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The Context of Plato

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The Context of Plato

Abstract

The Platonic dialogues serve as a launching point for any student of philosophy and are often used in other fields such as literature as a base for a specific type of writing and critical thinking. Plato is not the first philosopher; however, it is his dialogues that introduce many of the fundamental problems of philosophy and launched a foundational approach to philosophy, dialectic. Plato is also a primary focus of advanced scholars for both his historical position as a philosopher as well as the content found within his writings. Such scholars find themselves consumed with one perplexing question: how should we interpret the dialogues? This question arises because of the chronological confusion of when each dialogue was written and the seeming contradictions found between the dialogues. For instance, on the topic of death there seems to be a contradiction between the Gorgias and the Apology. In the Gorgias, Socrates states that we should fear death because of the judgment that takes place upon our death. However, in the Apology he states that we should not fear death because we do not have knowledge of it and therefore cannot assume that it is evil. In one dialogue we should fear death because we know what happens upon our death and in the other dialogue we should not fear death because we do not know what happens upon our death. How should we interpret the dialogues? Is there a contradiction? Did Plato change his mind?

Interpretations have offered resolutions to the seeming contradictions of the dialogues. These modes of interpretations range from devising a religion of Socrates to chronologically ordering the dialogues and making a distinction between who is actually speaking, Plato or Socrates. Though these interpretations provide valuable and even plausible information concerning the dialogues, they also fall into problems of their own which leaves the lingering question of how to interpret the dialogues open for further examination.

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The Context of Plato

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A. Introduction

The Platonic dialogues serve as a launching point for any student of philosophy and are often used in other fields such as literature as a base for a specific type of writing and critical thinking. Plato is not the first philosopher; however, it is his dialogues that introduce many of the fundamental problems of philosophy and launched a foundational approach to philosophy, dialectic. Plato is also a primary focus of advanced scholars for both his historical position as a philosopher as well as the content found within his writings. Such scholars find themselves consumed with one perplexing question: how should we interpret the dialogues? This question arises because of the chronological confusion of when each dialogue was written and the seeming contradictions found between the dialogues. For instance, on the topic of death there seems to be a contradiction between the *Gorgias* and the *Apology*. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates states that we should fear death because of the judgment that takes place upon our death. However, in the *Apology* he states that we should not fear death because we do not have knowledge of it and therefore cannot assume that it is evil. In one dialogue we should fear death because we know what happens upon our death and in the other dialogue we should not fear death because we do not know what happens upon our death. How should we interpret the dialogues? Is there a contradiction? Did Plato change his mind?

Interpretations have offered resolutions to the seeming contradictions of the dialogues. These modes of interpretations range from devising a religion of Socrates to chronologically ordering the dialogues and making a distinction between who is actually speaking, Plato or Socrates. Though these interpretations provide valuable and even plausible information concerning the dialogues, they also fall into problems of their own which leaves the lingering question of how to interpret the dialogues open for further examination.

In light of this situation I propose that we examine the content and context in which each dialogue is written. I will be arguing for one mode of interpretation called the contextual approach in which the environments, actions, and purposes within the dialogues play a major role in determining the philosophical content and that these factors can resolve the problem of contradiction.

There are various topics covered within the dialogues and the notion of contradiction between dialogues is not limited to one topic. However, I am going to concentrate on the topic of death. This is not because this topic is more prominent in its contradiction nor is it because it is an easy contradiction to tackle. The topic of death is mentioned in a number of the dialogues and seems to be a good base to use for this examination.

B. The texts

I will be using three texts to examine death, contradiction, and interpretation. These texts are the *Gorgias*, the *Apology*, and the *Phaedo*. I will look at each of these

texts in order to understand the aim of each dialogue, what each dialogue states about death, and where the contradictions arise.

The first text to look at is the *Gorgias*. The overall examination of this text is about the question of how one ought to live. The text opens with a discussion between Socrates, Gorgias, Callicles and Polus. Gorgias, Callicles and Polus are considered to be great orators. However, Socrates alleges to be confused about what the craft of oratory entails and engages each of the orators in a discussion about the nature of their craft. The three orators believe their craft to be about speeches, power and justice. However, through the discussion with Socrates it is revealed that oratory is an act of persuasion in which no knowledge is needed on the topic being spoken about and has no concern for what is good. Socrates asks:

Do you think that orators always speak with regard to what is best? Do they always set their sights on making the citizens as good as possible through their speeches? Or are they also bent upon the gratification of the citizens and do they slight the common good for the people trying solely to gratify them, without any thought at all for whether this will make them better or worse? (Zeyl 502e)

This question leads the interlocutors into a discussion of justice because Socrates questions if the act of oratory is a just or unjust action. Socrates shows that the act of oratory can be unjust because it is not concerned with what is good but with pleasure and gratification and these things may not always lead to what is good for the soul.

This then leads to a discussion of the soul. Socrates wishes to show that the actions of our lives determine our deaths and it is here that the topic of death develops. Socrates introduces the writing of Homer. He tells the tale of the god's judgments on

human souls which determines if one is to go to the Isles of the Blessed or to Tartarus.

Socrates states:

When a man who has lived a just and pious life comes to his end he goes to the Isles of the Blessed, to make his abode in complete happiness, beyond the reach of evils, but when one who has lived in an unjust and godless way dies, he goes to the prison of payment and retribution, the one they call Tartarus. (Zeyl 523b)

Socrates continues by describing death as the separation of the soul from the body and how the soul and the body retain their natures from life. It is this nature of the soul that is judged by the gods in determining where the soul will spend eternity. According to Homer, Rhadamanthus judges people's souls upon their death and "he brands the man as either curable or incurable, as he sees fit..." (Zeyl 526c). This section of the text is also where Socrates describes the fear of death. He explains to the orators that if one has not lived an ethical life then he should fear death because upon judgment of the soul such a person will end up in Tartarus. Socrates states:

For no one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what is unjust is what he is afraid of. For of all evils, the ultimate is that of arriving in Hades with one's soul stuffed full of unjust actions. (Zeyl 523a)

Thus, in the *Gorgias* death is the separation of the soul from the body and when this separation happens the soul is judged by the gods and sent to another place. The fear of death is linked to how one has lived, justly or unjustly, and the consequences that follow these actions.

