CHAPTER 24

Plato

Kathryn Morgan

Any discussion of character in the Platonic corpus is complicated by the fact that Plato not only employs techniques of characterization as author, but pervasively makes character an object of analysis. Two obvious examples of this latter feature are the survey of the character types (aristocratic, timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical) that correspond to the different types of constitutions in *Republic* Book 8, and the discussion of the ruler's art of 'weaving' the fabric of the state by mingling courageous and moderate dispositions through education and eugenics in the *Statesman* (306a–311b).[1] As my previous chapters on Plato in this series have suggested, narrative form cannot be separated from philosophical content. When, in Book 1 of the *Republic*, Socrates narrates how Thrasymachus disapproved of the turn taken by the discussion and 'drew himself up like a wild beast and let himself loose upon us as though he intended to tear us to pieces' (336b), this is not merely an instance of metaphorical characterization by Socrates, but resonates with later passages in the dialogue where the appetitive part of the soul is characterized as a wild beast that needs to be tamed and controlled. Although my discussion here will focus mainly on narrative technique, this other level of interpretation should be kept constantly in mind. We should, moreover, be aware that for both ancient and modern interpreters, a Platonic dialogue has as its goal cognitive and ethical transformation in the reader.[2]

Diogenes Laertius (3.48) defined dialogue as 'a discourse consisting of question and answer on some philosophical or political subject, with due regard to the characters (*ēthopoiias*) of the persons introduced (*tōn paralambanomenōn prosōpōn*) and the choice of diction' (transl. Hicks). This formulation is useful because it directs our attention to an important characteristic of the Platonic dialogue, the intimate connection between philosophical thought and character. In the dialogues where Socrates plays a primary role, he crafts an argumentative strategy that is tailored for the character of a particular inter-

1 'So if there are five types of cities there would also be five types of individuals' (*R.* 8.544e).

2 So e.g. Procl. *in Ti.* 5e–f ('Plato sketches the outlines of our duties through his very representation of the best men') and Gordon 1999: 80–84.

© KATHRYN MORGAN, 2018 | DOI:10.1163/9789004356313_026
This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

locutor, and the character of the interlocutor emerges through the answers he gives, especially given Socrates' fundamental insistence that the person whom he questions answer what he really thinks. His philosophical quest thus proceeds in an *ad hominem* manner.[3] Dialectic exchange can only be successful if the interlocutor has 'the appropriate qualities of character and intellect';[4] in many dialogues, the interlocutor proves not to have the requisite qualities and the discussion ends in an impasse. As Blondell observed in her influential analysis of 2002: 'The entire text of a Platonic dialogue may … be understood as a vehicle for characterization'.[5]

Diogenes also tells us (3.9–10) that Plato was influenced by the thought of the Sicilian comic playwright Epicharmus, and (3.18) that he was the first to bring the mimes of Sophron to Athens and drew character in his style (*ēthopoiēsai pros auton*). Although the influence of Epicharmus on Plato's characterization has been asserted, this is not a safe inference from the text of Diogenes.[6] When it comes to Sophron, it is not unlikely that Sophron's presentation of rich characters portrayed in scenes taken from everyday life could have served as a model for Plato or at least have been seen by ancient literary critics as an important forerunner of his practice. *Mimesis prosōpōn* was regarded by ancient literary critics as a distinctive feature of Platonic dialogue.[7]

Plato's dialogues, both those with a frame narrator and those without, offer more than ample scope for the examination of characterization, and all the more so given this volume's inclusion of dramatized *ēthopoiia* within the remit of its inquiry. Still, it is in the framed dialogues that the construction of character through narrative is most obtrusive, and many of my examples will be taken from such dialogues. I will investigate Platonic characterization under several rubrics, such as characterization through setting or speech patterns. Yet important recurrent problems cut across these categories and will receive separate treatment (although resolution is beyond the scope of this contribution). Chief among these are the assessment of Socrates' character and Socrates' irony. Is the central character presented to us in the dialogues inimitable, honest, and heroic, or unscrupulous, competitive and insincere? Or is he some combination of these or additional qualities? That such different and incompatible readings are possible is due in part to Socrates' irony.

3 Kahn 1983: 76; Gordon 1999: 31, 79; cf. Beversluis 2000: 9, 116.

4 Gill 2002: 149.

5 Blondell 2002: 53.

6 Gordon 1999: 69–70, relying on the work of McDonald 1931.

7 Haslam 1972: 18–24, but see Ford 2010: 228–229.

Physical Description

Characterization through physical appearance is rare in the Platonic dialogues, and all the more significant when it does occur. For an example of indirect characterization of this kind, we may see *Hippias Major* 291a, where the sophist Hippias protests to Socrates that he would not want to talk with a man who asked questions about spoons and cookery. Socrates responds 'That's right! For it would not be appropriate for you to be filled up with such words when you are finely dressed like this and finely shod, and renowned for your wisdom among all the Greeks', a comment that invites an inference about the splendour of Hippias' costume, and 'highlights with pointed metonymies Hippias' vanity, which extends from his overblown talk to his elaborate dress'.[8] Again, Socrates' remark at *Meno* 80c, that Meno has compared him to an electric ray because Meno wants to be compared in turn, and that 'I know this about all handsome men, that they enjoy being described in images' implies that Meno is good-looking.

