Reconsidering the Platonic Cleitophon

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REVIEW ARTICLE — RECONSIDERING THE PLATONIC CLEITOPHON

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I

The riddle of the Cleitophon is a creature of modern scholarship. Since Friedrich Schleiermacher’s unitarian reconstruction of the Corpus Platonicum at the threshold of the nineteenth century, and his sophisticated disallowance of this minor dialogue as inauthentic, it has been repeatedly thrown away by many scholars literally into the dustbin of the Platonic spuria, or, more often, neglected altogether without a single word of notice. Notwithstanding the fact that, as Schleiermacher himself confessed, the old catalogues of the writings of Plato enlisted the little dialogue amongst the genuine ones, the distinguished scholar insisted on the existence of ‘internal reasons’ casting doubt on its authorship. In the first place, the dialogue starts with Socrates addressing Cleitophon in the third person, while showing signs of a peculiar and conspicuously non-Socratic sensitivity: he appears offended by what had been said in a rather depreciatory manner against him. This is, to go no further, according to Schleiermacher, completely unplatonic (ganz unplatonisch). But the philosophical grounds for dismissing the dialogue are far more decisive. Even if it is just a fragment, and assuming that Socrates (who after a short introductory statement falls totally silent) would have defended himself immediately after Cleitophon’s accusatory speech, it still remains difficult to understand why Plato should allow his Socrates to suffer such an unseemly attack. The more so as such an attack is fully misplaced and philosophically meaningless, for Plato’s Socrates by no means abstained from affirmative teaching. All things considered, according to Schleiermacher, it seems most likely that the dialogue comes from one of the best contemporaneous schools of rhetoric, and is directed against Socrates and the Socratics — Plato included. We can be reconfirmed to this verdict when we see how the text is actually a ‘Parodie und Karikatur’ of the Platonic manner, especially of

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all that appears against the sophists as teachers of the art of politics. In short, Schleiermacher’s commentary signalised the birth of a riddle.3

In effect, the whole story of the minor spuria and dubia is to a great extent an invention of modern scholarship. There is ample and incontestable evidence that the ancient commentators and intellectual historiographers were not, strictly speaking, concerned to discover a coherent philosophical meaning in Plato’s separate compositions.4 They were not disturbed by the pluralism of Plato’s ideas, neither did they seem to have bothered about explaining or neutralising the discrepancies and gaps that frequently occur between disparate passages. They had very little interest in the chronology of the works attributed to Plato; instead, they were more concerned with the order of reading them in accordance to a presumably self-evident criterion: the degree of philosophical complexity. Whatever the students in antiquity seem to have generally disregarded in their intellectual excursion to the dialogues as repositories of Plato’s thought, turned out to be the dominant themes in Platonic interpretation since Wilhelm Gottfried Tennemann. Kant’s devoted disciple applied the term ‘system’ to Platonic philosophy and, as Lutoslawski observed, relied throughout ‘on Plato alone as the interpreter of the Platonic teaching’.5 Turning to Plato as the sole interpreter of the essence of Platonism implied a dramatic redirection of emphasis from earlier approaches (to wit, from how one could utilise a certain dialogue to lend support to his own theoretical construction) towards ascertaining what Plato actually thought when he was writing a dialogue? What was the philosopher’s intention (and even motivation) in drafting a conversation, and how is this to be verified? How did he understand his own thought? How are his contradictions to be accounted for? Which of the moral and political doctrines introduced through the dramatic and fictional conversations of the dialogues can legitimately be attributed to him? This substantial methodological reorientation mirrored the thesis that philosophy must be systematic (a result of German critical thought under the auspices of Kant) as well as the romanticist view that a certain text is primarily shaped by the mind, spirit and personality of its author.

3 It is called a riddle (‘rätselhaft Schrift’) by H. Raeder early in the twentieth century, *Platons Philosophische Entwicklung* (Leipzig, 1905), p. 24, and afterwards it appears often under such a denomination. For a more extensive summary of the dialogue see section VI below.


The modern period in Platonic interpretation has thus been initiated, carrying with it countless (subjective) reconstructive versions and various strategies for reading the Platonic text. Predictably, one obvious consequence was the so-called ‘athetizing’ practice, that is the often-arbitrary dismissal of certain dialogues as worthless forgeries or spurious (uÒqoi). Whereas the authoritative canonical arrangement of the dialogues by Thrasyllus — the court astrologer of the emperor Tiberius — transmitted to us by Diogenes Laertius, left no doubt as to the authenticity of its components, the nineteenth century, as Guthrie writes, ‘did its best to rob us of some of the most valuable parts of Plato’s work’. Starting from the premise that Plato qua philosopher must have erected a systematic edifice reducible to primary and subordinate principles, unfolded in the Platonic panorama of ideas in a rather knotty yet premeditated way, scholars were inevitably led to the question of authenticity, and through it to attempts at determining the chronological sequence of the dialogues. If a text seemed to be opposed to the systematic principle, it was simply declared spurious. Not surprisingly, the Cleitophon, which was never rejected in antiquity, fell an easy victim to the assumption of die natürliche Ordnung der platonischen Schriften (the natural order of Plato’s writings), to

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6 Among the most interesting comprehensive monographs are: F. Ast, Platons Leben und Schriften (Leipzig, 1816); J. Socher, Ueber Platons Schriften (München, 1820); H. Ritter, Geschichte der Philosophie alter Zeit (Hamburg, 1836–8), vol. II; K.F. Hermann, Geschichte und System der platonischen Philosophie (Heidelberg, 1839); E. Zeller, Die Philosophie der Griechen (Tübingen 1844–52), 3 vols; F Susemihl, Die genetische Entwicklung der platonischen Philosophie (Leipzig, 1855); G.F.W. Suckow, Die wissenschaftliche und künstlerische Form der platonischen Schriften (Berlin, 1855); H. Bonitz, Platonische Studien (Wien, 1858); F. Ueberweg, Untersuchungen über die Echtheit und Zeitfolge Platonischer Schriften (Wien, 1861); C. Schaarschmidt, Die Sammlung der platonischen Schriften, zur Scheidung der echten von den unechten untersucht (Bonn, 1866).

7 In the middle of the nineteenth century, observed A.E. Taylor (who is inclined to consider the Cleitophon genuine), especially in Germany, ‘the “athetizing” of Platonic dialogues became a fashionable amusement for scholars’: see Plato the Man and his Work (London & New York, 1926), p. 11.


use Edward Munk’s profoundly revealing title of his 1856 monograph published in Berlin.

II

An interesting protest against the athetizing trend, which virtually devastated the Platonic corpus, we find in Ernst Ferdinand Yxem (1799–1867). In the introductory pages of his defence of the authenticity of Cleitophon, Yxem asserted the authority of the Thrasyllean catalogue and went even further arguing that the tetralogical diairesis reflected the genuine order established by Plato himself. As far as the Cleitophon is concerned, Yxem interestingly remarked that the first idea of questioning the authenticity of the dialogue arose from the fact that in the Aldine edition of 1513 it was published along with the spurious dialogues. Although in the same edition Aldus Manutius and Marcus Masurus apologised for their mistake not to place the dialogue in its natural position (that is, first in the eighth tetralogy along with the Republic, Timaeus and Critias), they regrettably passed over to the future generations of analysts the germs of suspicion as to its genuineness. Hence, out of a contingent erratum, the Cleitophon was condemned to endless and perhaps undeserved discredit.

Yxem’s reaction to the formalistic principle of athetesis failed, however, to convince not only his adversaries but also those who would side with him. Thus in his memorable polemic against the German interpretation in toto (i.e., versus both the Schleiermacherean ordering based on the assumption of Plato’s preconceived philosophical system and the so-called ‘genetic’ or developmentalist reconstruction propounded in detail by Karl Friedrich Hermann), George Grote criticised Yxem for failing to set forth the grounds of the authenticity case as well as for his hyperbolic confidence in the tetralogical order as exhibiting Plato’s own organisation of the corpus. Grote, whose point of view we may rather loosely call ‘orthodox’, tried to rehabilitate the credentials of the Thrasyllean canon in opposition to the modern rejectionist approaches. It is worth quoting at some length from the fifth chapter of his Plato:

I have reviewed the doctrines of several recent critics who discard this Canon as unworthy of trust, and who set up for themselves a type of what Plato must have been, derived from a certain number of items in the Canon — rejecting the remaining items as unconformable to their hypothetical type. The different theories which they have laid down,

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12 Cf. Tigerstedt, Interpreting Plato, pp. 17–18, who interestingly calls Grote ‘a counsel of despair’.