The *Apology* is one of only a few platonic texts not written in the dialogue format. It is the speech where Socrates defends himself against the accusations that condemn him to death. He is in front of a series of jurors and he addresses each of the accusations against him. The first is that he corrupts the youth and the second is that he denies the gods and creates new gods.

It is when he is addressing the second accusation that we find the topic of death within this text. Here, death, or more specifically the fear of death, is linked to our presumed knowledge of death. He states:

You see, fearing death, gentlemen, is nothing other than thinking one is wise when one isn't, since it is thinking one knows what one doesn't know. I mean, no one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all goods for people, but they fear it as if they know for certain that it is the worst thing of all. (Reeve, 127, 29a)

What Socrates is saying here is that he does not fear death because there is no way to know what death entails. We have no knowledge of what follows death.

Later in the dialogue Socrates sets death up as a dilemma. He states:

Being dead is one of two things: either the dead are nothing, as it were, and have no awareness whatsoever of anything at all; or else, as we're told, it's some sort of change, a migration of the soul from here to another place. (Reeve, 138 40c)

This exemplifies the unknown nature of death and gives examples of what the nature of death could be. If death is either nothing or the migration of the soul, there is no need

to fear it. That is, if death is nothing there is no need to fear it because there would be no perception at all, not even the perception that results in fear. If death is the migration of the soul to another place there is no need to fear it because this other place is not necessarily bad. As he suggests within this text, the migration of the soul may be to a place where one can converse with great minds or a place where absolute knowledge is obtained. He states:

What wouldn't one give, gentlemen of the jury, to be able to examine the leader of the great expedition of Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or countless other men and women one could mention? To talk to them there, to associate with them and examine them, wouldn't that be inconceivable happiness? (Reeve 139, 40c)

These possibilities are not evil or bad, and thus, should not be feared.

From what has been said the notion of death in the *Apology* focuses on the fear of death and the knowledge, or lack thereof, of the nature of death. We should not fear death because we do not know what it is and the possibilities that we can suppose of death does not show that death is bad or evil.

The final dialogue to look at is the *Phaedo*. The primary concern of this dialogue is the immortality of the soul which is undoubtedly linked to the notion of death. The setting of this dialogue is in the cell of Socrates moments before his death. The dialogue begins with Socrates making the claim that stuns both the friends present in his cell as well as the reader. He states "others are apt to be unaware that those who happen to have gotten in touch with philosophy in the right way devote themselves to nothing else but dying and being dead" (Brann 64a). It is this claim that sets up the content of

the rest of the dialogue. Socrates supports this claim by describing the immortality of the soul through the argument from opposites, the argument from recollection, the argument from invisibility, the argument from cause, and the argument from the separation of the soul from the body. Though, every one of these arguments is closely related to death, the relevant ones, for our purposes here, are the separation of the soul from the body and the argument from opposites. It should be noted that these arguments are not under investigation here. They are arguments given by Socrates and I am only using them as examples of what Socrates says about death in this dialogue.

In the beginning of the dialogue Socrates goes back to what was said in the *Gorgias* that death is the separation of the soul from the body. Life is the combination of the soul and the body. Concerns of the body are those of materiality and desire such as seeing, hearing, love-making and food. However, these things are not precise in giving truth but can stray from the truth. The soul, on the other hand, is reasoning and thoughtfulness. When connected to the body the soul is distracted from the truth.

Socrates states:

The soul reasons most beautifully when none of these things give her pain—neither hearing nor sight, nor grief nor any pleasure –when instead, bidding farewell to the body, she comes to be herself all by herself as much as possible and when, doing everything she can to avoid communing with or even being in touch with the body, she strives for *what is*. (Brann 65c)

The term *what is*, here, refers to the ultimates or absolutes such as Good or Just.

Socrates' claim is the soul all by itself has the ability to reason to the truth of these things.

That is, the soul, in its purification from the body is the vehicle of understanding.

Socrates goes on to say that the philosopher is not concerned with things of the body but of truth, of reaching the understanding of the Good or Just. Hence, because a philosopher is searching for *what is* and the soul is the vehicle to this when separated from the body in death, the philosopher is in preparation for death.

After Socrates explains the philosopher's pursuit for death through the separation of the soul from the body, Cebes interjects and questions how Socrates knows that the soul continues on after death. This is where the argument from opposites is introduced. Socrates starts by explaining that all things that are contraries, or opposites, have a becoming. This becoming is the process by which a thing becomes its opposite. Take for instance, Socrates bigger/littler example. He states:

Whenever something comes to be bigger isn't it a necessity that it become bigger later from something that was littler before...and also if something comes to be littler, won't it come to be littler later from something that was bigger before...(Brann 71a)

Socrates is showing that contraries breed and return to one another through the process of becoming. With each pair of contraries there are two becomings. Socrates states:

Aren't there, in the case of all contraries, since they come in pairs, something like two becomings between them, from one to the other, and, again, from the other to the first—between a bigger and a littler thing isn't there growth and decay, and so we call the one 'growing' and the other 'decaying'?(Brann 71b)

This leads Socrates to the topic of death. The contrary to being alive is being dead. Like all contraries, life and death go through the processes of becoming. Life becomes death and death becomes life. Just as in the case of littler and bigger, Socrates' claim is that if something dies it is necessary that it becomes dead after having lived. Because life and death are contraries the same rule applies to life. If something lives it is necessary that it becomes alive after having died. Thus, the soul, in death, does not float away or becomes nothing, but goes through its own cyclical process of becoming between the contraries of life and death.

