

Erotic Wisdom and the Socratic Vocation in Plutarch's *Platonic Question* 1

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THE LAST SEVERAL DECADES have seen a ballooning of work on Plutarch as a philosopher, and a corresponding refinement of our understanding of his place in the history of late antique philosophy. As opposed to an older tendency to class him as an “eclectic” philosopher, a picture has more sharply emerged of Plutarch the defender of Platonism, who sees Pythagoras in Plato’s background and Aristotle as in many respects a continuation of Platonic teachings.¹ What remains far from clear, however, is the exact place and role of the tradition of Academic Skepticism in Plutarch’s thought. In this essay, I will attempt to press the limits of how we conceive both the importance and the very character of the skeptical Platonism to which Plutarch adheres. The uniqueness of Plutarch’s appropriation of the skeptical heritage, and the key to harmonizing it with his use of central Platonic teachings, lies, I wish to contend, in the centrality of eros to his conception of the skeptical vocation.

The general consensus view is that Plutarch is a doctrinal Platonist who employs Academic skeptical strategies “chiefly as a weapon to use against the Stoics.”² Jan Opsomer, who argues that Plutarch is somewhat peculiar in the Middle Platonic

¹ See in particular J. M. Dillon, “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Eclecticism’: Middle Platonists and Neo-Pythagoreans,” in J. M. Dillon and A. A. Long (eds.), *The Question of “Eclecticism”: Studies in Later Greek Philosophy* (Berkeley 1988) 106–113, and George E. Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement? Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry* (Oxford 2006), ch. 2.

² Dillon, in *The Question* 106.

tradition in that he “attached great value to the zetetic and aporetic approach” of the Academics, nevertheless sets out to examine Plutarch’s meditation on Socrates in *Platonic Question 1* in order to “study the way in which Plutarch *incorporated Academic themes* in his brand of Platonism.”³ George Karamanolis, though adducing Opsomer as precedent, actually goes further in affirming the centrality of at least one aspect of Academic skepticism in Plutarch’s thought:⁴

Plutarch forcefully argues that the sceptical interpretation of Plato, far from being a distortion of Plato’s philosophy, as Antiochus had maintained, does justice to the aporetic spirit of this philosophy. For Plutarch, though, this aporetic spirit remains compatible with Plato’s doctrinal aspect. This is because for him scepticism amounts to a way of searching out the truth, that is, the dialectical methodology of arguing on either side of a question in order to adduce without prejudices where the truth lies. This neither amounts to a dogmatic denial of the possibility to know, nor does it mean that no conclusion can be reached in this process ... There is evidence to suggest that Plutarch perceived Aristotle’s accord with Plato’s philosophy partially through Aristotle’s adherence to his aporetic spirit.

Karamanolis, however, does not go on to elaborate further the skeptical interpretation of Plutarch, but rather focuses on the question of Plutarch’s harmonizing of Plato and Aristotle.

The most obvious sort of evidence for a skeptical Plutarch is suggestive but elusive. The *Lamprias Catalogue* tells us that he wrote a work *On the Unity of the Academy since Plato*, but we do not know its content.⁵ Plutarch’s disciple Favorinus is reputed to

³ J. Opsomer, *In Search of the Truth: Academic Tendencies in Middle Platonism* (Brussels 1998) 268 and 127 respectively (emphasis mine); cf. 186, “Plutarch himself makes ample use of the sceptical strategies as weapons in his polemical texts.”

⁴ Karamanolis, *Plato* 85–86.

⁵ *Lamprias Catalogue* 63. Other apparently relevant but no longer extant texts named in the *Catalogue* are *On the Difference between the Pyrrhonians and the Academics* (64), *On Pyrrho’s Ten Tropes* (158), and *Whether one who Suspends Judgment on Everything is Condemned to Inaction* (210).

have written a work called *Plutarch*, or *On the Academic Disposition*, but again the text is lost.⁶ The extant occasional passages endorsing suspension of judgment or other Academic themes are hardly conclusive and not always easy to reconcile with Plutarch's more overt apparent doctrinal Platonism. It seems to me that if we are to bring greater clarity to this question, we must avoid the tendency of most of the historians of this period of philosophy to cherry-pick passages from various works and align them within a historical narrative of doctrinal and methodological developments already in place. Plutarch writes in a variety of genres, and has quite clearly taken great pains to perfect a variety of rhetorical styles. There can thus be no substitute for closer and more careful reading and exegesis of individual texts than has generally been attempted hitherto.

In this respect, Opsomer's decision to devote extensive attention to Plutarch's reflections on Socrates in the first *Platonic Question* seems altogether sound. Unfortunately, the questions he brings to the text, stemming from his concerns with a history of philosophy whose narrative he hopes to correct, both limit his attention to the details of the text and lead him into questionable interpretations based on unwarranted assumptions. What I hope to offer here, through a more thorough and attentive examination of this same text, is a compelling interpretation of the significance of a skeptical and erotic Socrates for Plutarch's understanding of the integrity of philosophical inquiry. I will confine criticism of Opsomer's interpretation to the footnotes.

1. *The Question* (999C–E)

Platonic Question 1 is concerned with understanding Socrates' description, given in Plato's *Theaetetus* (at 150C), of his practice of philosophy in terms of midwifery (*maieusis*). Socrates claims that he does not give birth to wisdom himself, but draws forth the purported wisdom with which other souls are pregnant,

⁶ Opsomer, *In Search* 222.

and tests its viability. This image captures both sides of the skeptical attitude: reticence in making claims to knowledge, and critical appraisal of claims made by others.⁷

Plutarch's attention seems to be drawn to a curious aspect of this description, which he formulates in the question that opens the essay (999C): "Why in the world did the god order [*ekeleusen*] Socrates to act as midwife to others, but forbid him to give birth himself, as the *Theaetetus* says?"⁸ As the next several sentences make clear, the initial perplexity for Plutarch is primarily over Socrates' claim about the action of the god.⁹

After posing the question, Plutarch assures us that Socrates would not use the name of the god jokingly or ironically. The evidence he offers in support of this assurance is, interestingly, not that Socrates is pious and reverent, but that, elsewhere in the same dialogue, Socrates does not hesitate to say boastful and pompous things—indeed, many of them (999D). In the example he gives (*Th.* 151C5–D3), Socrates observes that, when he deprives men of some bit of folly¹⁰ of theirs, they do not understand that he is acting toward them like a benevolent god—and moreover that he does so in accordance with a divine code (*themis*) that, apparently, applies only to himself,

⁷ On the importance of interpretations of the *Theaetetus* in the first century for the question of Plato's skepticism, see H. Tarrant, *Scepticism or Platonism? The Philosophy of the Fourth Academy* (Cambridge 1985) 71–72, and Opsomer, *In Search* 42–43.

