

1

THE PLACE OF PHILOSOPHY

In this first chapter, I wish to discuss what is at once perhaps the most pervasive locus for the presence of the theme of finitude and transcendence in the dialogues, and at the same time the condition for all the other manifestations thereof.⁹ I refer to a crucial aspect of the dramatic element in the dialogue form, the “place” of each dialogue. I take the notion of place, as the dialogues themselves do, in a double sense. In a narrow sense, it can refer to the spatial location of the dialogue, such as a private home, a jail, or the agora. Or, the sense of place can be sufficiently broad to include the “situation” in which we find ourselves, the occasion for our being there, and the people with whom we interact. This broad sense is implicit in English usage, as when we say “a woman’s place is in the house...and senate.”

In this chapter, I shall touch on the narrower sense of place as spatial location but shall focus on the significance of “place” in the broader sense of “situation” alluded to above, namely, the way in which the *Umwelt*, the “environment” that occasions each dialogue, is used by Plato to open up the themes of finitude and transcendence. One must note the irony that notwithstanding the pervasive presence of “place” in the Platonic dialogues, when scholars turn to a thematic treatment of this issue, they too often ignore its manifest presence in the dramatic context of every dialogue and turn instead to the more abstract and often explicitly mythical speeches about “space,” such as the famous discussion

9. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the Metaphysical Society of America conference held in March 1991 at Pennsylvania State University. A later version appears as “Potentiality and Presence: The Significance of Place in the Platonic Dialogues,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1994): 28–43.

in the *Timaeus*. In doing so, they do justice neither to place nor to Plato.¹⁰

Perhaps the single most distinguishing feature of the Platonic dialogue compared to other formats of philosophic writing is that the dialogue always begins in a specific place, a specific situation, within which the limitations as well as the possibilities of each dialogue arise. In this the Platonic dialogue is realistic in a way matched by no other philosophic writing, quite especially the dominant one, the philosophic essay or treatise. All of our own philosophic discussions take place (note the phrase) in a specific place, on a specific occasion, and what is said in the conversation is always tinged by that situation; both its potentialities and its limitations are literally de-fined by the place of its presence. Most contemporary philosophic treatises and essays, of course, are usually presented as if the place of their saying were irrelevant, as if they were said, literally, in no place; but a moment's reflection reveals that this is pretense. Although it is rarely treated as an issue in its own right, we do speak, for example, of "American philosophy," "German philosophy," or "British empiricism," thus identifying, however superficially, certain philosophical positions by the place of their origin.¹¹ Perhaps more important is the striking and increasing dominance of the university as the place of so much of contemporary philosophy, and derivative from that, the near hegemony of the article or the book as the locus of written philosophical discourse, even when most of those writings remain silent or, more often, unself-conscious about such influences.¹²

Surely Plato could claim to be the realist on this issue, teaching by example that there is truly no such thing as abstract

10. For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Paul Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), esp. chaps. 14, "Plato as Physicist," and 15, "Plato as Geographer."

11. So-called continental philosophy is a good example of the superficiality of these labels, since most of it seems now to be done in the United States. I am indebted to Bob Pippin for this example.

12. A separate and disturbing work could be written on the negative effects of the conventions of the academy on philosophy in the last few centuries.

philosophy, philosophy that occurs in no place, philosophy the *topos* of which has no significance for the content of the thought. One might profitably begin the process of understanding the role of place in the dialogues by developing a topology of the places in which dialogues occur. Here is a brief list:¹³

Apology: lawcourt of Athens

Crito: prison

Phaedo: prison

Charmides: Palaestra of Taureas

Laches: apparently a public place, unspecified

Lysis: Palaestra of Miccus (between the Academy and the Lyceum!)

Euthyphro: on the steps of the Stoa Basilike (near the agora)

Menexenus: on the streets near the agora

Hippias Minor: apparently in a private home

Ion: apparently a public place, but unspecified

Gorgias: agora

Protagoras: frame: agora; contents: home of Callias

Meno: unspecified, but possibly a palaestra

Euthydemus: frame: possibly at Crito's house; contents: Lyceum

13. I use the dialogues translated in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, in their order, and with thanks to an unnamed reviewer for suggesting that I present the list. For an insightful discussion of the "universe" of the Platonic dialogues, see Diskin Clay, "Gaps in the 'Universe' of the Platonic Dialogues," and the largely supportive commentary by Mitchell Miller, "Commentary on Clay," in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 3, ed. John J. Cleary (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 131–64.

