Are there any “youthful” and/or socratic dialogues? Some reflections on the \textit{Apology of Socrates}

I must take it for granted that the reader recalls 1) what Plato states in the \textit{Phaedrus} about philosophical writing as an important “game”; 2) that Plato was Socrates' pupil and tried hard to preserve his master's educational, maieutic approach, 3) that is: the view that philosophy is not taught, but practised; and, consequently, that it is the duty of a good teacher to lead his interlocutor to think, through the spoken and written word.\footnote{1}

1. \textit{The order of the dialogues}

In the modern age, the sequence of Plato’s works has emerged as a crucial question for dealing with the “contradictions” in his writing. Actually, a wide range of arbitrary and diverse solutions to the problem of the reading order of the dialogues have been put forward since Antiquity. To avoid this outcome, modern hermeneutics has identified two \textit{objective} tools by which to establish a sequence for the dialogues.

1) The first method is the “stylometric” one,\footnote{2} based on the presence of particular expressions and words,\footnote{3} stylistic features whose frequency is statistically calculated starting from the \textit{Laws}, which are certainly the last work. This analysis makes it possible to classify the texts into differ-

\footnote{1 See the first essay (\textit{How Plato Writes}) and the fifth (\textit{The Phaedrus’ Polyphonic Structure}), in this book.}

\footnote{2 The insights of L. Campbell (1867), F. Blass (1874) and C. Ritter (1888) became a hermeneutic paradigm in the work of W. Lutoslawski 1897; (a masterful analysis of the debate in Stefanini 1949 pp. LXXII-LXXXI); for a more recent version of this kind of research, see Ledger 1989; Brandwood 1990 (and the interesting assessments in Kahn 1999 pp. 36–100).}

\footnote{3 For instance, Dittenberger (1881) draws attention to connecting particles, Ritter (1888) calculates the frequency of certain phrases, and Lutoslawski focuses on the frequency of 500 stylistic features, which he arranges into four groups according to their rate of occurrence (from accidental to very frequent).}
ent sets, in agreement with the hypothesis of an evolution in Plato’s thought put forward by K. F. Hermann (1839). This scholar’s attempt was based on questionable interpretations of the contents of the dialogues, but the stylometric method has provided an objective basis for his hypothesis. Consequently, the 20th century witnessed the predominance of evolutive interpretations over unitary ones, according to a standard model: “Socratic” dialogues, middle and mature dialogues, and late dialogues. However, we are actually dealing with two very different questions: the succession of the dialogues and the alleged evolution of Platonic thought are two problems that are best kept distinct.

The evolutionary interpretation would appear to have entered into crisis today for a number of reasons\(^4\) – some intrinsic to the hypothesis itself,\(^5\) others connected to the increasing affirmation of a unitary view of

\(^4\) It is important to note that what we are dealing with here are two separate elements: 1) the succession of the dialogues; and 2) the development of Plato’s thought. The crisis of the evolutionary model has engendered a negative feedback on stylometric, whose results must instead be accepted, since they derive from independent investigations. These, however, never yield identical results. This, however, is typical of statistical methods, which always entail a variability index. It is necessary, therefore, to accept a classification into groups without seeking to establish the precise order of succession of individual dialogues. Statistical computation always implies a certain margin, whereby on the one hand it is impossible to define which of two “neighbouring” dialogues comes first and, on the other, it is possible to rule out a significant gap between the two. Confirmation of this comes from the following fact: there is almost complete agreement when it comes to dialogues written after the Republic, since the statistical computation is more effective when applied to dialogues closer to the final point of reference represented by the Laws. By contrast, the discrepancies are greater when it comes to the early texts (it cannot even be ruled out that alterations were made to them at a later stage). Finally, it is not particularly useful to determine the exact position of individual dialogues: within a succession of thirty-odd dialogues, the fact that a particular one is no. 3 or no. 8 makes little difference.

