argued elsewhere,¹¹ to take "the one" to stand for any one defining form, and "the others" to stand for those sensibles in place and time that it defines, and if it is also right to take the indeterminate magnitude and multitude to be the instantiation of the dyad, the Great and the Small, then Parmenides' analysis explicates the first of the five teachings Aristotle reports: since sensibles (that is, "the others") receive their whole-part structure from some one defining form (that is, "the one") and their magnitude and multitude from the Great and the Small, forms and the dyad, the Great and the Small, are conjointly responsible for the being of sensibles. Moreover, we can also glimpse the first part of the second of the five teachings. The defining form, on Parmenides' analysis, is itself simple and unique; further, to be responsible for whole-part structure is to bestow unity. Both in its own unity and in its causal work, therefore, the defining form instantiates Unity itself. This gives us a first intimation of the role Unity plays in its conjoint responsibility with the dyad for the being of forms.

To see the way the dyad collaborates with Unity, however, we must make explicit and bring together several sets of implications in Parmenides' account. (i) Parmenides argues that each part of a sensible whole is itself, in its own unity, a whole of parts. This implies that just as each sensible thing gets its unity as a whole by participating in some one form, so each part gets *its* unity as a whole by participating in some one form of its own. Now, just as parts must befit one another and the whole to which they belong, so, in order to

10. For exegeses of different parts of this account, one can see (i) the analysis of the third hypothesis (and related passages in the second and sixth hypotheses) of the *Parmenides* in my "'Unwritten Teachings' in the *Parmenides*," *Review of Metaphysics* 48, 3 (March 1995); (ii) the treatment of the way the relevant passages in the *Philebus* and the *Statesman* dovetail, in my "The God-Given Way," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. VI (1990), eds. John Cleary and Daniel Shartin (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1992), pp. 323-359; and (iii) the more expansive account of the whole web of teachings in my "Dialectical Education and Unwritten Teachings in Plato's *Statesman*," in *The Sovereignty of Construction*.

11. See my *Plato's Parmenides*, 77, 89-99, 124-125, 139-141, 159-162.

establish this fit, must each form of a part match up appropriately with each of the other forms of parts and, with them, answer to the form of the whole. And this, finally, implies that a thing's defining form, in requiring of it its whole-part structure, implicates a definite set of forms of parts. (ii) A key respect in which the parts of a sensible must befit one another and the whole to which they belong is their relative size; to combine as parts, each must be of a size appropriate to each other and to the whole. But this is to say that the forms of the parts must pick out, on a continuum from smaller to greater (or *vice versa*), a set of ratios or proportions establishing the relative sizes of the parts. (iii) Now, this continuum is an abstract instantiation of the dyad, the Great and the Small, and it is here that we can recognize the way the dyad collaborates with Unity. We have already seen that it is in its bestowal of whole-part structure on a sensible thing that a defining form instantiates Unity itself. We have also seen that this bestowal requires, according to (i), a definite set of forms of parts that, according to (ii), implicate a corresponding set of ratios on the continuum from smaller to greater. The instantiation of Unity therefore requires the continuum. Hence, as Aristotle reports in teaching [2], Unity and the dyad, the Great and the Small, are conjointly responsible for the being of the forms as, to quote from teaching [1], the "cause of what [a sensible thing] is."¹²

The remaining three teachings, [3], [4], and [5], are implied by the complex structure articulated by [1] and [2]. First, the ratios on the continuum of relative size articulate the ideal proportions of the parts to one another and to the whole. These proportions constitute a normative order for actual sensibles. A sensible will be "good" insofar as its parts reproduce these proportions, "bad" insofar as they exceed or fall short of them. Now, if we are right to trace back from these proportions to the forms of parts that call for them and then to the defining form that calls for these forms of parts and, finally, to Unity itself as what the defining form instantiates, it is Unity itself that is ultimately responsible for these proportions. On the other hand, it is the dyad of the Great and the Small that, in its indeterminateness as a continuum of relative opposites, is reflected in the excess and deficiency that mark the failure of "bad" parts to reproduce the normative proportions. Hence, as teaching [3] holds, the One is cause of "good" (*to eu*); the Great and the

12. This qualifying clause is important. On the reading I am proposing here, the "unwritten teachings" do not offer an account of the generation or constitution of the forms as such; rather, they explicate what is necessary for the forms to play their causal roles in being responsible for the structure of "things." In the analysis I shall offer shortly of the diairesis of the arts in the *Statesman*, for instance, the continuum is necessary not for the being, *as such*, of "care" or even for the being of each of the kinds of art but, rather, *for the expression of "care" in the various proportions of material to spiritual* that the fifteen kinds of "care" require in a good city.

