

Introduction

Philosophy, as the Greek heritage of the West, comes into being with Plato. The self-questioning associated with Socrates was instrumental in laying the ground for the attempt to find a way out of the one-sided and bipolarly opposite reflections by earlier thinkers—especially the Ionians and the Eleatics—on *what is*. The very form of philosophical reflection beginning with Plato involves such self-criticism in a fundamental manner. Of course, this does not mean that Platonic philosophy can simply be reduced to such self-criticism, but the establishment of the specific *topoi* that make up this philosophy, especially after Socrates' turn away from the philosophy of nature, is intrinsically tied to it. However, although it is broadly recognized within the living tradition of the Platonic legacy in the West, self-criticism has been a rare commodity in its history. Nevertheless, some of Plato's dialogues have bequeathed on the West an even more formidable challenge: the challenge of not only being open to criticism from strangers, but allowing, or rather explicitly inviting, criticism of oneself by a stranger. If self-criticism is a rare thing, openness to such an unheard-of request is an even rarer thing. It presupposes tying, in a constitutive way, one's own identity to the intervention of a stranger, which in the same breath bestows upon him or her a unique status. Yet, this is precisely what is staged in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, two late dialogues of Plato—that is, in works that are an integral part of the philosophical corpus of the Western tradition. Thus, this makes self-criticism, and the relation to oneself as one implicating otherness, an essential feature of Western philosophy. Self-criticism demands that one be other to oneself—ultimately, a stranger to oneself—and thus prepares the ground on which a foreigner or stranger can be invited to accomplish what normally one shies away from doing, that is, critically uprooting oneself. Undoubtedly, the Western tradition has not always lived up to—or, rather,

has more often than not ignored—this unprecedented beginning in Greek thought at its own core. But, I hold, when in the *Sophist* and then again in the *Politikos* Socrates withdraws and falls silent, leaving the word to the *xenos eleates*—a radical stranger, since nothing whatsoever is known about him except that he is from Elea and hence, as the occasion demands, is familiar with Eleatic thought, but is not in any way necessarily an adherent of Parmenides himself—Socrates (meaning also Plato) allows a stranger to call into question the foundations of all Greek thought hitherto, and in particular one of its several tribal streams, that is, the thought of Parmenides. With the *Sophist*, Greek philosophy becomes grounded on what the Stranger himself, though denying it—that is, also affirming it—calls a parricide, the parricide of the *patrikos logos*, “father Parmenides,” one of the major fathers of philosophical thought in Greece so far. Although one may argue that the new way of philosophizing sketched out by the Stranger in the two dialogues where he heads the discussion (namely, his doctrine of “the greatest kinds”—that is, of the minimal intelligible building blocks of philosophical thinking and speech—and his discussion of the nature of the statesman) is not entirely new, since it has some antecedents in earlier Platonic dialogues—particularly in the *Theaetetus*, as we will see—the dramatic dimension of having a stranger explicitly develop a conception of philosophizing that is other than native, and that breaks with any native authority, has *in all its radicality* to be taken seriously.

The *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* form a cycle: the dialogues take place over two consecutive days at the same location, and the protagonists remain identical throughout, except for a stranger who joins them for the last two discussions, in which he figures as the principal examiner, thus replacing Socrates, who remains silent throughout both. The topic of the first dialogue concerns the nature of knowledge. Attempting to answer Socrates' question of what knowledge is, Theaetetus proposes three definitions: knowledge is perception; knowledge is true opinion; and, finally, knowledge is true opinion with an account. Socrates refutes the first “sensualist” definition as self-contradictory, in that it implies that one can simultaneously know and not know something.¹ But in the course of the examination of this definition, both Socrates and the young Theaetetus arrive at the conclusion that, rather than being generated in sense-perception, knowledge is generated by the soul, which highlights what is “common” to sense-perceptions and its objects. The second thesis—that knowledge is true opinion—is found lacking because it is unable to explain satisfactorily how false opinion arises, a question intrinsically intertwined with it. The third attempt at defining

knowledge—as true opinion with an account or an explanation—falls short of its expectation as well: indeed, if giving an account means only to express in words, to enumerate the elementary parts of a known thing, or to furnish the differential mark of some particular thing, this is not sufficient to define knowledge if knowledge is not primarily to be about sensible objects, but instead about what the soul focuses on as what is common to all things.