\(^5\) The aim of stylometric is clear, but there is little agreement on ways to achieve this goal (cf. Ledger 1989, p. 1). Indeed, there is no way of knowing whether the features taken as a model are those which best grasp the evolution of Plato’s style. However, the fact that the results are quite even (and even “logically justifiable”) cannot be ignored (by contrast, any calculation that radically diverges from others only shows that it has taken data “with varying degrees of reliability” as a point of reference).
Platonic thought.6 The problem is that this has led many scholars to question the reliability of stylometry. However, the results of stylometric studies cannot be doubted, because they have been reached by different researchers independently. No doubt, stylometric analyses never yield identical results, as is bound to be the case with any statistically based research. Moreover, one must accept a classification by sets and forgo any claim to establish the place of individual dialogues. This is impossible because a statistical method always entails a certain “range”. Therefore, while it is impossible to define which of two “neighbouring” dialogues comes first, we can rule out chronological attribution that diverges too much from the stylometric calculation. Finally, there is one element that confirms this conclusion: scholars almost universally agree on the succession of dialogues posterior to the Republic. This result is quite obvious: stylistic calculations are more effective for dialogues close to the point of reference, namely the Laws. By contrast, in the case of early texts it cannot even be excluded that they underwent later revisions.

There is also a second method to order Plato’s works. The dialogues are written in dramatic form, as theatrical texts, but seven of them (Protagoras, Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides, Symposium, Phaedo, and Republic) are written in a narrative form, i.e. with the recurrent use of expressions like “said”, “replied”, and so on. If we consider the order established stylometrically, we find that the dialogues written in direct form occur at the beginning and at the end, while those in a narrative form fall in the middle.

Therefore, at some point in his writing career, Plato opted for the indirect form, only to then revert to the dramatic one. In both occasions, after having made this choice, the author – like a good teacher – offers an explanation that a careful reader cannot fail to grasp. In Republic III, 392C-398B, Plato distinguishes between three kinds of writing: narrative writing, where the author steps in to report a character’s words using indirect speech; imitative writing, where the character is brought on stage, and dramatic writing, where the character is brought on stage,

---

6 According to the evolutive hypothesis, what we have is a kind of miracle: a philosopher engaged in feats such as the Syracusan expedition found the time to leave behind a “diary of his philosophical journey”. Furthermore, any attempt to explain the “contradictions” of the dialogues in terms of evolution runs up against the fact that apparently different positions can be identified even within individual texts (e.g. in the Phaedrus alone the soul is said to be unitary, twofold and threefold: see Migliori 2019, pp. 31–32).
so to speak, and the author writes in direct form (this is the typical form of comedy and tragedy); and, finally, mixed writing, which switches between these two forms, as in the case of epic. Direct and imitative writing is rejected for general reasons: we must carry out only one task if we wish to carry it out well: it is rare, if not impossible, for someone to imitate many different things well (394E-395B); moreover, we must imitate only virtues and values, so as not to acquire negative habits (395B-396C).

Therefore, an honest man can imitate the words of another honest man; he will not do so gladly in the case of a man who finds himself in a difficult situation because of disease, passions, or misfortunes; and he will refuse to do so in the case of a man worse than himself, “unless it is a game” (396E2). An honest man, then, must devote himself to the mixed form, leaving little room for imitation. Plato repeatedly affirms this, even though he acknowledges that the most fascinating form is direct writing (397D) and that a poet capable of imitating every model must be revered as a divine man (398A). Hence, Plato recognises the beauty and effectiveness of the direct form of writing, but sets clear ethical limitations to purely imitative art: he does not completely reject it, both because the mixed form is possible, and because the hypothesis of a “game” is always open.

As already noted, if we consider the list of the final dialogues (Phaedrus, Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, Critias, Laws), we find that they are all in direct form, creating a remarkable literary game: Part 1 of the Parmenides is narrated, while Part 2 is in direct form; this transition is made without any explanation whatsoever, creating the impression that we are reading two different texts that have been grafted together. In the Theaetetus, instead, Plato begins with the indirect form and then switches to the direct (143B-C), so as not to weigh the dialogue down with boring expressions. Indeed, the second part of the Parmenides, consisting of complex arguments, would be almost unreadable with the constant insertion of expressions like “said” and “replied”. Moreover, the “ethical” limitations seem less compelling here: in the last, “difficult” dialogues there is no room for “negative” characters and “immoral” theses.

The concurrence between these two ways of reconstructing the succession of the dialogues and the “logical” order which this order reveals (and which has reinforced the “evolutionary” hypothesis) makes it possi-
ble to suggest a sequence not as a chronological arrangement (though, roughly speaking, this is a plausible order), but rather as an interpretative hypothesis that makes no claim as regards the placement of individual dialogues: 1) eight introductory dialogues, all in direct form: Apology, Ion, Euthyphro, Crito, Laches, Hippias Minor, Hippias Major, and Alcibiades I; 2) eight in-depth critical and theoretical texts, four in indirect form, Charmides, Protagoras, Lysis, and Euthydemus, and four in direct form, Gorgias, Menexenus, Meno, and Cratylus; 3) four major theoretical dialogues, the first three in indirect form, with a return to the direct form in the last dialogue: Symposium, Phaedo, Republic and Phaedrus; 4) four dialectical texts: Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman; 5) five final dialogues: Philebus, Timaeus, Critias, Laws, Epinomis.\(^7\)