Small, of "ill" (*to kakōs*). Secondly, these proportions and the continuum itself from which they are selected are mathematical structures and articulate the possibilities, "good" and "ill," that sensibles actualize. They are, therefore, just the sort of "mathematicals," standing "intermediate" between forms and sensibles, that teaching [4] declares. Finally, we can also now recognize the qualified sense in which, according to teaching [5], forms can be said to be numbers. As we have seen, the proportions on the continuum are picked out by the definite set of forms of parts and, so, since it is this that first implicates these forms, by the defining form. If we make a distinction between the nature of a form and its causal power, we can say that in its nature a form is not, but in its causal work a form is, identical with numbers. That is, even while it is the case that, as teaching [4] affirms, forms and the proportions they call for are ontologically different in kind, nonetheless, in picking out these proportions on the continuum, forms *express themselves as* numbers. Hence, in this qualified sense of functional equivalence, forms "are" numbers.

Let me now just indicate the way these five teachings, thus interpreted, are concretely exhibited in the closing distinctions of the *Statesman*. To do this, we must first add one significant qualification. In both the *Parmenides* and Aristotle's reports, the counterprinciple to Unity is the dyad of the Great and the Small. In the *Philebus*, by contrast, Socrates treats "greater and smaller" as but one pair of relative contraries among others; he also names "hotter and colder," "drier and wetter," "more and fewer," "quicker and slower," and "high and low" (25c, 26a), and he designates all of them as cases of the Unlimited (*to apeiron*). Moreover, he goes on to say that the mixture of the unlimited and limit, that is, of continua and sets of proportions, gives rise not only to "beauty and strength along with health" but also to "a further host of beautiful characters in our souls" (26b). Thus, Socrates extends the reach of the "unwritten teachings" beyond sensibles, the focus of the third hypothesis in the *Parmenides*, to include the spiritual as well.

With this in mind we can turn to the Eleatic Stranger's closing distinctions in the *Statesman*. At 287b, after proceeding by bifurcation in every one of the many previous diaireses in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, the Stranger suddenly declares that "cutting into two" is "difficult," remarking only that "the reason will become clearer to us as we proceed" (287b10-c1). He then works his way through a division of the arts concerned with the city into these fifteen kinds:

the "contributory arts":

- (1) arts which produce raw materials
- (2) arts which produce tools
- (3) arts which produce containers
- (4) arts which produce vehicles
- (5) arts which produce defences

- (6) arts which produce amusements
- (7) arts which produce nourishments

the “directly responsible arts”:

the arts of services ordinary ...:

- (8) the art proper to slavery
- (9) the arts of merchants and traders
- (10) the arts of heralds and clerks
- (11) the arts of priests and diviners

... and precious:

- (12) rhetoric
- (13) generalship
- (14) the art of justice

the art directing all these:

- (15) statesmanship

How does this division exhibit the teachings we have discovered in the *Parmenides*? As I confessed at the outset, to give a full and adequate account in support of this claim would go far beyond the constraints of the present occasion. But to give a concrete indication of this is possible. Consider, in turn, the instantiation of Unity as “care,” the instantiation of (not the Great and the Small but the more general principle these exemplify, namely,) the Unlimited as the continuum that underlies the fifteen kinds, and the status of the fifteen themselves as constituting a normative order for cities. (As we proceed, it may be helpful to keep in view the reconstructive diagram that I have offered at the end of the essay as an appendix.)

(i) **The instantiation of Unity as “care.”** At the close of his initial diairesis (258b-267c), the Eleatic Stranger points out that the resultant definition of the statesman as a kind of herdsman concerned with the “collective nurture of humans” (*anthrōpōn koinotrophikēn*, 267d11) opens the field to a host of challengers; merchants, farmers, bakers, and even teachers of gymnastic and doctors are all concerned with “nurture” (*tēs trophēs*, 268a2). His express purpose in turning next to the great myth of the ages of Kronos and Zeus is to remove these competitors. It is therefore surprising when the first revision he makes on the basis of the myth is to replace the notion of “nurture” by the still *broader* notion of “care” (*to therapeuein*, 275e3). Rather than eliminating the challengers, the notion of “care” opens the field still more, summoning a host of arts that “nurture” would exclude. Why does the Stranger do this? We can respond on two levels. In terms of the specific issue of statesmanship, the myth has shown the inappropriateness of the metaphor of the herdsman: such a figure, relating to other men as if of a higher species—that is, as if a