Cratylus: unspecified

Phaedrus: outside of town, on the banks of the Ilissus

Symposium: first frame: unspecified; second frame: between Phalerum and downtown Athens; contents: Agathon's house

Republic: first frame: unspecified; second frame: Piraeus; contents: house of Cephalos

Theaetetus: frame: Euclides's house; contents: a palaestra

Parmenides: frame: agora, then Antiphon's house; contents: house of Pythodorus

Sophist: apparently same palaestra as *Theaetetus*

Statesman: apparently same palaestra

Philebus: unspecified, probably indoors

Timaeus: unspecified, presumably a private home

Critias: same as *Timaeus*

Laws: walking outdoors, in Crete (from Knossos to the Cave of Zeus)

Epinomis: unspecified, presumably in Crete

Hippias Major: indefinite location in Athens

The place of a discussion can have an effect on its content in a number of ways. At the most concrete level, for example, whether it is an extraordinary place, laden with drama, or a more everyday place can have a direct effect both on the subject of a conversation and on what is said about it. A dialogue that takes place at a trial, or on the day of one's death, will have an altogether different nuance and impact from one that takes place, say, at a private party or while walking in the country. What are the chances that a discussion we might have together would have the same topic, or that we would say the same things in the same way, if it took place at a party where one of us was celebrating the winning of a MacArthur Award, as opposed to its taking place in

a jail, where one of us was imprisoned for civil disobedience? Plato's writing exhibits the conviction that the place of a dialogue is nothing incidental to the content or character of the discussion that ensues therein. Once we recognize this truth, we can see that even those occasions when the context of a discussion seems ordinary and everyday, such that it does not seem so dramatically to affect the discussion, even that becomes significant in contrast to the more striking alternatives. Sometimes, and we see this reflected in several Platonic dialogues, we are vouchsafed a "free space" for discussion, where the place of our talk determines and so confines what is said less than it sometimes does.¹⁴

A crucial dimension of place in the broader sense surely must be the "time" of the dialogue. It goes without saying that anything that happens in a place also happens at a given time. Strictly speaking, therefore, I should say that in the dialogues place in the narrower sense is co-primordial with time. The dramatic date of various dialogues (as opposed to the speculation as to the date of their composition by Plato) should be significant in our interpretations. The relative age of Socrates (for example, that he is a precocious adolescent when his juvenile "theory of forms" is refuted in the *Parmenides*), is, or should be, an important element in our understanding of that dialogue. Or consider the usually ignored fact that Plato has Socrates engage in at least eight dialogues (counting "The Philosopher") during the last fortnight or so of his life.¹⁵ Surely the sense of urgency that would mark those last days should be a factor in our understanding of those dialogues, as it would be in a similar event in our own lives; but how many commentators on those dialogues take account of

14. Though we must always wonder whether such "everydayness" is not more insidious than innocent. Consider again the undramatic but altogether powerful and not always beneficial effect of the university and its conventions on contemporary philosophic discourse, written and oral.

15. The dialogues are *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, "Philosopher," *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. It is to be noted that those dialogues range throughout the conventional chronology of their supposed composition by Plato, from "early" ones such as the *Crito* or *Euthyphro* to "late" ones such as the *Sophist* or *Statesman*.

those existentially powerful factors? Clearly, then, the dramatic time of the dialogues is an important aspect of its "place" in the broader sense.

The place of a dialogue can also take on symbolic significance, especially as it is employed in the literary artifact which is the Platonic dialogue. Dialogues that take place in gymnasia invite reflection on the dominance of the body in our lives and on our speech, on the possibilities and the limitations conferred by embodiment.¹⁶ Or they could invoke the theme of play. The playful eroticism of the opening scene in Plato's *Charmides* and the appropriateness therefore of the particular discussion of the nature of *sophrosyne* that ensues, could hardly be imagined, say, at a funeral, or at a trial for one's life. Dialogues in prisons invoke the theme of constraint, coercion, or the urgency conferred by impending death, even when nothing is explicitly mentioned concerning those topics. Dialogues in the agora remind us that philosophy must confront the public, even if that confrontation is fraught with tension and danger.