Therefore, death in the *Phaedo* is the separation of the soul from the body. Death is the contrary to life and as such the soul is forever in a process of becoming between these contraries as opposed to becoming nothing at all.

There seem to be three noticeable contradictions between these dialogues. These contradictions pertain to our knowledge of death, the fear of death, and the nature of death. The first of these can be seen by grouping the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo* together in opposition to the *Apology*. In the *Apology* the claim is that we do not have certain knowledge about the nature of death. However, in the other two dialogues Socrates speaks as though he is certain that there is an afterlife where either judgment or a sort of reincarnation occurs. In one dialogue it seems that we do not have certain knowledge of the nature of death and in the other dialogue it seems that we do have certain knowledge on the nature of death.

The second contradiction on death between the dialogues concerns the fear of death and is linked to the first contradiction because the fear of death is dependent on the knowledge of death. In the *Apology*, again, Socrates states that we should not fear

death because we do not know what it is. And in the *Phaedo* we should not fear death because it is in death that the soul is free to be *what is*. Whereas, in the *Gorgias* we should fear death only if we have lived unjust lives. Much like the first contradiction, in one sense we should not fear death because we do not know what it is and in the other sense, we should not fear death because we do know what it is. And yet in another sense we should possibly fear death because we know what it is. Our knowledge of death, or lack of knowledge of death, determines how we should react to death. However, it is unclear if we have knowledge of death and it is unclear, if we do have knowledge of death, how we should react to it if it should be feared or not.

With what has just been said about the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo* we come across a third contradiction. In both of these dialogues death is the separation of the soul from the body. However, what happens after this separation is different. In the *Gorgias* the soul is judged and either sent to the Isles of the Blessed or to Tartarus for eternity. In the *Phaedo*, the soul goes through a sort of reincarnation. In one case the soul is judged and sent to another place for its fate but in the other case the soul returns to life.

These three contradictions exemplify the problems philosophers face when interpreting the dialogues. And it leaves the philosopher wondering if Plato is in fact contradicting himself or if there is a mode of interpretation that proves to resolve such issues.

C. The Interpretations

Now that I have outlined how the texts discuss death and the controversies that arise upon the topic of death, I will show how scholars have tried to solve these controversies through interpretation. Over the years many approaches have been developed on how to interpret the dialogues. However, the traditional approach is called the “developmental interpretation.”

This interpretation starts by chronologically ordering the dialogues and classifying them as early, middle, or late. In doing so, this interpretation seeks to show that the early dialogues are recounting the words of the historical man, Socrates, and the middle and late dialogues are the words of Plato. Secondly, this interpretation seeks to show that the middle and late dialogues are not only the philosophies of Plato, but also that these philosophies are a development of thought over time. It is suggested that ordering the dialogues aid in our interpretation by distinguishing who is actually speaking. The idea is if we can figure out who is speaking, Socrates or Plato, we can resolve the contradictions by showing that in one dialogue it is one philosopher speaking and in another dialogue it is the other philosopher speaking.

The method in which scholars separate the dialogues is known as “stylometry.” Here, the language and style of each dialogue is compared with one another and then categorized by these likenesses. The *Laws* is seen as Plato’s last work and in stylometry it is used as a reference point. That is, separating the dialogues into the early, middle, and late categories is achieved by comparing the language and style of each dialogue to that of the *Laws* and then using this comparison to determine the chronology of each dialogue.

Though this interpretation is the most commonly used interpretation among philosophers, it poses problems that suggest it may not be the proper mode of interpretation for Plato's dialogues. The first problem associated with this interpretation is determining exactly what category each of the dialogues falls under. We are sure the *Laws* is a later dialogue. However, the *Gorgias* is harder to classify. Some scholars believe it is an early dialogue while others believe it is a middle dialogue. Since, in the developmental interpretation, it is said that the early dialogues are Socrates and the middle dialogues are Plato, determining whether or not there is a contradiction between the dialogues, especially on death, depends greatly upon what category we classify the *Gorgias* as. If we do determine that this dialogue is a middle dialogue then it does not resolve the contradiction of death because the *Phaedo* is also a middle dialogue.

Another problem with this interpretation, as noted by Bernard Suzzane in his various works, is that it is based on statistical data. The method of stylometry cannot take into account if a dialogue was written in one day or over many years. Also, it cannot determine, with certainty, if the dialogue is recounting the words of the man Socrates or if it is recounting the words of Plato through the interlocutor Socrates. If the dialogue is recounting the man Socrates, this method cannot determine whether the dialogue was written the day after Socrates spoke or if it was many years after. The problem with this is 1) we cannot be sure that the philosophies were recounted exactly to what Socrates said and 2) there is no way to be sure which are truly the philosophies of Socrates and which are that of Plato. This approach can only give us relative or plausible results but cannot give us the exactness required to determine whose philosophy is actually being portrayed in the dialogue.

Also, there are philosophical problems with this interpretation. First, this approach relies on various assumptions. The main assumption is that because most things operate in a chronological fashion the dialogues must also operate in the same manner. It is true that the history of philosophy builds upon itself. That is, the late moderns were responding to the early moderns and the early moderns were responding to the medieval and so on. The assumption that the texts operate in a linear progression of thought is how a historical recounting of philosophy exists in the teaching of philosophy itself. However, there is no philosophical reasoning presented by those who propose to use this interpretation of why it is the proper approach to understanding the dialogues of Plato, which leads to the idea that this interpretation is used only based on the assumption of tradition.