Socrates' satyr-like appearance and its implications are thematized in Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* as we shall see, but there the point is that his exterior appearance is belied by his 'interior', his soul. This contrast is of a piece with core philosophical material in the dialogue, where the philosophical lover of beauty is said to move beyond physical beauty to spiritual beauty and finally to the contemplation of the Form of Beauty. Physical appearance is often an irrelevance from the philosophical point of view: the job of the philosopher is to move beyond appearances to the truth. As Worman has pointed out, Plato constructs Socrates in opposition to an elite imaginary focused on the perceptual apprehension of character type, one that assessed moral and social status by such indicators as dress, vocal tone, and vocabulary.[9] The contrast between the Socratic exterior and interior was important in the work of another Socratic, Phaedo of Elis, whose dialogue *Zopyrus* confronted Socrates with a travelling physiognomer. When asked to diagnose Socrates' character on the basis of his appearance, the physiognomer said that Socrates was stupid (judging by his bull neck) and a womanizer (judging by his protruding eyes). Although those present ridiculed this assessment, Socrates declared that this was indeed his nature but that it had been overcome by reason.[10] A different point is being made here than in the *Symposium* (the power of reason to overcome nature), but the clash of inner and outer again represents the difficulty of understanding Socrates.

8 Worman 2008: 203.

9 Worman 2008: 166.

10 Kahn 1996: 10–11.

The issue of the relationship between the inner and outer person recurs several times in the corpus. It lies behind the eschatological myth narrated by Socrates in the *Gorgias*, where Zeus has to change the method by which souls are judged. In the Age of Cronus, souls were judged while still alive, so that the appearance of the body could screen that of the soul: handsome and wealthy sinners were mistakenly being sent to the Isles of the Blest. Zeus institutes a procedure whereby the soul is judged after death and 'naked' so that the maiming and scars caused by an unjust life can be seen (*Grg*. 523a–525a). The same issue underlies the introduction of the boy Charmides in his eponymous dialogue, where Socrates is the narrator. Charmides is astonishingly beautiful, so much so that Socrates almost loses control of himself. Everyone else is similarly entranced, he tells us:

> he appeared amazing to me in his size and his beauty, and all the rest seemed to me to be in love with him, so confused and thunderstruck were they … and it was less astonishing that men of our age were like this, but I was also paying attention to the boys, how none of them looked anywhere else, not even the smallest, but they all looked at him as if he were a statue.
>
> *Chrm*. 154b–c

This type of thick description is only possible in a narrated dialogue. It characterizes both Charmides and Socrates. We learn that Charmides is beautiful (although, interestingly, his beauty is described only in the most general terms; the reader experiences it through its effects on others) and that Socrates is much affected by him (he is 'simply a white measuring-line' when it comes to the beautiful, 154b). Yet we note too that despite Socrates' protestations of helpless admiration, he still has time to look around at people *other* than Charmides and assess his effect on them. We suspect (not for the first or the last time, if we are experienced readers of Plato) that Socrates is exaggerating his own weakness. This suspicion is confirmed when Socrates asks Critias whether, in addition to his beautiful body, Charmides has a well-formed soul (154d), and much of the rest of the dialogue is spent putting the young man through his intellectual paces. The final element in the understanding of Charmides' character could be supplied only by the external narratee. Charmides would grow up to be a member of the oligarchic junta, the 'Thirty Tyrants' that ruled Athens immediately following the end of the Peloponnesian War. A reader should therefore juxtapose the shy boy of the dialogue with the type 'murderous oligarch'; Charmides' life will be far from fulfilling the promise of his youthful beauty.

With Charmides we may contrast the young Theaetetus. In the frame of the *Theaetetus*, two external narrators (who are also Socratic disciples) meet in Megara and discuss a meeting that one of them has had with a mature Theaetetus, who is dying from battle wounds and dysentery and is on his way back to Athens. Contemplation of his virtues reminds them that Socrates had prophesied a great future for him, which in turn leads them to listen to the reading of a dramatic dialogue between Socrates, Theaetetus, and his maths teacher, Theodorus. As this internal dialogue opens, Theodorus enthusiastically praises Theaetetus to Socrates: 'If he were beautiful, I would be afraid to speak emphatically, in case I should seem to someone to desire him. But as it is—don't be annoyed at me—he is not beautiful, but resembles you in his snub nose and protruding eyes, except that he has these less than you.' (143e). When Socrates starts his conversation with Theaetetus he moves from the question of whether they resemble each other physically to whether they share an intellectual resemblance as well, an issue that becomes the pretext for further discussion.[11] The presence of the dialogue frame here enables us to compare the characters of the young and mature Theaetetus, if only sketchily. It pointedly confirms Socrates' skills as a judge of character but also reinforces the tension between character and appearance.