⁸ Translations are my own. For my complete translation of the first *Platonic Question*, see www20.homepage.villanova.edu/mark.shiffman/Platonic_Question_I_Translation.pdf.

⁹ Opsomer, *In Search* 127–128, notes that it may seem "surprising" that Plutarch "first and foremost focuses attention not on Socrates' maieutic art, but on the element 'God' in Socrates' assertion." His interpretation is that "Plutarch wants to make clear that Socrates does not use the name lightly, 'as a manner of speaking', but that he really means that he considers his maieutics a divine mission, in the full sense of the word." Opsomer seems to take for granted that "the full sense of the word" is to be understood in terms of an "external" god (205).

¹⁰ The Greek *leron* also suggests trash or ornamental trumpery.

making it unholy for him to keep company with falsehood and to leave truth in obscurity. Given that Plutarch adduces Socrates' boastfulness as an argument against the notion that he might be speaking with irony, it seems that we ought to take the term *eironeia* in the Aristotelian sense, according to which "the ironic person [in contrast to the braggart] seems to disown things that do belong to him or understate them."¹¹ Socrates, we are to understand, is not speaking with mock piety, presenting himself as a humble servant of a divine master, but is implicitly asserting his special proximity to the divine. Not only, then, does Socrates make an assertion about a divinity, but he goes so far as to imply that he has privileged access to some understanding of the divine—and all this in the course of explaining his skeptical-maieutic vocation.

Plutarch then turns to the next obvious question: What did Socrates mean when he spoke of this god?

Was it then his own nature, which was more critical than fertile, that he referred to also as a god—like Menander ("Our mind is our god") or Heraclitus ("Character is a human being's daemon")? Or was it some truly divine [*theion*] and daemonic cause that showed Socrates the way to this kind of philosophy in which, by inspecting others, he continually set them free from delusion and error and pretentiousness, and from being burdensome first to themselves and then to their companions? (999D–E)

If Socrates does not hesitate to describe himself as godlike, perhaps he is referring to the promptings or limits of his own character when he speaks of the god who directs his conduct. In the other alternative he presents to us, Plutarch widens the

¹¹ *Eth.Nic.* 1127a22–23 (transl. Joe Sachs). Opsomer, *In Search* 106–126, argues that "irony" bears the sense of "simulating a certain attitude," and not necessarily of attempting to indicate a meaning by expressing its opposite, so that Plutarch's denial of irony means that we should take the claim to a divine mission literally. But this assumes that a divine mission, taken literally, would mean the action of an external divinity upon Socrates. It seems, however, that the sense of "divine mission" intended by Socrates is exactly what is in question for Plutarch.

field of possibilities for what Socrates might be describing: not necessarily a god as such, but some kind of divine or daemonic cause.

In placing before us this disjunction, Plutarch reaches the end of the first movement of the essay and sets out the task to be accomplished by the remainder. Having rejected the explanation that Socrates might be either making an isolated joke or modestly dissimulating in speaking of a god directing his practice, Plutarch leaves us with two other alternative explanations, without deciding between them. He then turns to an examination of the meaning and aims of Socrates' maieutic practice, in order to gather from its character some response to this dilemma. As it turns out, the investigation will bring us to see that this bifurcation between anthropological and "theological"¹² explanations is not altogether adequate as a formulation of the question.

The remainder of the inquiry passes through five moments of deepening explanation, each illuminating a distinctive characteristic of the practice of Socratic questioning. The first three are negative or, as Plutarch calls them, cathartic;¹³ the last two might be called distinctively Platonic in a more positive sense. As Plutarch's examination proceeds, it becomes clear that the order of exposition, as it carries us closer to the inner meaning of the Socratic vocation, turns out to reflect as well the order of subordination of these various moments, from lowest to highest.

2. *Elenctic Catharsis (999E–F)*

In his first account of Socratic practice, Plutarch expands on what he has just characterized as the salutary effects of Socra-

¹² Here I follow the lead of Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea* (Chicago 2007) 6, in using *theological* "to indicate that we are speaking of the *divine* (in Greek, *theios*) and not [necessarily] of one or several gods (in Greek, *theos*)."

¹³ Plutarch explicitly invokes the notion of catharsis once in each of these three sections: 999E12, 1000B7, and 1000D1.

tes' examination of others. He highlights the singular impression made by Socrates against the backdrop of the teaching of the Sophists. The Sophists charged young men a great deal of money for their lessons, and thus cultivated in them a vested interest in believing they had gotten something for it. Thus the youths were filled with a high opinion of their own wisdom, and were zealous for contentious arguments that served no purpose but to satisfy their love of honor (999E).

Socrates, in response, applied as a purgative medicine (*kathartikon pharmakon*) the refutatory or elenctic speech that was at his disposal. What rendered him trustworthy when refuting others was that he made no positive claims, "but rather took their side, seeming to search for the truth in common and not to defend any opinion of his own" (999F).¹⁴ This is the Socrates we know from Plato's so-called "Socratic" or "elenctic" dialogues: the Socrates who helpfully and infuriatingly refutes the opinions of others, generally without offering alternative answers.¹⁵

This account has several interesting features which give definite shape to the agenda of the rest of the essay. First, Plutarch emphasizes that Socrates claims nothing of his own; the next section (3) will explain what is wrong with the love of what one considers one's own and how Socratic practice serves as a therapy for it. Second, by describing Socrates as "seeming to search for the truth in common," Plutarch implies the question of whether Socrates really thought one could seek and find truth (the topic of sections 4 and 5). Third, by bringing in the theme of love of honor (*philotimia*) on top of the theme of generativity already present in the *Theaetetus* passage, Plutarch intimates an underlying theme that pervades the essay and shapes its culmination: the theme of eros (section 6). In the speech of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, the wise-woman Diotima pre-

¹⁴ Compare Plutarch, *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 72A.

¹⁵ Scholars have typically thought these dialogues to be chronologically early, while ancient scholars often understood them to be pedagogically initiatory. See Opsomer, *In Search* 27–33.

sents *philotimia* as one of the manifestations of eros, characteristic of those who are pregnant in soul, longing to give birth to virtue either through representing it in their own everlasting reputation or by engendering it in others through lawgiving or heroic poetry (208C–209E). The Sophists flatter this eros by giving their students the belief that they have intellectual virtues, and so make them burdensome to others in their need to display these virtues. The Socratic purgative will ultimately be seen to lead to a more authentically philosophic understanding of eros.