Secondly, there is a stark difference in the way we read or interpret later philosophy. After Plato, most philosophy was written in a format called treatises. This format explicitly presents a theory and who is advocating that theory. The dialogues, on the other hand, never explicitly described a theory of anything. That is, nowhere in the dialogues does Socrates or any of the interlocutors say that they are describing a theory of forms or a theory of art. The dialogues open with a question and proceed to try and draw out that question. The notion that a theory of X is not explicitly present within the dialogues suggests that it is not to be interpreted in such a way that we would interpret a treatise. That is, the dialogues do not present theories as the developmental approach would suggest. As John Sallis puts it "to propose to write a treatise on the philosophy of one who wrote no treatises is, to say the least, questionable –especially since, on the basis of what he did write, it appears that he avoided such kind of writing for quite important reasons" (Sallis 1). This also presents problems in assuming that the dialogues should be

read as a “philosophy of Plato.” Plato is never present in his dialogues. He is mentioned in two of his dialogues and in both of these dialogues he is mentioned as not being there. This suggests that the focus of the dialogues has nothing to do with a philosophy of someone. If Plato wanted a theory or a philosopher to be recognized in his writings he could have done so in the format used by all other philosophers, he could have written treatises or in a more formal essay format that philosophers such as Aristotle used. However, he chose to write in a very specific format. For instance, while there are never any theories presented in the dialogues what is always in the dialogues is a particular environment or setting. Each dialogue opens in a specific place with specific people present. Why would Plato never explicitly write a theory but would explicitly write about a setting? Relying on the assumption that Plato’s dialogues are to be read as treatises is to ignore the particularities that Plato presents in his dialogues and to assume something is present within the dialogues that is never explicitly stated.

D. Contextual Approach

I have shown controversies concerning death in the dialogues as well as an interpretation to solve these controversies and the problems that follow from this interpretation. Now, I wish to defend an alternative mode of interpretation that will perhaps resolve these controversies. This interpretation is a contextual approach. By contextual I mean that we return to the dialogues themselves and allow the content and context held within each dialogue to answer our questions concerning these controversies. Philosophers such as John Sallis and Drew Hyland advocate this

approach. They describe that we treat our examination of the dialogues in much the same way we examine our own experiences. As Hyland puts it:

In our own philosophic discussions, by and large, what is most fundamentally determinative of the content and character of what is said is less the literal location of the discussion than the people with whom we are speaking. In our own experience, the people who are present are often virtually determinative of what we talk about and the manner in which we discuss it. (Hyland 20)

Hyland is arguing that in order to understand the dialogues we should read the dialogues in the same way we enter into discussions and inquiries in our own experiences. That is, that depending on who we are talking to and what we are talking about determines the nature of the discussion as a whole. Similarly, the nature of the philosophical content of a dialogue is dependent on who is present, what is being spoken about and even the way about which it is spoken. However, in order to do this we must understand the nature of the dialogue in general. That is, we must ask: is there something present in all of the dialogues that leads to an understanding of how all the dialogues operate? I contend that there is a dimensionality present in all of the dialogues, what John Sallis calls "the dramatic character."

The dramatic character of the dialogues employs the notions of the logos, mythos, and ergon. In a general sense, these notions are present in every dialogue and are what make up the dialogue as a whole. Each of these notions plays a role in explicating the philosophies held within each dialogue.

The ergon of the dialogues refers to the function of the dialogue. Sallis states, "...a dialogue is a discourse in and through which something is done, a discourse in and

through which certain deeds are accomplished by certain of the speakers with respect to other participants in the dialogue" (Sallis 18). For instance, in the *Gorgias* Socrates and the other interlocutors are discussing the nature of oratory versus dialectic. In order to make his point, Socrates uses the dialectic to show that this method goes beyond persuasion and into the realm of understanding. Thus, this dialogue, in deed, actively includes what is being claimed and argued for. An example of this that Sallis uses to express the notion of *ergon* in the dialogues is found in the *Lysis*. He states, "...the various participants, discussing friendship without being able to reach any defensible conclusion, nevertheless become better friends through the discussion" (Sallis 18). What these examples show is that *ergon* illuminates a concept by showing the function of this concept through the actions of the interlocutors.

The *mythos* can be translated as the setting in which the dialogue takes place. The *mythos* of a dialogue can be the cell of Socrates, in the court room, or on the side of the road. This can also refer to the others present in the dialogue such as the Pythagoreans in the *Phaedo* or the orators in the *Gorgias*. Many philosophers believe that nothing in the dialogues is accidental and the *mythos*, as the setting, is an important piece in the explication of the philosophies because the particular setting brings out aspects of those philosophies being discussed. For instance, Eva Brann points out in the *Phaedo* that Socrates is speaking to the Pythagoreans. The Pythagoreans have a long history of examining purification and the separation of the soul from the body is a type of purification. The Pythagoreans are interlocutors that discuss purification which adds to that underlying theme of purification. Thus, the *mythos*, as the setting or environment of the dialogues, also brings out the topic being discussed.