One final aspect of physical appearance that will concern us here is transient manifestations of emotions such as humour, temper, shame. Shame, sometimes leading to anger, can be a potent motivator in philosophical discussion. This emotion is thematized in the *Gorgias* (where each of Socrates' interlocutors is backed into an argumentative corner by Socrates' manipulation of their sense of shame), but operates in other dialogues as well.[12] We have already considered the example of Thrasymachus drawing himself up like a wild beast, a simile that communicates the tension and energy we are to imagine he displayed. Similar to this is Socrates' summary comment on a passage of dialogue where he has made Thrasymachus contradict himself 'Thrasymachus agreed with all my suggestions not as I now easily narrate it, but with difficulty and being dragged along, with an amazing amount of sweat, since it was summer, and then I saw it, although I had never seen it before—Thrasymachus blushing' (350c–d). As was noted in *SAGN* 1: 363, Plato makes Socrates' narrative control obtrusive here: the characterization of Thrasymachus through his sweat and blushing is particularly emphatic because Socrates makes it a cap to this

11 For the philosophical significance of Theaetetus' likeness or unlikeness to Socrates, see Blondell 2002: 251–313.

12 Kahn 1983, McKim 1988, Gordon 1999: 22–27.

section of narrative and narrates it out of temporal sequence. A blush is, of course, evidence of shame or modesty. In Thrasymachus' case it is shame at being bested in an argument. In the case of more attractive and younger interlocutors it can be both. Thus Hippocrates in the opening scene of the *Protagoras* blushes when Socrates suggests that he might want to become a sophist (shame). What is more, Socrates is able to see this (the dialogue starts when it is still dark) because the day was just dawning: an instance of metaphorical characterization, as Denyer observes: 'here the physical dawn coincides—in both time and colour—with something's dawning on Hippocrates intellectually'.[13] In *Euthydemus* too (275d) the boy Clinias blushes when confronted with a difficult question he does not know how to answer (again shame). At *Charmides* 158c Charmides blushes when asked whether he is sufficiently temperate (a claim that had previously been made for him by his cousin), and this blush made him even more beautiful, since his modesty became his age.[14]

Another characteristic emotion in the dialogues is amusement, whether gentle, self-depreciating, or triumphant. When the sophist Euthydemus has confused young Clinias, his brother Dionysodorus whispers to Socrates, 'smiling all over his face', that Clinias will be refuted no matter what answer he makes (*Euthd.* 275e). To this cruel complacency we may contrast the smile that is the sign of a gentle and philosophical temperament, as when Zeno and Parmenides smile at the intellectual precocity of the young Socrates (*Prm.* 130a, cf. 136d), or Socrates smiles at a good objection from Simmias ('Socrates looked keenly at him, as he was often accustomed to do, and said with a smile …', *Phd.* 86d).[15] There are few displays of grief in the dialogues. Only in the *Phaedo* are we presented with the shrieks of Socrates' wife in the face of his imminent death (60a) and the tears of his friends when he has drunk the poison (117c–d). On both occasions Socrates takes steps to have the weeping stop; there is to be no self-indulgence. Both the grief of his friends and Socrates' quelling of it are indications of character and the nature of their relationship.

The kind of overt comment that remarks on signs of emotion is most at home in the narrated dialogues, although it is possible to achieve these effects in a dramatic dialogue also, as when Socrates says to Polus 'Why do you laugh

---

13 Denyer 2008: 74; cf. Gordon 1999: 26–27.

14 Cf. *Lysis* 204b–d, where much is made of the embarrassed blushes of Hippothales in the face of erotic teasing.

15 Cf. *Phd.* 102d, where Socrates observes, with a smile, that he is talking like a book, and 115c where Socrates laughs and comments that all the arguments about immortality have done nothing to convince Crito.

at this, Polus?' (*Grg*. 473e). There will be less of this in the 'late' dialogues, where the philosophical expert in charge of the discussion is not Socrates, and where the interlocutors are less fully characterized.

Setting and Class

We saw in *SAGN* 3 that most Platonic dialogues take place in a restricted number of settings, most often a palaestra or other semi-public location or a private house (exceptions were the dialogues that present the trial and death of Socrates, which are associated with the Royal Stoa in the Athenian Agora, the law court, and the prison, and two dialogues that take place in the countryside, *Phaedrus* and *Laws*). These settings characterize the participants as members of a leisured class within the polis, who do not need to work for a living, but can spend time exercising, gossiping, flirting, and, most importantly, engaging in intellectual discussion and politics. Plato's own family was an old and a wealthy one, and several members of it have parts to play in the world of the dialogues: Critias, Charmides, Glaucon, and Ademantus. The house of the rich metic Cephalus in the Piraeus hosts the discussion of the *Republic*; the house of Callias, the richest man in Athens, is crammed with visiting sophists and hangers on in the *Protagoras*; the house of the tragic poet Agathon is the scene of the *Symposium*. All of them can accommodate large numbers of people, and many of these people know each other (there are several overlaps between dialogues). The characters in the dialogue are, then, drawn for the most part from a restricted sociological range.[16]

In this world of affluence, Socrates is something of an oddity. He is not wealthy himself (in the *Apology* his rich friends propose to pay on his behalf any fine levied by the court), although he is a member of the hoplite class, for which there was a property qualification. The only time we are told of his house, it seems modest. At the opening of the *Protagoras*, Hippocrates visits Socrates at home while it is still dark, finds Socrates in his bedroom, and sits on the end of his bed. The word used for bed here, *skimpous*, denotes a small couch or pallet, and Socrates' domestic situation contrasts vividly with the spacious residence of Callias that he and Hippocrates are soon to enter. His priorities, unsurprisingly, are not in the realm of worldly possessions. Socrates' frequent use of the craft analogy may associate him with lower-class types such as cobblers, and he is sometimes characterized as crude (*agroikos*), both by

16 Beversluis 2000: 29–30.

himself and by others.[17] Indeed, Worman has argued that we should read the Socrates of the dialogues as 'low' sort, an iambic contender who frequently uses comic topoi and parodic, insulting speech. On this reading, Socrates is given a 'resistant, outsider's stance', one that punctures the overblown elite discourse of sophists and other professed experts.[18]