god—would usurp the task of caring for themselves that, creating the need for the many arts and drawing human beings together into a collaborative community, gives rise to the city. This implies, however, that statesmanship is one among these many arts and that all together share the essence of being kinds of "care." Hence—now to put the point in terms of the "unwritten teachings"—"care" is that one form that, instantiating Unity, calls for the fifteen kinds of art as the parts that comprise the community as a whole. The Eleatic Stranger alludes to this whole-part structure when, at 287c3, he introduces the distinctions to come by saying that the arts must be divided *kata melē . . . hoion hierieion*, "limb by limb . . . like a sacrificial animal." Understanding "care" requires recognizing which are the kinds of art that, like the "limbs" of an animal, fit together to make an organic whole.

(ii) **The instantiation of the Unlimited as the continuum of the material and the spiritual.** But how is one to recognize these "limbs?" The "unwritten teachings," as we have reconstructed them, provide basic orientation for one attempting this difficult task. Complementing the instantiation of Unity in the one form—here, "care"—is the abstract instantiation of the Unlimited as a continuum between opposites; the forms of parts that the one form requires themselves pick out proportions of these opposites on the continuum. To recognize the "limbs," therefore, one must begin by recognizing the opposites and the continuum they frame. For us, reading back from the results the Stranger presents to the orienting "teachings" they exhibit, the task is to discern, in the list of fifteen, the underlying continuum. Three signal features of the Stranger's list enable this. [1] *The gradual character of the movement toward statesmanship.* With each kind that he distinguishes, the Stranger pauses to ask whether this is the sought-for art of statesmanship and, by the relative force and character of his negations,¹³ he makes evident how the list as a whole charts a path that leads gradually, step by step, from kinds of art that are least to those that are most like statesmanship. Thus, he indicates the underlying gradient that his list articulates. [2] *The opposites that frame the continuum.* Initially, this gradient appears to be one-directional, oriented entirely by the goal of statesmanship. In truth, it is a bipolar continuum, stretched between opposites, with statesmanship itself just one locus on it. The Stranger indicates the bipolarity by a telling revision at 289a9. There, summarizing the initial seven divisions by which he has articulated the merely "contributory" arts, he points out that "it would have been more just to have put the kind that produces raw materials"—which he first came to in his sixth cut (288d-e)—"at the beginning (*kat' archas*)," and he reorders the list accordingly. (Hence the order in which I have given the list above.) That the

13: For a detailing of this point, see Miller, "The God-Given Way," 348f., n. 29.

arts most concerned with the material stand at the farthest remove from statesmanship makes conspicuous by contrast that statesmanship is the art most concerned with the spiritual. The Stranger will go on to make this explicit in the final pages of the dialogue, in which he assigns to the statesman responsibility for generating and preserving the civic virtues of temperance and courage and (since the balance of these is secured by law) justice in the citizens. Hence the material and the spiritual emerge as the opposites that frame the underlying continuum. [3] *The range of proportions*. That, in turn, the list of fifteen marks out a range of proportions between these opposites, the Stranger spurs us to recognize by the provocative reticence with which he sets the bifurcatory mode of diairesis aside at 287b10-c1 (quoted above). Why is it “difficult” (287b10), indeed “impossible” (c4), to “cut into two?” The Stranger cannot mean that the arts cannot be sorted into two overall groups, for he does just this, invoking the differentiation of “contributory” and “directly responsible,” *sunaitioi* and *aitiai*, that he first made in the paradigmatic diairesis of weaving. Rather, he is forewarning us that the eighth of his distinctions—the art of slaves—prevents this bifurcation from separating the arts into equal halves. To see why, moreover, he positions us to understand the character of each of the other distinctions as well. Slaves are at once both “possessions” (*ktētous*, 289d10) and agents; as instruments, they are completely heteronomous and thing-like, but their value as instruments consists in their capacity to perform the actions that each of the other arts requires. In this sense, they mark the point at which the material and the spiritual, thing and agency, stand in precisely equal balance. Once we see this, the continuum as a whole emerges as a series of proportions of material to spiritual, ranging from the preponderance of the material over the spiritual in the “contributory” arts to the equality of the two in the art of slaves to the preponderance of the spiritual over the material in the “directly responsible” arts. To bring this into sharper focus, consider first the “contributory” arts, (1) through (7) in the Stranger’s list. The Stranger begins with the arts that provide unformed *stuffs* for other arts to shape into things (1); then, within these latter arts, he sorts out the making of things to *produce* (2), then to *preserve* (3), then to *transport* (4) other things. The things transported, in turn, may be persons. Hence (4) marks a transition to the arts that make things for the sake not of other things but of persons, albeit in their physical being, the arts that make defences and clothes (5), diversions and ornaments (6), and nourishments and nourishing activities (7). Strikingly, this last series moves from what is relatively external to persons in their physical being to what is fully internal—the foods that become part of the body and the exercise that is itself the body’s own activity. Thus, the Stranger leads smoothly into the art of slaves, in which the artisan himself produces his own body’s activity in service of other artisans. By contrast with the first seven kinds, the final seven mark out proportions in which the spiritual comes increasingly to dominate the