The final part of this dimensionality of the dialogues, and possibly the most important, is the logos. The term "logos" can be interpreted in many ways. It can mean speech, discourse, intelligence, thought, reason, word, or meaning. It can be seen as that which governs all things and/or that which is in all things. If taken strictly on its etymology the logos means "gathered together." With so many variations of interpretation it is difficult to strictly define the logos. However, as Sallis states, this is the important part of logos. In one dialogue the logos can be a search of the understanding of virtue as in the *Protagoras*. It can be the importance of recollection as in the *Meno*. The vagueness of the logos is what allows the reader to become part of the dialogue as an interlocutor because its meaning is to be drawn out and thus gives the reader the opportunity to let the dialogue speak for itself concerning the philosophies held within it. The logos can almost be seen as the purpose behind the dialogue or as Sallis calls it the "rational discourse." However, such language needs to be taken carefully. Presupposing the purpose of the dialogue lands us in circulatory reasoning; if the point of reading the dialogues is to arrive at a sound interpretation of them, then we cannot presuppose what it is about because we would be presupposing exactly what we were questioning.

Also, Sallis makes an important distinction that the logos, in being what it is, is linked intimately to ergon. That is, in order to understand the logos we must recognize and understand the deed of the dialogue. There is also a specific deed accomplished in all dialogues by the logos which is, according to Sallis, the "provocation of recollection of the soul." Socrates believed that the way in which we gained wisdom was through recollection. He believed that the soul, in some sense, already possessed knowledge and that through the process of dialectic provoked the recollection of what the soul

already knew. It is this aspect that allows the reader to become an interlocutor in the dialogue because the reader, here, is provoking this deed of recollection while examining and questioning what is being illuminated by the dialogues. Sallis states:

It is for the sake of the appropriate deed that the Platonic *logoi* have the form they do –what is, then, called for on the part of one who undertakes to read and to interpret the dialogues is that he dialogue with them in such a way as to let them exercise their deed of provocation. And this means that to interpret the dialogues of Plato is not merely to re-present a certain philosophical position; it is to seek to gain access to philosophy as such, to seek to begin philosophizing, through a response to the provocations which the dialogues are capable of exercising. (Sallis 21).

Thus, in one sense, the logos is uncovering the rational discourse of the dialogue. In the other sense, the logos is the reader engaging in the philosophical inquiry of the dialogue.

I would like to note that it does seem circulatory to lay out a presumption of the dramatic character because it seems then that we need to have an idea of the operation of the dialogues before interpreting the dialogues when it is exactly the interpretation we are questioning. And we have already decided that we should not presuppose that the dialogues operate under any fashion such as a developmental one. So, why should we assume that there is a dramatic character prior to our investigation? Both Sallis and Hyland have addressed this question and believe it to be resolved in the process of the interpretation. This is because upon reading a dialogue the very first sentence is always indicating the environmental aspect of the dialogue which alludes to the notion that this information is important to the following discussion.

And as one reads on the ergon and logos become as evident as the mythos. Though it might seem it is presuming too much of the dialogues initially, the understanding of the dramatic character prior to the examination of a dialogue is vindicated through the examination. This should become evident in the following sections.

E. The Application of the Contextual Approach

Now that I have laid out how this interpretation operates I will apply it to the dialogues in question. I will begin by identifying the three dimensions of each of these dialogues. Then, I will ask the questions of the dialogues concerning death. And finally, I will allow the dialogues to answer those questions in order to resolve the controversies held within them.

The first dialogue to apply this interpretation to is the *Gorgias*. As stated earlier, the ergon of this dialogue is the use of dialectic to show how dialectic goes beyond the persuasive nature of oratory. That is, the deed of this dialogue is the use of dialectic. For example, throughout the dialogue Socrates repeatedly states "...if you, like me, think that being refuted is a profitable thing, it would be worthwhile to continue this discussion, but if you don't, let it drop." This is a challenge to continue the refutation, the discussion, the dialogue concerning these matters. To "let it drop" is to stop the discussion, leave it as a speech, or as the oratory. This challenge allows the dialogue, the deed, to continue. In this examination I found that the mythos in the *Gorgias* is the setting of this dialogue as Socrates is speaking to the three who use and promote oratory. Gorgias, Callicles, and Polus are considered to be famous teachers of oratory. It is in discussing this topic with these people that allows the setting of the dialogue to

be intimately linked to the deed of this dialogue. That is, the teachers of oratory are confronted with the nature of oratory by Socrates who is doing his deed, his opposing deed, dialectic. The logos of this dialogue is a gathering together of the nature of oratory and dialectic and how each pertains to the virtue of teaching and obtaining wisdom as well as how these actions affect our lives and our deaths.

Thus in applying this approach of interpretation to the *Gorgias*, I believe, the dramatic character of this dialogue is this: the ergon is a discussion of oratory versus dialectic, the mythos is the orators, and the logos is the consequence of oratory if it turns out to be an unjust action.

The next dialogue I examined with this contextual interpretation is the *Apology*. This dialogue is unusual in its dimensionality. What I mean by this is that this dialogue almost combines the mythos, ergon and logos. This entire dialogue is Socrates' defense against accusations of who he is and therefore the logos of this dialogue illuminates who Socrates is. The ergon is exemplified by Socrates being Socrates. That is, Socrates examines the question "who is Socrates" by doing exactly what Socrates has always done. He confronts tests and refutes accusations. And in this case he is confronting, testing, and refuting the accusations made against who he is through his deed. As Sallis shows

Socrates simply says –in several regards –who he is. He says this especially in the testing of various counter-images that are presented in the form of accusations against him. What is especially remarkable is this connection is that this way of affirming who he is constitutes, not only a refutation of the counter-images and

an assertion over against them of a truthful image, but also *a concrete exhibition* of the very practice which defines who Socrates is. (Sallis 26)

What Sallis is referring to here is how Socrates puts these accusations to the test and also puts who he believes himself to be to the test in order to show who he really is. The mythos is also combined with the ergon and logos when Socrates defends his actions through his meeting with the oracle. When defending himself against the second accusation Socrates explains that the oracle sent him on this search of wisdom and the only way to do this search is through examination. He tells the men of Athens about his meeting with the oracle and how he was told that he was the wisest of all men. However, Socrates did not believe that and searched for a man wiser than him to prove the oracle wrong. When he did not find a man wiser than him, Socrates states to the jurors,

