

DIALECTIC IN ACTION



An examination
of
Plato's *Crito*



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To Joan,
without whose encouragement and loving help
(not least with sentence-length)
it would never have been finished

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PREFACE

This book amounts to a running exposition with commentary of Plato's *Crito*. My intention has been simple. It is to help those who read the dialogue, whether or not they read Greek, to understand what Plato and his character Socrates are up to. It has proved impossible to make the exposition altogether simple, since the dialogue's argument is complex. Despite every effort to secure clarity, I have relied in the end (like Plato) on my readers' intelligence and persistence.

The book has been too long in gestation, for reasons not all within my control. The result is a certain unevenness in bibliographical information, particularly for the present millennium. I hope I have missed nothing of high significance, but it is human to err.

I would have missed more, and the book would have been worse, without the help of colleagues too numerous to mention here. Two good friends I must mention with specially deep gratitude: Spiro Panagiotou and Gabriel Danzig. Each has read the whole or extensive parts in draft, and furnished me with the most helpful criticisms. Each has also over years of friendship talked or corresponded with me about all sorts of problems in the *Crito*. To their respective Universities, McMaster and Bar-Ilan, I owe opportunities to talk to them, and to John Glucker, face to face, with great profit to me. My mistakes will surely be found in places where I have ventured to go against their arguments and advice. I am indebted to Anton Powell for his careful and constructive editing of my typescript. One other debt of a more personal and less academic nature I have reserved for my dedication.

References to Plato are to the Oxford text. In the case of the *Crito* itself and other dialogues in the First Tetralogy I have tried to be constant in using the lineation of the new Oxford text vol. I, edited by E.A. Duke and others.

Michael C. Stokes

PROLOGUE

Methodology is not everyone's cup of tea. Readers with no taste for it, and wishing to proceed at once to the interpretation of the *Crito*, are welcome to pass over these prolegomena and turn immediately to the Introduction below. Those interested in the methodology of reading and interpreting Plato, with special reference to the 'early' dialogues, are invited to ponder the brief remarks on this subject which follow here. Interested readers deserve a warning that the principles underlying the present study of the *Crito* remain much the same as those developed and used in my *Plato's Socratic Conversations* of 1986. The principles, however, have not pleased everybody. It is therefore necessary to restate them in a form modified to take account of some criticisms, to add certain new features and to subtract some rash over-statements. The subtraction owes something to a judicious article by M. Frede which mentioned no other scholar than Frede himself; the re-statement and the subtraction owe their very existence to some pages of stimulating criticism from J. Beversluis;¹ the new policies on interpretation result pretty directly from some helpfully provocative comments, most kindly contributed by Dr Gabriel Danzig, on an earlier draft of this study.

The method deployed here is one of close analysis, step by step, of everything that the parties to the dialogue say. In this it is not distinctive.² It treats the 'early' Platonic dialogue as not only a slab of philosophy but also a work of literature, a drama, with a situation, plot and characters.³ In this, too, it does not differ from many ways of reading Plato – and in particular the *Crito* – advocated or exemplified in recent years.⁴ What distinguishes it most sharply from the great bulk of modern Platonic scholarly writing in English is its determination to treat the questions that Socrates asks as questions, and not as thinly disguised assertions. In rash moments I have suggested that the *only* aim of those questions was to discover and elicit the respondent's beliefs, and, by implication, that the respondent owes his refutation *only* to the inconsistency or to the absurd consequences of his own beliefs. That was too exclusive, ignoring as it did the Platonic Socrates' dialectical skills in phrasing and ordering his questions. But there remain reasons for holding that Plato saddles the respondent with almost all the responsibility for his defeat. There is a further nuance distinguishing the

present approach from most others. The present approach assumes that where the course of the argument appears to leave the respondent a way out which he fails to take, the failure is not necessarily due to Plato's not having seen the need for an additional premiss, or to his portrayal of Socrates' bullying of his respondent. The respondent's failure may be due rather to the blockage of the escape-route by things Plato has had the respondent in character say previously, or by assumptions inherent in the respondent's professional or other main activity, or by the circumstances of the respondent's encounter with Socrates, or by character-traits of the respondent appearing in Plato's portrayal before or, less often, during the more obviously philosophical part(s) of the conversation. Nor is this merely a way in which Plato can browbeat his readers. No reader is compelled to identify himself with the character whom Socrates defeats; but the dialogues would be difficult to explain if there were not some readers who could identify themselves with, or at least recognize the humanity of, a given defeated or enlightened character.⁵