The problem of the meaning of this sequence needs to be addressed. Even if we discard the evolutionary hypothesis, we are left with the fact that there is a logic in this succession of the texts. The order we have cannot be a random one, so we must posit a protreptic-educational choice on Plato’s part, who thereby proves to be Socrates’ pupil. It is a matter of fostering a process of philosophical development that leads from a series of “simple” dialogues, through some very beautiful ones with a complex structure, to denser texts that pay little attention to the aesthetic dimension and appear to be increasingly reserved for philosophical readers almost exclusively interested in dialectics, which is to say theoretical questions (as Plato himself, a true teacher, explicitly states in Statesman

\(^7\) So far I have spoken of a relative chronology for the succession of the texts. As far as the absolute chronology is concerned, which is to say the dating of the dialogues, traditional suggestions are based on data with no objective foundation. A classic case is the Gorgias, which according to many scholars is to be dated to around 387 BC, as Plato apparently displays a psychological state shaped by his voyage to Syracuse. However, no one has ever been able to quote a single line from this dialogue that might suggest a connection with Syracuse or Plato’s journey. The interpretation of the text based on the alleged psychological condition of the author is not scientifically correct. Indeed, the Phaedo – a dialogue describing Socrates’ death, which must have occurred many years earlier – shows that an artist is capable of reliving a given psychological state regardless of temporal conditions. But even if we were to take the year 387 as the terminus post quem, it would be a trifling acquisition, since all other hypotheses are untenable. This is always the case: all dates that may be inferred from the dialogues are either hypothetical or insignificant. So it is better to desist from this fruitless game.
We are dealing not with an evolution, but with the construction of an itinerary for the philosophical development of a potential reader.

2. The “youthful” dialogues

At this point we can delve into the heart of the matter. The underlying problem, namely the protreptic nature of Platonic writing, far exceeds the scope of this short contribution. However, there is a widespread view among scholars that might usefully be brought under critical scrutiny: the idea that Plato wrote his first dialogues in a “youthful” phase, so much so that many scholars speak of a “Socratic” phase. These dialogues would present not the philosopher’s own thought, but that of his master. But if it is possible to argue that Plato had already developed the views on writing which he presents in the *Phaedrus* by the time he started penning his first dialogues, and if it is possible to show that the latter are the work of an author already confident enough of his thought to engage in very bold “games”, then the hypothesis about youthful dialogues no longer holds water or must be radically redefined: these are no doubt “youthful” texts, but only insofar as they were written by a fully mature philosopher for “young readers”, with the aim of leading them on the path of philosophical reflection. Proof of this claim requires the analysis of different dialogues and hence a volume that I hope to publish… some day. For the time being, for the sake of example, I will only offer a little food for thought based on a concise analysis of the *Apology*.

---

8 Plato must clarify the *criteria* according to which the value of a philosophical text is assessed. In philosophical reflection pleasure must be considered an accessory, the elegant resolution of the posed problem is ranked second, while the dialectic is presented as the highest good. Indeed, this is the defining feature of the last dialogues, which are far from being the most aesthetically pleasing, but are very important for dialectic, which is to say philosophy.
The Apology

The Apology, one of the earliest Platonic texts, is not actually a dialogue. The narrative focuses on Socrates’ trial, held in 399 BC, and the only voice we hear is that of the philosopher himself, who even imagines a dialogue with Meletus, a poet unknown to us. The latter had submitted the accusation, but the real instigators were Anytus, a politician, and Lycon, an orator. In this work Plato carries out a series of operations that can only be understood in the light of the “games” mentioned in the Phaedrus, and makes a series of statements that a “youthful” philosopher could never have made.

It is worth briefly recalling the three speeches that Socrates delivers to the judges. In the first (17A-35D) the philosopher recalls that the accusations have two remote causes: 1) the action of a comedian who described Socrates as both a naturalist and a sophist – the reference here is almost certainly to Aristophanes’ Clouds, a work written in 423 BC, 24 years before the trial; 2) the effect of an oracle by the Delphic Apollo, who had told Chaerephon that there was no one wiser than Socrates. The latter, who deeply respected the words of the god but knew that he was not wise, enquired as to the meaning of this response. To this end, he chose to question learned people: politicians, poets, and craftsmen. In such a way he realised that the god, who alone is wise, praised Socrates because the latter knows that human wisdom is worthless. Unfortunately, this investigation attracted the enmity of many individuals who did not appreciate Socratic mode of questioning people by putting them in a tight spot.