So I asked myself on behalf of the oracle whether I'd prefer to be as I am, not in any way wise with their wisdom nor ignorant with their ignorance, or to have both qualities as they did. And the answer I gave to myself, and to the oracle, was that it profited me more to be just the way I was. (Reeve p121 22e)

Through the setting dimension of the *Apology* Socrates not only shows how he came to be who he is, a man whose wisdom is to know he is not wise, but the dialectical deed that brought him to such conclusions. Thus, in this dialogue the dramatic characters interact with one another to grasp a total understanding of who Socrates was. Socrates puts himself through the deed of dialectic, examines who he is and why he is the way he is through his interaction with the oracle, and it is all to show the jurors who he really is and that he is not what he is accused of.

The final dialogue I examined is the *Phaedo*. This dialogue also combines the three dimensions of the dialogue but in a slightly different manner than in the *Apology*. The logos of this dialogue is two-fold. That is, it examines both immortality of the soul and who the philosopher is. The mythos is combined with the logos here in the setting of the dialogue. Socrates' friends come to his cell on this day because the ship has returned from Delos which means the waiting period is over and Socrates will be put to death. The logos and mythos are brought together here because Socrates is examining the immortality of the soul while awaiting his death. Also, there is an overlap of the story of Delos that adds to the mythological dimension of this dialogue. The trip to Delos is to commemorate Theseus for saving fourteen men. In the *Phaedo*, fourteen of Socrates' friends (the Twice Seven) come to hear him speak one last time and he devotes his last moments to calming the fears of these friends. It is the death scene of Socrates that causes the examination of death and the immortality of the soul to come about.

Also, with the combination of the mythos and the logos, there is a sense of purification within the dialogue. Eva Brann points out that all the men in the cell with Socrates are Pythagoreans and one of the main themes for the Pythagoreans is that of purification. Throughout the dialogue Socrates speaks about who the philosopher is and there is an alignment with this sense of purification. Brann states, "The true philosopher, in Socrates' depiction, seeks to purify himself of all bodily entanglement in order to dwell with being or the forms" (Brann 3). Thus, the logos of who the philosopher is, is actively shown through the discussion of the purification of the soul with these men who see purification as something significant. Also, this can be tied to the mythos of story of Delos present in this dialogue because the purpose of no one being put to death while the ship travels to Delos is to keep the city pure.

The ergon of this dialogue is tied to the logos of the immortality of the soul. As stated, the argument from opposites discusses the becoming and passing away of contraries. Later in this dialogue Socrates examines his own becoming or what is known as “the second sailing.” Sallis points out that

Socrates advises his friends that a thorough investigation of coming-to-be and passing-away must be undertaken. He so advises them, however, only after he has paused for some time to meditate. It is as though, confronted by his own death, Socrates looks into himself, back into his own past: he proceeds to supply the basis for the necessary investigation of coming-to-be and passing-away by recalling how his own way of investigating came to be. (Sallis 39)

I believe this exemplifies the ergon of this dialogue because it is through the deed of examining Socrates own becoming and soon-to-be passing that illuminates this notion of contraries and how they relate to the death of the philosopher and the immortality of the soul. Thus, in the *Phaedo*, through deed and setting, the immortality of the soul is illuminated along with how this relates to the pursuit of the philosopher.

F. The Contextual Approach and Death in the Dialogues

It is time to put this approach to the test upon the question of death in the dialogues. What we are asking of the dialogues is: 1) if we take what was said about the dramatic character to be true then what is being said about death in light of this dramatic character? And 2) does examining death in the dialogues through this interpretation resolve the contradictions that arise between these dialogues?

If we take the dramatic character of the *Gorgias* to be a sort of illumination of how we interact and teach (dialectic or oratory) and how this deems our actions as just or unjust, then the discussion of death is in relation to ethical actions and the judgment upon those actions. That is, the purpose of the discussion of death in this dialogue is to show how unjust action, such as teaching others using persuasion and flattery, can send a soul to Tartarus. But a just act, such as discussing a topic with deduction to get at the truth behind it, can send a soul to the Isles of the Blessed. This is illustrated by Socrates closing of the text. He states,

I think about how I'll reveal to the judge a soul that's as healthy as can be. So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of the people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that. And I call on people as far as I can –and you especially I call on in response to your call –to this way of life...and I take you to task, because you won't be able to come to protect yourself when you appear at the trial and judgment...your mouth will hang open and you will get dizzy. (Zeyl 526d)

This shows how death in the *Gorgias* is explained by the dramatic character as something related to the actions of life and how these actions affect the soul in the afterlife. Namely, if one devotes his life to dialectic and the inquiry of truth then his soul is safe in judgment and if one devotes his life to persuasion it is an unjust act and as such the soul will be condemned. Thus, the dramatic character reveals that death in the *Gorgias* is in terms of the ethical.