This means that the final upshot of a dialogue as a whole, so far as there is one, is in some measure hypothetical. What Plato says, so far as he could actually bring himself to say something, is this: *if* you resemble in relevant ways the respondent he has duly characterized, or *if* you accept certain views he has attributed to the respondent, then you have to follow out the argument to its conclusion. If you are not thus similar, or do not accept such views, then you are not compelled to accept the conclusion. This may seem a ridiculous mouse to spring from a mountain of argument. Plato, however, was a shrewd enough thinker to be fully aware that, if the person or kind of person one is arguing with does not accept the premisses of one's argument, then no amount of argumentation will convince them. He was also well aware that different premisses, or sets of premisses, appeal to different sorts of people.

Be that as it may, to dig out and fill such apparent gaps in the line of argument down which Socrates and his respondent travel, one must go step by step through the conversation. At each stage we should ask not only what the argument is, but also several other questions. We should inquire, in the more strictly argumentative parts of the dialogue, not only what admissions the respondent has made, but why he has made them.⁶ We should ask what alternatives he had, and why he did not choose one of those alternatives. We ought to look for reasons of previous commitment, or of professional or other circumstance, or of recognizable personal character, to explain why the respondent chooses the responses he does. The upshot will not be to remove all taint or suspicion of fallacy or enthymeme from Plato's writings, or in the present case from the *Crito*; the set of tools

and materials used here does not include whitewash. The technique will, however, reduce the number of dubious arguments or assertions in the *Crito* by showing that some apparently missing premisses or apparently faulty inferences or doubtfully acceptable statements are warranted by Crito's previous remarks, his circumstances at the dramatic time of the dialogue, or by his well-established character. It may also explain how and why genuine weaknesses arise in some arguments.

This manner of interpretation seems relatively little affected by the disturbing article of S.M. Cohen and D. Keyt on the principles of charity and parsimony.⁷ In supplying a premiss, they ask, is one divining Plato's thought or extending it? In charity an interpreter supplies a suppressed premiss rather than charge a great philosopher with a *non sequitur*. There are broadly two alternative procedures: the first is to supply the most reasonable premiss, reasonable either supposedly for the philosophical author – which ultimately takes us to the second procedure, dealt with below – or in fact for the interpreter. Adequate interpretation on these lines will remove all *non sequiturs*. If the philosopher's conclusion is false, then at least one of the philosopher's explicit or implicit premisses must be false. If one interprets all the premisses and conclusions charitably, all the arguments end up being both valid and sound: valid and sound, that is, in the eyes of the interpreter. Cohen and Keyt offer as corollaries that all philosophers are contemporaries, all interpretation is anachronistic, all classical philosophers are infallible and omniscient, and major philosophers never disagree. This splendid jeu d'esprit has, obviously, serious consequences. These are not mitigated by the principle of parsimony or (if you like) simplicity. The simplest explanation *for* a text with a missing premiss is that the philosopher failed to notice that it was missing. Parsimony may, however, guide the interpreter to the simplest, most elegant supplement *of* the text. But that places no significant restraint on the above-mentioned paradoxes of interpretation.

A version of the second alternative procedure is adopted here; this, though not without pitfalls, carries less drastic risks. The present type of interpretation tries to 'extend the context', in Cohen and Keyt's phrase, of remarks made by Socrates or his interlocutor to a point where one can see why one or the other, especially the interlocutor, goes – or seems to go – astray. The procedure presupposes that in many cases, though not necessarily all, Plato did in a way write down the missing propositions: one may unearth them from what he wrote by studying the characters, circumstances, methods, and previous words of the Socrates and the interlocutor whom Plato as an author created. It would be idle to pretend that such study does not, as the saying goes, read between the lines of an argument

under inspection. But it does so in the main by observing and applying what stands on other lines of the same work.

This whole method treats the Platonic dialogues as containing a substantial proportion of *ad hominem* argument, of a normally serious and not frivolous kind. It thus reads Plato's Socrates as pursuing dialectic in his questions and his reception of answers. It comes close, despite differences, to Cohen and Keyt's 'retrospective' model of interpreting a real enthymeme. On that model,

[T]he interpreter supposes either that Plato consciously entertained the supposed premiss but, for one reason or another, did not write it down, or that there is a premiss he would have supplied if he had been queried about the gap in his argument.