Another indication of the status of Socrates and many of the interlocutors is the frequent references to pederastic passion and relationships, as well as flirting. In this arena Socrates seems to be comfortably assimilated within the elite. It seems to be a running joke that Socrates is the *erastēs* of Alcibiades, and a famous scene in the *Symposium* plays out a farcical scenario of pederastic jealousy and hurt feelings ('Please protect me, Agathon', says Socrates, 'My love for this man has proved to be no light matter. Ever since the time I fell in love with him it's not been possible for me to look at or talk to a good-looking man—not one—or this one here does unbelievable things in his jealousy. He abuses me and can scarcely keep his hands off me.' 213d). The same dynamic underlies the opening of the *Phaedrus*, and the dialogues where Socrates tries to discover who the beauty of the day is (*Charmides*, *Lysis*, *Theaetetus*). It generates witty exchanges and adds much spice to conversation, but it also marks those who participate in it as citizen males with the leisure time to woo and pursue their love interests. At the philosophical level this world of physical desire and passion adumbrates a higher realm, where desire is desire for truth and passion leaves the earthly body behind.

Assimilation to Mythological Paradigms

At *Theaetetus* 169a–b Theodorus compares Socrates to Sciron and Antaeus, who force passers-by into a trial of strength (in this case, the defence of the Protagorean Man-Measure doctrine). The comparison is ironic and doubly allusive. Like Sciron, Socrates inveigles his victim into a seemingly harmless task but then plans an ambush. The comparison with Antaeus implies that Socrates is an almost unstoppable dialectical wrestler.[19] Although Socrates accepts the identification and comments that he has been battered by many a Theseus or Heracles, the experienced reader knows that Socrates is rarely bested in argument (perhaps, then, Socrates should be associated rather with Heracles or

17 Worman 2008: 157, 188.

18 Worman 2008: 154–167.

19 Morgan 2000: 246.

Theseus). We see a similar phenomenon at *Protagoras* 340a, this time combined with a Homeric quotation. Uncertain about how to combat Protagoras' argument, Socrates calls to Prodicus 'as the river Scamander in Homer called on the Simois when hard pressed by Achilles, with the words "Dear brother, let us both together stem the hero's might"'. Socrates implies that opposing Protagoras is like fighting Achilles, parades his own skill at poetic quotation, and assimilates the discussion to epic warfare.[20] Quotation of Homer is relatively frequent in the Platonic corpus and often comes from the mouth of Socrates.[21] Poetic citation is a marker of cultured elite status,[22] yet such citations also encourage us to read Socrates as a heroic figure.[23] They may trigger an ongoing subtext for large stretches of individual dialogues, as in the *Republic* when Socrates' disapproving citation of *Odyssey* 11.489–491 (Achilles' pessimistic assessment of existence among the dead) at *Republic* 386a–d is taken up again at 7.516d–e to characterize political existence among the dwellers in the cave. The *Odyssey* passage comes from Odysseus' visit to the land of dead, and it has been plausibly asserted that katabatic themes surface repeatedly in the *Republic*, with Socrates serving as an Odysseus-like figure.[24]

Identification with a mythological prototype seems to have been a common move in the late fifth century, at least as Plato represents it. In the *Hippias Major*, Hippias boasts how he has gained fame by giving advice to young men about how they ought to behave, but it turns out that this catalogue is actually put in the mouth of Nestor (286a–b). Hippias thus assimilates himself to an epic prototype. Similarly at *Phaedrus* 261b–c Socrates mentions 'Arts of Speech' written by Nestor, Odysseus, and Palamedes during their leisure time at Troy, but Phaedrus suspects that the name Nestor disguises Gorgias, and that Odysseus hides Thrasymachus and Theodorus. Mapping intellectual conflicts and characters onto the mythological world elevates the issues and achievements of Socrates and his rivals.

---

20 Cf. *Euthd.* 297c, where Socrates' battle with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus is compared to Heracles' encounter with the Hydra and crab (Worman 2008: 210), and *Euthd.* 285c–d, where complex allusions to Medea and Marsyas may serve a protreptic function (Collins 2015: 113–116).

21 Yamagata 2012 argues that Homeric quotation may have been a characteristic of the historical Socrates.

22 Halliwell 2000.

23 Cf. Yamagata 2012: 133 on *Ap.* 28b–d.

24 O'Connor 2007: 57–63.

Socrates

Socrates as Narrator

In *SAGN* 1: 361–364 I explored the phenomenon of Socrates as narrator in five dialogues where he reports a previous conversation. Some of the conclusions reached there may now be repeated. I shall return shortly to the question of irony; for now we may note that Socrates characterizes himself with a goodly amount of humorous exaggeration and self-depreciation which may or may not be taken seriously. In addition to the examples cited in *SAGN* 1, we may mention Socrates' report of his reaction to Protagoras' argumentation centred on Simonides' poem at *Protagoras* 339e:

> At first, like someone struck by a good boxer, everything went black for me, and my head swam when he said these things and the others shouted in approval. Then—to tell you the truth—so that I could have time to consider what the poet meant, I turn to Prodicus …

Socrates narrates his momentary intellectual discomfiture as though it had been a physical experience, although we may imagine that everything did not, in fact, go black for him. A similar situation recurs at *Euthydemus* 303a–c, where Socrates declares that he lay speechless, as if he had been struck a blow by the argument, and was so affected by the applause given to the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus that he agreed that he had never seen men so wise and was 'absolutely enslaved' by their wisdom.