We should note as well that Plutarch has left to one side any direct and explicit consideration of the driving question regarding the meaning of Socrates' claim about the divine. If the action of the divine of which Socrates speaks is manifested in Socrates' maieutic practice, then a closer examination of that practice itself (as represented by Plato's Socrates) ought to bring to light the way in which the divine action manifests itself in it. In sections 2 and 3, Plutarch considers the two sides of the midwifing image separately—the testing and the non-engendering—and the question of the divine action does not arise. Only in section 4, when he is able to consider the unity underlying the two manifestations, does consideration of divine action come explicitly back into the discussion.

3. *Aporetic Catharsis* (1000A–C)

In the next phase of the inquiry, Plutarch turns from the benefit of Socratic practice for others to examine the benefits for the seeker of wisdom himself. With this change of emphasis, he shifts the focus from the inducing and scrutinizing (or elenctic) side of the midwife metaphor to the non-engendering (or aporetic) side. In this transition, however, the problem of *philotimia* is not left behind. Rather, it is deepened by being subsumed into a more inclusive psychological category, that of *philautia*, or love of what is one's own.¹⁶ The questioner is still at

¹⁶ While helpfully bringing out the similarities in the treatment of *philautia* in *Platonic Question 1* and *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend* (and the evocation

this point considered as a judge of arguments, but not especially with reference to the attachment that others have to them; the emphasis now is on judging the merits of the arguments as such, and the problem is the attachment of the would-be philosopher to his own arguments.

Plutarch begins by observing that judgment is beneficial, and then goes on to consider how the faculty of judging can be maintained and exercised in its best condition.¹⁷ The great impediment to just judgment, he tells us, is engendering, because engendering begets love of one's own, and love of one's own begets blindness to the true relative merits of one's own vis-à-vis what belongs to or comes from others. In formulating the problem this broadly, Plutarch captures the full range of the phenomena of eros as presented by Socrates/Diotima in the *Symposium*. Eros is there described as the desire for the good to belong to oneself forever (206A11–12). In the first two forms Diotima examines (pregnancy of body and pregnancy of soul), the intensity of desire is focused on the “forever” side of the formula—self-perpetuation via offspring or immortalizing one's virtues (207A–209E). In these two forms of eros, what counts as the *good* to be possessed is rather uncritically accepted. The

in both of Plato's *Laws* 731E3–5), Opsomer, *In Search* 151–155, fails to note that in *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, Plutarch is discussing the importance of the free-speaking critic as an aid to overcoming *philautia*, whereas in this section of *Platonic Question* 1 the emphasis has decidedly shifted to the questioner's relation to his own *philautia*.

¹⁷ One may wonder why exactly judgment (*krinein*) is beneficial. Whenever one hears critical thinking extolled, for example as one of the aims of education, what that ultimately means in terms of actual educational practice will depend a great deal on whether the criticism is understood as serving a prophylactic and liberating purpose (guarding against being taken in by the thought and rhetoric of others), or is understood as serving a substantive pursuit of truth and wisdom. Plutarch rightly puts off this question—the question of whether we should or should not suppose there is a truth to be found, hence the question of a properly understood skepticism—because one cannot address it with integrity without first being clear-sighted about what such integrity requires.

philosophical initiate, on the other hand, by discovering the higher ranges of beauty, discovers as well a richer world of human goods (210A–212A). Plutarch’s own references to the love of parents for offspring (1000A) and the Athenian generals all voting themselves the prize for virtue (1000B) reinforce the textual parallelism with the first two parts of Diotima’s analysis of erotic phenomena.

But like Diotima, Plutarch makes a transition to the love of the Good that is required of the philosopher. In the case of offspring, Plutarch notes, there is justice in holding firmly to one’s own; but in the case of arguments, one must hold on to the better, even if it is the argument of another. But “nothing of one’s own is so loved as an opinion or argument is by its begetter” (1000A). Hence, like the Greek generals, all philosophers award themselves the palm, except those who, just like Socrates, show themselves purified (*katharous*) and incorruptible adjudicators of truth by confessing that they are saying nothing of their own (1000B).

In the course of presenting this problem of the love of one’s own, Plutarch shows himself to be implicated in its delicate ambiguities. The situation of philosophy in his day seems to make *philautia* harder to escape than before. In contrast to “that time” (999E) in which Socrates made his strikingly anomalous appearance in the Athenian agora to pose his questions, philosophy has in its latter years developed an institutionalized tradition, involving long-standing polemical controversies. There are now a number of schools or “options” (*haireseis*), choices of different ways of life grounded upon different principles, all claiming to be truly philosophical. Their multiplicity testifies to the resistance of “one’s own opinion with which one is at home” (*oikeia doxa kai sunoikos*) toward accepting anything that jars against it (1000C). By endorsing a skeptical Platonic-Socratic model of philosophizing, Plutarch seems to be taking up and defending a position within the polemical field, and indeed to be taking some position in the partisan controversies that divide the Platonic tradition internally concerning the historical unity of the Academy.

Plutarch's response seems to be that the Socratic option is the only choice that cultivates the integrity necessary to judge whatever is proposed by any of the options on offer. This requires "confessing that one says nothing of one's own." This condition is clearly not satisfied by mere fidelity to the thought of a school's founder; in that case Epicureans, known for doctrinal fidelity, would be perfect Socratics. Socrates provides a model of philosophical practice rather than of doctrinal attachment. To the Stoics who want to take Socrates as a moral model, Plutarch implicitly responds that Socrates' fundamental *justice* is to be found in his skeptical openness. Defending doctrinal positions like those of the Stoics and Epicureans reinforces *philautia*; one can only overcome it through fidelity to the Socratic model, which means fidelity to the demands of the integrity of argument and judgment.

The practice this requires we may describe as "aporetic." Plato's Socrates uses the word *aporia* to denote his "lack of resource" in not possessing the truth, his "being at a loss" and "having nothing of his own" concerning the answer to a question at hand. It was Aristotle, however, who went on to associate the name with a distinctive argumentative practice of developing the *aporia* involved in a given question—that is, articulating the opposed positions, both possessing eminent plausibility, and evaluating them relative to one another and to the phenomena in question.¹⁸ Indeed it may have been nearly inevitable that aporetic philosophizing would have to become something like this outside of the conversational context in which we always see Socrates. If philosophy can take the form of "the soul conversing with itself," it will need something to converse about; and if this something is to escape the coils of *philautia*, detachment will have to be gained by always counter-

¹⁸ The utility of developing the *aporia* on both sides (*amphoterā diaporesai*) for the discerning of truth and falsehood is affirmed in the first book of Aristotle's *Topics* (101a35–37), a treatise on which Plutarch is reported to have written an extensive commentary (*Lamprias* 56).

poising alternatives.¹⁹ Since Plutarch's philosophical style is aporetic in this sense, he can acknowledge Aristotle as part of the philosophical tradition to which he belongs.²⁰

Thus when Plutarch ends this section by observing that "philosophy, if it is faring its best, has one option that is going on prosperously, while all the others are opining and fighting against the truth," he may be implicitly praising his own philosophical school, but in a way consistent with his cautions against *philautia*. In describing the "best case scenario" of the controversy of philosophical schools, Plutarch affirms that only one, at most, will be right. While this implies the possibility of adhering to one's own school and accusing the others of opposing the truth in favor of home-grown opinion, it does not go so far as to say that the "right" school *possesses* that truth. Its rightness is characterized by a prospering (*katorthousan*), a right orientation that leads to philosophical thriving, rather than by having in its possession the right body of doctrinal principles. But the hypothetical mode of the description of the best case leaves open the question of how far this rightness may proceed in the direction of doctrine. Hence, Plutarch turns now to the postponed question of the possibility of knowing truth.