But the present contention will be that Plato often not only entertained the apparently missing premiss but did in effect write it down, *and* that if queried Plato would have been able to point to it. The method contends also that in quite a strong sense such arguments are not Plato's. True, Plato constructed and wrote each argument which emerges from Socrates' talk with his respondent. Nevertheless, how much of the argument Plato endorsed, how many of the premisses or inferences he would in his own person have accepted, is a question not always answerable at all, and rarely, if ever, with certainty.

The principle of charity in interpretation, then, lays down that between any pair of interpretations one should if at all possible adopt the interpretation which attributes less obtuseness or factual inaccuracy to the philosopher being examined. This principle is one of the foundations of the present method; if there were no apparent call on one's charity in Plato's works then the method would scarcely be needed. The method does therefore lie open to some of the criticisms Cohen and Keyt level at charitable interpretation. It will, for example, be a partly subjective matter to determine which propositions or inferences one can supply or account for by the method sketched above. Which propositions or pre-suppositions is it 'reasonable' for the interpreter to *attribute* to the 'character concerned'?⁸ Clearly they will sometimes be propositions it would seem reasonable for the author to hold, including on occasion those which the *interpreter* finds reasonable; sometimes, for reasons which need not stand to the character's discredit, they will not. In these circumstances what is reasonable to attribute to a character will be subject to differing views and attitudes in interpreters. However, in principle there seems to be no cause to doubt that in such matters, as in literary interpretation generally, though one can never be sure that one has the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, it is in most cases possible to tell a good interpretation from a bad

one, and one containing a measure of truth from one that contains none. The text itself is the measure of one's interpretative success; if the interpretation fits and explains the text, then it is at least tenable until someone finds an interpretation with wider explanatory power, or an overall more satisfying approach or type of interpretation. If other interpretations prove to work better than the present one, no-one would be more pleased than I. Meanwhile it is comforting to find that Cohen and Keyt's earthquake has its epicentre some distance away from the site where I am at work.

But there is another potential earthquake to be guarded against by building a structure strong enough to stand up to it. It has a name: the 'documentary fallacy'. The name, if not the concept, was apparently introduced to classical scholarship by A.J.A. Waldock in a brilliant little book entitled *Sophocles the Dramatist*, and it has been familiar for many years.⁹ But the full measure of its applicability to the interpretation of Plato only became clear to me from friendly criticisms levelled by Gabriel Danzig at a draft of this book. He pointed out that if one read too much between Plato's lines, one began in effect to diagnose what, e.g., Socrates and Crito thought at each stage as if they were not literary constructions but real personages whose speeches had been taped for analysis. There are limits beyond which such diagnosis cannot go without leaving behind the concerns and perceptions of ordinary readers, for whom (at least among others) Plato presumably wrote the shorter and less technical dialogues. If no ordinary reader, even if intelligent, is likely to perceive the thoughts the critic attributes to the characters in a drama, then the critic is committing the documentary fallacy, treating the work not as a drama but as a documentary record of real events and conversations.

Does this mean the interpreter should give up reading between the lines? Not at all. But it does mean that interpreters should exercise care and discretion in 'extending the context' of an argument. The extension should not go beyond the abilities of all the readers Plato may have had in view. The relevant abilities include verbal memory, precision in understanding words, and logical penetration. The difficulty lies in the dual nature of the great dramatic dialogues: they are both literary masterpieces, widely accessible as such, and intellectual explorations of a subtlety and depth likely from the start to be fully accessible only to those prepared and equipped for detailed study. Those equipped for detailed analysis might find some of the more rhetorical arguments, or some of the fallacies in Socrates' apparent reasoning, beneath them; those reading for the vivid characters, for the comic or tragic brilliance, or for Plato's marvellous eloquence, might find stretches of verbal in-fighting tedious. The interpreter must, in reading on or between the lines, bear this nest of difficulties in mind.