As narrator, Socrates attributes a great deal of knowledge to himself and at times seems omniscient. It is clear that he pays careful attention to the dynamics of a conversation, noticing not only the movements and emotions of the speakers, but also of the audience. He is a master of conversation management. This is most clear in the narrated dialogues, as we can see from the *Protagoras* example above where he makes his strategy explicit. Yet his control is clear even when it is not obtrusive. The Socrates of the *Euthydemus* declares himself to be incapable of holding his own with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, but he still directs the discussion, both at the intradiegetic and extradiegetic level.[25] Even a dramatic dialogue like the *Gorgias* showcases Socrates as a 'psychological strategist' who defeats an opponent by picking an

25 Collins 2015: 57–59 and 45–144 *passim* (see particularly 58: 'this ubiquitous character orchestrates a good deal of the marketplace contest both while he is engaged in it and when he narrates it later').

apparently uncontroversial premise to start the discussion, one that will trigger no resistance from his interlocutor.[26] Socrates' attention to detail characterizes him and is replicated at the intellectual level as he keeps careful track of the progress of an argument, watching for problems and inconsistencies.

His observations, of course, characterize his interlocutors. Thus in the *Lysis* Socrates narrates that he engineered a conversation with Lysis after learning that Hippothales was in love with him. A group gathers in a palaestra, and Lysis eventually comes to sit down near Socrates, who narrates how

> Hippothales when he saw that several people were standing around used them as a screen and stood where he thought Lysis would not see him, afraid that he would annoy him …
>
> *Ly*. 207b

When Socrates has given Lysis a salutary dose of cross-examination about the nature of friendship,

> I looked away towards Hippothales and almost made a mistake, for it came into my head to say 'This is how, Hippothales, you ought to talk to your boyfriend, humbling and reining him in, not puffing him up and pampering him like you do'. But when I saw him in agony and thrown into confusion by what was being said, I remembered that even though he was standing nearby he wanted to pass unnoticed by Lysis. So I got a hold of myself and held back from my comment.
>
> *Ly*. 210e–211a

Hippothales' thoughts and fears seem to be perfectly transparent to Socrates, and this enables a lively presentation of a nervous and besotted individual. Socrates' psychological expertise corresponds to the requirements for a competent orator listed towards the end of the *Phaedrus* 271e–272a:

> He is competent to say what sort of person is convinced by what sort of discourse. When someone is present he can perceive clearly and prove to himself that *this* is the person and *this* is the character now really in front of him about which he had previously had discussions, and he must apply to it *this* discourse in *this* way in order to create conviction about *these* things.

---

26 McKim 1988: 45.

Socrates seems to have an aptitude for this kind of analysis. Most readers of the dialogues have been content to take his conclusions at face value, although those disposed to mistrust his intellectual honesty would doubtless urge us to accept them only with reservations.[27]

Socrates Characterized through Metaphor

Socrates' perplexing and (for some) disturbing character is reflected in the efforts made by himself and others to describe himself through metaphors. We must mention first the famous passage in the *Apology* (Plato's imaginative reconstruction of Socrates' defence speech at his trial) where Socrates compares himself to a gadfly:

> I was attached to the city by the god—if you will allow me to say something rather ridiculous—as to a large and noble horse that was rather sluggish because of its size and needed to be roused up by a gadfly. I think that the god has imposed me on the city as this sort of thing.
>
> *Ap.* 30e

We note here both the insight with which Socrates describes the annoyance he causes and the characteristic humour with which it is presented. He presents himself as an insect and draws attention to the ridiculous nature of the comparison, perhaps in an attempt to diffuse the hostility of the jury. Similar to this is Socrates' comparison of himself to a bee at *Phaedo* 91c. In this conversation just before his execution, Socrates worries that if his argumentation is deceptive, he might, like a bee, leave a sting in his interlocutors even after he is dead. Paradoxically, the reader is aware that Socrates' arguments, whether deceptive or not, did indeed leave a sting in the minds of his interlocutors, as witnessed by the existence of the dialogues themselves.[28] Characterization through metaphor becomes a heuristic tool when it comes to Socrates. Both Socrates and his interlocutors (and ultimately the readers of the dialogues) are encouraged to explore the extent to which any given metaphor is fitting and the implications that this has for the nature of the soul and of philosophy. Thus in the opening pages of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates refuses to be drawn into a discussion of the rationalization of myth because he has not yet learned to 'know himself', whether he is a 'more complex beast than Typhon and more inflamed, or a more

27 So, for example Berversluis 2000.

28 It can be no accident that the same metaphor was used to describe Pericles in the *Demes* of Eupolis (102 K-A): of all the orators, only his speech remained in the mind of his audience, like a bee sting.

gentle and simpler creature, sharing naturally in a divine and un-Typhonic portion' (*Phdr.* 230a3–6). In the *Theaetetus* Socrates famously compares himself to a midwife (148e–151d). His interlocutor confesses persistent worries about the nature of knowledge and Socrates says that this is because he is 'pregnant'. He then observes that most people think that he (Socrates) is extremely odd and causes people to be at a loss. This is because he is a midwife—though a midwife of souls rather than bodies. This lengthy interlude is broadly apologetic in that it attempts to explain why association with Socrates is sometimes annoying and sometimes ineffective; it also characterizes Socrates as methodologically self-aware.[29]