Socrates then moves on to discuss the charge itself: corrupting the youth and introducing new gods into the city. In a fictional dialogue with Meletus, the philosopher is accused of being an atheist. This claim contradicts the accusation and at the same time suggests something that the whole of Athens knows to be false: for Socrates practises philosophy at the god’s behest, encouraging citizens to improve themselves.

However, Plato shows that he is perfectly familiar with the dialogue technique and even uses it in this complicated situation because Socrates imagines some dialogues: between Socrates and Callias (20A-B), between Socrates and Meletus (a very long dialogue: 24C-28A), and between the Athenian citizens and Socrates (29CE), in addition to the conversation that the Pythia has with herself (21B) and citizens’ reflections about the gods (23B). In a way, the third discourse as a whole may be read as a dialogue.
The second speech is delivered after the first round of votes, which found Socrates guilty (35E-38B). The Athenian judicial system allowed the person on trial to suggest an alternative punishment from that suggested by the prosecutors – in this case, “death”. However, the philosopher does not consider himself guilty and makes a series of almost provocative claims: 1) what he deserves is not punishment, but a prize for the good he has done to the city; 2) he cannot suggest an alternative punishment, because he has never harmed anyone and cannot do so upon himself by bringing a sentence now even though he is innocent; 3) whatever the judges’ decision, he will never cease philosophising, both because he wishes to comply with the divinity’s will and because a life devoid of research is unworthy of being lived. Be that as it may, since he is poor, he might suggest a fine of just three minae; but given that his friends will insist to cover the cost, he suggests thirty.

The last speech is delivered after the second round of voting (38C-42A), which sentenced him to death, and it features some lofty reflections. Those who believe they have done away with a dissenting voice will be disproved, as others will take Socrates’ place. Then, addressing the “true judges”, those who have acquitted him, he argues that what is about to happen is probably a good thing, as is shown by the fact that his daimon has never stepped in. Death is not an evil in itself, since it is either a long, dreamless sleep or a journey to a world where it is possible to meet the great men of the past. In any case, nothing bad can happen to Socrates, as the gods take care of those who are good. Socrates can therefore bid everyone farewell (40C-41C).

In order to identify some of the “games” played by Plato in presenting this Socrates, we must start from two elements: 1) the author is dealing with a State trial, so he could not lie and get away with it; the event had occurred a (relatively) short time earlier and some of the witnesses were certainly still living. Plato informs us that he was present at the trial, which is significant since he refers to himself only here (twice, 34A; 38B) and in the Phaedo (to say that he was not present). So in a way he presents himself as a witness to the facts he is recounting. As we shall see, the narrative contains no lies, but neither does it give us the stark truth: in fact 2) we are dealing with a philosophical, not historical, work, as is shown by the topics addressed.
The charge

The first “game” concerns the indictment, preserved by Diogenes, II, 40, 1–7:

The affidavit in the case, which is still preserved, says Favorinus, in the Metron, ran as follows: “This indictment and affidavit is sworn by Meletus, the son of Meletus of Pitthos, against Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus of Alopece: Socrates is guilty [1] of refusing to recognise the gods recognised by the State, and of introducing other new divinities. He is also guilty [2] of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death.

Xenophon (Memorabilia, I, 1, 2–5; Apology, 10–11) states the same thing: the main charge is a “religious” one, while the charge of corrupting the youth is, in a way, consequent upon it. In Plato the charges are the same, but the order is inverted. Socrates himself points out that he is not quoting the exact words of the prosecutors’ statement:

It states more or less (ἔχει δέ πως ὧδε): “Socrates is guilty because he corrupts the youth and does not believe in the gods the city believes in, but in other new gods” (24B8-C1).

However, Plato shows that he is aware of how the charge was formulated:

But nevertheless, tell us, how do you say, Meletus, that I corrupt the youth? Or is it evident, according to the indictment you brought, that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods the city believes in, but in other new gods? Do you not say that it is by teaching this that I corrupt them? (26B2–6; cf. 23D1–7)

Plato repeats the same game in Euthyphro, 3A-B: first Socrates recalls the charge of corrupting the youth; then Euthyphro asks him how he does so, according to Meletus; at this point, Socrates recalls that he is being accused of inventing new gods and scorning the old ones, and that this is the charge brought against him.