One way – not necessarily the only way – of bearing it in mind is to suppose that, like other dramatists, Plato wrote for more than one audience simultaneously. Like Sophocles, in my view at least,¹⁰ and Shakespeare in many critics' assessments, Plato will have written to be read or heard on more than one level. In the case of Shakespeare, some of the groundlings will have enjoyed the gore at the end of *Hamlet*, and the long-drawn-out suspense that precedes it, allowing the subtleties and beauties of the poetry to roll over them in a sonorous blur. More sophisticated theatregoers will have appreciated Shakespeare's gloriously mixed metaphors and the simpler beauty of lines such as 'But, look, where the morn in russet mantle clad Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.' In the case of Plato, some readers could be expected to follow the argument in some detail, spotting apparent fallacies and perhaps using what they read elsewhere in a dialogue to close the gaps in the argument; some could be expected to appreciate Plato's stylistic virtuosity; and some could be expected only to be moved or amused, as appropriate, while exposing themselves to a splendid sermon on, e.g., the importance of behaving justly or of recognizing the limits of their own knowledge. To descend for a moment to the autobiographical, I myself first read the *Crito* as a first-year undergraduate, appreciating something of its eloquence, being uplifted by Socrates' heroism, and feeling for the finally silenced Crito; analysis of how, and how legitimately, Socrates silences Crito came later. It is at least a plausible hypothesis, and one worth exploring, that Plato wrote, as it were, both for raw freshmen and for their teachers, both at once. On that hypothesis it becomes worthwhile to examine the effect the *Crito*, in each of its parts, may have had on different kinds of readers in Plato's own day.

To 'explain' the text: that is the object, and an interpretation must fulfil it. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating; a method can in the last resort be defended only if it works, that is to say if it provides an explanation which satisfies. Who, then, is the judge of what works, or what satisfies? H.W. Ausland wrote some years ago of something very like the present method, 'somehow unsatisfactory'.¹¹ In part this verdict rested on a review of Stokes (1986) in *Classical Philology*. The reviewer took me to task in effect for neglecting the sweep of argument developed by some of Socrates' interlocutors in favour of niggling minor points and questions. To this criticism the proper answer is to point to a very important precedent. The precedent is that of Socrates himself. Socrates in the *Protagoras*, after thinking for a while at the close of Protagoras' 'Great Speech', does not develop at once a critique of the sophist's main line of argument. Instead, he asks a single small question about what is, to all appearances at the time, a mere detail.

In any case other ways of reading Plato, much though I have learnt from them, do not satisfy me. In particular the ‘doctrinal’ way, reading Socrates’ questions mostly as embodying and laying down Socratic and/or Platonic doctrines, does not. It is still unclear to me what, on such doctrinal ways of reading Socratic questions, is the point of the sometimes elaborate and always skilful characterization of Socrates’ interlocutors. It is also unclear why Plato should not have expected, or at least hoped, that his contemporary readers would take Socrates’ questions as, genuinely, questions – of whatever sort. True, Aristotle takes the early dialogues as in part reports of Socratic doctrine. But he may have been arranging history (or biography) to fit his own form of dialectic, and in any case his accounts do not go into the detail of the arguments in Plato’s shorter dialogues.¹²

There is, moreover, in Plato’s *Apology*, what may be a warning against taking the questions in Socratic argument as in effect assertions: at 23a Socrates explains his reputation for wisdom as due to those bystanders who took him as being ‘wise’ on the topics of his refutations – apparently, in Socrates’ view, mistakenly. Socrates refers in the sequel, at 23b, to his habit of questioning people. In this passage Socrates declines to take to himself the authority to make pronouncements on the subjects he discusses. This implied refusal is fully in keeping with the Platonic Socrates’ habitual reluctance, stressed by Thrasymachus at *Rep.* 337a, to answer questions – a reluctance, that is, to venture even firm opinions, let alone a claim to knowledge. Indeed, if Socrates’ normal stance in argument were not genuinely interrogatory, it would be hard to explain why he so seldom allows himself to be questioned.

Other passages sing the same tune. When in the *Gorgias* (462b ff.) Polus is allowed to take on the role of questioner, it is clear that the questions are genuine – if feeble – attempts to find out what Socrates thinks before refuting it, and that Socrates is trying to strengthen them as such. This passage suggests that there is something more than merely formal about Socrates’ use of questions in ‘early’ Plato. The same suggestion arises from the slave-passage in the *Meno* (82a–85e), where, as I have previously argued, if Socrates is teaching Meno, or us as Plato’s readers, anything, it is that he does not teach by his questions.¹³ The slave *recollects* under the stimulus of Socrates’ interrogation; he does not learn from Socrates, whether the interrogation results in the slave’s possessing opinion or knowledge. The *Theaetetus* gives us several remarks in the same vein. At 157c Theaetetus himself says, ‘I don’t know, Socrates; for I can’t make out about you either, whether you are saying things you think are right, or whether you are testing me.’ Here the victim himself shows uncertainty, corresponding to modern scholarly uncertainty, whether Socrates believes