Since the question of what a philosopher is has been raised at the beginning of the *Sophist*, Socrates asks the Stranger in this dialogue to elaborate on the differences of the philosopher from figures such as the sophist, the statesman, and the madman, under whose appearances he manifests himself to the common folk in the cities. In the *Sophist*, the question of knowledge raised in the previous dialogue is pursued not only with regard to the knowledge in which the sophist pretends to excel, but also by way of showing knowledge to consist in the definition of its object: that is, in finding, through a process of division, the genre or class to which its object belongs. In the *Statesman*, the Stranger makes a similar attempt at defining statesmanship.² Before moving on, however, let me first provide a succinct description of what the *Sophist* is about. If pinpointing the sophist by way of a definition is an ardent task, it is so particularly because he rejects being classified as an imposter who simulates wisdom, an allegation he counters by arguing that there is nothing such as false pretense or falsehood. Untruth presupposes Non-being. However, in order to counter his definition as a sayer of untruths, the sophist calls on Parmenides, who argued that, in distinction from Being, it is impossible to speak of Non-being, and thus that there is no falsehood in what he teaches. To come to grips with this claim, the Eleatic Stranger therefore faces the task of showing how deceitful imitation and false statements are possible, a demonstration that involves a refutation of the whole tradition of pre-Socratic philosophical reflection in Greece, including above all that of Parmenides' doctrine on Being and Non-being. The refutation, which is compared to a parricide, must show that in addition to Being, Non-being also, in a way, *is*. The Stranger accomplishes this by way of a turn to language, to Being and Non-Being as discursive forms—more precisely, forms belonging to the order of the eidetic building blocks of discursive speech. In his doctrine of “the greatest kinds,” which comprise Motion, Rest, Otherness, and Sameness, Non-being is everything Being is not, and becomes part of the greatest kinds insofar as it names Otherness. Some of these “kinds,” or forms, connect with all other kinds, whereas others only blend with some of them. It is this understanding of the interconnection between them—and lack thereof—that allows for the

possibility of discursive truth and untruth. Falsehood is not a statement about Non-being in the sense of the not existing, but is rather a statement that connects discursive forms that are incompatible. With this conclusion, the sophist's hiding behind the cover of Parmenides is dispelled, and he can be pinned down as a deceptive imitator of knowledge that he does not possess.

In order to define the statesman, the dialogue about him takes as its departure an inquiry into knowledge, which is separated into practical and theoretical knowledge. The statesman's art is found to reside in the theoretical arts, specifically in the injunctive arts that are instrumental to all engendering of something, as opposed to the discriminating arts, which are limited to judging the validity of an insight. Yet, when the process of division along these lines leads to the conclusion that the statesman is a shepherd in charge of the well-being of featherless bipeds, the Stranger interrupts the division to recount a myth to Young Socrates, his present interlocutor. This tale describes the age of Cronus in which the god, like a shepherd, nurtured human beings in all respects, in contrast to the present age, in which he has withdrawn and in which human beings must care for themselves, invent ways of living together, and rule themselves, including the art of statesmanship as an exclusively human art. If, at this point in the dialogue, the Stranger evokes the art of weaving, it is in order to be able to proceed to another mode of division, as a result of which the statesman—now recognized as possessing the human art for the ordering of human beings into a commonwealth—can be neatly separated off from all of those who have, or pretend to have, a part in the actual governing of a state. Already, before the Stranger brings up the myth, the question had been raised in the dialogue of the shortness or excessive length of certain developments, which leads in the second part of the dialogue to an inquiry into "true measure." This is the knowledge that, in addition to true opinion, the statesman must possess if he is, as will be shown, to weave the contrary virtues of human beings into a lasting social web. With this knowledge, which is specifically that of the statesman, the class finally has been found in which he is at home.

It is my firm conviction that examining the role of the Stranger in these late Platonic dialogues, as well as what already in the *Theaetetus* foresees his arrival, is not merely an academic exercise. It is also this, of course, but more than ever it is a question that concerns the thick of current debates. If what, since Plato, is called philosophy would prove to require a constitutive place and time for the Stranger, and if Plato's deferral to a stranger of the inquiry into a truly democratic policy is not accidental, such an examination of seminal texts in the history of Western thought and politics cannot but

be important. In spite of the historical neglect by the West of the exigencies that come with this founding concern of such canonical texts, this concern confronts the West with demands that determine it from the beginning.

From the start, my reading of the trilogy is predicated on the contention that the Stranger, in the last two dialogues, is not merely a dramatic figure in the same way as the other protagonists, including the several other strangers that appear in the dialogues. What characterizes him is not his dramatic or literary function alone which, in these dialogues, is kept at an absolute minimum.³ Instead, the distinctive role that he plays in the dialogues in question is theoretical. The status he enjoys as a stranger is philosophical. As a stranger and a foreigner, he himself is an argument, as it were, within the argument that is made in the dialogues themselves. Indeed, as a stranger he is intimately implicated in what will be established henceforth in these dialogues as philosophy and statesmanship. But such implication also lodges a space and time of otherness in philosophical and political thought, one in which the presence of the other forbids any unifying closure.