Plato does not lie but by inverting the factors at play, he makes education (and the contrast between different ways of life, which enables him to present the figure of the “philosopher”, as we shall see) the main theme on which to focus, as opposed to the theme of Socrates’ relation-
ship with the gods, with regard to which the author wants to propose a much more elaborate reflection (that of the *Euthyphro*). However, this “second” theme, which cannot of course be ignored, is circumvented through a remarkable game.

The gods

Before defending himself against Meletus, Socrates recalls the accusations which the judges heard when they were young. He fears these more than the charges currently brought against him. These are widespread rumours, also reported in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (18D):

Socrates is a criminal and [1] a busybody, investigating the things beneath the earth and in the heavens and [2] making the weaker argument stronger and [3] teaching others these same things (19B4-C1).

Here the charge of teaching constitutes a sort of aggravating circumstance with respect to the two main charges. The accusation is explained, confirmed and integrated at the end of the exposition about the research which Socrates has conducted with politicians, poets, and craftsmen:

As a result, therefore, those who thus offended are angry with Socrates, and say [A] that Socrates is a most abominable person and is corrupting the youth. [B] And when anyone asks them “by doing or teaching what?”, they have nothing to say, but they do not know, and that they may not seem to be at a loss [C] they say these things that are commonly said against all philosophers,[1] “the things in the air and the things beneath the earth” and [2] “not to believe in the gods” and [3] “to make the weaker argument the stronger” (23D1–7).

In these texts, therefore, we find the charge 1) that Socrates is a physicist – indeed, Anaxagoras’ name is mentioned later on (26D); 2) that he is a sophist, or rather a Protagorean; 3) that many people have concluded that he “does not recognise the gods”, i.e. that he is an atheist. This leads Meletus into “contradiction”, because either Socrates has invented

---

10 This is a “logical” consequence, given the cases of Anaxagoras and Protagoras, which Socrates was associated with.
new gods or he is an atheist. In the fictitious dialogue, Meletus repeatedly “replies” that Socrates is an atheist. «That is what I say, that you do not believe in gods at all» (26C7); «But, by Zeus, do you think this of me, that I do not believe there is any god? – No, by Zeus, you don’t, not in the least» (26E3–5).

Therefore, Meletus contradicts himself, for he accuses the atheist Socrates of inventing new gods, arguing that the philosopher at the same time believes and does not believe in gods. But the contradiction is not found in the charge itself: Plato has devised it. In such a way the philosopher succeeds in postponing the discussion of the topic of the gods, which requires a more sophisticated treatment (that provided in the Euthyphro) compared to the one he could offer by following Socrates’ self-defence. Moreover, by presenting the two crucial themes, those of education and ways of life, Plato can begin to construct the figure of Socrates as an “embodiment of philosophy”, which is one of the aims of his writings.

Socrates’ defence

Yet it is precisely the presentation of this figure, combined with the need to respect the trial proceedings, that engenders a new contradiction. After receiving his sentence, a person on trial could suggest an alternative punishment from the one proposed by the prosecutors – in this case, the maximum penalty: death. Diogenes Laertius, II, 42, informs us that Socrates first suggested a penalty of 25 drachmas (while noting that according to Eubulides he offered 100); then, when this caused an uproar among the judges, he suggested that he deserved to be maintained at the Prythaneum. As a consequence, Socrates was sentenced to death by 360 votes against 140.11 We do not overestimate the reliability of this source, but the narrative – at least in its general outline – is a logical and consistent one. The same is not true of Plato’s narrative (35E-36A), which states the same things, but then reverses the sequence, making it less logical and – most importantly – less consistent.

11 The astounding thing about this vote is that 80 “judges” who in the first round had deemed Socrates innocent sentenced him to death in the second round.
In the *Apology*, instead of suggesting an alternative penalty, Socrates offers a reflection on what is just and best for him: as a benefactor, he deserves to be maintained at the Prythaneum at the public expense far more than any Olympic winner. Socrates is aware that he might come across as haughty and, in attempt to clarify his point of view, he repeatedly states:

I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged anyone; but I cannot convince you of this (37A5–6).
Since, then, I am convinced that I never wronged anyone, I am certainly not going to wrong myself, and to say of myself that I deserve anything bad, and to propose any penalty of that sort for myself (37B2–5).
Shall I choose one of those things which I know to be evils? (37B7–8).