The next dialogue to ask the question of death in terms of the dramatic character is the *Apology*. Remember that in section B of this essay this dialogue discussed the uncertain knowledge of death. If the dramatic character of this dialogue is an examination of who Socrates is, then is the discussion of death also in terms of who Socrates is? I would assert that it is. First, this can be seen in the ergon of the dialogue. In describing who he is Socrates continuously states that he is not wise and as such he would not claim to have certain knowledge of anything, including death. Socrates states, "if I really were to claim to be wiser than anyone, in any way, it would be this: that as I don't have adequate knowledge about things in Hades, so too I don't think I have knowledge" (Reeve 128 29b). Here Socrates is referring to his own knowledge of death. Secondly, the end of this dialogue is after he is found guilty and sentenced to death and it is here that he describes why *he* will not fear death. To him death is either a dreamless sleep or an opportunity to have discussions with great minds and to him these are positive opportunities and nothing to be feared. Thus, what is being illuminated through the dramatic character, here, is Socrates on death exemplified by who Socrates is

Finally, if the dramatic character of the *Phaedo* is the immortality of the soul and the pursuit of the philosopher then death in this dialogue is the dramatic character itself. This dialogue differs from the *Gorgias* and the *Apology* because this dialogue is directly about death. The purpose behind this discussion is to examine why the pursuit of a philosopher is death by a philosopher who is about to die. The dramatic character illuminates exactly that by the discussion of purification of the soul with the Pythagoreans, by deducing death as the separation of the soul from the body and how the soul is immortal. All of this is to provide an explication of why the philosopher is in

preparation for death. If the soul strives for truth all by itself, if the separation of the soul from the body is what we call death, if the philosopher is in pursuit of truth in his life, then it follows that the philosopher is in pursuit of death. Thus, death in the *Phaedo* is in terms of the pursuit of the philosophers given that certain assumptions are true.

With what has been said about death in terms of the dramatic character of each of these dialogues, I will now pose the question, does this interpretation resolve the contradictions? I believe what this interpretation shows is there are no contradictions to be resolved. At first glance, we may see that if the topic of death in each dialogue is taken together then there are the contradictions shown at the end of section B. However, what this interpretation shows is that each discussion and purpose behind the topic of death is different and thus, the way in which death is described, in nature and reaction, is going to be different. It is analogous to an examination of the brain by a biologist and a psychologist. Both scientists are trying to get a better understanding of how the brain operates. However, their purposes are different. The biologist is trying to figure out how the brain works in relation to the movement of the body. The psychologist is trying to figure out how the brain works in relation to human behavior. Similarly, the purpose behind the examination of death in each dialogue is different.

I have stated that in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo* Socrates seems to imply that there is a certain knowledge of what happens upon death while in the *Apology* he implies there is no certain knowledge of death thus, resulting in a contradiction. However, if we look at death in terms of the dramatic character of the dialogues we find that the discussions, purposes, settings, deeds, assumptions, etc. are entirely

different. The *ergon*, *mythos*, and *logos* changes the way death is discussed in each dialogue. In the *Gorgias* Socrates is speaking with the teachers of oratory who would have believed in Homer's tale of the afterlife which causes Socrates to speak of death in terms of these specific assumptions. The purpose of talking about death is to get across that using oratory results in an unjust act and so death is spoken of in terms of consequences in the assumed afterlife. In the *Apology* everything that is discussed is in terms of who Socrates is because he is the one on trial. His depiction of death to the jurors is going to be in terms of a defense of who he is, a man that claims to have no certain knowledge and a man who could not pretend to have knowledge of death could also therefore not conjure up false gods. And in the *Phaedo* the discussion of death is in terms of a set of deductions and assumptions that pertain to the life of a philosopher. That is, death is going to be in terms of obtaining the knowledge that philosophers have been in search for their entire lives, it will be in terms of when the soul is freed from the body in order to strive for truth.

Essentially, this interpretation shows there are no contradictions between the dialogues by showing that each dialogue is a specific inquiry and the way in which the topics are discussed are conditional upon how the discussion takes place, who is present, where the discussion is, and the purpose behind the discussion. That is, the way the dialogues operate when the dramatic character of each is taken together results in conditionals –if we take certain premises to be true, then certain conclusions will follow. If we take the stories of Homer on the afterlife to be true then death is in terms of judgment of the soul. If we take the assumption that man has no certain knowledge to be true, then death is going to be discussed in terms of uncertain possibilities. And if we take it to be true that the philosopher spends his life in pursuit of truth, that the soul, by

itself, strives for truth, the way to get to this truth is through the separation of the soul from the body, and the separation of the soul from the body is death, then death is in terms of the pursuit of the philosopher.

G. Objections

If the contextual approach is correct and the statements about death between the dialogues are to be treated as conditionals, then there is one objection that needs to be addressed. Was Socrates lying? That is, if death is broken down into contextual conditionals then doesn't it seem that Socrates was misleading the interlocutors in at least one of the dialogues?

First I would like to discount the terminology of "lying" as it seems that this is highly unlikely in the case of Socrates. Lying implies deceit or ill intention. As discussed in the *Gorgias* oratory, an act of persuasion, which is very similar to lying, is an unjust action. If Socrates was lying about death in any of the dialogues then he would be committing the same unjust act that he accused the orators of.

Socrates is constantly describing himself as a seeker of truth and justice. For example, in the beginning of the *Apology* he describes his own adoration of truth. He states:

...from me you will hear the whole truth. But not, by Zeus, men of Athens, expressed in elegant language like theirs, arranged in fine words and phrases. Instead, what you hear will be spoken extemporaneously in whatever words come to mind, and let none of you expect me to do otherwise –for I put my trust in the justice of what I say. (Reeve 17b)

Socrates strives for truth and justice in nearly every dialogue. Other areas of these texts that I have been examining, addresses this very issue of who Socrates is and what he sees as just. Thus, lying seems incredibly unlikely and is even discouraged by Socrates.

Often, philosophers answer this question by turning to what is called "Socratic irony." There is a lot of controversy on where this applies but at the basic level this is described as "a pretense of ignorance in a discussion to expose fallacies in the opponent's logic" (Soccio 101). That is, in a sense, Socrates pretends to lack the knowledge on a topic to engage the interlocutors in the discussion in order to reveal problems within their arguments. An example of this would be when Gorgias and Socrates are discussing what oratory is. Socrates states "I'm not sure I understand what sort of craft you want to call it" (Zeyl 450c). Socrates claims to not understand what oratory is. However, through the discussion that follows it is apparent that Socrates does understand but uses this irony as a method to show Gorgias the flaws in oratory.