As a somewhat extended example of the significance of place in the Platonic dialogues, let us briefly consider the opening scene of the *Republic*.¹⁷ The dialogue begins, "I went down yesterday to the Piraeus...." When we couple this statement with what soon happens, that after the festival Socrates wishes to go back up to Athens but is constrained by his companions, however playfully, to remain down in the Piraeus and discuss the nature of justice, we recognize that Plato has set the dialogue up so as directly to reflect the situation that he later suggests will confront the philosopher in the cave analogy, who, once escaped from the cave, must be coerced to go back down into it in order to lead the people in the direction of a just city. The element of constraint is of special significance here. Just as the philosopher-king of the

16. Not to mention the significance of the fact that this "place of nakedness," a place for bodily exercise, should become a center of social life for Athenian males.

17. The gist of what I note here has already been discussed by writers such as Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom in their work on the *Republic*, but I repeat it here with special emphasis on the significance of place for what ensues.

cave analogy will participate in politics only under constraint, so Socrates conducts the very dialogue that presents that teaching under conditions of constraint himself. We would be mistaken to take this symmetry merely as literary flare on Plato's part. Would Socrates have said the same things about justice without the same coercive conditions? Would Plato have written the same things about the tension between philosophy and politics if Socrates had not in his own life fallen prey precisely to those tensions? If we decide that in our own place, for whatever reasons, such tensions between philosophy and politics no longer exist or not in the same way, how should that affect our reading of the *Republic*?

Socrates goes down to the Piraeus with a purpose, to see a religious festival, where he is no less impressed by the foreign, Thracian procession than by the native one. Socrates, we note, has no natural commitment to orthodox piety. Yet he and his companions soon go to the house of Cephalos, who before long leaves the discussion of justice engendered by Socrates, and leaves precisely in the name of orthodox piety: he goes out to perform religious rites. In the discussion soon to take place, Socrates will institute radical reforms, or at least, radical changes, into Athenian religion. In the opening scene, we see that he is no pious respecter of traditional religion, and that those who are so pious, such as Cephalos, simply will not listen to him. We are also invited to remember that Socrates was brought to trial for impiety. As with the tension cited earlier between politics and philosophy, so here, we ask, is the tension between Socrates and conventional religious piety a peculiarity of Socrates and Athenian religion, or is it indicative of a more general and fundamental tension between philosophy and orthodox piety altogether?

Already present in the preceding remarks is an element of place often more decisive than the literal locus of the discussion. 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. We talk about some things, in certain ways, when in the company of professional

philosophers; we talk about other things, in other ways, in different company. These differences, I hasten to add, are not manifestations of hypocrisy. They are rather an indication of a moderate sensitivity to the nuances of human situations and the differences they entail.

Why do we ignore this simple recognition when we turn to the Platonic dialogues, especially since Plato always reminds us of its significance by placing every dialogue in a specific context with specific people who are participating in the discussion? When we read a book of more orthodox philosophic format, such as the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the almost complete absence of reference to context invites us to suppose that Kant is speaking as a "pure mind," that he is speaking universally, that he would say much the same thing to anyone, at any time.¹⁸ We are justified in making no such assumption when we read Platonic dialogues, where the leading interlocutor, and Socrates in particular, always says what he says to *specific* people, to *particular* character types.

Let me again begin by citing some general types of interlocutors, before I reflect on the significance of some particular examples. Consider first dialogues such as the *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and the first book of the *Republic*, where Socrates' primary interlocutor is a professional Sophist, but where impressionable youths are also present. In those situations, Socrates is at his rhetorically most fierce. Not only does he question his interlocutor and call into question his views; he demolishes his opponent, embarrasses and humiliates him, sometimes to the point where we are almost lead to a certain sympathy with the refuted Sophist who suffers Socrates' rhetorical cruelty.

Is Socrates' conduct in these situations simply a function of his polemical character, or is the presence of impressionable youths as important a factor as that of the Sophists? Is Socrates here refuting Sophists in part as therapy for youths? We get a clue when we compare his behavior in other dialogues, where his chief, or at least initial, interlocutors are youths: *Lysis* and *Menexenus* in the *Lysis*, *Charmides* in the *Charmides*, or

18. Or, no less striking, that a specific audience, that of academic philosophy, is silently assumed.

Theaetetus in the dialogue named after him. In these situations, Socrates becomes, in his own famous metaphor, a midwife; his choice of topic as well as his more gentle, maieutic manner is determined by the character of the youths with whom he speaks. With Lysis and Menexenus, two young boys who consider themselves friends, he conducts a dialogue on friendship, gently leading them to the recognition that they don't know what friendship is. With the handsome Charmides, who suffers, strangely, from headaches in the morning (presumably a function of his behavior the night before!), and who will eventually become one of the thirty tyrants, he engages in a dialogue on *sophrosyne*. With the not-so-handsome but intellectually gifted Theaetetus, he discusses the nature of knowledge. In these encounters there is none of the humiliating repetition of questions unanswerable, forcing the interlocutor to publically admit defeat, that we see in Socrates' dialogues with Sophists.