Hannah Arendt reminds us that it was the Romans who, after having established their political existence on the founding event of the Republic, wanted to provide themselves with an equally authoritative and binding foundation in matters of theory, thought, and poetry by turning to the legacy of Greece, and thus invented, if I may say so, Greece as an authority in spiritual matters. Therefore, one may wonder: is it not the legacy of the Romans that has bestowed upon Europe the idea that Greece is not only its origin but also, in this capacity, a unified origin?⁴ Indeed, the concern—if not obsession—with beginnings is not Greek but Roman in essence. As Arendt also reminds us, only the Romans had a god of beginnings: Janus.⁵ Without the Romans, what happened in Greece might have remained without consequences as far as Europe is concerned; but it is also the case that the Roman legacy bestowed upon Europe a conception of Greece as a unique and unified event not unlike the founding event of the Roman body politic. But was Greek civilization indeed a phenomenon so unified that it can be construed in terms of a beginning that remains authoritative and constitutive for a tradition throughout the history of the West? Let me refer here to the subtitle of Christian Meier's book *A Culture of Freedom* (in the original, *Griechische Anfänge—Anfang Europas?*). Its English translation, which gives the subtitle as *Ancient Greece and the Origins of Europe*, does not render the question posed by the subtitle, namely, whether the multiple beginnings of Greece are the beginning of Europe, and even more generally, what exactly the relations are between Greece and Europe.⁶ The

subtitle of this book, written for a cultivated but broad audience by an eminent historian of Greek political thought, bespeaks the multiple beginnings comprising Greek civilization and, in doing so, suggests that Greece is the beginning of Europe, not as a unified origin, but precisely by virtue of the plurality of the beginnings that make up its history and culture. The specific form of cultural formation without monarchs that characterizes archaic Greece, and that is maintained throughout Greece's history, is the unheard-of frame for the progressive political consolidation of increasingly broader segments of the population. This process, accompanied by a mode of thinking whose focus concerns the form of the *polis*, is punctuated by an array of radically new beginnings. Among the most important of them, I mention Cleisthenes' far-reaching reform of the *phylai*, the divisions based on kinship, a reform that amounted to a refounding of Athens in 507 BC. Fifty years after his modification of the institutional structure of the *polis*, as a result of the introduction of the equality (*isonomia*) of both aristocrats and the bulk of the citizenry, Athens was the first in Greece to make another beginning with the introduction of democracy. Another example of these new beginnings is when, with the victory at Marathon over the Persians—a power of continental dimensions—the tiny Greek city states, under the guidance of Athens, achieved hegemony over the whole of the Mediterranean.⁷ These multiple beginnings of Greece entrust the beginning of Europe, and more generally the West, with a heritage that, because of its manifoldness, is not—unlike the Roman heritage—unified and imperial. As emphasized by the title and, in fact, by Meier's study as a whole, the plurality of beginnings in Greece is the result of a culture that pivots around a concern with freedom, not in the sense of private free space, but as that which brings its citizens together in a common space, and as the incentive (or chance) for living a way of life entirely different from that lived by all its historical neighbors. Even though these neighbors were recognized for their high cultural accomplishments, the Greeks despised them for their despotic structures. As Meier points out, Greek history and culture are characterized by “something unique in world history” of which no other example can be found in the preceding history of the world, namely, “a grand experiment in living life, under difficult circumstances, without a single ruling force,” and this also means a life devoted to making such a life “possible and to secure it, producing themselves everything they needed for it.”⁸ The following reflections on Greek philosophy take off from the assumption that Greek philosophical thought, like its history and culture, is not a unified but rather a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, in order

to bring into relief one among its beginnings that yields to the concern with freedom from rulership not only in the domain of thought, but in that of political life as well. This form of philosophical and political thought at the beginnings of Greece could, precisely because it has not been heeded, perhaps be construed as an inheritance in wait for the (future) beginning not only of a certain Europe, but also, in more general terms, of the West.

I do not question the claim that Greece is the origin or, at least, one of the most important beginnings of Europe. I do wish, however, to reconsider here what of Greece has been construed as the origin of Europe or the West, in light of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*—two of Plato's late dialogues that, because of their complexity and difficulty, have not received as much attention with respect to the question of Europe as other Platonic discourses—in order to show that even within Platonic thought (commonly considered to be the source of Platonism, that is, the practice beginning with Aristotle of interpreting Plato's thought as a two-world doctrine, a practice which, essentially, has commanded Western philosophy) new starts are made. More precisely, these starts are radically innovative to the extent that they demand a systematic interrogation not only of the tradition of philosophical beginnings in Greece but also of what in Greece was considered to be one of the most heinous crimes, namely, a parricide intimately linked to these novel beginnings—in our case, the parricide of a father of Greek philosophy. Significantly enough, the author of this new beginning of philosophizing *within* the Platonic dialogues in question—in short, within Greek philosophical texts themselves—is a stranger. Let us not in the following ever lose sight of the amazing fact that Plato, a Greek thinker, charges a stranger to uproot this Greek thing that is philosophy from the bottom up; for, indeed, if Greece is the prime beginning of Europe, the task of self-questioning is precisely what has been bequeathed to Europe. Throughout the dialogues, this stranger is simply referred to as the Stranger (*o xenos*). Although that which is strange or foreign does not yet constitute a fundamental concept of classical philosophy, and even less so a concept of the Other in the sense of the human other, the prominence of the Stranger in these Platonic dialogues, as well as the radical overhaul of all philosophical thought to which he proceeds, represents another beginning in Greek thought itself that, even though its legacy is perhaps the least attended to, I propose to consider as the beginning of a certain Europe, another Europe or a Europe to come.⁹