4. *Ephectic Catharsis* (1000C–D)

Next, Plutarch presents the two sides of an *aporia* that belongs recognizably to the philosophic controversies of the

¹⁹ The Eleatic Stranger describes thinking as "the soul's internal dialogue with itself" at Pl. *Soph.* 263E4. As Cicero suggests (*Fin.* 5.10), Aristotle's development of this more specific sense of *aporia* makes him an important ancestor of one of the distinctive features of skeptical argumentation—though of course the original model for arguing both sides to an apparent impasse is Plato's *Parmenides*. Montaigne (with slight rhetorical exaggeration) describes this style of Aristotle's argumentation as "Pyrrhonism in an affirmative form" (*The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, transl. Donald Frame [Stanford 2000] 376).

²⁰ Karamanolis, *Plato* 34–35, 86–89; the second chapter as a whole is an outstanding treatment of the question of Plutarch's Aristotelian debts and sympathies.

ancient schools: either secure knowledge is possible for humans, or it is not. He introduces the *aporia* by assuming the negative, “that nothing is apprehensible or knowable to the human being.” It was on the basis of this assumption that Arcesilaus recommended the withholding of judgment (*epoche* or *ephexis*). The word *katalepton* (“apprehensible”) is also easily recognizable as evoking the “cataleptic impression” of the Stoics, a specific point of contention between them and the skeptics (both Academic and Pyrrhonian).²¹ The even-handedness with which Plutarch treats the *aporia* demonstrates the compatibility he has just implied between eschewing *philautia* and maintaining fidelity to the Socratic model within the arena of controversy (both extramural and intramural).

If compellingly recognizable knowledge is not available to humans (Plutarch explains), then “it was plausible (*eikotos*) that the god forbade Socrates to engender what is empty, false, and unfounded, and compelled him to refute others who opine such things” (1000C). Here Plutarch restates the description of the Socratic vocation (with slight alterations whose significance we will consider below). For the first time, under the aspect of *ephexis*, we can make sense of the two sides of the Socratic vocation together. While the movement from *elenchus* to *aporia* involved a shift of focus from the more limited psychological phenomenon of the *philotimia* afflicting the examined to the more comprehensive category of *philautia*, the shift to *ephexis* seems to integrate the two other forms of catharsis, and so to offer the most comprehensive grasp of Socratic practice as catharsis. If the problem is opinion as such, then Socrates’ cathartic medical treatment (*iatreia katharmos*, 1000C–D) consists in piercing the covering that hides this festering corruption of the soul, so that the unhealthy pus of conviction can flow out.²²

²¹ For a thorough study of the polemical context of this section of the essay, see Opsomer, *In Search* 161–193.

²² Within this opposition between cataleptic knowledge and empty opinion, Plutarch implicitly leaves room for two other possibilities: true opinion and probable opinion. True opinion, however, can only be known to be

Four features of this formulation deserve attention:

- (1) We have returned to the question of Socrates' speaking about divine action upon him, and so implicitly to the question of what he means in speaking of the god and its action.
- (2) Plutarch begins his summary of Socrates' claim with the negative or preventive side, whereas before (at 999C) he had started with what the god ordered Socrates to *do*. This change of order is consistent with the negative assumption about the possibility of knowledge: a well-meaning god would plausibly steer Socrates away from the conceit of claiming a knowledge that is not available, and lead him in turn to liberate others into the freedom from falsehood he already enjoys. It is also consistent with Plutarch's earlier broadening of the referent of Socrates' language to include the daemonic (999E), since Socrates' own daemon is always said to act by way of prevention or warning rather than by directing him toward specific actions.²³

such if *knowledge* of truth is also possible; absent such knowledge, we can only identify opinion that is more likely to be true. Thus we are left with the standard of the probable (*eikos*), which Plutarch explicitly invokes in the present passage. Opinion that is shown to be probable through the elenctic process would seem, however, to lose its character as conviction: what is affirmed is not the opinion as such, but rather the judgment that this opinion is best to adopt provisionally, since it has, thus far, most coherently explained the phenomena and/or best withstood the test of refutation. It would seem to be in this sense that Plutarch counsels Favorinus to part company with opinion and practice *ephexis*, at the end of *On the Principle of Cold* (955A). Even there, however, he leaves open the possibility that one might affirm in some stronger sense an opinion that greatly exceeds its rivals in trustworthiness. (It must of course be understood that "probable" is here used in a dialectical sense rather than a statistical one.)

²³ Plato's Socrates is explicit on this point at *Ap.* 31D and *Theag.* 128D. Much is made of the apparent exception at *Phdr.* 242C, where the daemonic sign is said to indicate the need for Socrates to make atonement before leaving (e.g. by Charles Griswold Jr., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* [University Park 1986] 256 n.17); but this positive indication remains internal to the prohibitive function, since the atonement is what is necessary to lift the prohibition. Assertions that Plutarch ignores this restriction of the daemon to a negative role (catalogued and endorsed by Opsomer, *In Search* 142–143) are mostly based on questionable claims made by characters in Plutarch's

Plutarch is attempting to gain a more accurate understanding of how, in Plato's depiction, Socrates claims the divine works on him, and implicitly draws in more of the evidence from the Platonic corpus to specify what it tells us about this.