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respecting general and systematic purposes of Plato (apart from the purpose of each separate composition), appear to me uncertified and gratuitous. The ‘internal reasons,’ upon which they justify rejection of various dialogues, are only another phrase for expressing their own different theories respecting Plato as a philosopher and as a writer. For my part, I decline to discard any item of the Thrasyllean Canon, upon such evidence as they produce. I think it a safer and more philosophical proceeding to accept the entire Canon, and to accommodate my general theory of Plato . . . to each and all of its contents. 13

Grote’s interpretive scheme has been widely commented upon as radical and novel. Yet it was not really such. (His critical analysis and the conclusions it yielded were indeed unconventional and provocative.) In my view, it represented one of the latest attempts, typical in antiquity, to construe Plato’s works in the light of principles which we commonly today consider as foreign to the philosopher’s ethical, political or metaphysical perspectives. Plainly, in Grote’s study Benthamian utilitarianism bestowed a formative impetus in elucidating Plato’s meanings, in the same way as (to take two examples at random) the Neoplatonists submitted Plato to a transcendental exegesis in order to reconcile his philosophy with their world-views, or the Cambridge Platonists understood the Greek sage in the light of fundamental Christian tenets and the divine mysteries of the Scriptures. The emphasis of utilitarianism on critical rationality and its unwavering respect for the value of evidence, allowed Grote to approach the Platonic dialogues in a multi-dimensional, liberal and pluralistic way, fundamentally unlike the stringent dogmatism with which his colleagues in Germany were inclined to analyse them. 14 But more on Platonic interpretation in due course; it is time now to go back to the receptive history of the Cleitophon.

Let us first provide a resumé of Grote’s account. It is important to keep his interpretation in mind when we come to examine more recent analytical discussions. As was his typical practice, Grote first presented the dialogue (persona, circumstances and content) through a free, albeit faithful, translation of the original Greek text. A rather lengthy English text, considering the small size of the dialogue, betrays the impression that it should have made to the his-

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14 See Plato, Vol. I, pp. 210–211: ‘Such sacrifice of the inherent diversity, and separate individuality, of the dialogues, to the maintenance of a supposed unity of type, style, or purpose, appears to me an error . . . Plato (except in the Epistolae) never appears before us, nor gives us any opinion as his own: he is the unseen prompter of different characters who converse aloud in a number of distinct dramas — each drama a separate work, manifesting its own point of view, affirmative or negative, consistent or inconsistent with the others, as the case may be’, etc. For an excellent account of Grote’s approach, see C.H. Kahn, ‘George Grote’s Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates’, in George Grote Reconsidered, ed. W.M. Calder III and S. Trzaskoma (Hildesheim, 1996), pp. 43–58.
torian. These are the major points of his commentary:15 (a) Like all the works of Plato cited by Laertius, in accordance to the Thrasylean tetralogical classification, the Cleitophon comes direct from the philosopher’s hand. (b) Nevertheless, it has all the typical characteristics of an ‘unfinished fragment’;16 ‘it is a sketch or fragment never worked out’, and which remained among Plato’s papers unnoticed by his pupils until his death, when it passed from the Academy among other Platonic manuscripts into the Alexandrine library. (c) It is perfectly sensible to place the dialogue in immediate antecedence to the Republic: Cleitophon appears bewildered and discontented on the want of a good explanation of Justice, which Socrates, in the great constructive dialogue, professes to explicate. Moreover, Cleitophon announces his inclination to seek advice from Thrasydamus and both appear in the first book of the Republic. So that the latter work ‘might be considered both as an answer to the challenge of the Kleitophon, and as a reproof to Kleitophon himself for having threatened to quit Sokrates and go to Thrasydamus’. Thus Plato himself might have originally intended the Cleitophon as a preparation for the solution to the issue of Justice, afterwards undertaken in the Republic. (d) One has, however, to provide an answer to Schleiermacher’s objection to the effect that Plato could have never addressed such a polemic against Socrates. There are two possible answers: first, as the ‘character of Plato is . . . essentially many-sided’ — i.e., ‘it comprehends the whole process of searching for truth, and testing all that is propounded as such’; ‘developing speculative views not merely various and distinct, but sometimes even opposite’ (p. 20) — it is legitimate to assume that the philosopher had no scruples to put Socrates under a trial, as he also did in the Parmenides. Secondly, ‘[t]he case against Sokrates has been made so strong, that I doubt whether Plato himself could have answered it to his own satisfaction’ (p. 21). (e) The literary Socrates vehemently attacked in the Cleitophon coincides perfectly with Socrates’ factual self-portrait which Plato presents in the Apology. There Socrates testifies to his mission to apply his elenchos ‘in testing and convicting the false persuasion of knowledge universally prevalent . . . He disclaims all power of teaching’. Before the dikasts, therefore, as well as in many of Plato’s dialogues,

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16 This view, namely that the Cleitophon is an unfinished draft or a discarded introduction to the Republic, is endorsed by P. Shorey and P. Friedlander: see respectively What Plato Said (Chicago, 1933), p. 422 and Plato (Berlin, 1957), vol. II, p. 45.
Socrates attacks his interlocutors for their ignorance: ‘the protreptic stimulus is powerful, stinging his [the interlocutor’s] mind into uneasiness which he cannot appease except by finding some tenable result: but the didactic supplement is not forthcoming’ (pp. 21–2). Likewise, the character Cleitophon in the dialogue that bears his name is ‘sick of perpetual negation and stimulus: he demands doctrines and explanations, which will hold good against the negative Elenchus of Sokrates himself’ (p. 23). But the challenge of Cleitophon remains unanswered. Plato, probably, ‘without intending it, made out too strong a case against Sokrates and against himself’ (p. 24). (f) Having tied a knot that he could not have untied, Plato decided to advance a far easier process to facilitate the exposition of Socrates’ theory of Justice. Instead of a calm and, ironically, Socratic in temperament Cleitophon, he introduced Thrasymanchus whose attack is ‘alike angry, impudent, and feeble’: in short, an easy victim to Socratic interrogation.

Despite its plausibility, Grote’s interpretation failed to satisfy the rigid analytical criteria of Platonic interpreters. After all, Grote echoes like a ‘a counsel of despair’. Thus either the Cleitophon has been usually dismissed as spurious or presented in a far different light. I shall be here very briefly concerned with the few positive attempts at solving the perplexing riddle, instead of attempting to investigate the motives for disqualifying it from the Platonic corpus.

III

Dealing with the history of Cleitophon’s interpretation would inescapably bring in the foreground the underlying themes modern Platonic scholarship expects analysts to come to grips with, namely: what was really Plato thinking when he embarked on writing the Cleitophon (if, of course, he was the author of this piece)? What intrinsic purpose did Cleitophon serve in the context of the development of his philosophy? Together with these problems, commentators could not evade the obscure matter of its chronological placement: in which period of Plato’s activity as a writer does it belong? Predictably, the vexed question of the Cleitophon has produced a body of scholarship incorporating a variety of interpretations, especially in terms of making sense out of it as well as in assessing its philosophical worth. 17

It is important to point out, in briefly documenting the modern debate over Cleitophon, that between 1933 and 1981 (when Johannes Geffcken and S.R. Slings have respectively produced works on that dialogue) there appeared only a 1967 contribution by H. Neumann. Interestingly, both Geffcken (1933) and Slings (1981) did not consider the dialogue as written by Plato. Geffcken’s judgement rested on what has been largely considered as the essence of the riddle: why, after all, should Plato have made such a strong case against both his hero and the other Socrates? Admittedly, the author speaks

platonically but he cannot be Plato.18 A few years earlier the Loeb translator of
the Cleitophon, R.G. Bury, observed that Bekker’s decision to place the dia-
logue among the works incerti auctoris was perfectly justifiable. If it comes
from Plato (which is extremely doubtful), then it may be regarded ‘as a kind of
fragmentary preface to the Republic, inasmuch as both treat of the same sub-
ject, the nature of justice’. However,

from various peculiarities of style and vocabulary it seems more probable
that it is a later composition . . . and it would certainly be strange to find
Plato leaving us with the impression, uncorrected, that Socrates was really
ignorant of the true nature of justice, which is the kernel of Cleitophon’s
concluding criticism.19

Slings reinstates the rejectionist view, ‘though hesitantly and with some reluc-
tance’. His 1981 Commentary concludes by the belief that ‘the Clitophon was
not written by Plato, but by a very close and intelligent pupil of Plato’ — a
belief one of his critics, W. J. Verdenius, confessed that he shared with a
‘sense of relief’.20