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates recalls that as a young man he had an extraordinary passion for the natural sciences as they were developed at the time by the Ionian philosophers. From its rational account of nature, in particular by

Anaxagoras, who had come from East Asia to Athens, Socrates hoped to find the answers to all questions. But, as he confides to Cebes, this wonderful hope was soon dashed when he realized that Anaxagoras made no use of reason as a principle, and instead explained everything by way of air, ether, and water. It is at this point that Socrates decides to abandon physical investigations, and begins instead to work out his “own makeshift approach to the problem of causation”—in short, what is generally referred to as “his second sailing” or “second best journey” (*deuteros plous*)—by having “recourse to theories [or, more precisely, to the discourses or *logoi* of others], and use them in trying to discover the truth about things.”¹⁰ By thus cross-examining the thoughts of others who claim to know what things are, Socrates pursues his quest for knowledge throughout the dialogues. In the *Theaetetus*, the whole problematic of Socratic midwifery further dramatizes this dependency on others whose thoughts or speeches on philosophical matters he helps to deliver in order to subject them to the art that is his own—that of cross-examination, or the elenctic art—to judge whether they are genuine or nonsense. Now, the others whose speeches about the nature of things Socrates examines are fellow others, or citizens of other regions within Greater Greece—some foreigners, no doubt, if from a different city than Athens, but never complete strangers. In Plato, it is never unimportant who the protagonists are that, for having expressed certain opinions regarding philosophical or political subjects, and hence an alleged knowledge about them, are to be cross-examined. Therefore, it certainly cannot be indifferent if a total foreigner is introduced in two dialogues. Compared to all non-Athenians or unnamed protagonists who appear in Plato’s works, the Stranger in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* is expressly referred to as *the* Stranger. His anonymity, his lack of facial and bodily characteristics, or even of all resemblances—that is, his lack of a specific “look”—and even the uncertainty regarding his origin, is the way in which Plato provides him with the features, however negative, that paradoxically make him into a concrete personality.¹¹ As a *xenos* he is, in a way, a concretely and fully determined *dramatis persona*.

Let us also remind ourselves that in the *Phaedo*, in the context of the question regarding the immortality of the soul, Simias and Cebes ask Socrates, now that he is about to leave them for good, who would be capable of charming their fears of death away. Socrates tells them that though “Greece is a large country [. . .] which must have good men in it, [. . .] there are many foreign races (*barbaron gene*) too.”¹² There are plenty of “good men” among both foreigners and Greeks who could accomplish the task of which, so far, Socrates has been in charge. In one of the few places in the

dialogues where Plato compares Socrates' own rhetorical skills to those of chant-singers, speechmakers, and magicians (*epoidos*), Socrates recommends that his students should ransack both Greece and foreign countries in search of an enchanter who, after his imminent death, could dispel the spell that has been cast on their inner child. But Socrates acknowledges here also a similarity between, on the one hand, the philosophical help he provided to his students and, on the other, the arts of enchanters. Indeed, in the *Euthydemus*, the same word for enchanting is used to characterize the art of persuasion as an *epoidon techne*.¹³ In anticipation of the Stranger's declaration in the *Statesman* that barbarians (that is, non-Greeks) are not another kind of species than human beings, Socrates thus acknowledges in the *Phaedo* that among foreign others are men as skilled as native Greek others. The question that arises therefore is whether, after having examined the *logoi* of numerous others about philosophical matters—and specifically, in the case of Theaetetus, a young Athenian lavishly praised by his teacher for his outstanding intellectual abilities—without however arriving at a satisfactory answer regarding the nature of knowledge, Socrates is not thereby driven at the end of the *Theaetetus* to welcome a complete stranger, listen to him, and let himself and the other participants be enchanted and persuaded in complete silence through the two following dialogues.

But why must Plato make room for a *complete* stranger who, rather than being another interlocutor for Socrates to grill, instead examines in turn the personalities of Theaetetus and Young Socrates, if not even that of Socrates himself, and is in fact invited explicitly to do so by his Athenian hosts? At this juncture, it may be warranted to recall that ancient Greece knew different types of strangers. In Athens, the numerous *metics*, or *metoikoi*, were settlers from abroad representing a significant source of manpower and skilled labor. Having a recognized place in the *polis*, they enjoyed both privileges and duties, unlike other permanent foreigners who had not attained the status of *metics*. Distinct from those two categories of strangers were the temporary foreign visitors welcomed by the city, and not only protected by the laws of a specific institution—that of hospitality (*xenia*)—but also accorded rights and privileges during their short stay that normal citizens were not granted. The Platonic Eleatic Stranger is, as will become evident in the chapter on the *Sophist*, modeled after this latter type of foreigners. Since they were not resident aliens, they remained entirely strangers to the city, strangers who, as in the case of Plato's Stranger, were protected, and could thus be asked to perform tasks that could not be expected from any ordinary citizen.