(3) Accordingly, Plutarch offers a correction to the way he earlier characterized the god's positive action. In the initial paraphrase of the *Theaetetus* with which he opened the essay, Plutarch had asked what the god meant when he ordered (*ekeleusen*, 999c) Socrates to practice midwifery (*maieusthai*) on others; here he affirms the plausibility that the god compelled (*enangkaze*) Socrates to refute (*elengchein*, 1000c). The revised version is, in one respect, more faithful to the text of the *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates says that the god compels him (*anankazei*, 150c7); this is the only significant word in Plato's formulation that is not accurately reproduced in Plutarch's opening question. Ordering or commanding suggests an external relationship between the divine being and the human person acted upon. This way of characterizing the god's relationship to Socrates, as presenting him with a mission through the medium of speech, is consistent with the impression the latter tries to give in his public accounting in the *Apology*, where he is defending himself against the charge of heterodox teaching. Plutarch's alterations in diction suggest that he chose to set in motion his inquiry into the role of the divine in Socratic philosophizing by starting from a common or vulgar notion of how gods act on humans, and that he has now reached a different conception that is more consistent with the Platonic presentation of what Socrates says in private contexts. This again is a change of perspective consistent with the skeptical or ephectic standpoint we are here presupposing: rather than imagining divine action anthropomorphically as commandment, we are describing empirically or phenomenally the compulsion experienced by Socrates, and finding it plausible that the divine, if beneficent,

dialogues, or on assumptions that he is referring to the daemon in contexts where this is not explicit.

would act in this way.

(4) On the other hand, Plutarch makes a different departure from Plato's formulation. We have already noted that he here places the negative side of the divine action first (whereas his initial ordering had followed the ordering in Plato's text). On top of that, he replaces "midwifing" (*maieusthai*) with "refuting" (*elengchein*) to describe what Socrates is compelled to do. This second departure, like the first, is consistent with the assumption of the impossibility of secure knowledge; but the two departures from the Platonic formulation would seem to cast some doubt on whether that assumption is altogether adequate to capture Plato's teaching. They highlight by contrast the fact that the Platonic formulation is not thoroughly negative in character. The medical image Plutarch invokes underscores the contrast: lancing a festering pustule differs rather drastically from delivering a baby. The phantom-babies of untrue opinion that Socrates most often delivers, though certainly empty, false, and unfounded, nevertheless point toward the possibility of real and vital births that would decisively pass scrutiny; on the assumption of the impossibility of secure knowledge, however, the affirmation of opinions can produce nothing but harmful pools of corruption.

This phase of the inquiry seems to suggest, then, the following. On the one hand, taking ephectic skepticism as the interpretive lens for Socrates' utterance about divine action helps us to see the unity of the two sides of the midwife image, which Plutarch has treated separately in the previous two sections. Moreover, it enables us to make sense of them together as two ways in which Socrates characterizes the divine as acting upon him. It is always possible and even likely that any opinion will be untrue; thus the harmfulness of opinion does not (as in the two previous purgative moments) result primarily from the psychological conditions under which it was formed and adopted (the influence of *philotimia* or *philautia* in general). The ban on opinion that Socrates traces back to the divine should then apply quite universally, both to Socrates and to those he encounters, and without regard to the sources or psychic history of those opinions. Both the prevention that is-

sues in refraining and the compulsion that issues in refuting flow from one and the same source: the relationship of the human being to opinion per se. If it is reasonable to assume that divine nature would be superior to human nature in the decisive respect, i.e. in its immunity to opinion, then it is also reasonable that, if benevolent, it would instill some favored human agent with a repugnance to opinion as such. At the same time the divine, understood thus phenomenally and without further presuppositions about its nature, is not so easily located as a power external to the human being; thus the bifurcation between “part of Socrates” and “something truly divine and daemonic” (999D–E) seems less adequate to the way Plato’s Socrates understands it.

On the other hand, the standpoint of ephectic skepticism seems less harmonious on the whole with the way Socrates speaks in the *Theaetetus*. It does not lend itself either to the maieutic characterization of the activity to which he is compelled or to privileging this positive shaping of his vocation over the negative or cathartic aspect of it. It also leaves us wondering on what basis Socrates affirms that this experienced aversion and compulsion are manifestations of the divine.²⁴ Thus, as we turn to the other side of the aporia about the possibility of knowledge, we turn as well away from the cathartic moments of the investigation toward its two more positive moments, which respond in turn to each of these two lacunae.

5. *Zetetic Receptivity* (1000D)

Plutarch articulates the second branch of the aporia thus: “If, on the other hand, there is knowledge (*episteme*) of the true, and

²⁴ In the line he quotes from Theognis, “not even to the sons of Asclepius did the gods give this gift” (432), Plutarch substitutes “not even” (*oud*) for the original “if” (*ei d*). He thus changes Theognis’ supposition that the god did give them a gift into a denial that the god gave them a gift so good as the “liberating discourse” of Socrates. Could not someone who is skeptical about divine providence follow his example and reject the supposition that the god gave it to Socrates?

the true is one, then one who learns it from the finder (*tou heurontos*) has it no less than the finder does. But it is rather the one not persuaded he has it who takes hold of it; and he takes hold of what is best out of all, just as the one not engendering offspring procures for himself as a child the best one.”

If truth is one, then all human beings in principle have the same relation to it as potential knowers of it. There is no distinction between discoverer and disciple in their possession of it that could serve as a pretext for *philotimia* or *philautia*. What they have is an eminently shareable good that is not an extension of oneself; for if it is the one truth, then it is as such not *generated*. Human beings are potential knowers as potential receivers.

But if truth is one, untruth is legion. In order to be receptive to the truth that may await discovery, one must cultivate the readiness, perhaps even the disposition, to suspect that what one has may not be the truth. Thus one will be always engaged in a search (*zetesis*), will always be looking for the best claimants to truth in all that is available. What many scholars have characterized as Plutarch’s eclecticism might be better described as his Socratic zeteticism, the play of possibilities in the always inquiring mind.²⁵

This assumption renders Socrates’ maieutic vocation intelligible, as a search for possible truths tempered by a demanding skepticism toward any given claim to truth. The positive search has priority, and is served by the prohibition against generating one’s own offspring. Indeed, this alternative seems to draw together all the insight gained thus far about the search for truth, including what is salutary in the other side of the aporia. For, if genuine *ephexis* is to be universal, then it must also apply to the aporia over whether knowledge is possible or not; but it is only possible to withhold judgment on this question, in practice, by combining the assumption that knowledge is pos-

²⁵ The Greek title of *Platonic Questions*, both in the manuscripts and in the *Lamprias Catalogue* (136), is *Platonika Zetemata*, which might be better translated *Platonic Inquiries*.

sible with caution against satisfaction that it has been attained. The assumption that truth cannot be found is not open to its own alternative, since one who makes this assumption gives up the *zetesis*. The assumption that it might be found, on the other hand, requires something closely resembling the specter of its own alternative to keep it honest: the working assumption that, in any given instance, one has probably not got hold of the truth. The assumption that there is truth and that it is one, combined with appropriate cautions, is thus the most comprehensive standpoint so far reached.²⁶

What Plutarch's articulation of this side of the *aporia* does not yet render intelligible, however, is the grounds for Socrates' claim that something divine is the source of the impetus for his vocation. Plutarch addresses this lacuna in the final section.