But others were more reluctant to dismiss the dialogue. H. Brunnecke, for
instance, appeared convinced that the dialogue was a late work by Plato,
whereas Kesters offered several counter-arguments to the assumption of
inauthenticity which rested on purely philological grounds.21 More substanc-
tial and invigorating was perhaps Grube’s intervention in the debate. Grube
showed that there is no conclusive evidence against the genuineness of the
Cleitophon emanating from its linguistic technique and style.22 According to
David Roochnik, such was the success of these scholars that critics eventually
came to consent that the Cleitophon cannot be discarded on philological
grounds. Thus in 1967 Neumann expressed the view that the philological
question has been firmly settled, stating that ‘[t]here is (now) general agree-
ment that its style offers no conclusive evidence for spuriousness’.23 But apart

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1929), vol. IX, p. 311. See also J. Pavlu, ‘Der Pseudo-Platonische Kleitophon’,
Jahrbuch des k.u.k. Gymnasiums (Znaim, 1909), pp. 3–20 who believed that the
dialogue was possibly written by a peripatetic. On the issue Bury raised, cf. Grote who
insists on Socrates’ sincerity when he professed ignorance. Scholars however, according
to the historian, paradoxically refused to take Socrates’ words for granted.
W. J. Verdenius, ‘Notes on the pseudo-Platonic Clitophon’, Mnemosyne, 35 (1982),
p. 146.
21 H. Brunnecke, ‘Kleitophon wider Sokrates’, Archiv für Geschichte der
Philosophie, 26 (1913), pp. 449–78; H. Kesters, ‘De Authenticiteit van der Kleitophon’,
23 Quoted in Roochnik, ‘The Riddle of the Cleitophon’, p. 134, from Neumann’s
from the issues of style and language, Grube raised also the central thematic question, hitting the very heart of the riddle: ‘Can such an attack upon Socrates have been written by Plato? How far is it answerable? What is the reason of it?’ The answer to all these questions is encapsulated in the following sentences. According to Grube:

Granted, then, that Plato was capable of this criticism of Socrates, why should he have done so? No one will deny that Plato in his earliest works concentrated on προτεστικοὶ λόγοι such as Cleitophon refers to, or that, at a later period, he became more positive in his teaching. We must then suppose that a time came when he was not satisfied with his earlier method? I suggest that this dissatisfaction is expressed in the Cleitophon, and that Plato is here just as much in earnest in his criticism of his earlier Socrates as he is in the Parmenides … If this is so, it may well be that the Cleitophon is not a fragment at all. Plato was not afraid to criticize himself, even when he had no answer ready.24

Now the author, most likely Plato, must have had Republic I before him. ‘I suggest’, Grube continued, that when Plato had finished Republic i, which, whether published separately or not, is complete in itself, he felt the need for criticism of his work in general and that book in particular. The Cleitophon is a first expression of such criticism. It is embodied and developed in the speeches of Glaucon and Adeimantus at the beginning of Book ii. The rest of the Republic is, in part, the answer.25

A similar argument has been more recently put forward by Julia Annas in her Introduction to Plato’s Republic. Annas observes that book I of the dialogue contrasts sharply in many respects with the books that follow. The first book distinctly resembles the early Socratic dialogues whereas in the rest Plato, in spite of formally preserving a dialogue form, does not present ‘strongly characterized interlocutors, and Socrates delivers what is essentially a monologue’. The idea is not a new one: over the last two hundred years lots of papers have been projected to account for the differences in style and content between the first book of the Republic and the rest. It is usually maintained that the style is affected by a chronological lacuna, whereas those more keen on the idea of an enigmatic or esoteric Plato are inclined to believe that there is something intentional behind any stylistic variation or philosophical ‘ambiguity’. What is more interesting in Annas’s account (and is our concern here) is her remark that there is ‘an interesting bit of external evidence’ lending support to the argument that book I had had a life of its own: the Cleitophon. In this vein she writes:

25 Ibid., p. 306.
In Book I a character called Cleitophon intervenes to make an unsuccessful attempt to help Thrasymachus. There exists among Plato’s works a short dialogue called Cleitophon (usually labelled spurious, but for no very good reasons), in which Cleitophon is given more of a say. There, he complains to Socrates that, although he would prefer to go to him for instruction, he is thrown back upon Thrasymachus, because at least the latter has definite and helpful views about what justice actually is, whereas Socrates is merely negative: he knocks down other people’s accounts of justice, and implores them with great passion to live the life of real justice, but offers them no help at all about what this real justice actually comes down to; they are left baffled as to what the first steps in living the good life could be. Now this makes no sense at all as a reaction to the complete Republic; but it does make sense as a reaction to Book I on its own.  

Annas (like Grube earlier) seems to suggest that book I of the Republic preceeded the Cleitophon, the latter dialogue being anecdent to books II–X of the former. Significantly, in the light of this logically plausible, if highly conjectural interpretation, the Cleitophon is granted an organic place within the Platonic corpus. As in Grote, it suddenly obtains a meaning and intentionality. Further, in Annas, it acquires an independent evidentiary status, in terms of supplementing hints as to the possible line that marked the internal development of the Republic. Could it be the solution to the riddle? It could be. But literary evidence shows otherwise. Reflecting on recent undertakings to shed light on the Cleitophon, it appears incontestable that the riddle is still the cause of substantially diversified interpretations.

To summarise: while Platonic analysts until the 1970s concurred to the idea that it might be unsafe to reject the Cleitophon on philological grounds, the dialogue has often been discarded as spurious on ‘internal reasons’. Its theme, argumentation, actual conversation and structure do not make sense. Socrates’ silence does not make sense either. (Ptolemy’s explanation, cited by Proclus, to the effect that Socrates considered the charges as not worthy of a response is totally unsatisfactory.) All this implies a pessimism about the prospects of dissolving the riddle. But once it is accepted that the dialogue comes from a rival of Plato, the riddle instantly evaporates. In that case, Socrates is thought to be bluntly attacked by an anti-Platonist and that is reasonable. Now, scholars who have accepted the Cleitophon as genuine tend to consider it (a) either as a kind of proemium to the Republic, (b) as Plato’s self-criticism, analogous to that inserted in the Parmenides, or (c) as an unfinished or tentative fragment.

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27 Wilamowitz, Platon (Berlin, 1959), vol. I, p. 490, n. 5, reversed Grote’s chronological ordering of the Cleitophon suggesting that it was intended to be an answer to the entire Republic, and not vice versa, written by a pupil who took no pains to read through the great constructive piece.
A new phase in the interpretation of the *Cleitophon* was inaugurated in the early 1980s. At that time, two scholars resolved to submit the dialogue to a critical analysis on the premise that it is a self-contained piece of work, capable on its own to raise important philosophical considerations.

The first piece comes from Clifford Orwin who maintains, in the path of Brunnecke, that the dialogue has the structure and character of a legal defence.\(^{28}\) In his view *Cleitophon*’s monologue presents a sort of ‘counter-Apology’. This explains why the dialogue starts with Socrates addressing Cleitophon in the third person (a point, as we have seen, raised by Schleiermacher long ago), which is a typical feature in legal speeches. The *Cleitophon* according to Orwin, ‘depicts the “missing” confrontation between Kleitophon and Socrates, implied by the *Republic* but absent from it’. Thus to interpret the former one should turn to the latter. In the *Republic* Cleitophon is the only speaker ‘who not only begins with but holds fast to the notion that justice is doing what the rulers say’. Entrapped in the manoeuvres of Socrates, the rhetorician Thrasymachus is led to abandon his original thesis, whereas Cleitophon, the spokesman for the city, never in the dialogue wavers from his interested attachment to legal justice (and thus he afterwards falls silent). The grounds for Cleitophon’s enmity towards Socrates are transparent: he is ‘the questioner par excellence of the authority of the laws of the city’. (As a historical person Cleitophon was known for his attachment to the conservative ideology of the ‘ancestral laws’.) As in the *Cleitophon*, here again, Orwin remarks, ‘we note that he [Cleitophon] figures in the *Republic* as a hostile witness in a mock trial of Socrates which foreshadows the real one’.\(^{29}\)

So far so good. But what is the real philosophical meaning of the dialogue? To find it we should take seriously into account the two great theoretical difficulties raised by Cleitophon and which Socrates seems unable to answer. Cleitophon deprecates Socrates for not going beyond mere *protrepein* (exhorting) people to justice. Socratic protreptic is said to exhort people to pursue knowledge of the good use of the soul itself (408a5). In Orwin’s judgement this is problematic.


\[^{29}\] Orwin, ‘The Case Against Socrates: Plato’s *Cleitophon*’, p. 744.
with which he presents us? For art is here knowledge of how to use, and the soul is not an object of use. It rather seems the seat or subject of such knowledge. 30

The whole issue thus seems to point to a missing link in Plato’s philosophy (i.e. a coherent theory of the soul). Such a theory cannot be found in Plato. There are many accounts of the nature of the soul, but no two the same: all are partial and problematic.