To take a different example, consider Socrates' conduct in the short dialogue, the *Crito*. Socrates is in jail awaiting his death. His friend Crito enters, and the dialogue that ensues takes place between Crito and Socrates alone. That dialogue is decisively determined, I suggest, by the person of Crito and by the project he brings to Socrates' attention. Crito, we note, is an old friend of Socrates, a wealthy businessman who has often been his financial patron. He is no philosopher. Of particular importance is the fact that he has attained early admission to the jail by bribing the guards, and he comes with the news that he has obtained the necessary bribes to assure Socrates' escape, if only Socrates will cooperate. With what kind of man is Socrates here confronted? Crito seems to be following the principle that if he cannot obtain justice (justice as he sees it) by legal means, he shall obtain it by any means at all, and money is the means by which Crito is usually able to obtain what he wants. Socrates then conducts a dialogue with Crito on the injustice of his escaping, the immediate effect of which is that Socrates refuses to escape, but the longer term effect, perhaps, is to restore Crito to his status as an obedient citizen.

As most undergraduates can see, there are a number of curiosities in Socrates' arguments with Crito. There are, in

particular, several obvious lacunae in the arguments which Crito, not being a philosopher or perhaps because of his emotional state at the time, does not observe. For example, at 53b ff, Socrates, speaking in behalf of the laws of Athens, begins his concluding argument as to why he will not leave. Where would he go? He allows two possibilities: he could go to a nearby, civilized city, such as Thebes or Megara, but there his reputation would follow him, and in any case, he would soon be in the same difficulties he suffered at Athens. Or, he could go to a distant, uncivilized city, such as Thessaly, but who would want to live in a city devoid of philosophy? In allowing a nearby, civilized city, or a distant, uncivilized city, Socrates leaves out an obvious alternative, which Crito fails to supply: a distant, civilized city—an alternative for which Socrates would have to develop new arguments.¹⁹ And just in case one needed a geographical reminder, on the previous page, at 53a, Socrates had mentioned just such a city: Crete. Obviously, Socrates is not considering all the arguments for leaving.

He makes this virtually explicit in his closing remarks of the dialogue.

“Be sure, my dear friend Crito, that this is what I seem to hear, as the worshippers of Cybele seem, in their passion, to hear the music of flutes; and the sound of these arguments rings so loudly in my ears *that I cannot hear any other arguments*. And I feel sure that if you try to change my mind you will speak in vain. Nevertheless, if you think that you will succeed, speak.” (54d; my emphasis)

Crito declines and the dialogue ends. But Socrates’ remark is a clear provocation to the reader: what other arguments is Socrates not hearing? Would they, under other circumstances, convince Socrates to escape? We do not know, but we are invited to speculate. Earlier, Socrates had indicated that another reason why it would be unjust for him to escape now is that he has always

19. Richard Kraut, in his often thorough and helpful reading of the *Crito*, passes over this problem; see *Socrates and the State* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 179, 222–23.

been free to try to persuade the laws to change if he so wished (that is, to engage in legislative persuasion), and he has also always been free to leave Athens for another city, but has never done so (*Crito*, 51d, ff). Socrates does not say what his position would be if he lived in a city that did not give him the opportunity to participate in the determination of the laws, or if he lived behind an iron curtain. What would Socrates' response have been if he lived in a nondemocratic regime? Would his arguments be the same? Socrates' arguments for not leaving, that is, quietly *assume* the political structure of a democracy. Perhaps in his life Socrates was a less harsh critic of democracy than he sometimes seems in his speeches.

This much is clear from these closing lines. Socrates, and surely Plato, know well that these arguments presented in the *Crito* are neither abstractly universal nor conclusive. They are not comprehensive, context-neutral arguments against anyone escaping from jail, and they certainly do not present "Plato's position on civil disobedience." But they do succeed in their existential intention; they convince Crito of what, as most students realize, Socrates has himself become convinced long before this discussion with Crito: that it is better for him to remain in Athens and to die.²⁰

One way to put the general point I am making is to say that what the dialogues capture, and what most philosophical essays ignore, is that most of our philosophic discussions are, in a non-pejorative sense of the terms, *ad hominem* and *ad locum*. They take place in given contexts and with given people, and these factors are often determinative both of the content and the manner of our discussion.