material. Of these, the first three are concerned with public practices ranging from the *economic* activity of distributing material goods (9) through the more *administrative* activities of record-keeping and communication (10) to the *conventional-spiritual* activity of directing the variety of public rites (11). The priests' and diviners' concern with conventional religious piety, in turn, leads into the next three kinds, in which the focus shifts from public practices as such to the civic virtues—that is, the sorts of good character—that make them sound and assure the city's flourishing. In the rhetor who persuades the citizens to accept the statesman's policies (12), the general who, taking orders from the statesman, leads the citizens in war (13), and the judge who applies the law with impartiality (14), the Stranger marks the cultivation of temperance, courage, and justice. This leaves only the statesman, whose regulation of education, public honors, and marriages aims at generating and preserving this temperance, courage, and justice and so itself embodies political wisdom (15).

(iii) **The fifteen kinds as constituting a normative order.** We are now in position to recognize the "unwritten teachings" in the *Statesman*—that is, to recognize how the Stranger's diairesis of the fifteen kinds exhibits the account of participation we have discovered in the *Parmenides*. Unity and the Unlimited collaborate to enable the normative order for cities. Unity provides, in its instantiation as "care," the form that implicates the forms of the parts necessary to the city; the Unlimited provides, in its instantiation as the dyad of material and spiritual, the continuum on which each form of a part picks out some definite proportion (or range of proportions) between material and spiritual. That the fifteen kinds are these forms of parts, the Eleatic Stranger indicates by comparing them to the "limbs" (*melē*) of an animal; that this set of parts is normative, he indicates by comparing them to the limbs of a "sacrificial animal" (*hiereion*), a sacred offering. The implication is that a city which lacks some one or several of the fifteen kinds of art would be incomplete and disfigured; conversely, the city in which all are present and in collaborative interplay would be (to develop the way the simile of the *hiereion* recalls the Stranger's myth) the model of that human self-responsibility—that is, of the "care"—that is called for in the absence of a divine shepherd in the age of Zeus.

2.

Let me now step back and address the second of the three questions I articulated earlier: what is the basic force and character, the spiritual function, of these "teachings?" I want to offer three tentative suggestions.

(i) The notion of *dogmata*, “teachings” or “doctrines,” tends to suggest final answers, positions that settle questions. This, it seems to me, is one of the underlying assumptions that motivates many of us at this conference to resist the view that the dialogues are, as I put it earlier, “primarily bearers of doctrine.” Such a view seems to impose an alien spirit on texts that are ironic and provocative, open-ended in their inquiry, dramatic rather than systematic in their unity. What is therefore striking about the “unwritten teachings” (as we have interpreted them) is that their basic function is not to resolve so much as to *orient inquiry*. We have not found in them a deduction of the forms themselves from prior causes, and we certainly have not found evidence for a reduction of forms to numbers. On the contrary, it is the “being” of a form as “cause of what [a sensible thing] is” that Unity and the Unlimited collaborate to enable; the form itself remains prior to this causal function and so is itself the basis on which we understand and interpret the interplay of Unity and the Unlimited, not the other way around. What the “unwritten teachings” do is to direct us toward the key questions we need to ask of forms in order to understand their causal power. Thus, first, to understand a form as an instantiation of Unity is to be turned to the question: what whole-part structure does it imply for the sensibles or, more generally, the “things” in place and time that instantiate it? Second, to understand that Unity collaborates with the Unlimited is to be turned to the question: on what continua, or in terms of what relative opposites, are the parts apportioned to each other? And third, to understand Unity as the ultimate source of the proportions or ratios on those continua is to be turned to the question: how is it that those proportions—and, an ontological level higher, the set of forms of parts that call for them—express what is normative or “good” and (since, as the dialogues stress,¹⁴ the good and the proportionate are beautiful) what is beautiful in the world?