6. *Erotic Wisdom (1000D–E)*

Plutarch begins his final formulation thus: "But consider that, on the one hand, the other things (poems, mathematical theorems, rhetorical speeches, sophistic doctrines) that the *daemonion* prevented Socrates from engendering were worthy of no seriousness." We return directly to the question of the divine action, and for the first time the preventive action is attributed explicitly to the *daimonion*, the description by which Socrates often identified his preventive sign; once again Plutarch is assimilating evidence from more of the Platonic corpus.²⁷

Plutarch's formulation arouses the expectation of a double contrast: (1) by treating of divine prevention of engendering, Plutarch leads us to expect a corresponding treatment of divine

²⁶ For a succinct formulation of how *ephexis* and developing both sides of the argument works in the service of *zetesis* and openness to the possibility of *katalepsis*, see *On Stoic Self-contradictions* 1037C.

²⁷ *Ap.* 31D1, 40A4, *Th.* 151A4; cf. *Euthphr.* 3B5. Plutarch also wrote a dialogue called *On the Daemonion of Socrates*. Since it consists of speeches by different characters on the topic, none of whom is clearly speaking for the author, any judgment about its relevance to Plutarch's understanding of the *daimonion* would require careful interpretation of the text as a whole.

compulsion to *maieusis*; and (2) the detailing of these “other” objects, unworthy of seriousness, makes us look forward to an articulation of the complementary worthy objects in whose light they pale in importance. These two expectations work together. Since the preventive action of the *daemonion* is here premised upon the relative worthlessness of the kinds of speeches it opposes, we expect its negative role to prove intelligible on the basis of the positive worth of that to which Socrates is directed; and we expect this directing toward what is worthy of seriousness to have the character of a compulsion exercised upon Socrates by the divine.

The mention of kinds of speech not worthy of seriousness (*spoude*), and the implied contrast with those that are, calls to mind the discussion on this topic at the end of Plato’s *Phaedrus* (276B–278B). The man who deals wisely with speeches is there compared to a farmer who has intellect (*noun echon*, 276B1–2), who will not with serious intent plant his fruitful seeds in a forcing-garden for show, but will tend them in fertile soil. Likewise, the man who knows the beautiful, just, and good will not seriously sow his seeds in writing (276C7); the serious treatment of these things is the one involving the dialectical art (276E4–6). Though the initial focus of these observations is on written works of oratorical art, Socrates ultimately expands the range of kinds of speeches that are not worthy of great seriousness to include both those in verse and those not, as well as those spoken from memory by rhapsodes (277E5–8). The matter for concern then is not simply writing per se, but the fixing of speech in a static form, meant to endure like an unresponsive idol, in contrast to the living speech of shared dialectical inquiry. Plutarch then legitimately extends the principle to other forms of speech, typically (though not necessarily) preserved in writing.

This implied connection to the subject-matter of the *Phaedrus* is strengthened by what follows. Plutarch begins his presentation of the other side of the contrast thus: “On the other hand, that which alone Socrates considered wisdom—called by him erotics regarding the divine and intelligible (*peri to theion kai noeton*)—of this there is neither generation nor discovery for

human beings, but recollection (*anamnesis*).”²⁸ With these words, he directs the path of the inquiry through the terrain of the two great Platonic dialogues on love: the *Phaedrus*, in which the experience of recollection is treated within the erotic experience of beauty (249C1–4), and the *Symposium*, in which Socrates claims to have knowledge of nothing other than erotics (177D6–7; cf. *Theag.* 128B2–4). In both dialogues, a true understanding of the erotic condition amounts to a genuine understanding of the character of philosophical existence.

The invocation of recollection at this point is striking. Socrates does not associate it with his maieutic art in the *Theaetetus*. In the *Phaedo*, he discusses it as a phenomenon supporting the thesis of the pre-existence of the soul; in the *Meno*, it is a supposition that supports the possibility of knowledge, and hence sustains inquiry. Only in the *Phaedrus* is recollection associated with eros. It is noteworthy, then, that every Plutarchan text that mentions recollection also makes reference to the *Phaedrus*. Two of these works are dialogues in which characters other than Plutarch invoke recollection tangentially to some other point they are making.²⁹ In *The Dialogue on Love*, Plutarch as character, in his speech in praise of the god Eros, recasts material from Socrates’ Palinode in the *Phaedrus* to describe the experience of love—especially its power to “conduct the soul to the Plain of Truth” (765A) and to lead us to discover in the

²⁸ The sentence could also, though less probably, read: “On the other hand, that which alone Socrates considered wisdom regarding the divine and intelligible—called by him erotics...”

²⁹ Cleombrotus in *The Obsolescence of Oracles* (422B–C) mentions the “Plain of Truth” (from *Phdr.* 248B5) toward the recollection of which our earthly philosophical inquiry should direct itself. (He is recounting the cosmology of a man he met on his travels—a cosmology his interlocutor Lamprias dismisses as a pastiche drawn from a variety of sources in Mediterranean lore.) In *Table Talk* 9.14 (745E), Ammonius, discussing the role of the sirens in the *Republic’s* Myth of Er, speaks of the power of their music to incite eros for the heavenly and divine, and suggests (in terms reminiscent of the *Phaedrus*) that through the medium of speech our souls are reminded of this divine music it heard before birth.

experience of beauty what is truly loveable (765D). In the remaining text—*Platonic Question 6*—Plutarch’s treatment of recollection in his own name is again closely associated with the erotic experience. He seems in general to have little or no interest in recollection as a prop to epistemology or doctrines of reincarnation, but primarily to regard and invoke it as an experiential element of the erotic core of philosophy.³⁰

Platonic Question 6, devoted explicitly to the passage about the soul’s erotic ascent in the *Phaedrus*, is of particular interest to us in that (like the passage of *Question 1* we are considering) it is somewhat ambiguous about the object of recollection. Plutarch asks what Socrates means by saying that the power of the wing to raise up what is heavy is, among bodily things, the one sharing most in the divine (1004C; cf. *Phdr.* 246D6–8). He tentatively suggests a first approach to an answer: “Is it because the speech is about eros, eros concerns the beauty of body, and beauty by its similarity reminds/recollects (*anamimneskei*) the soul and moves it toward the divine things?” The verb *anamimnesko* generally takes two objects in the accusative, one for the person reminded, the other for the thing recollected. When it takes only one accusative object, as here (*ten psychen*, the soul), the object is supposed to be the one recollected. So in this sentence either what is recollected by the soul is the soul itself, or the soul is reminded of objects that are omitted and are to be understood (i.e. the Wise, the Beautiful, the Good, and other like things, mentioned in the *Phaedrus* passage). Plutarch may

³⁰ Thus Opsomer’s treatment of recollection in *Platonic Question 1* (*In Search* 193–212) is doubly dubious. By maintaining that in this last section Plutarch “relates the epistemological issue to the doctrine of *anamnesis*” (193), Opsomer implicitly assumes that what Plutarch is after when he invokes recollection (as well as in the text as a whole) is “a general ‘solution’ for the epistemological issue” (210). Thus his interpretation is that in this last section Plutarch provides “the most satisfying approach to the central *zetema* of the *Quaestio*” when he “transposes the epistemological issue into a genuine Platonic [i.e. doctrinal] context: true knowledge comes through *anamnesis*” (203–204). It seems to be Opsomer’s preoccupation with the polemical context that leads him to make epistemology the central question.

well mean us to take it both ways: the soul, by being brought into its proper erotic relationship to the divine knowable things, is brought back for the first time to its true self.