Out of the three evils mentioned, however, he only establishes that exile and imprisonment are genuine evils, whereas his judgement on the possibility of a fine is far more vague. Still, Socrates confirms:

I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any punishment (38A8-B1).

This is an unequivocal stance, worthy of the figure of the philosopher that Socrates embodies here. However, immediately afterwards he contradicts himself:

If I had money, I would have proposed a fine, as large as I could pay; for that would have done me no harm. But as it is—I have no money, unless you are willing to impose a fine which I could pay. I might perhaps pay a mina of silver. So I propose that penalty; but Plato here, men of Athens, and Crito and Critobulus, and Aristobulus tell me to propose a fine of thirty minae, and they will stand as guarantors. So I propose a fine of that amount (38B1–8).

The question here is that of harm, whereas the previous claims centred on the contrast between good and evil, between committing an injustice and avoiding it. Socrates had stated that he did not wish to commit any wrongdoing against himself, which is what he ultimately does.

This contrast between “two Socrateses”, the historical Socrates and the ideal philosophical one, also occurs on different levels, such as the episte-
mological. On the one hand, we have a Socrates for whom human knowledge is of little worth and who does not pass any judgement because he “does not know”; on the other hand, we have a Socrates who shows he knows many things, including one that is described as true (αληθές) (41C-D). The most evident contrast concerns the way in which the afterlife is judged. Those who fear death behave as though they were wise, when in fact they know nothing at all:

For no one knows whether death be not even the greatest of all goods for the human being, but they fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And is not this the most reprehensible form of ignorance, that of thinking one knows what one does not know? Perhaps, men, in this matter also I differ from other men in this way, and if I were to say that I am wiser in anything, it would be in this, that not knowing very much about Hades, I do not think I know (29A6-B6).

What we are dealing with here is not generic Socratic non-knowing, but a specific claim, so much so that immediately afterwards Socrates states:

But I know that it is evil and disgraceful to do wrong and to disobey him who is better than I, whether he be god or man (29B6–7).

So the Socrates who known he does not know, knows something that concerns the very relationship between gods and human beings. Nor is this a one-off case. The philosopher has other certain opinions (30C-D): he does not believe that a death sentence is an evil, because a better man cannot be harmed by a worse; death and exile are not great evils for him, whereas putting a just man on trial is. This does not apply to death, «about which I say that I do not know whether it is a good thing or an evil» (37B 6–7). At the same time, however, Socrates states that he knows well that all other punishments, such as imprisonment and exile, are evils.

Thus the text ends on a problematic note:

But now the time has come to go away: I go to die, and you to live. But which of us goes to the better thing is known to none but God (42A2–5).

Yet in his third speech to the “judges”, Socrates states something quite different, based on an amazing fact (θαυμάσιόν τι γέγονεν, 40A3), namely
that his daimon has not stopped him; hence, the sentenced inflicted upon him cannot be ranked among the greatest evils (ἔσχατα κακῶν, 40A8):

This which has happened to me is doubtless a good thing, and those of us who think death is an evil must be mistaken. A convincing proof of this been given me; for the accustomed sign would surely have opposed me if I had not been going to meet with something good (40B7-C3).

He continues:

Let us consider in another way also how good reason there is to hope that it is a good thing to die. Now being dead is either of two things: either it is virtually nothingness, so that the dead man has no consciousness of anything, or it is, in accordance with the things that are said, a sort of change and migration of the soul from this to another place (40C3–9).

In both cases the outcome is positive: in the former, we will experience something akin to a sweet, dreamless night; in the latter, we will meet true judges, like Minos and Rhadamanthus, and live in the company of Orpheus, Musaeus, Homer, Hesiod, and other great men of the past.

And the greatest pleasure would be to pass my time in examining and investigating the people there, as I do those here, to find out who among them is wise and who thinks he is when he is not. What price would any of you pay, judges, to examine him who led the great army against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or countless others, both men and women, whom I might mention? To converse and associate with them and examine them would be immeasurable happiness. At any rate, the folk there do not kill people for it; since, if what we are told is true, they are immortal for all future time, besides being happier in other respects than men are here (41B5-C7).

Socrates ends by adding a certainty to this hope:

But you also, judges, must regard death hopefully and must think that this is true (ἀληθές), namely that no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death, and that the gods does not neglect him (41C8-D2).
Indeed, Socrates is certain that nothing occurs by chance and that to die is the best thing for him (βέλτιον, 41D5).