(ii) Thus understood, the “unwritten teachings” seem to articulate the path of dialectical inquiry on the way down. Whereas the major thrust of much of Socrates’ elenchus in the dialogues is to point to the transcendence of the forms and to lead thought upwards from the unstable particulars and one-sided opinions that fall short of the forms, the thrust of the “unwritten teachings” is to turn attention to the normative order that the forms imply for their sensible participants. This involves a renewal of interest in features that, to thinking attempting the way up, first present themselves as obstacles to be left behind. To bring this psychagogic course more sharply to view, consider two important texts that exhibit thinking on the way up. In the middle books of the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates chart the “conversion” of the soul from becoming to being (518c) as a turning away from what is material and given to the

14. See, e.g., *Symposium* 201c, *Philebus* 64e.

senses towards what is purely intelligible. A major function of the five mathematical disciplines is to teach the thinker to detach his thought from sensibles and to bring directly to mind the forms they image; the thinker prepared by mathematics for dialectic will be capable, in Socrates' emphatic language, of "making no use at all of anything sensible but of using forms themselves, going through forms to forms, and ending in forms" (511c).¹⁵ Similarly, in the first part of the *Parmenides*, Plato presents the youthful Socrates mistakenly applying to the forms the sort of whole-part structure and plurality that belongs to sensible things. The lesson for critical readers is that the forms must be grasped conceptually as different in kind from their participants, and in the second part of the dialogue Parmenides provides the occasion for this thinking by distinguishing between the unique and simple "one" of the first hypothesis and the many composite "ones" of the second hypothesis.¹⁶ In contrast to these passages, the "unwritten teachings" turn our attention back to whole-part structure, to plurality in a variety of senses, and to what is material and sensible. What makes this turn complementary rather than contradictory, however, is that these are called to mind as the features not of forms but, specifically, of what becomes, that is, of things in place and time, *as these are structured by forms*. If, on the upward path, the task is to let the forms themselves emerge in their prescindion from the features of things in place and time, the task on the downward path is to disclose the causal power by which forms are constitutive for things, reconstructing the order they establish in the world.

(iii) Finally, I want to offer some very tentative thoughts¹⁷ on the possible implications of the "unwritten teachings" for the "existential-ethical becoming" that the dialogues aim to incite. Too often we proceed as though to bring out the ethical-existential aspect we must downplay the seriousness of the metaphysical theory in the dialogues. Near the center of the *Republic*, however, Plato has Socrates offer an extended reflection that undermines this either/or:

15. This is Alan Bloom's translation, slightly altered, in *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

16. For extended argument for this reading of the *Parmenides*, see Miller, *Plato's Parmenides*.

17. A further question, too complex to take up here, is the relation of the spectacle of the Good, with its power to form the philosopher's character (for discussion, see my "Platonic Provocations: Reflections on the Soul and the Good in the *Republic*," *Platonic Investigations*, ed. Dominic O'Meara [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1985], 163-193), to the account of the causal power of the One in the "unwritten teachings." That there is a connection to be pursued is implied by the alignment in teaching [3] of the One with what is *good* in the condition of things (*to eu*).

— For, presumably, Adeimantus, a man who has his understanding truly turned toward the things that *are* has no leisure to look down toward the affairs of human beings and, as a result of fighting with them, to be filled with envy and ill will. Rather, because he sees and contemplates things that are set in a regular arrangement and are always in the same condition—things that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it at one another's hands but remain all in order according to reason—he imitates them and, as much as possible, makes himself like them. Or do you suppose there is any way of keeping someone from imitating that which he admires and therefore keeps company with?

— It's not possible, [Adeimantus] said.

— Then it's the philosopher, keeping company with the divine and the orderly, who becomes orderly and divine, so far as it is possible for a human being.¹⁸ (500c-d)

Socrates's key notion is the "regular arrangement" (*taxis*, implicit in *tetagma*, 500c2) and "order" (*kosmos*, 500c4, c9) that distinguishes the forms from the "affairs of human beings;" it is this that so deeply impresses the philosopher that he is moved to "imitate" it, becoming "orderly and divine" in his very character. What the specific character of this "order" is, however, Socrates leaves open. That the forms do not "do injustice to one another" suggests only, in the context of his definition of justice in Book IV, that none impedes the work proper to any other. How, positively, does each in doing its own work function collaboratively with each other? My interpretation of the "unwritten teachings" in section I above provides the outline of an answer to this question; it also shows how, as is appropriate for dialectic on the way down, the "teachings" extend the order this cofunctioning exhibits into the domain of things in place and time. We can bring this back to view one last time by marking four basic respects in which, in the encompassing structure that inquiry oriented by the "unwritten teachings" discloses, there is a distinctive harmonizing of opposites. [1] For any subject matter, there will be a vertical axis reaching from the *one* form to the *unlimitedly many* possible proportions of the opposites on the continuum; between these extremes stand the *limitedly many* forms of parts or "limbs" that, answering to the one form as form of the whole, pick out the appropriate proportions on the continuum.¹⁹ [2] The continuum itself is the balanced series of possible proportions between the relevant opposites. [3] As a mathematical structure, the continuum stands between *being*, that is, the one form and the set of forms of parts it implicates, and *becoming*, the many things in place and time; the set of proportions picked out on the continuum by the forms of parts, since they stand as normative specifications for the parts