It seems clear that Plato was sufficiently impressed by this "existential" aspect of philosophic discourse that he chose to bring it home vividly in all his formal works. But it has rather powerful

20. For a discussion of the *Crito* compatible with my own, see Clifford Orwin's discussion of Richard Kraut's *Socrates and the State*, entitled "Liberalizing the *Crito*: Richard Kraut on Socrates and the State," in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles Griswold (New York: Routledge, 1988), 171–76.

and often ignored consequences for our reading of Plato. If the content and the manner of presentation of the speeches in the dialogues are functions in part of the place and the participants, then we should be far, far more cautious than we usually are about making comprehensive pronouncements about "Plato's philosophy," about, for example, "Plato's criticism of art," "Plato's earlier metaphysics," or "Plato's moral theory." If Plato had such abstract or totalizing philosophic "theories," and wanted to make them available to all readers, he surely could have done it best, as he himself reminds us in the Seventh Letter.²¹ But he does not; he chooses instead to bring home another, perhaps deeper, lesson about philosophic discourse: its irreducibly existential character, that its place and its participants cannot be ignored in reflecting on what is said.

There is an obvious objection that might be raised at this point, one that students of the dramatic aspects of Plato's writing have come to know as "the Aristotle question." If Plato had wanted to be read in the way I suggest, surely Aristotle, his outstanding student of many years, would have understood that. But Aristotle, as we know, has no hesitation about attributing all sorts of abstract pronouncements to Plato—usually promptly to criticize them! If Aristotle read Plato with little or no attention to the dramatic significance of the dialogues, aren't we thereby justified in doing so too?

First, it should be noted that Aristotle more often attacks "the Platonists," presumably of the Academy, than Plato himself or the dialogues in particular. But in any case, second, Aristotle's specific criticisms of Plato would be more of a problem if there were evidence that the Stagirite was trying to be objectively fair to his predecessors, acting as a good historian of philosophy; but there is no such evidence. He is not "fair" in this sense to the pre-Socratics, so why should we expect him to be fair to Plato? Aristotle, in a proto-Hegelian strategy, is interested in his predecessors primarily insofar as they lead partially up to him (Thales and the other Milesians saw the presence of "material cause,"

21. Plato, Seventh Letter, 341d: "Besides, this at any rate I know, that if there were to be a treatise or a lecture on this subject, I could do it best."

Empedocles added "efficient cause," and so on.).²² To read one's predecessors primarily insofar as they prepare the way for your own thought is hardly the basis of an objectively fair reading.

Our own problems in this regard are increased by the historical fact that, over the course of centuries and particularly with the advent of modern philosophy, the essay or treatise form gradually attained dominance as the standard form of philosophic writing. It is important to recognize that such simply was not the case for Plato. He had before him a rich palette of philosophic styles from which to choose. There surely was no standard or conventional format. He had, to be sure, the "Concerning Nature" treatises of some pre-Socratics. But he also had Parmenides' and Empedocles' poems, Heraclitus' aphorisms, and perhaps most important, the rich tradition in Athens of comedy and tragedy. It is fair to assume, then, that Plato's choice of the dialogue form was much more considered and self-conscious than, say, our own choice to write essays. We are therefore justified in asking, as I am, what the philosophic import of his choice of format might be.²³ Finally, Plato surely cannot be blamed for the subsequent historical fact that so dominant did the treatise format become that not only did almost all philosophers adopt it, but that they would read its conventions back into writings such as Plato's dialogues.

I have been arguing that the dramatic aspects of the dialogue form entail that we be much more wary than we usually are about making generalizations regarding Plato's theory of this or that.

22. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book 1, 983b, ff. For an interesting account of this issue which, on the one hand, recognizes that Aristotle's criticisms of his predecessors must be read skeptically, yet on the other hand, argues at length for a certain consistency between his criticisms of Plato and the content of at least the "late" dialogues, see Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Late Ontology: A Riddle Solved* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). I shall address the question of Aristotle's reading of Plato in more detail in my final chapter.

23. In an earlier article, "Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, no. 1, (1968): 38–50, I develop at length a response to this question which focuses on the criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus*.