In brief, in the text we find both a Socrates who does not know and one who does, a situation that also occurs in other dialogues, and which is influenced here by the actual unfolding of the legal proceedings. This does not stop Plato, because his aim is to present Socrates as someone who has been sentenced unjustly and yet continues to uphold a way of living that is also put forward in many other dialogues.

Post-eventum prophecies

There is another element which cannot be ignored. Socrates repeatedly states:

For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, like me, whom the god has fastened upon the city (30E1–3)

Another one like me will certainly not easily arise for you, men (31A2).

Socrates fears that the Athenians will sentence him to death and continue to “sleep”, «unless God, in his care for you, should send someone else to you» (31A6–7).

In the third speech, the question crops up again. Indeed, we find a kind of a response, as Socrates addresses those who have sentenced him to death by uttering a real prophecy:

And now I wish to prophesy to you, who have condemned me; in fact I am now at the time when men most do prophesy, the time just before death. And I say to you, ye men who have slain me, that punishment will come upon you straight-way after my death, far more grievous, by Zeus, than the punishment of death which you have meted out to me. For now you have done this to me because you hoped that you would be relieved from rendering an account of your lives, but I say that you will find the result far different. Those who will force you to give an account will be more numerous than hereto-

12 The Greek has an aorist optative, which seems to suggest both a possibility and a wish.
fore; men whom I restrained, though you knew it not; and they will
be harsher, inasmuch as they are younger, and you will be more in-
dignant. For if you think that by putting men to death you will pre-
vent anyone from reproaching you because you do not act as you
should, you are mistaken. That mode of release is neither possible at
all nor noble. Instead, the best and easiest kind is not by cutting oth-
ers’ words short, but by making yourselves as good as possible. So
with this prophecy to you who condemned me I take my leave
(39C1-D9).

How could a young Plato formulate a prophecy such as this, which clear-
ly alludes to “pupils of Socrates” committed to carrying on his mission
in Athens? Is it not more reasonable to assume that this “prophecy” was
written by the founder of the Academy?

Platonic elements

We then have some specific contents that should not be underestimated.
The first element – already mentioned – is Plato’s awareness that he must
discuss the question of education and the topic of religion separately. In
addressing the first topic, Plato must tackle the main issue, namely the
science of the virtue of man and the citizen (20B). In his “dialogue” with
Meletus, Socrates asks who helps youths to improve. First Meletus gives
no answer and then says: the laws. But Socrates notes that he did not ask
“what” but “who”, confirming that this person must first of all (πρῶτον,
24E2) know the laws. The answer is judges, so Socrates concludes that
all Athenians except Socrates are capable of educating the young. Plato is
here outlining a topic on which he will return again and again: citizens
are poor educators and a training in virtue is necessary, but it is more
problematic than what the sophists believe.\footnote{Cf. Migliori 2013 pp. 911–927.}

Socrates does not say who such person might be, but takes the oppor-
tunity to emphasise that such a person differs from rhetoricians and
sophists. He repeatedly denies (19D-20E, 31B-D, 33A-34B) that he wish-
es to teach others and receive money from them, unlike the sophists (he
mentions Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias, significantly omitting Protago-
The most radical contrast actually emerges from Socrates’ very first words: the accusers’ speech was wonderful and so convincing that he almost forgot himself. However, it was not a truthful speech (ἀλήθες, 17A4). In particular, the accusers lied by stating that he is a good speaker, which is false unless indeed they call a clever speaker the one who speaks the truth (τάλητʰή); for if this is what they mean, I would agree that I am an orator – but not after their sort. Now they, as I say, have said little or nothing true (ἀληθῶς); instead you shall hear from me the whole truth (πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν). Not, however, men of Athens, speeches finely tricked out with words and phrases, as theirs are, nor carefully arranged, but you will hear things said at random with the words that happen to occur to me. For I trust that what I say is just (17B4-C3).

We might think that what we have here is simply an autobiographical reference, but the text confirms that this is a theoretical element occurring in numerous dialogues: the contrast between a kind of rhetoric that is merely designed to persuade and one that respects the truth. As usual, Socrates will speak so that his listeners may consider whether what I say is just (δίκαια) or not; for this is the virtue of a judge, while the orator’s virtue is to speak the truth (τάλητʰή) (18A4–6).