The second theoretical question raised in the Cleitophon concerns the identification of justice with art, technē. Speaking at several times of justice (which is called technē), Socrates and the Socratics have failed to specify its ergon (product, result). Instead they simply call it ‘the advantageous, the rightful, the beneficial, the profitable’ (409c2–3). The problem with these definitions is that, apart from not being erga in the proper sense, are not even equivalent concepts. Further, the Socratics fail to distinguish the products of justice from those of the other technai. The attempt to define the product of justice as techne has ended unsuccessfully.

What is fairly clear from Orwin’s occasionally obscure analysis is the idea that Cleitophon’s implicit assertion of justice as convention is fully rebutted in the Republic, and that no convincing answer is given to the two major theoretical questions raised (examined above). A coherent and convincing theory of justice is missing. The end of justice (the health of the soul) conceived as art seems to be virtue (410b,d), but as Socrates has shown elsewhere ‘there can be no end to discussing virtue — and therefore no beginning to practising it. Practically speaking, the search replaces the object sought. Philosophy is not, as Socrates’ protreptic seems to suggest, a means to specifying the virtuous life: it takes the place of that life’. 31 For Orwin, if I understood him well, the significance of the Cleitophon lies in what is not stated, in what is purposely left by Plato for us to elicit. Such a hypothesis of Plato’s hidden intention dissolves the riddle, and bestows to the little dialogue a uniqueness hitherto unimaginable.

Roochnik’s essay, which copies the title of Geffcken, is to a great extent inspired by Orwin. His stated aim is ‘to show that there may be good reasons for Plato’s constructing such a riddling dialogue’. In his analysis, Roochnik makes instrumental use of Cleitophon’s speech in the Republic, showing that it indicates sufficient reasons for Socrates’ silence in the Cleitophon. Finally, he argues that the Cleitophon ‘is a companion piece to the Republic’. This is not, however, to deny that each text stands philosophically on its own. ‘There is a peculiar mirroring between these two dialogues: in the former, Socrates falls silent after being attacked by Cleitophon: in the latter, it is Cleitophon

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30 Ibid., p. 746.
31 Ibid., p. 753.
who falls silent. I contend that both silences are philosophically explicable and that, ultimately, this is the clue to the riddle of the Cleitophon.32

After calling attention to the historical Cleitophon’s support of the πάτριος πολιτεία which was an ideological mixture of democratic and oligarchic elements, Roochnik considers the context of Cleitophon’s appearance in the Republic, namely, Socrates’ examination of Thrasymachus’ account of justice at 338c1–2. Cleitophon intervenes in the series of Socratic refutations advanced against the Thrasymachean understanding of justice by altering the sophist’s initial definition in a way that, if accepted, would have practically saved it from Socrates’ critique. Thrasymachus, argues Cleitophon, ‘called the advantage of the stronger what the stronger believes to be advantageous to himself. This is what must be done by the weaker and this is what he posited as just’ (340b6–8, my italics). According to Roochnik, what ‘Cleitophon has seen is that the initial account, justice is the advantage of the stronger, presupposes a real or true advantage as opposed to an illusory or false one’. But this leads Thrasymachus to a series of contradictions inasmuch as his proclaimed conventionalism co-exists with relativism. If the principle ‘justice is the advantage of the stronger’ is linked to an objective appreciation of the advantage of the stronger/ruler, then whenever the ruling body errs and makes incorrect laws, these turn to be disadvantageous to itself. Consequently, if it is just to obey all laws, both correct and incorrect, then it is just to do what is disadvantageous to the ruler. Whereas Thrasymachus retained some measure of objectivity in his relativistic framework, thus exposing his account to the uncompromising Socratic elenchos, Cleitophon argues that the ruling body can be said to make choices that result in its disadvantage only if it is proved that there is ‘a real or true advantage’. Cleitophon, in Roochnik’s perception, is a consistent subjectivist, an extreme relativist. He suggests altering the account to read . . . ‘the just is whatever the ruling body believes to be to its advantage’. In this formulation, there would be no conventional standards whatsoever to measure correct and incorrect laws and the contradiction facing Thrasymachus evaporates: the just would simply be identical to the legal.

Socrates thereafter unconvincingly dismisses Cleitophon’s view, and the latter falls silent. According to Roochnik, ‘he has formulated a position which is never refuted by Socrates. So, rather than take Cleitophon’s silence as grounds to dismiss him, I propose he deserves philosophical attention’.33

Now in the dialogue that bears his name, Cleitophon appears frustrated by Socrates’ inability to move beyond protreptical speech. And here we are confronted with the ‘mirroring relation’ between Republic I and the Cleitophon. In the former, Cleitophon advocates ‘radical relativism’ and then falls silent. In the latter, he shows the grounds for being a relativist: he is not persuaded

33 Ibid., p. 140.
that ‘philosophy can transcend its merely protreptical aspect or that knowledge can replace opinion, and it is Socrates who falls silent’. The reason for Socrates’ silence is, according to Roochnik, that from Plato’s perspective ‘radical relativism is indistinguishable from silence’. There is no refutation whatsoever of a radical relativist, of one who denies the possibility of attaining objective knowledge. Rational discussion depends upon a value judgement:

It is precisely this judgment that animates Socrates’ protreptical speeches. But because it is a value judgment it is subject to rejection by someone asserting that values are relative to the ones upholding them. As such, the very project of philosophy is dependent upon a judgment that cannot itself be secured by argumentation. In other words, this project is initiated, not by a demonstration of its value, but by exhortation. This, I suggest, is the meaning behind Plato’s Cleitophon. He is a character who finds this absence of an articulated ground and answer to his demanding questions, this aporia intolerable, and both his protest in the dialogue named after him as well as his silence in the Republic are philosophically significant. This is, finally, the best reason to accept the Cleitophon as authentically Platonic, aimed at the Platonic Socrates, and as a complete dialogue worthy of serious study. Its riddle, as we have repeatedly seen, is Socrates’ silence. I propose that it be understood as his tacit agreement with the position I have just outlined.34

It would lead us astray to expand further on the interpretations of Orwin and Roochnik. The accounts presented above (in sections III and IV) suffice, I hope, to show that the Cleitophon, as it has been examined since the advent of modern Platonism, deserves the designation of a ‘riddle’. Orwin’s and Roochnik’s accounts have been presented in more detail than previous attempts at solving the riddle inasmuch as they provide, in my view, an example of the analytical complexity that permeates current Platonic interpretation based on a broad, even if implicit consensus, that there exist rational motives and indispensably concrete purposes (either preconceived or developed in the course of time) behind the composition of Plato’s dialogues, motives and purposes discoverable by the sharp eye and mind of the critic who does not get disappointed by the superficial picture of a contradictory and an immensely argumentative philosopher. The essential legacy of nineteenth-century Platonism, the idea of a logically coherent, systematic or evolutionist body of ideas and doctrines, is still with us, and it is vivacious.

V

At this point, and before our discussion culminates in Slings’s contribution to the Kleitophonproblem, we should make a brief digression back to the history of Platonic scholarship as a sequence of section II above. This time our

34 Ibid., p. 142.
attention will focus on some recent perspectives on interpreting Plato’s philosophical vision. Even though such perspectives can be considered as shedding complementary rather than contradictory light on conventional academic interpretive methods, they present a material advantage: in re-locating the corpus in its broader historical and literary settings they encourage an understanding of the dialogues not only from the inside. They represent a partial departure from the ‘what did Plato think’ formula (practically implying the effort of scholars either to discover the unity of Plato’s philosophising or to verify, in an eclectic way, some aspects of it) towards questions of the type: ‘how are Plato’s dialogues situated within the cultural, literary and political context of the fifth century? What are the major issues, questions or challenges to which they do respond?’ The conjectural and intrinsically speculative survey seems to give way to a quest for more tangible features that promise to give a faithful picture of Plato. The new approach seems to aspire to an all-inclusive ‘recontextualization’ of the literary and philosophic Plato. A most representative paradigm of this enterprise is the brilliant study of Charles H. Kahn, Plato and the Socratic Dialogue.