the propositions he puts to his respondent or is merely exploring the respondent's own views. Socrates replies, 'Do you not recall, my friend, that I neither know nor claim any such [opinion] as my own, but rather am unable to give birth to them, and act as midwife to you...until I help to bring your opinion into the world... Answer as you think on the topics of all my questions.' Plato here acknowledges that there does, or could, arise a question or doubt whether or not Socrates is pushing views onto his interlocutor; he has his Socrates politely but firmly slap down the suggestion that he is doing that. Plato's Socrates produces very little he wishes to call his own. Again in the *Theaetetus*, at 161a6, Theodorus says to Socrates, 'By the gods, say how it nevertheless is not so.' And Socrates says in the course of his reply, '...you think I am a bag of arguments and that I am going easily to take one out and say how, nevertheless, it is not so. You don't see what is going on, that none of the arguments comes from me, but always they come from the person conversing with me, and [that] I know no greater knowledge except for a little one, as much as to be able to extract an argument from someone else [who is] wise and receive it appropriately. So now I am going to try [to extract] this from [Theaetetus] here, not to say anything myself.' Socrates vigorously repels the suggestion that he *says*, or even tries to say, anything; he is simply drawing an argument, a theory, a λόγος, from a respondent. A further revealing remark at 167d–e includes the idea that Socrates demonstrates to his partner in conversation only such mistakes as the partner has been pushed into by himself and by his previous discussions. The Socratic dialectic does indeed confute a man out of his own nature and out of his preceding remarks. Socrates clearly, though not quite explicitly, disclaims responsibility. The same distinction emerges also from a brief passage of the *Crito*: at 49e5 Crito says, 'Say on!', and Socrates answers, 'Then I say the next item – or rather ask it.' Even though Crito's request is natural after Socrates says 'Listen to this!', the correction of the request is pointed: Socrates is not about to *assert* anything, only to ask questions.

Admittedly passages such as these have been dismissed by some as mere Socratic irony, or even as farce; there is an unfortunate tendency among scholars to take Plato's Socrates' words seriously only as long as it suits them to do so. Hopefully this book will avoid that tendency. In this whole context, *prima facie* one can readily accept that not all grammatical questions straightforwardly require information from the respondent, without supposing that one could transpose Socrates' questions into assertoric form without discernible effect on the argument. The present work aims to provide an interpretation of the *Crito* which will enable readers to understand Socrates' questions as questions, while distributing the

responsibility for the course of the argument fairly between Socrates and Crito. It will implicitly explain the necessity for Crito to be in the dialogue the kind of person he is.

Some of Socrates' questions, at least, must be exploratory of the respondent's views: if he asks 'What is courage?' or any similar question, he is obviously transmitting nothing, only probing his interlocutor. So where is one to draw the line between exploratory and didactic, or otherwise virtually assertoric, questions? Socrates sometimes distinguishes the respondent's views from his own, with expressions, normally used after the event, such as 'as you say', or 'on your view' (ὥς σὺ φης or κατὰ τὸν σὸν λόγον). But that is a long way from proving that only answers so tagged after the event are answers with which Socrates would not agree. There is no immediate formal feature that reliably distinguishes between views Socrates shares with the assenting respondent and those he does not share. This is a state of affairs consistent with the suggestion that the point of Socrates' questioning in what are commonly called the early dialogues is normally to lead to a confutation of the respondent. What Socrates needs is to elicit responses which suffice for confutation. It should be clear that for purposes of refuting the respondent out of his own mouth it need not matter at all whether Socrates would give the same response as the interlocutor, or whether Socrates in some measure agrees with the response he obtains, or not.