The contrast between different ways of life

Finally, Plato embarks on a lengthy discussion that has no direct connection with the charge brought against Socrates. Someone might ask Socrates whether he does not regret having devoted himself to a pursuit that has exposed him to the risk of death; to such a person Socrates would answer:

You do not speak well, my friend, if you think a man in whom there is even a little merit ought to consider danger of life or death, and

14 According to Diogenes Laertius. II, 40–41, Socrates turned down the speech Lysias had written for him (Xenophon too recounts that Socrates refused to prepare a speech).
not rather regard this only when he does things, if they are right or wrong, and acts of a good or bad man (28B5–9).

Therefore, in accordance with the truth (τῇ ἀληθείᾳ, 28D6), a man must remain wherever he has chosen to station himself or has been stationed, be it by his commander in battle or by the will of the gods. This was the case with Socrates, who had to live as a philosopher. Had he refrained from philosophising out of fear of death, he would indeed have proven himself to be an atheist and someone who disregards the oracle’s words (29A). Philosophy, therefore, emerges as a way of serving the God and the city, starting with the Pythias’ response. This point is reaffirmed when he addresses the citizens of Athens, who – Plato surmises – might possibly be willing to disregard Anytus’ accusation if only Socrates agreed to cease philosophising:

Citizens of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting and warning anyone I may meet, saying in my accustomed way: “Excellent man, you are a citizen of Athens, the greatest of cities and the most famous for wisdom and power: are you not ashamed that you care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honour, when you neither care nor give thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul (φρονήσεως δὲ καὶ ἀληθείας καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς)?” (29D2-E3).

If anyone disagrees, Socrates will submit him to elenchos, and he will do so because there is nothing more important than this service to the God:

For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls, or even so much; and I tell you: “Virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both in the private and in the public sphere” (30A7-B4).

Socrates further confirms that he cannot relinquish philosophy:

For if I say that such conduct would be disobedience to the god and that therefore I cannot keep quiet, you will think I am jesting and will not believe me; and if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and ex-
aming myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that a life without research is not worth living by a human being, you will believe me still less. Yet the things are as I say, men (37E5–38A7).

Again in the second speech Socrates states that he has never entered politics because this would soon have led him to death, which would not have been of much help to anyone:

instead I devoted myself to conferring upon each citizen individually what I regard as the greatest benefit, as I said, by trying to persuade anyone that in order to become really good and wise you don’t have to take care of your own things before yourself, and likewise not even the interests of the city before the city itself, and so on for other things (36C3-D1).

Most significantly, Socrates here foreshadows a distinctly Platonic theme which links virtue, philosophy, and happiness. Socrates deserves the Prytaneum more than any Olympic athlete:

For he makes you seem to be happy, whereas I make you happy in reality (36D9-E1)

Finally, we have the distinction between divine wisdom and human knowledge (the man is always exclusively philo-sopher). The moment Socrates attempts to pinpoint the causes of the slander against him, he displays his wisdom – a human form of wisdom, whereas the sophists possess “higher” wisdom, if they know virtue and are capable of teaching it. Socrates’ enquiry, therefore, is precisely designed to show the limits of this “human wisdom”. It is in such terms that Socrates interprets the Delphic oracle:

but the fact is, men, it is likely that the god is really wise and by his oracle means this, namely that human wisdom is of little or no value. And it appears that he does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: “This one of you, human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth he is worth nothing with respect to wisdom” (23A5-B4).
Hence, Socrates has chosen to come to the god’s aid (23B7) by showing that no one is wise (in an absolute sense) – as Plato will argue again in the *Laws*.\textsuperscript{15}

4. Conclusion

Obviously, not one of the arguments presented here constitutes an adequate demonstration. Indeed, no argument could. “Demonstrations” in hermeneutics are miracles, and as such they are necessarily very rare. The real problem lies elsewhere. Given the data I have schematically highlighted, which is the most likely hypothesis: 1) this is a youthful text written by a philosopher who is searching for his path, and who shows himself to have certain limits and to be closely dependent on his master; 2) this is a text through which a mature Plato addresses the citizens of Athens in order to recall the crime committed, to assert his role in carrying on the religious-educational function of his master, and to start outlining some of the underlying themes in his own thought?

My answer is clear, particularly in the light of the “game” involving Meletus’ charge and that strange “prophecy”, but especially because I am capable of performing the same operation on all the dialogues from the first period. Regrettably, I can only hope that the Good Lord will give me the time and means to write that text too.

\textsuperscript{15} On this crucial co-presence of two concepts of knowledge and truth, absolute and relative, see the seventh essay in this book (*A Hermeneutic Paradigm for the History of Ancient Philosophy: the Multifocal Approach*, pp. 110-130) and Migliori 2018.