Kahn’s study reminds us, in the most emphatic manner, that the Socratic dialogue was a genre of literary fiction, not historical biography. This means that Plato’s activity as a writer largely corresponded to a fashionable tendency among Socrates’ companions, and thus a great deal of his dialogues can be read as authoritative parts of the new genre, the logos Sokratikos, or ‘conversation with Socrates’. According to Kahn,

it was the Socratics as a group, and the literature they produced, that ‘moved to that zone between truth and fiction which is so bewildering to the professional historian.’ ... This fact is to a large extent obscured for us by the extraordinary realism or verisimilitude of Plato’s dialogues. Plato’s portrayal of Socrates is just as free, just as much his own, as that of Aeschines and Xenophon, Antisthenes and Phaedo . . . Analogously we may say of

35 See Bowen’s remark, ‘On Interpreting Plato’, p. 277 n. 25, to which I subscribe.
36 The new methods are not to be confounded with the classical biographical approaches, like that of G.C. Field, Plato and his Contemporaries (London, 1930). The emphasis now is not so much on Plato’s entanglement in politics and the social milieu as determinative of his dialogues, as on his connection with contemporary literary and philosophical streams. Needless to say, any interpretation based on either the biographical or the re-contextualizing method is inextricably bound to involve a certain amount of conjecture.
Plato that he invents the conversations of Socrates with the same freedom as other Socratic authors, but that Plato does it both more philosophically and more lifelike.38

Kahn recognises that such an approach to the dialogues, in which Plato ‘is amusing himself in the new literary genre’ of Socratic conversations — and granted also other features of Plato’s dramatic expertise, like his irony, the use of anonymity, etc. — makes it tempting to read each formally autonomous piece as ‘if it were a complete literary unit and a thought-world of its own’. While one might have expected Kahn to adopt such a pluralistic approach, partly traceable to Grote’s assumptions, he goes on to postulate that Plato’s philosophy is a unified literary project. He thus examines how Plato transformed the logos Sokratikos ‘into an appropriate vehicle for constructive philosophy’, and tries to discern ‘the artistic intention’ with which the dialogues were composed. In his view, the dialogues do not constitute different stages in the philosopher’s thinking, but different literary moments in the presentation of his thought.39 Kahn’s interpretation appears thus to be a balanced mixture of the old and the new, yet it is the latter that deserves most the praise of Platonists.

Another monograph that successfully amplifies and elucidates a similar point of view is Andrea Wilson Nightingale’s Genres in Dialogue. In her impressive study, Nightingale examines the ways in which Plato incorporates other texts and genres into his (‘intergeneric’) dialogues with a view to defining constructively the philosopher’s activity. She begins with some reflections on the genre of Sokratikoi logoi, arguing that Plato actually appropriates ‘both the topoi and the texts’ of the established genres into his dialogues. Yet, since ‘we lack the writings of other Socratics, it is impossible to assess the extent to which Plato was innovating’. It is reasonable however to believe that Plato ‘took a simple genre characterized by recorded or dramatized conversations and transformed it into a multi-generic hybrid’. Now we should keep in mind that

[s]ince Plato is concerned not so much with a specific author or text as with the genre as a whole, it makes little difference whether the subtext is written by Plato or by someone else. It should be emphasized that Plato targets genres that have currency in classical Athens — genres which make some claim to wisdom or authority. Nor surprisingly, then, when Plato engages with a given genre of discourse, his stance is usually adversarial. As I will argue, Plato uses intertextuality as a vehicle for criticizing traditional genres of discourse and, what is more important, for introducing and defining a radically discursive practice, which he calls ‘philosophy’.40

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39 Ibid., pp. 53, 39, 41–2.
Plato’s use of intertextuality, in which he forces poetic and rhetorical subtexts to serve his adversarial purposes, should be analysed as ‘a species of parody’. To interpret the parodies one must identify the ‘specific subtext’, and then determine the grounds on which the target is parodied. According to Nightingale, a dialogue must include at least one of the following discursive structures: ‘an entire text from a given genre; a cluster of allusions to a specific text from a given genre; or the sustained use of the discourse, topoi, themes, or structural characteristics of a given genre’. Progressively, by parodying certain modes (genres) of discourse and spheres of activity as ‘anti-philosophical’ Plato is able to advance and legitimise his conception of philosophy. Parody is his chosen strategy for ‘marking the boundaries of philosophy’.

Though neither Kahn nor Nightingale makes a single reference to Cleitophon, there could be no better introduction to Slings’s Plato: Clitophon than their solidly suggestive introductions.

VI

Slings’s interpretation of the Cleitophon is part and parcel of such new re-contextualising understandings. He offers a critical edition and a new translation of the dialogue, based on a comprehensive examination of all relevant manuscripts and literary sources. In what follows I intend to give a précis of Slings’s study, placing special emphasis on arguments that relate broadly to questions of meaning and interpretation of Plato’s philosophy. This implies that the prodigious philological apparatus set admirably in motion by Slings in his analytic approach will need to be appraised in the future by a specialist. It is here expected that Slings’s work will help us to reflect further on the intellectual origins of modern Platonic scholarship as well as to explore alternative readings of the Platonic text.

First as to the structure: the book contains an extensive introduction to the Cleitophon (pp. 1–234), followed by the Greek text and the English translation. A considerably lengthy ‘Commentary’ elucidates the Greek and discusses the meaning of certain passages. There are also two appendices attached, ‘The ending of Aristotle’s Protrepticus’, and a ‘Note on the text’. A rich ‘Bibliography’ and four ‘Indexes’ assist the readers to orientate themselves in the mass of great learning and erudite detail exhibited throughout the book. As is apparent, the introductory section comprises two thirds of the study, and it forms the most interesting part for a historian of ancient philosophy or the non-specialist on issues of linguistic detail.

Revealingly, an earlier version of the present book was a privately published doctoral dissertation of the Free University at Amsterdam (1981). As said earlier, Slings in the precursory Commentary on the Platonic Clitophon held that there were strong doubts about the authenticity of this work. After
nineteen years he is able to declare that he no longer entertains such doubts: ‘I now feel that the grounds for my doubts are rather weak, and I have no compunction in presenting this revised version as Plato: Clitophon . . . But no matter if this dialogue is authentic or not, the most important question is its literary and philosophical intention . . . ’ (pp. x–xi). The dialogue, Slings continues, mainly represents an attack on Socrates and it is called a riddle. Hence, prior to deciding on questions of authorship one has to interpret its meaning. It might be important that Cleitophon, who addresses the criticism, appears enthusiastic about the teaching of Thrasymachus. A presumption in favour of a relationship between this dialogue and the Republic is thus fairly plausible, yet Slings suggests that ‘it is possible to explain the Clitophon from the Clitophon itself’. Accordingly, his practice has been to use other Socratic texts in order to ‘either test the hypotheses formed on the basis of the Clitophon alone, or, occasionally, to answer questions for which I found no satisfactory answer in the text of the dialogue’ (p. 2). Slings forewarns the reader that his interpretation consists of a number of arguments which can be found scattered throughout the book. However, to ease the reader’s comprehension he inserts an outline of the conclusions of his study just before summarising the composition itself.

But for our purposes it is more useful to begin from the dialogue itself. Slings’s schematisation of its structure (pp. 5–10) renders the following parts:

Prologue (406a1–407a4). In this part of the dialogue Socrates ‘says someone told him that, in a conversation with Lysias, Clitophon had criticised Socrates’ intellectual guidance and praised that of Thrasymachus’. Cleitophon replies that this is not the entire truth and offers to explain his position. Socrates gives him that opportunity in the hope that he will benefit from his speech.

Cleitophon’s report (407a5–410b3). This part is the heart of the dialogue and naturally the lengthier. It includes Cleitophon’s praise of Socrates; a report of Socrates’ protreptic (407b1–408b5), which is subdivided into three parts; and Cleitophon’s criticism (408c4–410b3). Socrates is always protrepticizing (protršpein) people to care for their soul, for it is the ruling part. Whoever cannot handle ‘his soul had better leave it alone and cease to live, or at any rate be a slave and hand over the rule of his mind to an expert’. In closing his report of Socrates’ protreptic speech, Cleitophon declares that he ‘quite agrees with this and similar speeches and considers them very suitable for exhortation and very useful’. But given that he had indeed expressed some reservations about Socrates’ method, he immediately

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42 See also p. 55: ‘Clitophon’s function is wholly explicable from the needs of the dialogue itself — his role in the Clitophon does not in any way illuminate his role in the Republic.’