I believe Socratic irony can be a resolution to the question of whether or not Socrates was misleading in his statements about death between the dialogues. That is, if the contextual approach is true. However, in order to do so, I believe we need to delve a little further into the operation of Socratic irony as described by Drew Hyland. (Again, Socratic irony is varied in its use among philosophers. It can be seen as a literary device or as a tool to expose fallacious arguments. And there are controversies concerning how Socratic irony operates. However, explaining all of these is beyond the scope of this paper and I only offer Hyland's account as a probable resolution to the objection.)

Hyland describes Socratic irony as pedagogic. That is, that Socratic irony is used as a method of teaching. The pretense of ignorance about a topic is ultimately to get

the other interlocutor to draw out the truth within the discussion itself and learn from the discussion. This is a reoccurring theme in the dialogues. Socrates very often enters into a conversation with Glaucon or Meno or any other interlocutor, claiming a sense of ignorance. Though, it becomes apparent that Socrates is not ignorant on the topic, in the end it is the other interlocutor that has learned something as well as the one who is reading the text. As Hyland puts it:

The significant point here is that the apparent motivation for this irony is Socrates' conviction that the best way to educate most people is not to dispense knowledge through lectures but to draw out their own nascent understanding through judicious questioning. (Hyland 96)

Here, it seems that the point of Socratic irony, a pretense of ignorance on a topic, is to ultimately teach someone about that topic. It can be seen as yet another tool to engage one in the inquiry.

So, how does this resolve the objection? Remember that a structure of a dialogue is not that of making claims but of inquiring. But how does one continue an inquiry without making claims? This is where Socratic irony comes in. The pretense of ignorance is to continue the inquiry in order to learn and teach. Take the *Gorgias* example. Socrates pretends not to know what oratory is, but through the discussion it is revealed that he does understand what oratory is and that it is unjust. Now, imagine if Socrates had just stated that oratory was an unjust action. Would that have continued the inquiry? If this was the case Gorgias and Socrates might have ended up arguing over definitions and not really uncovered any truths concerning oratory. The pretense of ignorance, in this case, allowed the inquiry to continue.

This irony can be seen in other dialogues as well. In the *Apology* we see Socratic irony when Socrates says that he is not wise. What we find is that Socrates is wise, but how we find he is wise is the key here. What we find through the irony is that Socrates is wise because of his recognition that he is not wise when it comes to having absolute knowledge. When trying to find a man wiser than he is, when testing his wisdom, he finds this:

I'm wiser than that person. For it's likely that neither of us knows anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows something he doesn't know, whereas I, since I don't in fact know, don't think that I do either. At any rate, it seems that I'm wiser than he in just this one small way: that what I don't know, I don't think I know. (Reeve, 120 21d)

The pretense of ignorance here is what engages Socrates in an inquiry of who he is.

What this shows is that Socrates was not misleading in what he says among the texts, but that he uses his irony to engage in the inquiry. In terms of what was said about death in these dialogues, it is quite possible that Socrates was being ironic. That is, he describes death in a particular way in order to continue the inquiry about what main aim of the text is. In the *Gorgias* he may describe death in a certain way, perhaps ignorantly, to continue the inquiry of what is just and unjust. And perhaps there is a similar case in both the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*.

I would also like to make a note of another possible resolution to this objection which is "Platonic Irony." The difference between Platonic irony and Socratic irony is described as:

Let Socratic irony be those instances of irony where the words and intentions are attributable, dramatically, if not historically, to Socrates...Platonic irony, on the

other hand, is that irony that occurs in that action or structure of the dialogue which Socrates could not be supposed to control. (Hyland 91).

In terms of Platonic Irony we are really looking at the structure of the dialogue. And remember that nothing is considered to be accidental in the dialogues. Perhaps, with this in mind, it is really Platonic irony that resolves the objection. Perhaps, when death is spoken of in different ways between the dialogues it is intentional, again, in a pedagogical sense. It is because death is spoken of in different ways that I became engaged in the inquiry of how the dialogues should be approached. On a bigger scale, it is because there are noticeable contradictions, within and between dialogues that philosophers continue to engage in inquiries concerning the dialogues. Perhaps, both Socratic irony and Platonic irony should be part of the dimensionality of the contextual approach because if nothing is accidental in the dialogues then the contradictions are not accidental either. And what these contradictions are is just another way of engaging us in a continuous inquiry.

Now, I don't think that this resolves the contradictions. I do believe that we need to look to the philosophical context and the dramatic character to resolve these contradictions. However, what Socratic and Platonic irony does is 1) resolve the objection that Socrates was misleading in what he said by showing how a pretense of ignorance continues an inquiry. And 2) that the reason for the contradictions in the first place is to engage in that inquiry. We would still need to resolve these contradictions but this may be an indication of why they are present in the dialogues.

H. Conclusion

Interpreting the dialogues has been the focus of philosophers for many years and probably will continue to be. With the uncertainty surrounding when the dialogues were written and some of the seeming contradictions within them, it is difficult for philosophers to determine how to properly examine them. However, from what has been shown, it seems that if we return to the texts themselves and allow them to answer our questions with their dimensionality, then we may be able to resolve some of these controversies that arise. We may find that the context of each topic is specific in its purpose and the road to understanding that purpose will be different. We may find that our approach of interpretation is not about classifying who said what but about the philosophy held within the texts themselves. We may find that it is best to allow the dialogues to be what they are, an engagement in inquiry.

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