Similarly, when *Platonic Question 1* speaks of recollection, it is not at all obvious that the object of recollection is the intelligible forms, as we might expect it to be in a doctrinally Platonic treatment.³¹ Plutarch's grammar indicates that recollection is of the "true wisdom" which Socrates calls erotics. What does it mean to say that recollection is of erotics? The way Plutarch leads up to the claim helps us to answer the question. The wisdom of erotics is something of which "there is neither generation nor discovery for human beings, but recollection." When we arrive at awareness of our erotic condition vis-à-vis the divine and intelligible, this arrival does not appear to us as a factitious implantation nor as a discovery of something we had been seeking. Rather, it presents itself as a new-found and unanticipated clarity about what, as seekers, we have been all along: beings stretched out between ignorance and wisdom.³² In this new clarity, knowledge of ignorance replaces mere ignorance, and our longing that has been implicitly for the divine and intelligible becomes explicitly so. The soul does indeed seem to recognize what it authentically is as if it had somehow known this all along but lost sight of it.

In setting up a contrast between recollection and finding (*heuresis*), Plutarch would seem to be responding to his own formulation of zetetic receptivity in the previous section. There, unitary truth appeared as something we suppose as a correlate to our seeking and studying: it waits for us to succeed in finding

³¹ Opsomer makes recollection of the *intelligibles* central to his interpretation of this final section, assuming that what is recollected and present in our nature is "noetic knowledge" (*In Search* 204, 207 [emphasis mine]). Since several of the subsequent *Platonic Questions* concern how properly to understand the characterization of the noetic in different dialogues, it would be surprising if Plutarch did *not* treat noetic objects and their relationship to the soul's powers with great caution in this first *quaestio*.

³² Cf. Pl. *Symp.* 204B.

it. In such a formulation, our relationship to truth appears as distance and alienation. The negative discipline of *ephexis* that aids us in overcoming that alienation thus appears as a rejection of what is our own, an ascetic un-selfing preparing for transparency to the truth.³³

In the erotic formulation, on the other hand, all this looks rather different. The overcoming of *philautia* results from a truer understanding of our selves as ordered toward and akin to the divine and intelligible, such that loving and seeking it comes to light as the authentic way of being ourselves. Immanent and transcendent, human and divine, knower and known—all these seem intertwined in the experience of eros in a way that seems impossible when looked at from outside that experience.³⁴ The soul recognizes its intimacy with the divine and intelligible, even while the latter remains elusive.

In such intimacy, the divine compulsion that acts on the soul appears neither as the command of an external god nor merely as a part of oneself that one instinctively obeys (the alternatives originally posed at 999D–E); rather, it appears as an irresistible beckoning coming from that which shines forth to the soul as the promise of its very fulfillment. This evocation of the overwhelming attractive power of the divine and intelligible, experienced as eros, seems to offer exactly the implied complementary material that the opening lines of this section have led us to expect: it provides an articulation of the worthy objects in comparison to which engendering is “worthy of no seriousness”; and it provides an account of divine compulsion as a complement to the divine restraint exercised by the *daemonion*. As in the zetetic formulation, the negative and preventive aspect of Socratic philosophizing makes sense as an auxiliary to the positive seeking aspect; the compelling attraction of the divine and intelligible moves us to seek it and stands in the way of

³³ This of course is the interpretation of Platonism in the Third Essay of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*.

³⁴ Cf. Pl. *Symp.* 201E–202E, 203E–204A, and also *Laws* 804A–C.

serious concern for lesser things. But in the erotic account the two are united in their divine character; for in the *Symposium*, the only dialogue in which Socrates discusses at length a divinity (the god Eros), that divinity turns out to be a daemon. Does it not stand to reason that the daemonic revelation of the soul's relationship to its true objects of longing would make lesser objects pale in significance, and prevent Socrates from allowing himself to be distracted by them?³⁵

The divine compulsion, however, also leads Socrates to act as midwife to others. The final sentences of the essay are, accordingly, devoted to a richer description of Socrates' maieutic practice than any we have seen so far:

Hence Socrates taught nothing; but, giving the beginnings of aporiai (of birth pangs, as it were) to youths, he awakened, set in motion, and cooperated in bringing forth the thoughtfulness in their natures [*tas emphutous noeseis*]. He called this a maieutic art, one not putting intellect [*noun*] into those who encountered it (as others claimed to do), but displaying them as having it intimately [*oikeion*] within themselves although unfulfilled, ineffectually muddled, and needing nourishment and grounding.³⁶

³⁵ Cf. *Symp.* 210B–C. Such an erotic interpretation of the *daemonion* persuasively harmonizes the main texts that give accounts of its preventive action. At *Ap.* 31C–D, Socrates says that it has prevented him from entering public life via the composition of public speeches. At *Phdr.* 242B–C, he claims that the divine sign (*daemonion semeion*) forbids him to leave before he corrects his reductive account of eros with an account that reveals its divine and recollective aspect. At *Tht.* 150E–151A, the *daemonion* prevents him from spending his time with some of the young men who leave him too soon because they look down on the divine aspect of the wisdom Socrates has brought forth in them and insist on attributing it to themselves.