18. Again, this is Bloom's translation in *The Republic of Plato*, slightly altered.

19. For the triad of one, limited many, unlimited many, see *Philebus* 16d. For the universality Plato has Socrates claim for this schema, see 17d-e.

of sensibles, bring *being* into the very heart of *becoming*. [4] This integration itself expresses the collaboration between Unity, instantiated by the one form's implication of the forms of parts, and the Unlimited, instantiated concretely and abstractly, respectively, by the intrinsically indeterminate play of contraries that the one form first delimits and by the continuum. The power and elegance of this whole structure is striking. Doesn't this make all the more compelling Socrates's claim that the philosopher's contemplative experience must have a deeply formative influence on his character? Just insofar as it is the "divinity" of the "order" the philosopher "keeps company with" that exercises this influence, the discovery of the all-encompassing order articulated by the "unwritten teachings" will only deepen it. Turning back to the domain of what becomes, he will be opened to the full spectrum of possibilities, appreciative of the gift of normative order which the forms provide, and arrested by the fundamental harmonies that first constitute the possibility of this gift. In the grip of this experience, will he not already be moved to live accordingly, to make himself, in his own character, an analogue to the divine whole he contemplates?

3.

We come, finally, to the third question: what are the implications of the discovery of the "unwritten teachings" *in* the dialogues for our conception of the basic character of the dialogue form and for our understanding of how to read and interpret Plato?

It seems evident, first of all, that we need to broaden our sense of the context in which we interpret the dialogues (or, at least, those dialogues in which we have found the "unwritten teachings" at work)²⁰ to include the conversations that were going on in the Academy. Without Aristotle's report in *Metaphysics* A6, we might never have had occasion to seek the "teachings" in the dialogues in the first place. But once we do find them, we see in retrospect that not to have looked for them would have been to bypass something very important. So, it seems, to be adequate to the thought in the dialogues requires, paradoxically, that we look to the Academy.

20. Should this list include all of the dialogues (as e.g., the Tübingen school, taking an essentially unitarian approach, would argue) or only a selection of the "later" dialogues (the approach exemplified by Sayre in *Plato's Late Ontology*)? My preference is to leave this general question open and to take each dialogue as much as possible in its own terms, letting its dramatic framing, especially, provide the starting-point for determining the context in which it should be read and turning to the "unwritten teachings" where reading in that context makes it appropriate.

This way of putting the matter seems to revive the problem of Scylla and Charybdis. Am I saying, after all, that to study the “unwritten teachings” we must look away from the dialogues?²¹ If discovering the “teachings” in the dialogues is possible only if we respond to reports external to the dialogues, doesn’t our “discovery” amount to reading into the texts something that they themselves do not intend—and, as a consequence, obscuring what they do intend? Haven’t we, after all, been seized by Scylla?

I think the answer is no. To begin with, the dialogues themselves, in their dramatic dimension, do invite us to look to the Academy. A number of them, at least, give us characters or settings that surely mime ironically characters and perspectives in play in the Academy. Think only of the figure of the youthful Socrates in the *Parmenides*, paradigmatic philosopher-in-the-making. Is he not, with his seminal distinction between forms and things and his inexhaustible energy for inquiry, the very embodiment of the philosophical aspirations that must have characterized many of the young Academicians? In constructing this *persona dramatis*, is Plato not mirroring back to them both their hopes and limitations? Or consider the *personae* “Theodorus” and “Young Socrates” in the Eleatic dialogues. Theodorus, “our greatest mathematician and geometer” (*tau peri logismous kai ta geometrika kratistou*, *Statesman* 257a7-8), represents expertise in those studies that, according to *Republic* VII, are propaedeutic to dialectic, studies that we know were a major occupation in the Academy. His presence in the dialogues also reminds us of the presence in the Academy of the still greater master of geometry, Eudoxus. Young Socrates, in turn, is Plato’s remake of an older member of the Academy well-known, apparently, for his expertise in legal or constitutional matters.²² By recasting him as a young student of Theodorus and an eager and respectful interlocutor for the Eleatic Stranger and (at least potentially)²³ the elder Socrates, Plato puts before the Academicians a figure who combines the two basic projects that, in all likelihood, drew many of them to the Academy in the first place: ascending through mathematics to dialectic and, with dialectical inquiry as the key resource, rethinking the basis and order of