When interlocutors characterize Socrates, they express his strangeness through animal, human, and mythological metaphor. Meno says that Socrates bewitches and enchants him so that he is at a loss (*Men.* 80a), implying that Socrates is some kind of eristic magician.[30] He expands upon this by referring to Socrates' broader reputation for causing perplexity and by making a 'joking' comparison of Socrates to an electric ray, which numbs anyone who touches it (*Men.* 80a–b). Socrates, however, disputes the accuracy of the comparison (he is only a ray if a ray makes itself numb as well as others) and flirtatiously impugns Meno's motives in making a comparison. The characterizing effect here is complex. Socrates' reservations about the comparison demonstrate his conversational rigour, but they also leave space for speculation about the role of irony here (is Socrates *really* as numb as he claims?). In addition, the reader learns in passing that Meno is good-looking. Socrates asserts that Meno made a likeness of him so that he would in turn make a likeness of Meno; this is because all handsome men enjoy images of themselves (*Men.* 80c). Now, the comment about good looks comes as a surprise: the (unproductive) discussion so far has been about the nature of virtue and physical appearance has not featured at all. It (metonymically) helps to characterize the social milieu in which the conversation takes place, that of the elite male in the late fifth century BCE, where homoerotic flirting is commonplace. Yet it also has an important role to play in the conversational dynamic. Socrates may imply that Meno is good-looking because Meno is frustrated and might abandon the discussion; Socrates compliments him to induce him to continue. The passage thus characterizes Socrates not only explicitly through metaphor, but implicitly by showing his manipulation of his situation through humour and irony.

29 For a more detailed consideration of the midwife metaphor and its ramifications, see Blondell 2002: 266–277.

30 For Socrates as sorcerer see Belfiore 1980.

The most elaborate characterization of Socrates comes in the *Symposium*, in Alcibiades' drunken speech in praise of Socrates. Alcibiades compares Socrates to the statues of Silenus that open up to reveal images of the gods, along the way giving a physical characterization of Socrates as looking like the satyr Marsyas. But, he says, the comparison does not end there. Like Marsyas, Socrates is a committer of outrage (*hubristēs*), a composer of melodies and flute-player (although unlike Marsyas, he needs no instrument) (*Smp.* 215a–c). He is mad about beautiful boys and claims to know nothing, both characteristics of Silenus according to Alcibiades (*Smp.* 216d), yet inside he is a miracle of sobriety and temperance. Even the usual practice of attempting to describe a character by comparing someone to a mythological hero (or the reverse), e.g. Achilles to Brasidas or Pericles to Nestor fails in the case of Socrates, who is beyond comparison (*Smp.* 221c). His arguments, too, are like hollow Silenus statues: ridiculous on the outside but golden and virtuous within (*Smp.* 221d–222a). This drunken *tour de force* of course characterizes Alcibiades as much as Socrates but is a fitting end to our consideration of characterization through metaphor. It not only attempts to capture the strangeness of a unique character, but foregrounds obtrusive reflection on the process of crafting character metaphors.

Socratic Irony

Socrates is often called ironic, although there continues to be a lively debate on what we should take this to mean.[31] Aristotle (*EN* 1108a22) called pretence in the form of understatement *eirōneia* (its opposite is pretence though exaggeration, *alazōneia*). At 1127b23–26 he comments, 'Self-depreciators, who understate their own merits, seem of a more refined character, for we feel that the motive underlying this form of insincerity is not gain but dislike of ostentation. These also mostly disown qualities held in high esteem, as Socrates used to do.' (transl. Rackham) The *eirōn* (self-depreciator), *alazōn* (braggart), and *bōmolokhos* (buffoon) were all types that operated in comedy. When characters claim that Socrates is engaging in *eirōneia*, this is not meant as a compliment and makes him guilty of an offense against sincerity. Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, exasperated by the course the argument has taken, and by Socrates' self-presentation as ignorant and timid ('I was afraid when I looked at him … trembling a little, I said: "Don't be harsh with us, Thrasymachus … I think it's much more appropriate for us to be pitied by you clever people …"', *R.* 336d–337a), has an outburst:

31 Vlastos 1991; Nightingale 1995: 114–119; Gordon 1999: 117–133; Worman 2008: 198.

> When he heard this he burst out laughing very scornfully and said, 'By Heracles', he said, 'this is that habitual irony (*eirōneia*) of Socrates. I knew this and said previously to these people that you would not be willing to answer but would be ironic (*eirōneusaio*) and do anything rather than answer.'
>
> *R.* 337a

For Socrates' opponents insincerity is a defining characteristic of his intellectual procedure. They accuse him also of twisting their words and talking off the subject (*Grg.* 489b–c, 491a–b, 497b). Even Socrates' admirer Alcibiades accuses him of irony, 'he lives his life continually ironizing (*eirōneuomenos*) and joking' (*Smp.* 216e), and reports him speaking 'very ironically (*eirōnikōs*) and very much in his accustomed manner' (*Smp.* 218d). More than one point is at issue here. First is the matter of specifying a certain aspect of Socrates' character in several dialogues of the corpus. When he proclaims ignorance, how seriously should we take him, and what is the nature of this ignorance?[32] Second is the problem of the extent to which Socrates is a reliable narrator. If he is disposed to humour, exaggeration, and irony (whether through false modesty or through making statements that imply the opposite of their surface meanings) how do we know whether to trust his narratives? Yet centuries of readers have projected themselves into the story world and taken the character of Socrates for an authoritative guide, even a paradigm for the philosophical life. Doubts on this front have led to studies such as that of Beversluis, for whom Socratic irony is a form of aggression: 'His ostensibly self-deprecating remarks are always thinly-veiled criticisms of his interlocutors'.[33] On such an approach, Plato's character Socrates is (demonstrably) insincere and an argumentative fraud.