Am I then saying that Plato's views are missing from the dialogues, that what we get in each case is a collection of relativistic, merely parochial discourses from which no more general lesson can be taken, other than the architectonic lesson about the philosophic significance of place? Not at all. But surely the determination of those more general teachings will be rendered more complex than in the case of treatises. How can we begin making that determination?

In the case of most treatises, we have the philosophic speech and nothing else. The author's teaching, we are invited to assume, is contained in that speech. The Platonic dialogues, by locating each speech in a given place and a given existential context, offer us a richer field of interpretation, more akin to the richness of our own lived philosophic discussions. We still have philosophic speeches, to be sure, and those speeches (*logoi*) will always be decisive in philosophy. But we can now compare them, balance them, perhaps modify them, in the light of what we can call the *local action* of the dialogue. Perhaps "Plato's view" on this or that is located not simply in the specific speeches of this or that person (including Socrates), but also in the interstices, the ironic contrasts, even the contradictions, between speech and action, between what is said in one place, and to one kind of person, and what is said in another place, to another. If Socrates refutes Polemarchus' definition of justice as "helping friends and harming enemies" in book 1 of the *Republic*, yet later employs that very principle as the guideline for the conduct of his "guardians" in the "city in speech," that ought to provoke us to a reflection on the relation between those two scenes. Perhaps a core part of "Plato's teaching" lies in the provocation to reflect on tensions such as these.

We must take note briefly of two other important aspects of the dramatic context of Platonic dialogues. I refer to the very ambiguous presence/absence of Plato, and a parallel presence/absence of the reader. In one sense, Plato, as writer of every dialogue, is always present. Yet, with the curious exception of the *Apology*, where he is said to be present (but silent!), he is never portrayed as actually present at the dramatic place of the dia-

logue.²⁴ In a similar way, the reader is in one sense present at every dialogue, yet in the dramatic sense, always absent.

This raises the possibility of a “hierarchy of places” in the hermeneutics of the Platonic dialogue. There is the place of the dramatic context. But there is also the place of Plato himself as he writes the dialogue, about which we know very little that is helpful. And third, there is the place of the reader, who must always contribute something of the significance of his or her own place in the way the dialogue is interpreted.²⁵

The fact that every dialogue occurs in a specific place and with specific people suggests that every philosophic occasion is limited by its place and those present; yet those very limitations also offer the possibility of the particular dialogue. That finitude, limitation, is inseparable from possibility, that the very factors of limitation are also the factors of possibility, offers, I suggest, at least one larger lesson that we can draw from an examination of the dialogue, one that Plato reiterates in numerous ways. To show this, let me develop this issue further, through a reiteration of the general remarks made in the introduction, in a way which I hope will make clear the crucial role of place in Plato’s larger teaching.

In dialogue after dialogue, as I have argued, Plato suggests dramatically that the occasion of philosophy, and perhaps the human occasion altogether, is almost always one in which we are forced to confront a situationally specific form of finitude, of limitation. In the *Crito*, Socrates is limited by the fact that he is in jail, and that he is confronted by Crito, a nonphilosophic friend who has arranged for him to escape illegally. In the *Phaedo*, he is limited decisively by his impending death, and by the fact that at the beginning of the dialogue everyone present but Socrates himself is wallowing in sorrow—a powerful inhibition indeed to the possibility of philosophy. In the *Republic*, he is limited in part

24. Indeed, in the *Phaedo* he is explicitly mentioned as being absent (*Phaedo*, 59b). I shall develop the significance of this point more fully in the penultimate chapter of this book.

25. Again, since many, if not most, readers of the Platonic dialogues are “placed” in the academy, a critique of the way in which its conventions have confined and limited fruitful reflection could be given here.

by having been constrained to stay when he wished to go home, by the specific character of the individuals who are present, and, especially in book 1, by the necessity of overcoming the dominance of Thrasymachus and his aggressive assertion of the truth of sophistic relativism. In the *Euthyphro*, he is limited by the impending trial, the charge for which he is on the way to answer, as well as by the complacent self-certainty of Euthyphro.