21. The following comments concentrate on the problem of whether interpreting the dialogues will lead us to the “unwritten teachings.” Notice that on my view there is no question about the converse, whether interpreting the “unwritten teachings” leads us to the dialogues. It is only in the context of the *Parmenides*, *Philebus*, and *Statesman* that I have been able to find a rich and determinate Platonic significance for Aristotle’s reports in *Metaphysics* A6. *Elevonh*

22. See the allusion in the *Second Letter*, 358d-e. Note also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z11:1036b25.

23. Was Young Socrates to be the elder Socrates’ interlocutor in the projected *Philosopher*? See Cornford’s interesting speculations (building on Diès) in *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1935), 168-169.

political life. Clearly, the mimetic functions of these *personae* are pointed and deliberate. This implies in turn that Plato targets the young Academicians as his readers of "first intention"²⁴ and invites them to interpret the dialogues against the background of what was going on in the Academy.

Does this put us, standing at such a distance from the Academy and knowing so little about it, at an insuperable disadvantage? For a complicated set of reasons, I think not. Close study of the comportment of the *personae* just mentioned suggests a surprisingly complex situation in the Academy.²⁵ On the one hand, the general atmosphere in the conversations in the trilogy of the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* is cordial and friendly; there is no trace of the personal hostility and contentiousness that is such a conspicuous feature in the dramatic action of so many other dialogues. On the other hand, there is pervasive evidence of what we might call substantive alienation, of a lack of comprehension that separates the would-be philosophers from philosophy itself. In the *Theaetetus*, for instance, Theodorus confesses to an antipathy for "abstract discussions" (165a) and repeatedly tries to avoid Socratic elenchus, appealing to Socrates (who is himself seventy) to let him off on grounds of age (see 146b, 162b, 164eff., 168eff., 177c, 183c). Theaetetus, in turn, never capitalizes on his powerful mathematical education to recognize that knowledge requires intelligible, not sensible, objects. In the *Statesman*, even more strikingly, Young Socrates twice leaps to agree that the search for statesmanship is complete when in fact the Stranger does not think so at all (267a and c, 277a), mistakenly presumes his own understanding of the Stranger's method of bifurcatory diairesis (262a), and never asks the Stranger for an explanation of his sudden abandonment of bifurcation in the passage we studied earlier (see 287cff.). In all of these passages he is authoritarian in his deference. Recognizing this, the Stranger warns him that the time may come someday when (no longer able to defer to a guiding elder) he will grow impatient with the discipline of dialectical method, and he provides Young Socrates with a "prophylactic"²⁶ doctrine with which to defend himself (283bff.); true to form, Young Socrates accepts the doctrine with no explicit reflection on his potential need of it. All of this suggests difficulties in the

24. This is R.E. Allen's useful phrase, in his *Plato's Parmenides: Translation and Analysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 197.

25. The following paragraph sketches the account I have worked out in detail in my *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980).

26. This is J. B. Stemp's translation in *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1961). The doctrine is that of due measure.

Academy.²⁷ Putting the Academicians on stage before themselves, Plato seems to point both to their unreadiness for dialectical inquiry into the forms and, what greatly complicates the problem this poses, their failure to recognize it.

How did Plato respond to such a situation? If it is reasonable to take as an analogue the way he makes his protagonists in these dialogues respond, then we can answer: with irony and indirect communication, aimed at provoking his associates to *self-movement*.²⁸ Indeed, the dramatic depiction of their unreadiness is itself such provocation. But if this is right, then not only are the dialogues good clues to the kind of conversation that was going on in the Academy (our initial point), but also they must themselves have been elements *within the conversation*. On this interpretation of the situation, we can imagine that Plato was as reticent as the language of the *Seventh Letter* suggests, reserving expression of his deepest metaphysical insights for “those few capable of discovering the truth for themselves with a little guidance”²⁹ (341e)—and even then restricting himself to “the very briefest statements” (*brachutatois*, 344e2) needed to provide that “guidance.” Otherwise and for the most part, he would have spoken indirectly, either face to face with the same sort of pointed inexplicitness we have seen in the *Parmenides* and *Statesman* passages we studied earlier or by way of the publication of the dialogues themselves. In such indirection, he would have been sustained by the hope that those who felt his irony would awaken, finding in the dialogues’ portrayals, in particular, of crucial limitations of character and thought occasions for self-recognition and self-transcendence. Such self-knowledge would be the decisive preparation for making good use, in turn, of the