43 My account is a bare outline of Slings’s extensive analysis. I omit whatever details I think are not absolutely necessary in understanding the dialogue.
proceeds to analyse the particulars of his criticism. In the introductory section of his criticism, Cleitophon says that ‘he asked those companions whom Socrates esteemed most how Socrates’ exhortation is to be followed up, supposing that exhortation itself is not the goal of life.’ (p. 6) His major concern has been to learn which art improves the soul. One of the Socratics, who seemed the best qualified ‘answered that this art is none other than justice’. The answer being incomplete, Cleitophon went on to employ a noticeably Socratic device — analogy — in order to provoke more satisfactory definitions: ‘Medicine has a double effect, the production of new doctors and health (of which the latter is a result of the art, not art itself) . . . Similarly justice will on one hand produce new just men, on the other it must have a result of its own. What is the latter?’ Thereafter Cleitophon quotes three unsatisfactory definitions of the result (ἔργον) of justice. Among the answers proposed (first definition) were the ‘beneficial, the fitting, the useful, the profitable’. The most ‘elegant answer’ given [κομψότατα ἐν διδασκαλίαν εἰπεῖν . . . etc., 409d4] (second definition) was ‘to effect friendship in the cities’ (p. 7). Then Cleitophon asked Socrates himself, who answered (third definition) ‘that the special result of justice was harming one’s enemies and benefiting one’s friends’ (pp. 7–8). Subsequently, however, it turned out that justice never harms anyone.

Cleitophon’s verdict (410b3–e8). Cleitophon confesses that after spending a lot of time in the pursuit of a convincing and well-grounded answer he has given up. ‘He thinks that Socrates is still the best in exhorting others to justice . . . but either [he] does not know what justice is or he is unwilling to impart his knowledge to Clitophon. That is why Clitophon visits Thrasymachus and others: he is at a loss’ (p. 8). Therefore, he addresses a last appeal to Socrates: Like him he believes that the care of the soul is all-important, and it is this understanding that generated his criticism. He implores Socrates to teach him whatever he should know about justice and cease exhorting him. In summing up (410c5–8), Cleitophon maintains that ‘Socrates is invaluable for those who have not been exhorted; for those who have been, he is almost a stumbling-block in their attainment of the core of virtue and becoming happy’ [ἐμπόδιον ἐρώτα τοῦ πρὸς τέλος ἀρετῆς ἔλθοντα ἐνεδάνον γενέσθαι] (p. 8).

Why does Socrates never reply to Cleitophon’s criticism? We have presented above a number of imaginative answers to this intriguing riddle. For Slings, Socrates did not have to say anything, at least in terms of an apology to Cleitophon. In fact, he is not really the person criticised. The dialogue is essentially a condemnation of a specific branch of Socratic literature, to wit philosophical protreptic in its pre-Aristotelian, ethical form. The speech put into Socrates’ mouth is a parody . . . in which various motifs of this genre are used; it is a parody of thoughts, not of one particular writer. The author is careful not to hit at the core of Socratic philosophy; it is the uselessness of protreptic preaching which is the target, not its ethical values. The choice of Clitophon, admirer
of Thrasymachus, as the main character suggests how dangerous protreptic can be (p. 3).

Now, why did the author of the *Cleitophon* pick out Socrates and his companions to be the main protagonists in this polemical piece of writing? In the first place, because in doing so he could easily prove that mere exhortation towards justice does not lead to knowledge of justice. At the same time elenchos is effectively demonstrated to be the antidote to fruitless exhortation. Its use in the *Cleitophon* is typically Platonic. According to Slings, the author’s judgement on the respective effectiveness of exhortation and elenchos fully corresponds to Plato’s. Further, *Cleitophon*’s author assents to an important aspect of Plato’s concept of justice, ‘namely that the true politician is he who renders his fellow-citizens more just’. In short, Slings argues, ‘the author’s intention is to show that his opinion of Socratic literature conforms in every respect to the views found in Plato’s literary production, which is, by implication, recommended as a better alternative for protreptic’ (p. 4).

In his lengthy introduction, Slings methodically weaves his argument into a solid argumentative structure with the aid of a wide-ranging use of primary and secondary literature. In the first stages of his account he shows persuasively that the *Cleitophon* is a finished text, and that the latter ‘as it stands responds to the author’s intention’ (pp. 14–15). Socrates’ silence is perfectly explicable in light of the dialogue’s structure and was intended right from the beginning. Understandably, if Slings is right in contending that Socrates’ silence conforms to the substantial requirements of the dialogue and that it was intended, then a long considered riddle is shown not to be a riddle at all. The combined type of exhortation which Socrates pleads in the *Apology* (protrepein associated with the critical exposition of self-conceit), which allowed him to practise his elenchos without himself possessing knowledge, had no place in the *Cleitophon*: ‘Clitophon himself does not possess knowledge and does not pretend to possess it, so elenchos is pointless in this case. What is more, there is elenchos in the *Cleitophon*, but it is directed against Socrates and his companions, and Clitophon is the one who uses it’ (p. 18). Of course the reader should be careful to distinguish between the historical Socrates and *Cleitophon*’s Socrates who functions here as ‘a literary character’ and ‘the central figure of Socratic protreptic writings’ (p. 42). In effect, there are some intentional un-Platonic features of this Socrates, the most obvious being Clitophon’s report of the philosopher delivering his exhortatory speech before a crowd. In the *Apology* it is made clear that Socrates’ protreptic is directed at individuals (p. 45). Obviously, at this stage, Slings’s reader still lacks a convincing explanation as to the reasons of Plato’s determination to assign to Socrates a substantially un-Socratic role, thus leaving his hero to be treated with irony by a certain Cleitophon. The question will remain open until a later stage (see below).
The notion of *Kurzdialog* (or, short dialogue) introduced by Carl W. Müller is instrumental in Slings’s attempt at classifying the *Cleitophon* among the works of Plato. Unlike Müller, however, Slings does not consider the ‘‘Short Dialogue’’ as a secondary and later development of Socratic literature, neither does he think that Plato could have never composed such short pieces. Instead he argues that short dialogues were written during the first half of the fourth century. What is more, he adduces an amazingly informative bulk of textual and philological evidence lending decisive support to the idea that ‘‘the Short Dialogue is a separate genre and that the *Cleitophon* belongs to it’’ (p. 34). A comparative analysis shows that the dialogue conforms both to the structural features and the thematic context of this literary genre.

Questions of meaning and authenticity are still unsettled. As such questions are not disjointed from wider intellectual discussions, Slings in the second part of the ‘‘Introduction’’ embarks on analysing philosophical protreptic in the fourth century BC. Apart from being instructive *per se*, such analysis was designed to validate the thesis that ‘‘Socrates who is made the target of our dialogue is not the philosopher himself but more or less a symbol of protreptic’’. Furthermore, in a most constructive part of his work, Slings examines Plato’s attitude towards protreptic and shows that the philosopher’s ‘‘alternative to protreptic is the dialogue, especially the complex of interrogation and aporia which he calls ἐλεγχὸς’’ (p. 59).

The origins and definition of philosophical protreptic, its content and applications, are therefore examined in depth (pp. 59–93). It would be cumbersome to restate Slings’s skilful distinctions between various kinds of philosophical protreptic. For our purposes it suffices to mention that ‘‘philosophical protreptic’’ is defined in relationship to all protreptic texts designed to cause a change in behaviour: ‘‘philosophical protreptic in the wider sense includes all texts written by philosophers or inspired by philosophy which aim at a change of conduct in the readers or characters of these texts (usually in the field of ethics); philosophical protreptic in the stricter sense denotes the texts which incite to the study of philosophy’’ (p. 60). Now such a distinction cannot be traced in the fourth century. Protreptic can rather be understood as a mixed type of exhortation (i.e., exhortation involving specific virtues, but simultaneously recipients are induced to the pursuit of philosophy). A useful distinction is also the one drawn between explicit and implicit protreptic. ‘‘Explicit protreptic’’ is embodied in all texts which ‘‘purport to state, prove or convince by other methods that one must adopt a certain line of behaviour or pursue philosophy’’; texts which have a similar intention but in which these aims are achieved indirectly are called ‘‘implicit protreptic’’ (p. 61).