In his response to Theodorus' introduction of the Stranger, Socrates not only greets the stranger as being possibly "a kind of refutative god" but also as one who "come[s] to look us over and refute us who are poor in speeches" (216b5–7).¹⁴ Only a complete stranger is in the position to do such a thing. In other words, if the Stranger is not just an other whose *logos* is the object of investigation but, in a reversal of roles, is invited to question the Athenians themselves, Socrates included, is this not due to a complete change regarding the status of philosophical speech, a change of which the Athenians all by themselves are thereby incapable? Could it not be that for such a speech to unfold, one that will not be cross-examined, but that develops into a definitively positive doctrine in the process of a radical interrogation of all philosophical efforts hitherto—a doctrine regarding the philosophical *logos* itself, and the specific art of statesmanship—Plato can entrust this task only to a complete stranger? Does not Socrates' silence throughout the two dialogues, and his closing remarks at the end of the *Statesman*, where he thanks the Stranger for also having drawn (besides his definition of the sophist) a perfect picture of the true statesman, confirm that the Stranger's speech differs from that of the previous Socratic dialogues?

The *Sophist* is part of what is commonly called a trilogy—a form the Greeks were deeply familiar with from the festivals of Dionysius—that, in addition to the dialogue in question, comprises the *Theaetetus* and the *Politikos*, or *Statesman*.¹⁵ If the presumed chronological order of the three dialogues is correct, and if there is no good reason to doubt it in spite of a difference in style between the first and the two other dialogues, it is not least because at the end of the *Theaetetus* Socrates tells his interlocutor that he must go to the portico of the King Archon to meet the indictment that has been drawn up against him, but that they will meet again in the morning of the following day.¹⁶ That the location where the three consecutive dialogues occur remains the same—an unnamed gymnasium—is further proof of their trilogical character. Faithful to the appointment made on the previous day, all those who participated in that conversation have arrived once more. Yet, though no hint whatsoever has been given the day before that an additional participant would join the group, Theodorus has this time brought a guest with him.¹⁷ How and when he met this guest is left unexplained. As only a stranger can arrive, the new participant arrives unexpectedly. We learn only a little bit later that on their way to the meeting Theodorus and his companions already had a conversation with him; yet it is not specified what this conversation was about, except that it was a subject matter closely allied (*paraplesion*) to the one that Socrates

at the beginning of the dialogue invites him to explore. Theodorus introduces his guest as “a kind of stranger, who in birth (*genos*) is from Elea, a comrade of the circle of Parmenides and Zeno, and a man very much a philosopher” (216a3–5).¹⁸ Throughout the two dialogues that take place after the inquiry the day before into the nature of knowledge—the *Sophist* in the morning, and in the afternoon the *Statesman*—the Stranger, to whom Socrates passes on the word while maintaining his silence, remains a stranger, anonymous, without a patronym, with no specific features to characterize him, and no indications of who he is. Yes, he is said to be from Elea, but Elea is a faraway place, *to ekei topon* (217a), thus making him all the more a foreigner. The reference to Elea serves Theodorus primarily to present the stranger as a philosopher, and is indubitably an indication that he is thoroughly familiar with Parmenides’ thought, a qualification that he must have if, in order to pinpoint the sophist, he will ultimately have to refute Parmenides. But whether he is in fact from Elea or not is perhaps not so decisive since, as we will see, one of the sole things that the Stranger, though implicitly, eventually reveals of himself is that he is not only at home with Parmenidean thought, but also with the whole, mostly anonymous, past of Greek philosophizing (242c9ff). His origin, as Jean-Luc Nancy observes, thus reaches back to an “anonymous genealogy.”¹⁹ Throughout the two dialogues, no effort is made to ask the Stranger to identify himself. He is allowed to remain a stranger, the *xenos Eleates*, distinct from the homogeneous group made up by the other participants in the conversation of the previous day.²⁰ Needless to say, in due time (that is, when reading the dialogue on the sophist), we will return in greater detail to the question of his identity, or rather his non-identity.

Now, although nothing in particular in the *Theaetetus* predicts the arrival of the Stranger on the following morning, I wish hereafter to discuss what it may be in this dialogue that anticipates, if not calls for, the dramatic introduction of a stranger in the two subsequent dialogues of the trilogy. In short, through a kind of proleptic reading of the *Theaetetus*—that is, by way of a reading that understands certain passages of this dialogue as inviting to be read from the later dialogues as an anticipation—I wish to explore why, and with what necessity, Plato must resort to a stranger in the two later dialogues.²¹ The fact that the questions raised in the *Theaetetus* will find an answer only in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* is something that has, of course, not gone unnoticed. Seth Benardete, for example, calls the coming of the Stranger a “godsend,” but the question of why it must be a stranger remains unanswered.²² Could it be that, given the very nature of the (seem-

ingly aporetic) problematic of the *Theaetetus*, only a complete stranger is in the position to do what Socrates has not been able to accomplish himself?