As was adumbrated in the introduction, when we are confronted by finitude, there are a number of ways in which we can respond. One is to try to demolish the limiting condition, to conquer or overwhelm it, to remove its limitation from our lives. In the dialogues, it is often the Sophists who exhibit and even espouse this strategy, and there is no better exemplar of it than the conduct of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, whose rhetorical strategy, an attempt to intimidate and overpower, is a consistent reflection of the position he espouses that "justice is the advantage of the stronger." Or, by way of a second example, consider the striking optimism of Eryximachus in the *Symposium*, whose confidence that human *techne* in its various forms can control not only the "healthy" but even the "diseased" *eros*, and not just in the human body but throughout the cosmos, is at once the informing theme and the decisive defect of his speech. But as Plato has the dialogues make clear, such a belligerent strategy toward finitude is rarely successful.

A second strategy, no less appealing on occasion, is simply to submit to the finitude, to capitulate to it and be dominated by it. In the dialogues, this standpoint is represented often by interlocutors who are unwilling to engage in dialogue with Socrates, who prefer to "stand pat" with their position, neither to question it nor bother to defend it. Philebus is one such person, as are Cephalos and Cleitophon in the *Republic*.²⁶ In more moderate form, Theodorus, so anxious to avoid the challenge of dialogue with Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, or Phaedrus, who seems delighted with any speech whatsoever, or Agathon in the *Symposium*, who

26. As David Roochnik has recently argued, such passivity makes them, in fact, next to impossible to refute; see his "The Riddle of the Cleitophon," *Ancient Philosophy* no. 4, (1984): 132-45.

seems not in the least distressed when Socrates convinces him that he didn't know what he was saying, exhibit this standpoint as well. No less obviously, Plato presents such a strategy as usually unsatisfactory, however pervasive it might be.

There is a third strategy, however, one that on the one hand does not pretend that our finitude can be comprehensively overcome, yet does not on the other hand passively capitulate to it. This is to acknowledge and understand the finitude as what it is, to recognize it in its depth and complexity, but to respond to that limiting condition by transforming it into possibility, to engage in what we may call "finite transcendence."

We see this phenomenon arise in the dialogues in a number of ways, some as explicit aspects of an argument, some in the existential drama of the dialogue. When Glaucon, in his account in *Republic*, book 2, of the origins of the city, characterizes our natural situation as one of radical injustice, of "a war of all against all," he suggests that the "social contract" wherein we agree to be just is a transforming and transcending response to that limitation.²⁷ Even more explicitly, Socrates, in reply, begins his own, very different account of the origins of the city by asserting that "none of us is sufficient for our own needs, but each of us lacks many things."²⁸ Here we see an explicit acknowledgment of our finitude, to which the developing of the city is a transforming, positive response.

Again and again, I suggest, Plato writes his dialogues in such a way that these three strategies or stances are presented, indeed, often, as in book 1 of the *Republic*, in such a way as distinctly to confront each other. So ubiquitous is this presentation, and so consistently is the third option presented as the more fruitful, that it is plausible to suggest that it is an informing theme of Platonic philosophy. As subsequent chapters will show, irony, comedy, and tragedy are all topics whose presence in the dialogues reflects a similar structure, as is, more particularly, the effort to construct a just city out of human incompleteness in the *Republic*.²⁹

27. Plato, *Republic*, 359a–b. See the next chapter for an extended analysis of this and the next point.

28. Plato, *Republic*, 369b.

29. I treat these themes in depth in subsequent chapters.

But surely the most pervasive instance of this theme in the dialogues is the dramatic situation itself. The place in which and the people with whom we find ourselves almost always present us with limitation. Faced with the alternatives of dominance and submission, we are sometimes able to see the situation for what it is, and to make of it a possibility of significance and meaning. When we do, by and large, we live well. Plato again and again brings home to us this lesson by placing his characters in such a limiting situation, and allowing us to watch the effort to transform it into possibility. Let me elicit two examples to which I have already alluded, which I think bring home this point with special force.

Consider again the situation faced by Socrates in the *Crito*. Crito wakes him from what the businessman characterizes as a remarkably comfortable sleep to inform him of the arrangements he has made to assure Socrates' escape. Two massive limitations here confront Socrates. First, he is in jail, and soon to die. Second, his non-philosophic friend, Crito, has made arrangements to accomplish precisely what, as is clear even from the *Apology*, Socrates has decided not to accomplish: his avoidance of death. Given this situation, a number of responses are available. He could, of course, in spite of his better judgment, simply capitulate to Crito's pleas. He could allow himself to be spirited away and spend the rest of his days, not in nearby Thebes or barbarian Thessaly, but in distant, civilized Crete. In so submitting, he would avoid having to persuade Crito otherwise, not to mention avoid suffering an imminent death. Second, Socrates could refuse even to consider the matter; he could retire into one of his well-known intellectual trances, refusing to speak, or he could curtly dismiss Crito, as he soon will curtly dismiss his wife, Xanthippe, on the day of his death, or he could, in the manner of Thrasy-machus, hurl a torrent of insults at Crito for interrupting his sleep.