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45 As Slings remarks (p. 58), the only monograph on philosophical protreptic in antiquity is P. Hartlich’s 1889 dissertation, ‘*e exhortationum a Graecis Romanisque scriptarum historia et indole*’.
In order to analyse the relationship of the Cleitophon to philosophical protreptic as a separate genre of philosophical literature in the fourth century, Slings draws up what he calls ‘an inventory of protreptic texts’ (p. 67). The ‘Protreptic Corpus’, confined to explicit philosophical προτροπία (to which the reported speech of Socrates in the Cleitophon belongs), consists of eight texts and a number of passages from Plato’s dialogues.\footnote{Those passages from Plato’s dialogues are called, following K. Gaiser (Protreptik und Paränese bei Platon (Stuttgart, 1959)), ‘protreptic situations’ (p. 75).} The Protreptikoi of Antisthenes, Aristippus and Aristotle; certain sections of Plato’s Euthydemus and Apology; the Alcibiades of Aeschines of Sphettos; Xenophon’s Memorabilia (4.2), and the pseudo-Platonic Alcibiades I, made up the list of the eight texts, even though only the latter has come to us un mutilated (pp. 67–76). Apart from the texts collected and minutely analysed, Slings examines also two passages which seem to reflect on philosophical exhortation and seem to be relevant to the Cleitophon.

The first passage is derived from Xenophon’s Memorabilia (1.4), in which Socrates’ pupil tries to show that far from being harmful to his companions (as Polycrates claimed) their mentor constantly worked for their benefit. This text has been taken by some scholars as a reference to the Cleitophon, but Slings, though accepting their striking coincidence, shows why this might not be the case. What is unambiguously attested in the passage, is ‘the existence of the criticism that Socrates is successful in exhortation but cannot actually lead people to’ ἱκτή (p. 81). The second passage is drawn from Demetrius’ Περὶ ἐξυπνοεῖας 296–8, which Slings believes depends on the Cleitophon. Slings’s hypothesis is that Demetrius in the passage quoted (pp. 83–4) speaks about three modes of protreptic, which coincide with statements found in Plato’s account of moral exhortation in the Sophist (i.e., accusation, advice, elenchos). Demetrius is not the only witness to the idea that the Socratic dialogue had a protreptic intention. It is also stated by Dicaearchus as well as by Cicero. ‘The Socrates of aporia and elenchos ... is there said [in the Academica Posteriora (I.4.16)] in so many words to be protreptic’ (pp. 86–7).

Slings’s central thesis is that in the fourth century ‘explicit philosophical protreptic appears to have been the domain of Socratic philosophers’, and this explains ‘why exhortation to virtue and to the care of the soul ... coincides with exhortation to philosophy’ (p. 90). There is also evidence that protreptic to philosophy was a subsequent construct that emerged out of moral exhortation (p. 91). The general argument being established, Slings turns to a more specific task of his study, the examination of protreptic in the Cleitophon itself. The assumption that Socrates’ protreptic speech is intended as a parody is set as a working hypothesis (pp. 93, 116). Three distinct kinds of exhortation are shown to merge in that speech, insofar as the author wished to give to it a structure which would have reflected ‘a theme not unknown to protreptic literature: the hierarchic scale of values χρώματα — σώμα — ψυχή’ (p. 100).
Hence a genuinely Platonic trichotomy of values was employed as a formal pattern for Socrates’ exhortatory speech. An important feature of the author’s method of parody has thus been detected: ‘he uses patterns taken over from other Socratic literature in order to furnish them with protreptic motifs unrelated to these patterns’ (p. 102).

Naturally, Slings’s next task is to specify the ‘protreptic motifs’ in Socrates’ reported speech (pp. 103–124). It is shown that the speech is constructed by utilising a number of patterns derived from other texts of the Protreptic Corpus. The thoughts those patterns furnish are typical of the exhortatory literature, thereby justifying one to speak of motifs. (For example, the motif regarding the inadequacy of contemporary education — Alcib. 1107a1–9; the well-known motif of the σύμμακτας ἐπιμέλεια; the often stated principle ‘τις μὴ ἐπισταται χρήσθαι, χρείττον εὰν τῶν τούτων χρήσιν (what one does not know how to use would be better left alone)’; the motif regarding the uselessness of collecting wealth by one who has not the knowledge to use it properly. According to Slings only one protreptic motif is more or less original in the Cleitophon — the ‘proof of the involuntariness of wrongdoing’.) All things considered, it is suitable to speak of a ‘cento of protreptic texts’. The fact that every single thought in the dialogue can find its parallel within the relevant corpus ‘is sufficient proof that a cento of protreptic texts was precisely what the author wished to compile’ (p. 124). It is worth observing that of the various texts used in this cento, two are directly identified in Plato’s Apology and the Euthydemus — dialogues which contain frequently used exhortatory motifs.

Section II.3 and its five subdivisions (pp. 127–164) are perhaps the more interesting for the Platonic analyst and the intellectual historian as well as instrumental in understanding Slings’s overall interpretation. The theme is Plato’s attitude towards protreptic which, as Slings contends, ‘can be reconstructed in relation to his use of the dialogue [form]’ (p. 128). Thus the discussion is not any longer confined to the Cleitophon but extends to the rationale of Plato’s appropriation of the dialogue form as a vehicle of his philosophy. Plato’s attitude towards exhortation is crucial not only for finding out the intention of the Cleitophon, but also ‘for the interpretation of the Platonic dialogue’. The issue, as Slings himself states, is complicated and extremely broad. Hence ‘avoiding the Scylla of subjectivity means getting into the Charybdis of circularity. I have some hope, nevertheless, that this section will contribute to understanding Plato as much as to grasping the intention of the Cleitophon’ (p. 128).

Slings first turns to the Sophist (231e5–6) where elenchos is put forward as a means for preparing the student to accept philosophical lessons, whereas oral and written ‘admonition’ or νοθετήσεις is rejected. In rejecting admonition, Plato displays his favour of implicit to explicit protreptic. Furthermore, what Plato proposes as an alternative for oral exhortation seems to be Socratic
interrogatory (or aporia-inducing) method as illustrated in the dialogues. In the *Theaetetus* (210b4–d4), Plato also identifies elenchos and μαίευτική, and therefore μαίευτική and implicit protreptic. ‘At the same time, since the *Theaetetus* itself clearly purports to give a demonstration of elenchos/μαίευτική, we are justified in analysing as Plato’s written implicit protreptic those dialogues which exhibit the same “elenctic” character as the *Theaetetus*’ (p. 133). The conclusive suggestion is that a considerable part of Plato’s œuvre is protreptic in character and orientation, as besides claimed in antiquity by Demetrius and Antiochus of Ascalon.

If the inference that elenchos and protreptic are consistently tied together (p. 144) is correct, then we are equipped with a supplementary tool for interpreting anew the Platonic dialogues. Elenchos is shown to possess a twofold function: first, it leads to aporia; and second, it encourages the pursuit of true knowledge; it constitutes a necessary step to move beyond the state of cognitive confusion in which the interlocutor ultimately finds himself (p. 141). The first (aporetic) stage appears to be Plato’s particular implicit protreptic, and it is the alternative for the explicit protreptic condemned in the *Sophist*. More consequential in terms of interpretation is Slings’s argument, in disagreement with several distinguished Platonists upholding the opposition between early Socratic elenchos and later dialectic, that there is ‘no rigid distinction between elenchos and “later” forms of dialogical discourse in Plato’. ‘I think that the differences must not be over-emphasised. *Ad hominem* refutation, dialectic, diaeresis, hypothesis are all different forms of testing, and therefore of elenchos’ (p. 137). Hence, even though Slings does not deny the idea of an evolutionary element in Plato’s method, he endorses — on the basis of the theoretical framework set out above — the unitarian approach.47

Slings goes on to reconstruct Plato’s theory of protreptic in relation to other elements of his philosophy. It is shown that ‘Plato rejects explicit philosophical protreptic because it is ineffective. Not only is it unable to establish philosophical knowledge in the reader . . . but it also fails to convince him that the care of his soul, or philosophy . . . is necessary for his life to be at all worth living’ (p. 155). In this regard, the dialogue is Plato’s written elenchos, expected to produce its twofold purpose mentioned above. Plato’s credible alternative to explicit exhortation appears everywhere in the guise of elenchtic (purely aporetic) dialogues or in the aporetic parts of other dialogues. Such is the consistency of Plato’s use of elenchos and protreptic in different texts at different periods that one is predisposed to think that it reflects a coherent method in Plato’s philosophy. The *Cleitophon*, which deals with the inadequacy of

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47 Accordingly, he boldly argues that the *Apology*, which exemplifies both elenchos and protreptic, ‘is programmatic in the sense that it announces dialogues that are yet to come . . . [and] that the *Apology* is the charter on which the dialogues are founded’ (p. 148).
explicit protreptic, can be enlisted among those dialogues which contain aporia and are implicitly protreptic (p. 179).

The material Slings presents and analyses in his study is enormous, but lack of space forbids us to do it full justice. Thus the remaining part of this presentation will focus on just summarising his conclusions about the Cleitophon.