It is none the less true that Socrates does obtain the respondent's assent to some propositions with which Socrates would in all probability have agreed if pressed. This is in spite of Socrates' well-known love of paradox. Indeed, as scholars have noted, Socrates does not put the paradoxes direct to an interlocutor until or unless he has prepared the interlocutor, and built up an argument for them. It would be curious if Socrates did not agree with *some* of the wide range of non-paradoxical propositions he puts questioningly to his respondents. But that does not imply that he palms off on those respondents any proposition he wishes; nor does it mean that he forces propositions upon them because he agrees with the propositions himself. It would be surprising if there were no common ground at all between Socrates and any of his interlocutors. J. Beversluis is right, nevertheless, to argue that the interlocutors do not always give their sincere prior beliefs, and that Socrates by no means always asks them to.¹⁴ Plato perhaps intends his Socrates even when he is not explicit to be seeking such beliefs. Many of Socrates' questions, however, concern topics on which it would not be normal to have a sincere prior belief; the questions come at the respondent out of the blue. Plato perhaps overestimated the capacity of ordinary folk to summon up a sincere prior belief when arguing on their

feet under close questioning conducted usually with a veto on long explanations, evasions, and the like. What Socrates undoubtedly does require as a minimum, though he does not say so in so many words, is that the respondent should shoulder the responsibility for his responses, at least until the conclusion of the argument. At the conclusion he sometimes relents and offers the respondent the chance to withdraw or modify his previous answers, but pending that offer the responsibility rests with the respondent.

To take such responsibility means to take on a commitment. It is essential to decide what sort of commitment Socrates requires. No doubt some interlocutors for some of the time give answers to which they have a firm, if not a lifelong commitment. One imagines that Nicias at least, in the *Laches*, must think he is giving answers of that sort; otherwise his remarks at 187e–188c about Socrates' turning his respondents' lives inside out would be beside the point. But one cannot expect all interlocutors to offer such commitment all the time. What sort of commitment, then, can they offer? Here one must distinguish two different sorts of commitment. The distinction is not one of degree but of kind. One can call them internal and external commitment respectively. One is internally committed to a proposition if one sincerely believes it and has no expectation of abandoning it. One is externally committed to a proposition if one gives voice to it in a context where one will, or will be afraid to, lose face, be accused of instability or weakness or incompetence, or the like, if one were openly to abandon it.¹⁵ Full internal commitment, when answering questions on the spur of the moment, is more than Plato's Socrates, or anyone else, has any right to expect. Socrates behaves as if he expects at least external commitment from the victims of his chains of questions. He would no doubt like, and no doubt sometimes obtains, internal commitment. But he ought not to feel entitled to it more than is possible in the circumstances; even the external commitment of the respondent he allows on occasion, in friendly mode, to be provisional. Naturally different sorts of confutation correspond to different sorts of commitment. Nicias in the *Laches*, again, has clearly in the past had deeply-held views apparently refuted by Socrates and has felt his life altered as a consequence. Other characters sometimes make admissions on their feet which on reflection or under pressure they wish to withdraw: one thinks of Callicles' turnaround at *Gorgias* 499b4 ff.

Without some such commitment on the part of the respondent, the conversation would be entirely frivolous, not to say irresponsible. There is, however, no corresponding reason why Socrates should be responsible for any of the propositions he puts to his interlocutor. *For the purposes of*

confutation, it does not matter whether Socrates takes on any commitments or not. The victim suffers confutation in Socrates' eyes, as his contretemps with Polus in the *Gorgias* makes clear, if and only if two conditions are fulfilled. First, the victim must take on some commitment to the propositions put to him. Secondly, he must accept that at the conclusion of the argument *he* has indeed been reduced to absurdity or contradiction. When Plato chooses to have Socrates make specially clear that he does *not* wish to take on a commitment even temporarily, the reason is likely to be *either* because to risk that particular commitment would be to imperil the remarkably consistent intellectual and moral characterization of Socrates throughout the early dialogues, *or* because the particular commitment concerned would endanger Socrates' position in the particular dialogue.

One thing in all this is clear: Socrates does not need to share beliefs, or commitments, with his interlocutors as a condition of his conducting a meaningful discussion with them. This results from the simple truth that Socratic conversations in the 'early' dialogues, once the scene-setting and the characterization are tolerably complete, are not 'discussions' at all, in the sense in which we should use the word. A free and unfettered exchange of views these dialogues certainly do not present. Socrates very rarely puts forward a proposition as explicitly his own view; and he very rarely indeed submits to questioning about such a proposition. One can think of one passage which might be construed as saying that shared beliefs are indispensable for Socratic dialogue, but that would be a mistaken construal. The passage is *Crito* 49c–e. There (not to anticipate too fully the discussion below) Socrates says to Crito that he should take care not to answer contrary to his opinion, since the proposition concerned is one which few will share, and those who share it can have no meaningful joint *deliberation* with those who do not. It is clear that Socrates does himself subscribe to the proposition in question, and it becomes equally clear that if Crito did not subscribe, or were not prepared to subscribe for the duration of the conversation, Socrates could not launch his deliberative argument at all. Nor would it be possible for subscribers and non-subscribers to deliberate together about any single serious joint moral choice. For this kind of deliberation common ground is necessary, because the argument must end in action, and the action must – or they are not 'deliberating together' in any helpful sense – be acceptable to both parties in the light of their respective ultimate goals. The same is not true of Socratic confutation in general, which has nothing directly to do with such deliberation.