The question of who the Stranger is has been an undeniable issue in Plato scholarship. In this context, one need also remind oneself that the Stranger joins the group of discussants the day after Socrates has been solicited to appear at the porch of the king, and shortly before he is condemned. Both dialogues—the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*—acknowledge in various ways, both obvious and not so obvious, Socrates' looming trial and his death. But does the Stranger, by filling in the place that Socrates occupied in Plato's dialogues until now, become only Socrates' double, foreshadowing his death? In the *Theaetetus*, “the Platonic Socrates is, as it were, on the way to becoming double,” writes Auguste Diès.²³ The question of whether the Stranger is a double of Plato or Socrates has been repeatedly asked, not without some grounds, given that in both the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* the questions of physical resemblance (between Socrates and Theaetetus) and the homonymy of names (of Socrates and Young Socrates) are raised. But by precipitating the identification of the Stranger in this manner, the commentators circumvent the question of why Plato resorted to the dramatic device of introducing a stranger in the first place, rather than someone from within Athens, or one of his own disciples. Casting him as a double of the Platonic Socrates diminishes his role as a distinct dramatic persona, and thus also the innovative nature that his teaching is supposed to signify. If Plato introduces a stranger, is it not because only a *stranger* is, according to him, in a position to address and solve the theoretical (and political) problems that have arisen in the first dialogue of the trilogy? Does Plato, with the introduction of the Stranger, not hint at a new kind of speech, a mode of philosophizing unlike that of Socrates who, at the very end of the *Theaetetus*, observes that his “art is only capable of so much and no more” (210c6)—that is, on this occasion, of emptying Theaetetus of all the wind eggs regarding knowledge with which he is pregnant, leaving him at the end of the conversation “as barren as Socrates himself?”²⁴ If he were only a double of Socrates or of Plato himself, why would Plato so forcefully stress the Stranger's thorough, if not plain, otherness from the homogenous group of the participants, which remains the same throughout the three distinct dialogues of the trilogy? Is one not to assume that by just calling him *xenos*, or Stranger, Plato wished to leave the Stranger other than all those present, and not identifiable through any resemblances? If the Stranger, who resembles no one, is nonetheless compared by Socrates at the very beginning of the *Sophist* to a god, is it not precisely to make him more thoroughly other?

By addressing him throughout the dialogues as *o xenos*, as “Stranger,” Plato makes him a *dramatis persona* different from all the others, one whose dramatic personality is to be a stranger.

It is a commonplace, not only in popular belief, but in much of the humanities as well, that Plato is the author of a doctrine of ideas that are situated in some heavenly place beyond the actual world, and are the object of intellectual contemplation. This stereotypical conception has a long history, and can be traced back to Aristotle’s interpretation and critique of Plato’s so-called Theory of Ideas, and in particular to Neo-Platonism. From the vantage point of this historically powerful tradition, Plato is also associated in a highly questionable way with the sage, whether Greek or Oriental, and thus all that which in Plato’s work seeks to break with the authority of the wise men and their withdrawal from the actual world cannot make itself heard or become fruitful. Indeed, the common understanding of Plato as a theoretician of Ideas—a stereotype that not only marks the average opinion about his work but also pervades many of the more intellectual approaches—categorizes him as a thinker who, at the origin of Western thought, has taught us that abstinence from political life and exclusive devotion to theoretical contemplation—star-gazing in all its forms—is what is really worth pursuing. What I intend to do in this essay is to bring out a different Plato, one who, because he does not fit this representation, has until relatively recently been largely ignored or treated as puzzling. As I will show in a reading of the trilogy, Plato sketches out here a conception of philosophy and politics rather different from the one still prevalent not only in much of Plato scholarship, but above all in our intellectual culture, in which Plato’s take on politics is largely determined by what he says about the philosopher-king in the *Republic* and the laws in the *Nomoi*. This novel conception of thought and the political, precisely because it has been ignored, could perhaps constitute a historical starting point in our tradition for thinking today in new ways about philosophy and political ontology.

An equally prevalent commonplace is that it was in Greece that philosophy and politics were invented. Although, historically, this is largely correct, the contention in question remains just a commonplace until the meaning of this invention has been fully established. In advance of the discussion of the three dialogues, a few remarks on the meaning of the invention of the philosophical and the political may thus be warranted. To do so, it is necessary to recall that Greece is a culture of freedom, and that it is this concern that is at the origin of the inventions in question. In the *Sophist*, the Stranger calls philosophy “the science of the free” (253c9). Among the

several implications of this statement, let me first emphasize the one that concerns the invention of philosophy in Greece. Philosophy is the science of men who have discovered that thinking can be freed not only of the fetters to which it is subjected by the necessities of a certain public life, as is the case with the sophist, but more generally those that are imposed on it and frame it by the authority of kinship or native privileges in all possible forms. In other words, philosophy is the discovery that thinking can be changed, that it is possible to free it from restrictions not only by ingrained forms of thinking, such as myths or tales, but also by “exterior” forces such as traditions, venerable authorities, or native self-evidences that, from within thinking, restrict the logic of its unfolding according to rules of their own.²⁵ Philosophy is the discovery by the Greeks that one can think differently not only as regards subject matters, but with different forms of thinking as well—different, that is, from what is the case with particular customary thinking.