³⁶ 1000D. The language of “thoughtfulness in their natures” or “native thoughts” (*emphutous noeseis*) is reminiscent of, but significantly different from, Stoic epistemological terminology. The Stoics speak of native apprehensions (*emphutoi prolepsis*), or natural or inborn conceptions (*phusike ennoia*), as grounding our capacity for genuine knowledge. Plutarch's *noeseis* can refer both to thinking and what is thought in that thinking, but has a distinctly more active suggestion than the static Stoic terms. Thus it does not necessarily imply particular thought-content that is already in us, and seems

Socrates' erotic wisdom places him in a paradoxical relationship to other human beings. On the one hand, erotic wisdom is the most fundamentally human condition, that which in principle constitutes the universal human relationship to truth. On the other hand, for most human beings it remains covered over, unrecognized and unrecalled. In order to know to what extent authentic communication with another is possible, Socrates must assay whether his interlocutor can be awakened to erotic wisdom as well. He is compelled to try to stir up the thoughts whose activity constitutes the human being's inner nature, and to make manifest that this power of thoughtfulness, in its needy and incomplete state wanting rootedness in the divine and intelligible, is most intimately who we are. It is not with the opinions to which our self-love weds us that we are most at home (*sunoikos*, 1000c); it is rather with our erotically enlivened intellect in its awareness of its longing.

Paradoxically, what Socrates has to give to others is the starting-points for attaining to his own *aporia*. The final word of the essay underscores the paradox and connects it back to the contrast between serious and unserious speeches. "Displaying" (*epideiknuousan*) is what orators do when they deliver an epideictic speech, one designed to exhibit the rhetorical prowess that is distinctly their own. Socrates' art of speech, on the other hand, exhibits that which belongs most of all to others: their erotic condition of distant intimacy with the divine and intelligible. If they become aware of this condition that they are always already in, they can recognize that they share it with Socrates as well. If Socrates' distinctive access to and understanding of the divine lies in his self-consciously erotic condition, it is only accidentally a privileged access; the divine dispensation making it unholy for him to keep company with falsehood and to leave truth in obscurity (999d) applies in principle to everyone. Thus, in refuting and sharing inquiry with others, Socrates is not just *seeming* to take their side in order to gain their confidence

deliberately chosen to be more ambiguous than the readily available alternatives.

(999F); he is joining with them (or joining them to himself) in the unconcealment of their true self and its true interest.

The recollection of erotic wisdom, of our erotic condition in relation to the divine and intelligible, thus provides Plutarch the most satisfactory key to interpreting Socrates' formulation of his skeptical-maieutic vocation in the *Theaetetus*: it makes sense of the divine dimension of the compulsion Socrates experiences; it accords fully with the way Plato formulates Socrates' description; and it harmonizes with a wide array of relevant passages from Platonic dialogues. More importantly, it reveals the inner core of the philosophical experience as Plato understood it, the compelling attraction of the divine and intelligible, in a way that allows this relationship to divinity to serve as an anchor for skeptical practice.

Conclusion

While placing the first *Platonic Question* within Plutarch's polemical context (his defense of Socrates against the Epicureans and of aporetic *ephexis* against the Stoics) may help us to make sense of many of its locutions and tactical moves, it can easily distort our sense of its overall strategy. The coherence of the essay emerges most clearly when we keep sight of the central question, which is not primarily polemical or epistemological, but hermeneutical.³⁷ Plutarch's working assumption seems to be that Plato, in the finest details of his word-crafting, intends to teach the reader what it is to philosophize (in this case through the example of Socrates), and that the reader must exercise extreme care in weighing alternative possible construals of the meaning of those finely crafted words. This hermeneutical question is, moreover, one that requires us to focus our attention and questioning on Plato's portrayal of Socratic practice rather than on purported doctrines.

The account the Platonic Socrates gives of his philosophic

³⁷ These categories of concern are obviously not mutually exclusive; nor are they always easy to separate, especially when it comes to philosophizing as a Platonist.

practice as a response to its divine source is enticingly elliptical. In his meditation on this account, Plutarch begins both with the most common-sense acceptance of Socrates' claim (that he is commanded from outside by a god) and with the most obvious manifestation of Socrates' vocation (his elenctic confrontation with the love of honor in the agora). He then explains the aporetic response to a problem likely to be familiar to any reflective reader, the love of one's own. In articulating the ephetic and zetetic responses to the problem of knowledge, he moves into regions of experience and discourse more familiar to those with a philosophic education. Finally, in his account of erotic wisdom, he brings to light what is most distinctive about the Platonic Socrates, and what this reveals about the innermost essence of an authentically philosophic life. His interpretation thus moves from what is more commonly recognizable to what is intrinsically more coherent and intelligible—in a phrase Aristotle claims to borrow from Plato, from what is more known to us to what is more knowable in itself.³⁸

While the essay penetrates deeper into the meaning of what Socrates says, the form of its progression increasingly reveals the character of how Socrates speaks: his formulations resonate with a more common idiom of thought, with superficial and widely shared conceptions, while at the same time they bespeak experiences intelligible to those who know the philosophic life concretely from the inside. Plutarch's essay is a tour de force as a hermeneutical crossing of that distance; but at the same time it reveals, through the very subtlety and sophistication it is required to marshal, the difficulty of speaking across it.³⁹ It also

³⁸ *Eth.Nic.* 1095b2–4.

³⁹ Pierre Hadot offers the Platonic experience of love as a prime example of how the “essential part of the philosophical life—the existential choice of a certain way of life, the experience of certain inner states and dispositions—wholly escapes expression by philosophical discourse”: P. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2002) 173–174. While “wholly” may overstate the matter, the difficulty is in any case profound.

exhibits the speech and practice of the Platonic Socrates as a model for living within that gap.

To be sure, Socrates is not the sum total of philosophy for Plutarch. Even remaining only within the Platonic corpus, we find that Plutarch draws with great frequency in weighty contexts on both the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus* (in which Socrates barely speaks) as well as the *Laws* (in which he does not figure at all).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is clear as well that the Platonic Socrates serves Plutarch as a fundamental fixed point of reference, a standard for the integrity of the practice of philosophy. One crucial measure of the integrity of that practice, it appears, is its ability to attain and maintain self-knowledge in the mode of erotic wisdom. This integrity demands the cathartic practices of elenchus, aporia, and ephexis; and while these tools from the skeptic's kit do turn out to be instrumental, it is not to a partisan doctrinal piety. Rather, they are in the service of a zetetic and, ultimately, erotic understanding of Socratic skepticism. If we were to make this orientation the starting point for our interpretation of other texts in the Plutarchan corpus, we might find a very different picture emerging of the distinctive place of Plutarch's thought within the history of the Platonic tradition.

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⁴⁰ In the subsequent *Platonic Questions*, Plutarch reflects in more detail on the divine and the intelligible as they appear in Plato's dialogues. Half of the ten questions concern passages in the *Timaeus* (2, 4, 5, 7, 8), others refer to the *Republic* (3), the *Phaedrus* (6) or both (9), while the tenth and final one concerns the *Sophist*. It seems worth considering whether this toggling back and forth between Socrates and Timaeus, and ending with the Eleatic Stranger, reflects an effort by Plutarch to come to terms with the "two paradigms of philosophy" counterpoised by Catherine Zuckert in Part Two of *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago 2009).