But why all this talk of 'commitment'? Why is it important for the student of Plato's 'early' dialogues? It is important to the present discussion for a particular but significant reason. In criticizing my previous stance on

Socratic questions, with its emphasis on the illegitimacy of interpreting them as disguised transmissions of doctrine, Beversluis said, rightly, that a question can serve different purposes and have different functions in different contexts. Socrates' questions do not have to be all of one sort, the sort which requires simply information from the respondent about his or her views. But one thing is common to most of these types of question; not 'all', but 'most'. By asking a question the speaker, however internally committed to the proposition at the core of the question, usually avoids – whether deliberately or not – at least the external responsibility for the proposition's truth. If one says, to take an example from Beversluis, 'There is a faculty meeting this afternoon, isn't there?',¹⁶ then one is shifting the responsibility for the truth of the proposition that there is a faculty meeting this afternoon to one's respondent or interlocutor. One may make it very clear, e.g. by tone of voice, that one regards the proposition as certainly true; but it is always open to the respondent to say 'No. As a matter of fact, there isn't; it's next week', or something of the kind. If the respondent says nothing or assents, then he or she is responsible for the truth of the proposition, and subject to possible fault-finding by the questioner if the proposition turns out to be false. There has to be some reason why Socrates does not normally take the answerer's role in a question-and-answer bout. A very likely reason is that that role, unlike that of the questioner, would saddle him with the responsibility for propositions contained in the questions, or their contradictories if he answers 'No'. He might be willing to take the responsibility for some answers – he declares at least his belief in some. But there are also some questions for whose answer, knowing nothing worthwhile, 'nothing fine and good', as he says in Plato's *Apology*, he would not wish to be held responsible, not even as far as the end of his current conversation.

Here, then, is my answer to Beversluis' criticism that I do not allow for the many different types of question. It gives also the reason why Beversluis, in criticizing my more extreme previous pronouncements, has not even touched the points made with greater circumspection by M. Frede and others.¹⁷ One cannot land Socrates with the whole responsibility for the course of the argument. The choice of questions, yes, that is Socrates' responsibility, as I.G.Kidd pointed out in 1992.¹⁸ Some of Socrates' questions one could regard as leading, perhaps on occasion unfairly or too strongly leading. Socrates evidently bears a large part of the responsibility for the shape of the argument. The more cleverly and artfully he tailors his questions to the responses he can expect from this particular respondent as characterized by Plato, the more evident and the greater his share of the responsibility becomes. But that does not make him responsible for

the answers the respondent gives, for the propositions the respondent accepts. Plato as author has of course the ultimate responsibility; within Plato's fiction the respondent has to accept the burden of responsibility for his answers.

It is this abdication of responsibility by Socrates and transfer of responsibility to the respondent that lends significance to the inquiry which the present study pursues. One needs to know, in order to understand what is going on, why the respondent at any given point shoulders the burden. One needs to know what alternatives were rationally open to him; one needs to know, when a proposition he accepts seems at first glance arbitrary, or seems not to follow, or seems in any way *prima facie* unacceptable, why – irrational propaganda apart – Plato should have made him concede it. An assumption of the argument is, of course, that Plato is not writing mere irrational propaganda. Another assumption is closely akin to that, viz. that Plato is writing with a reasonable degree of realism. We ought to find, on these two assumptions, that these are the answers that such a respondent as Plato has given Socrates, on such an occasion, in such circumstances, would offer. If other responses would have turned out better for the respondent's case, then we must seek good reasons why those more convenient responses – more convenient for the respondent – did not find their way into the respondent's mouth. But this programme necessitates the step-by-step examination of the conversation announced at the opening of this prologue. To that examination we may now turn.¹⁹