Moreover, the Greeks also discovered that the way one lives together with others is not limited to the modes and habits inherited from the tradition, but that it too can be changed and improved. In the same way as the unheard-of abstraction associated with philosophy—its concepts and ideas above all—allowed for a novel mode of thinking apart from established beliefs, the introduction of the equally highly abstract concept of equality (*isonomía*) between the various groups of the *polis* made the transformation of the political institutions possible. Further, as Christian Meier observes, Solon’s realization that certain happenings in the *polis* stand in a cause-effect connection—such as the exploitation of the peasants by the powerful, the resulting enslavement of the former, and the resulting civil war—and that they are aspects of a total event rather than isolated phenomena, led him to the conviction that “the citizens had the potential of turning the fate of their cities to the better.” Meier writes: “Solon’s specific discovery consists not so much of the (unpleasant) lawfulness [according to which such phenomena inexorably lead to calamity], but of the recognition based on these laws of the (highly pleasant) possibility that the human being can intervene, and change things towards the better.”²⁶ With the notion of *eunomía*—that is, the idea of an ameliorated lawful constitution of the *polis* (*isonomía*) for which its citizens have the ultimate responsibility—there arises in Greece, and for the first time in history, a concrete sense of an alternative to existing political conditions.²⁷ In the same way that the Greeks became aware that thinking could be freed from the grip of nativeness, they also discovered that the realm of the political, insofar as it concerns life together in the

polis, is a realm excluded from that of nature and its eternal laws. For the latter, Zeus continues to be in charge, whereas another goddess, one of the *Morae*, the goddess of Good Government—*Eunomia*—presides over the practical realm where change for the better can occur only at the initiative of the entirety of the citizens to transform it. In the late Platonic dialogues of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, Plato thus advocates for a radical break with modes of thinking aligned with traditional beliefs and forms, however authoritative they may be, as well as with a conception of statesmanship that in principle must be able to ignore the authority of the law as representative par excellence of the power of the customary and the traditional in order to make just decisions.

It is a stranger who, in two of Plato's late dialogues, brings these two Greek discoveries home to the Greeks. Is this simply a paradox? Apart from the coziness, but also violence, that tribal representations represent, and apart from the deterrent burden that responsibility for the *polis* brings with it for every individual, are there more fundamental reasons for this dramatic staging? In *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Bonnie Honig has forcefully argued for the "intricate relation between democracy and foreignness," claiming that democracy as a form of political togetherness, rather than being enclosed in the national, is in its essence and impulse "always about living with strangers," and is therefore inherently cosmopolitical.²⁸ A democracy is something different from a state or a nation. It is a political order—a *politeia*—and consists of a mode of rule in which foreignness has a constitutive role to play. Aiming at "rethink[ing] democracy in non-kinship terms, as a politics among strangers," Honig asks "whether democracy itself [. . .] might require not just the (re)construction of the national [. . .] but also the violation of the national," precisely by "presuppos[ing] and requir[ing] some deep relation to foreigners."²⁹ There is, first, the curious "figure of the foreign-founder" in the history of the concept of the political, which compels one to ask whether every foreigner is not potentially in the position of a re-founding function.³⁰ And, further, there is the foreigner putting "foreignness to work on behalf of democracy by modeling forms of agency that are transgressive, but (or therefore) possessed of potentially inaugural powers."³¹

By according a stranger the principal role that hitherto had been the privilege of Socrates, Plato inscribes into the very texture of philosophy a role of the stranger that has nowhere else its equal. To recognize this is not to celebrate some European or Western superiority, but instead to advocate a kind of thinking that is not simply or inconsequentially open to foreigners, but that acknowledges their constitutive role for all self-identity. It is to

recognize what in any event is always already at work in any self-enclosing identification, namely the differentiation from others, outsiders, and foreigners, who are thus openly welcomed for their singular work. In no way does such recognition imply the uncritical adoption of a stranger's equally conditioned views, but instead fundamentally mitigates the self-centeredness and blindness of one's cultural formations to others by the presence within them of the foreigner. Rather than providing any sort of comforting superiority over others, such a conception confronts Western thought with itself, and inscribes at its core a face-to-face confrontation with its own expectations, with its idea, or with its concept—in short, it inscribes self-criticism as a unique institution. It is this, an essential vulnerability characteristic of Western thought, which has been decried from within the West by the conservative forces as self-destructive, and, paradoxically, as the source of the arsenal of tools that has allowed European and non-European anti-Europeanists to make the accusation of Western self-centeredness.

In the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, Plato has a stranger establish what philosophical thinking is, and who a true statesman is. Indeed, when realized in conformity with their essence, the true philosopher and the true statesman break with ethnic privilege and as a result are, in a way, foreigners. This is also the reason why only a foreigner or stranger can bring home to his hosts that which the Greeks themselves invented but did not heed, namely, the realization that both thinking and the ways of living together can be changed for the better. Only a foreigner, it would seem, is capable of persuading natives—who are blinded by the divisive and colorful diversity of “the many-headed sophist” (240c5), who claims for himself the title of a philosopher, as well as the very large chorus of politicians whose “genus is of every kind of tribe” (291a8)—that they have the power to change things from ground up.