Instead, as we know, Socrates does something very different. Confronted with this twofold limiting condition, he transforms it into a twofold possibility, the possibility, first, of restoring to his friend his lost sense of what is just and what is unjust, while at the same time, second, engaging in one more philosophic dialogue, one more effort to question the foundations of one's beliefs and

one's actions. The *Crito* is the actualization of that possibility, of that finite transcendence of a limiting situation.

As a second example, consider again the opening scene of the *Republic*. Socrates, wanting to go back up to Athens from the Piraeus, is detained from behind by the slave of Polemarchus and a number of others, and ordered to stay for a party and a horseback race. Once again, a number of paths are open to Socrates, which he does not take. First, as always, there is submission. He could accede to the request, have a good meal, see the race, and then, perhaps, be free to go home. (He would surely have gotten home earlier than he in fact does, given the length of the ensuing dialogue that obviously extends throughout the night.) Second, there is the path of mastery or dominance. He could try refusing to stay, or convincing them to let him go. Indeed, he pretty clearly entertains this possibility at 327c, asking Polemarchus, who had playfully threatened Socrates with the force of their numbers, "what if I persuade you to let me go?" The reply, however playful, is striking given the theme I am invoking: "How can you persuade us if we will not listen?"

What Socrates does, instead, is to transform this limiting condition into the possibility of philosophic dialogue which becomes the *Republic*. He indeed goes to the house of Cephalos, thereby superficially acceding to the demands of Polemarchos and the others.³⁰ But they never make it to the horse race, and the party itself is transformed into a monumental dialogue on justice by the philosopher who had just been unjustly detained from going back up from the "cave" of the Piraeus. For it is unmistakable that it is Socrates himself who determines the course of the discussion. Cephalos, innocently responding to Socrates' penetrating query as to what he thinks the chief benefit of his wealth is, allows that it is the ability to avoid doing injustice by

30. Does Socrates *provoke* the desire for his presence by pretending to be such a reluctant guest, as Mitchell Miller has suggested to me? Consider a similar scene at the beginning of the *Symposium*, where Socrates, by remaining behind on a neighboring portico, seems to provoke the desire for his presence all the more intensely by his sustained absence.

not having to lie and by paying one's debts. Socrates seizes upon this innocent reply as a *definition of justice*,³¹ and the great dialogue begins. Once again, Socrates has transformed what might be considered an inherently unphilosophic situation into yet another occasion for philosophy. Finitude has been turned into possibility, an unphilosophic presence into the potentiality for philosophy.

So, it might be objected, is Plato's thought no longer relevant to us, since what he portrays is limited to situations and issues as they might have arisen in fifth-century Athens? That would be so only if the philosophical predicaments that humans face today are so radically different from those in ancient Athens that there was literally nothing that was said out of those ancient situations that transcends the limitations of specific context and would be applicable to similar situations today. I certainly believe no such thing, nor, surely, did Plato, or why would he have written dialogues for posterity? Again, as I have insisted, we are not merely limited to parochial discussions. It is always possible to transcend the specific situation out of which philosophic discourse arises, to, as we say, generalize from this or that instance; but that transcendence is always *finite*. Part of one's understanding of a given "theory" must always be a consideration of the kind of situations out of which and in terms of which it might arise. But a totalizing or "absolute" theory is impossible.

Then what about the "theories" that have made Plato famous, the theory of forms, Plato's criticism of art, Plato's theory of the state, and so on? We can certainly talk of forms, as characters in Plato's dialogues do. But we must remember that it is we who come to speak of it as an abstract "theory." Plato never does. We do not know whether Plato had such a "theory." We do know that his characters speak from time to time of the necessity of forms, or now of the weaknesses, now of the positive possibilities of art, in response to specific problems and predicaments, and in different ways to different people. I suggest only that we do not forget that reality of the Platonic texts.³²

31. Plato, *Republic*, 331c.

32. In the last chapter I shall address in detail the issue of the transformation of the various discussions of forms in the dialogues into the "theory of forms" of classical scholarship.