The solution to this interpretative quandary is beyond the scope of this essay, yet as we leave this issue it is worth asking why Plato has chosen to present Socrates in this way. As Vlastos remarked, Xenophon did not do so.[34] As was the case with Socrates characterized through metaphor, the irony of Socrates bespeaks his uniqueness and the feeling that he is, as a character, difficult to grasp. If he is an *eirōn* we are tempted to understand some of his

---

32 He states in the *Apology* his opinion that he was wise because he recognized his own ignorance (21d) and that human wisdom amounts to very little (23a–b). When he says he knows nothing, this might be a product of philosophical conviction. Self-depreciation/irony would then be a consistent approach to life, and Aristotle would be wrong to take this as pretence.

33 Beversluis 2000: 259.

34 Vlastos 1991: 32.

more troublesome interlocutors as the opposing comic type of braggart, and to see their encounters as in some sense comic. Yet the stakes are high: life and death for Socrates, and thus no ordinary comedy. Blondell speaks aptly of Socrates as the embodiment of the serio-comic (*spoudaiogeloion*). Given that this presentation is Plato's literary construction it is fair to infer that difficulties in interpreting Socrates are part of the philosophic project.[35] When the reader undertakes the task of assessing the nature of his irony, she is engaged in ethical investigation and coming to the grips with the mystery of philosophical motivation.

The Interlocutors

Socrates' interlocutors are an essential ingredient in the Socratic dialogue. Indeed, the presence of interlocutors is a more enduring narrative phenomenon in Plato's works than Socrates himself is, although the intensity of their participation changes. As we have seen, they are drawn from a fairly restricted social background. Women are not directly represented (apart from the brief appearance of Socrates' wife Xanthippe in the *Phaedo*), although Socrates does claim to report the speech of two unusual women: Diotima the seer (*Symposium*) and Aspasia the partner of Pericles (*Menexenus*). Craftsmen are absent despite Socrates fondness for using craft metaphors when he attempts to understand a given expertise.[36] Socrates' youthful friends are all members of the Athenian leisured elite; their elder lovers, friends, and relatives are, for the most part, similar. Many (with the exception of metics such as Cephalus) entertain political ambitions, and therefore seek out interactions with travelling intellectual professionals such as Protagoras and Gorgias. This latter group generates Socrates' most lively conversations, since the result of the encounter is often the debunking of intellectual pretension and a challenge to prestige. This is why the action of these conversations is so often characterized in hunting, military and athletic metaphors.[37] Yet whether the dialogue partner is a sophist, an ambitious youth, a general or some other category of established citizen, the discussion is always brought home to the character of the interlocutor. As the general Nicias says:

---

35 Blondell 2002: 69 sees Socrates as mysterious both because of his ironical manner and because his contradictory nature allows him to embody the paradoxes of the human condition.

36 Beversluis 2000: 29–30.

37 Louis 1945: 53–55, 57–63, 212–217.

> whoever gets very close to Socrates and engages with him in conversation, is compelled, even if he begins by talking about something else, to go on being led around by him in speech until he falls into giving an account of himself, how he lives now and how he has lived his previous life.
>
> *La.* 187e–188a

Socrates is interested not just in examining propositions but in examining lives, and every encounter showcases the character of the interlocutor.

We have already surveyed some of the techniques employed by the Socratic narrator to characterize those with whom he speaks. The self-professed experts are shown to be arrogant, reluctant, and, to varying degrees, helpless in the face of Socrates' questioning. In spite of his argumentative skill, however, they remain unpersuaded; Callicles' response (in a dramatic dialogue) is instructive: 'Somehow or other you seem to me to be right, Socrates, but my experience is that of the many: I don't entirely believe you.' (*Grg.* 513c). In non-narrated dialogues, the speakers are characterized by the arguments they make and by their reactions to Socrates' comments. Let us take Euthyphro as an example. This prophet and religious expert is on his way to prosecute his father for murder when he runs into Socrates and has a discussion about the nature of piety (one that ends in *aporia*). Euthyphro's complacency is communicated by the several times he draws a distinction between himself and his expertise and the crowd. He confesses that the Athenians laugh at him in the assembly when he makes a prophecy, even though they all come true. He sympathizes with Socrates over the impiety charge on which he is being prosecuted but maintains that the Athenians 'are jealous of all people such as ourselves' (*Euthphr.* 3c). When Socrates doubts his expertise, he declares that if he could not distinguish holy from unholy deeds 'Euthyphro would be no different from the general run of men' (5a). Later, when he cannot defend his understanding of piety, he is confused, without, however, suspecting that there is any failure on his part; the arguments simply will not stay put, and he suspects that Socrates is to blame (11b–d). With a more skilled interlocutor, this suspicion would build into outright hostility; in the current instance it merely results in Euthyphro's swift exit from the scene. Euthyphro is painted in broad strokes; we might say he embodies the type of unjustified intellectual complacency, but he is individualized by the specifics of his profession, his naivety, and the nature of the activity that brings him into contact with Socrates (prosecution of his father because of his convictions).