Slings abandons the assumption that the Cleitophon intervenes chronologically between parts of the Republic, and argues that the dialogue dates after the Republic as a whole (pp. 206–208, 222).48 The author borrowed largely his definitions from the Republic. The fact that in the great constructive piece a well-reasoned account of justice is given shows clearly that the criticism of the Cleitophon is not aimed at Plato. But what is the meaning of the Cleitophon? Cleitophon’s report of Socrates’ exhortation to justice is easily recognisable as ‘a farrago of patterns and motifs from protreptic literature’ (p. 209). The author intended to criticise this genre for being unsuccessful in making people virtuous. The author ‘clarifies his intention by surrounding the report of the speech by clear markers of irony, by Socrates’ own inability to give a correct answer, and by Clitophon’s last words: those who have been explicitly exhorted cannot become virtuous and happy unless a wholly different method is applied’ (p. 210). This different method which can lead to virtue is presented through Cleitophon’s interrogation of the Socratic companions: it is elenchos as practised in Plato’s aporetic dialogues. The intention of the Cleitophon is twofold: ‘explicit protreptic is condemned, implicit protreptic (more precisely, elenchos as a means of reaching aporia) recommended’ (p. 211). In sum, the Cleitophon is a defence of the didactic dialogical form to which Plato committed his philosophy.

Plato’s tactic, however, to make Socrates a symbol of the criticised protreptic, caused many misinterpretations. According to Slings, in constructing this dialogue ‘our author ran the risk of being seriously misunderstood. Socrates he made the symbol of protreptic literature, but as Clitophon is made to attack him, the dialogue could easily be interpreted as an attack on Socratic philosophy’. Yet it should be emphasised that even though Socrates’ little exhortatory speech is parodied, the author ‘does not hit at the values which

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48 It is worth observing that G.R. Ledger, in his highly technical study Re-counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato’s Style (Oxford, 1989), acknowledges the authenticity of the Cleitophon (pp. 81–2) which he places in the last group of Plato’s dialogues. According to his calculations, the dialogue was written between 355 and 352 just after the Philebus, whereas the Republic belongs to the middle group and is dated between 380 and 369 (p. 224). The Cleitophon, Ledger argues, represents Plato’s ‘farewell to Socrates . . . The ensuing dialogues owe less to the inspiration of Socrates than they do to Plato’s own philosophical ideas. If Socrates figures at all in them it will be only as a silent listener, but he will not himself contribute anything’ (p. 207). Despite the considerable disagreement between Ledger and Slings about the meaning of the Cleitophon, the former lends his specialised support to the latter’s chronological hypothesis. Slings postulates as terminus ante quem for the Cleitophon the year 370, from which it should not considerably digress (p. 222).
Socrates exhorts his fellow-citizens’. When all is said, however, ‘one wonders whether the means of attack was well chosen. Did the author have no other way of conveying his message than by having Socrates victimised by an admirer of Thrasymachus?’ (p. 212). The ancients could not get the message, and they took quite seriously the speech of Socrates — a speech that enjoyed great popularity in later antiquity! The fact that many scholars from Schleiermacher onwards have considered the Cleitophon as an attack on Socrates, ‘does indeed show that to a certain extent the form of this dialogue obscures its meaning’ (p. 213).

In the final pages of his study Slings presents both the arguments that may be advanced in favour of the authenticity of the dialogue and vice versa. In favour: the Cleitophon is written from a wholly Platonic point of view; specific linguistic features (choice of words and certain expressions, grammar, syntax, etc.) are indicative of the changes that Plato’s style underwent over a span of fifty years; it has been transmitted among the philosopher’s genuine list. Among the serious counter-arguments is that ‘foreign material was incorporated’, whereas ‘the clumsy manner in which it is at times adapted to the context is not in keeping with Plato’s manner of writing’ (p. 229). Slings rightly points out, however, that the more serious objection to the assumption of genuineness is the fact that it contains (‘on the surface’) an attack on Socrates, and thus by implication on Plato himself. Moreover, ‘can Plato really have ascribed to Socrates the view that it is just to benefit friends and harm enemies, a view which Socrates so eloquently rejects in the Crito?’ (p. 230). Having weighted and analysed all pros and cons, Slings concludes his masterful ‘Introduction’ by declaring that he accepts the Cleitophon as a genuine work of Plato (p. 234).

The translation of the text that follows is characteristic of Slings’s shining scholarship. It is fluent, accurate, and there is clarity of style. It strikes a balance between elegance and literalness, whilst displaying Slings’s familiarity with both textual and philosophical issues which are involved in Platonic thought. The commentary is alike careful and methodical, and avoids as much as possible to raise issues argumentandi causa. It is not recommended to those who are not interested in the grammatical apparatus typical of analyses of this kind, but the introductory section that largely rehabilitates the Cleitophon in the place it deserves in the Platonic corpus, would be rewarding for the patient non-specialist.

VII

Slings’s book is in scholarly and intellectual terms an impressive achievement. It does not only succeed in restoring the philosophical credentials and literary value of the widely neglected Cleitophon, but also represents in my view a paradigmatic exemplification of a two-dimensional approach to the Platonic text that avoids exaggerated and often misleading conjectural
over-interpretations. It is the merit of Slings’s method that it integrates textual philological analysis and intellectual history without an extremist devotion to either side. Historians of ancient thought can definitely gain from such mixed approaches, if they have the patience to go through a work of philological scholarship without getting bored at the sight of numerous interpolations dealing with structural formalities and verbal subtleties in the Greek original.

I have reached Slings’s study through a circular road, in the belief that the debate over Cleitophon could help us to reflect on the origins and complexity of modern Platonic interpretation, and perhaps to tentatively reconsider some aspects of its problematic nature. In saying this it would be unwise of me to reduce the rich variety of methods and strategies of interpretation to a single monolithic ‘what Plato thought’ formula, neither do I cherish the conviction that there is an ideal scientific approach which, by transcending contextual impediments, could yield historically accurate accounts of Plato. As long as every age is committed to its own philosophical preconceptions and ideological anxieties, Plato will ever be one’s own invention. In this regard, the classic German axiom that we need to understand Plato better than he understood himself practically means, in effect, to reinterpret his political and philosophical doctrines in a way that is meaningful to us.

The reception of the Platonic Cleitophon exemplifies, like any other dialogue, the richness and the unlimited resources of ingenuity of modern scholarship. But several characteristics of that dialogue, which justify its designation of a ‘riddle’, stimulated a debate that brought to light the foundational requisites and premises of Platonic interpretation since the late eighteenth century. Cleitophon’s fate has been each time dictated by the theoretical preconditions constitutive of the methodological framework a certain critic might have favoured. Whenever a commentator could not understand why Socrates was criticised and the reasons for his silence, the dialogue was discarded as spurious. Could Plato ever become so detached — so dramatically detached — from his philosophical hero as to submit him to such a humiliating attack by a certain Cleitophon?

The question begs the answer. Scholars like Roochnik and Orwin, on the other hand, more faithful to the inherent logic of modern Platonic interpretation, tried to accommodate the riddle of the Cleitophon within the compound body of Plato’s philosophising, thereby neutralising the impression that the philosopher could contradict himself. Grote differed. His understanding of a many-sided and largely inconsistent Plato, unencumbered by contemporary intellectual traits and the monomania for systematisation, allowed him to accept the idea of the latter’s detachment from Socrates, either in the context of a transition in his thought or simply as a literary device. Slings shows persuasively that the riddle is not a riddle, and that there is no case of detachment from Socratic philosophy. He makes his point clearly, that the Platonic dialogue springs from a fashionable literary genre, the Sokratikoi logoi. What is
implicit in this argument is that exploring Plato’s intertextual dialogical engagements and encounters of literary genres might be the solid cornerstone towards a new reconstruction of the purport, operation and, foremost, the historicity of his philosophy.

No one would of course expect from a book dealing with such a short dialogue that issues of competing interpretive strategies would be resolved. But, as I have tried to show, Slings’s analysis effectively demonstrates that there are alternative ways to enter Plato’s thought without compressing the relevance of the intellectual circumstances of his times. Moreover, it prompts us to test our idea of Plato as a thinker more or less elevated above the stream of history in an idealistic abstraction. If we concede that this Plato is a distorted, largely over-theorised academic creature, then it would be much more tempting to engage anew in a critical enterprise designed to rediscover the original philosopher. What has been called above, in the broadest sense, a method of recontextualization seems to be a viable alternative. Slings and others before him have shown the way.

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