27. There is an analogous argument to be made regarding the *Parmenides*. By his refutations in the first part of the dialogue, Parmenides shows Socrates that he does not yet understand his own distinction between forms and things. He exposes Socrates as still too much in the grip of “the opinions of men” (130e) and as “attempting to define *beautiful* and *just* and *good* and each one of the forms too soon, before [he] has had [the] preliminary training [he needs]” (135c-d). On the other hand, the youthful Socrates of the *Parmenides* differs from Young Socrates in the *Statesman* by becoming aporetic and asking for help. This makes it all the more striking, however, that Parmenides, even as he agrees to Socrates’s request, immediately replaces him with the young “Aristotle” as his interlocutor; young “Aristotle,” now excessively compliant (see 137b), will later become one of the most vicious of the Thirty Tyrants (see 127d). For interpretation, see my *Plato’s Parmenides*, 78 with, e.g., 89-91, 144-145.

28. See R. Schaerer, “Le mécanisme de l’ironie dans ses rapports avec la dialectique,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 48 (1941): 181-209.

29. This and the following quotes are drawn from L.A. Post’s translation in *Plato’s Collected Dialogues*.

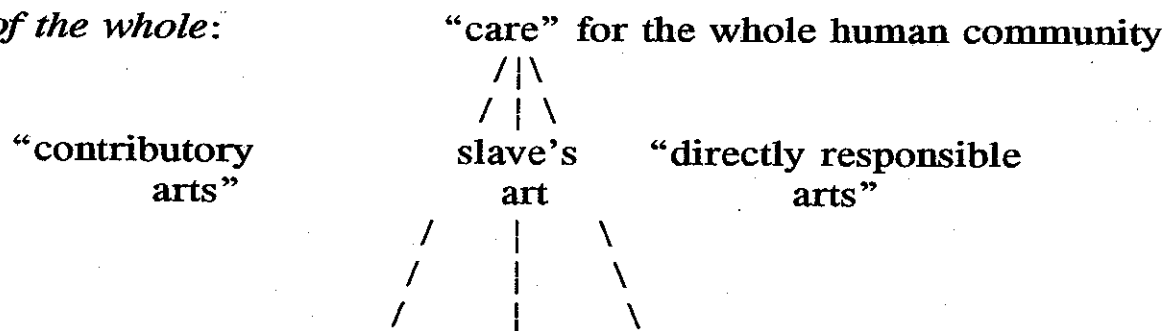
"guidance" expressed in those "very briefest statements" of his deepest metaphysical insights.

If it is right to take the dialogues to be both ironic mimeses of conversation in the Academy and acts of indirect communication within that conversation, then taking the context of the Academy seriously does not put us at an insuperable disadvantage, and taking the "unwritten teachings" seriously does not put us at the mercy of Scylla. On the contrary, *like the Academicians themselves*, we have, as one kind of resource, something very much like Plato's "briefest statements"—for this is just what Aristotle's reports in *Metaphysics A6* amount to. And again *like the Academicians themselves*, we have, as another kind of resource, the indirect and ironic communication of the dialogues. What is needed is to bring these together in inquiry.

Appendix: Reconstruction of the List of Fifteen Kinds

(*Statesman* 287b-2091a, 303d-305e)

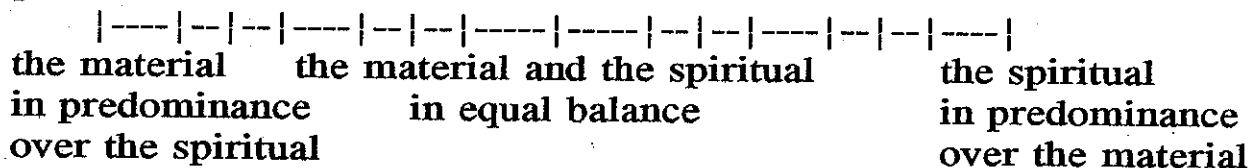
the form of the whole:



the forms of parts:

- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8,9,10,11,12,13, 14, 15
 rm, t, c, v, d, a, n,sl,m, c, p, r, g, j, st

the continuum between opposites and the proportions picked out by the forms of parts:



particulars in place and time:

the arts in any actual city that, to instantiate well the form "care" and so constitute a good city, must embody the various normative balances picked out by the fifteen kinds