The interlocutors in the dialogues are also carefully characterized by their speech. Alcibiades' drunken intervention in the *Symposium* is chaotic, flowery, and extravagant, while the speech of Phaedrus in the same dialogue is poetic

in some of its rhythms and is full of Gorgianic features. In the *Gorgias*, Polus too speaks in a style that is recognisably Gorgianic. The speech attributed to Lysias and read by Phaedrus, Lysias' admirer, in *Phaedrus* is clearly Lysianic in its use of particles such as *kai men dē*, and may indeed be a Platonic parody of Lysias' prose.[38] Thrasymachus in the *Republic* is aggressive and forceful, perhaps reflecting his reputation for a powerful and emotionally stirring style.[39] Socrates himself usually speaks in a down-to-earth fashion, characterized as we have seen by humour and irony, but even he can be carried away on occasion, as when he verges on 'dithyrambic' speech in the lines preceding *Phaedrus* 238d and 'epic' as he brings his speech to a close at 241d–e.

'Late' Dialogues

In the dialogues that are conventionally called 'late' Socrates begins to take a back seat in the discussion and cede his place either to a mysterious 'Eleatic Stranger' (*Sophist, Statesman*) or to the philosopher-politicians Timaeus and Critias (*Timaeus*, *Critias*). In Plato's final dialogue, *Laws*, Socrates is absent altogether and the philosophical expert is an Athenian Stranger, speaking to a Spartan and a Cretan. In *Sophist* and *Statesman*, the interlocutor is a well-behaved philosophical novice, young Socrates (a younger namesake of Socrates). In *Timaeus* and *Critias* Socrates and two others listen in turn as the narratives of cosmology and Atlantis unfold. Although these works do have some stretches of lively interaction, they never rise to the same density of characterization as the rest of the 'earlier' dialogues, and serious conflict is absent.[40] This seems to have been a conscious choice on Plato's part. Often quoted in this connection is the remark of the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*. When asked whether he would rather conduct his explanation as a speech or do it through questioning, he replies 'It's easier to proceed talking to someone else, Socrates, when one's respondent is docile and doesn't cause trouble' (217d). For positive exposition of complex ideas, dialogical warfare is unsuitable. The late interlocutors are, then, to a greater extent 'flat' characters, or as Beversluis uncharitably puts it 'they cease to be recognizable individuals with minds of their own and tend to be faceless straightmen who can be relied upon to produce the desired response'.[41]

---

38 Shorey 1933.

39 Worman 2002: 154, 2008: 204.

40 But see also Gill 2002: 151, 'The main speakers in the later dialogues are varied and distinctively characterized, at least as regards philosophical method and project'.

41 Beversluis 2000: 378.

There is, of course, another way of looking at this, and at the presentation of Plato's two Strangers. This is the approach of Blondell, who sees philosophic reasons for the move towards blandness and lack of individuality in interlocutors and the indeterminate identity of the Eleatic Stranger. Theaetetus and young Socrates in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* are relatively colourless because they are young and unformed, uncorrupted by life in the Athenian polis. Yet they both have great potential. The Eleatic Stranger (Blondell notes how significant it is that he has no name) is unengaged in Athenian life and transcends intellectual parochialism. His creation would then free Plato from the baggage of historicity and Socratic characterization. On this reading, the Stranger is the type of the ideal philosopher and models the transcendence of the particular that it the ultimate goal of Platonic philosopher.[42]

Conclusion

For all of his idiosyncrasies, Socrates prides himself on his intellectual and argumentative consistency. Once he has established something through argument, he will not back away from it, even if it means ridicule or death; as he says at *Crito* 46b, 'not now for the first time, but always, I have been the sort of man who obeys nothing other than the argument that appears best to me as I consider it. I cannot now, when this fortune has befallen me, throw out the arguments that I spoke previously.' The goal of philosophy is to create a stable character and Socrates embodies that goal. The non-philosopher, on the other hand, may be at the mercy of his passions (or, if he has political ambitions, of public opinion). Socrates' interlocutors vary widely in their character and are never merely types, even though they may emerge as strongly representative of certain categories of people such as sophists or generals.[43] They are drawn with vivid detail (the urbane Protagoras at the centre of his chorus of admirers, the good-natured metic Cephalus who potters off to attend to sacrifices when the discussion gets too much for him, the enthusiastic Hippocrates who wakes up Socrates in the wee hours of the morning), reinforcing in their variety Gill's fundamental point that each dialectical encounter has its own integrity and significance.[44] The dialogues are rooted in the specific: individuals in particular situations with particular beliefs and ambitions, strengths and weaknesses.

42 Blondell 2002: 314–396.

43 Beversluis 2000: 8–9; Blondell 2002: 68–69.

44 Gill 2002: 153.

Socrates' task (and the task of philosophy) is to make them look beyond the particular to the universal and to transform moral instability and irresponsibility into reasoned virtue. Plato's characterization does ample justice both to the engagingly idiosyncratic and to the aspiration towards a moral and intellectual uniformity of the highest calibre.