As should be obvious by now, this essay is not conceived as a philological contribution to Plato scholarship. As it is in genre an essay, it has a much freer form, characterized by its repeated recommencements to bring into relief one particular concern—that of the Stranger—which, needless to say, not only has methodological implications for the presentation of the argument, but also for the argument itself. The *intentio recta* of this essay is to show that the problematic of the Stranger in Plato's dialogues engages our present historical moment and the potential of future of our Western culture.

Although my reading is based on the current standard translations of the dialogues, only on a few occasions do I touch on textual uncertainties or issues of translation. Nor, furthermore, is this essay a study on the trilogy in a critical dialogue with existing interpretations of decidedly difficult and puzzling passages in these late Platonic texts. I do not, in a technical sense, take issue with previous interpretations, and only rarely take issue with the place they occupy within the history of the interpretation of these classical dialogues. This, of course, does not mean that I have not greatly profited from the scholarship in question. Without it, I could not have written this essay. But my approach is, of course, not disinterested: I read the dialogues in question not only in terms of an anti-Platonist interpretation of Plato, resisting all absolutization of particular aspects of his philosophical concerns, such as his theory of the ideas; I also, on occasion, resist Plato's self-interpretation. In addition, in my reading I highlight the dialogues' seemingly non-philosophical textual and dramatic (if not theatrical) nature, with the recognition that these aspects demand to be read in a strong sense—which is also to say that, while recognizing the fine contributions it has made to the clarification of delicate technical problems in the dialogues, I pay little attention to the analytic tradition of their reception—basing myself above all on scholars within this particular tradition of interpretation. My approach to the dialogues proceeds on the assumption expressed by Julius Stenzel of the indissolubility of the connection of the literary form of the dialogues and their philosophical content, and the impossibility of dealing with one without taking the other into account.³² Indeed, rather than merely being of the order of artistry, the dramatic staging of the arguments in the dialogues—which concerns the time and place of their occurrence, the protagonists' characters, their knowledge, and so forth—is intrinsically interwoven with the arguments. I also give priority to those commentators who argue for a shift of direction in Plato's late work as opposed to the first and second periods of his writings. In the later dialogues, I hold, and in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* in particular, something fundamentally new occurs in Plato's work, something strange or rather alien to Socratism. For this reason, I also consider that the fact that in these dialogues Socrates is replaced by a stranger as the head of the discussions is anything but fortuitous; on the contrary, this is tightly interwoven with Plato's mature philosophy, and will thus be given appropriate attention in this study.

Precisely because my focus in this essay is on three of Plato's later dialogues, with the contention that in the triptych a new philosophical vision is elaborated by Plato's Stranger, the reader may expect a more systematic

comparison of these later works with Plato's earlier ones. Regarding issues such as Plato's early conception of the ideas and its recast form in the *Sophist*, or the status of the philosopher-king in the *Republic* compared to that of the statesman in the homonymous dialogue, I certainly could not avoid meeting that demand, at least to some extent. But my reading of the three dialogues seeks to bring the dramatic role of the Stranger, as well as what it is that Plato has him accomplish, onto center stage. Therefore, my prime interest here is not so much the way that this new vision compares with Plato's earlier one—which would have led to a quite different study—but instead how the Stranger relates to the whole of Greek philosophy, including that of Plato himself. In other words, in order to show that it is fundamentally the task of a stranger to bring philosophy into its own, not only “Plato's Stranger” but also “the Stranger's Plato”—rather than the historical Plato—had to occupy center stage.

If the title of this book is *Plato's Stranger: An Essay*, this is also to indicate that it is a book-length essay, an attempt at articulating a problematic that is not only of theoretical, but also, at this moment of history, of some cultural and political interest. Not only do I develop certain issues in the dialogue well beyond the space that they are granted in Plato scholarship, but I also introduce some new threads into their weave. If I have taken what some may judge to be unwarranted liberties, it is because of what I hold to be the topicality of these dialogues: in my view, they contain highly topical resources for the reinterpretation of the West's heritage. If, for example, one takes into account that “our world is and will remain more and more mobile, and will ‘produce’ more and more strangers,” the Platonic Stranger holds in reserve some food for thought.³³ On more than one occasion I venture risky interpretations of certain passages and topics that may go beyond what seems to be textually and philologically allowed. For such audacities, there may not always be the “literal” support in the texts that some may believe to be indispensable. Furthermore, these risky interpretations may on occasion also seem to interpret Plato otherwise than he might have understood himself. Yet, I risk the contention that the concerns I have brought to these Platonic dialogues are not simply arbitrary, but that even there where the dialogues do not seem to offer explicit textual evidence for the points I make, these extrapolations are nonetheless in tune with the spirit of their text.