

Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy

PRACTICING A POLITICS OF READING



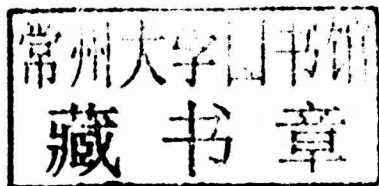
CHRISTOPHER P. LONG

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**PRACTICING A POLITICS
OF READING**

Christopher P. Long

The Pennsylvania State University



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OVERTURE

Thus it is, Phaedrus my friend, but far more beautiful, I think, is becoming serious concerning these things, when someone uses the dialectical art and, taking a proper soul, plants and sows in it words accompanied by knowledge, words that can defend both themselves and the one who planted them and that are not infertile but have seeds from which others grow in other places, so they come to be eternal and immortal; having them makes a human being as happy as a human can be.

— Phaedrus, 276e4–7a4

The seeds for this book were planted more than a decade ago now, when I first took up the practice of reading the texts of Plato collaboratively with students. In those early courses of my then-young career as a professor of philosophy, “words accompanied by knowledge” were few and far between. The land was arid, and yet, in the course of things, as we took up the texts and began to listen not simply to what they said but also to what they showed and how they made us feel, something fertile began to take root. In dialogue with the texts and with one another, I began to feel the urgency of a question that has come over the course of time to blossom in unanticipated ways in the things written here in this book. The question seemed so straightforward at first: What is the nature of the politics Socrates claims to practice in the dialogues of Plato? This question, it should be noted, is limited in scope, for it asks neither about the historical Socrates nor about Platonic political theory but rather only about how this character, Socrates, appears in the dialogues to practice a peculiar kind of politics with those he encounters. But in the course of trying to put that practice first into words for students and then into writing for potential readers, the practices of

Platonic writing began to emerge as a vivid and powerfully transformative political activity of its own, different from but in many ways analogous to the politics Socrates practices in the dialogues.

Thus, a distinction emerged between the practices of Socratic political speaking and those of Platonic political writing. E. N. Tigerstedt anticipates this distinction when he suggests that Platonic writing is a “meeting of two minds. In the first place, the minds of Socrates and his interlocutor; in the second place, the minds of Plato and his reader.”¹ But the difference between these two relationships is marked by the difference between speaking and writing, so to distinguish between the political activity that plays itself out as Socrates speaks with his interlocutors and that which is at play when Plato writes for his readers, it was necessary to articulate a distinction between the *topology* of Socratic politics and the *topography* of Platonic politics. The topology of Socratic politics names the site, the *topos*, of Socratic saying, *logos*, a space that opens between Socrates and his interlocutors in which the things Socrates says to those with whom he speaks are shown to have profound political effect. Here, however, politics takes on a fundamentally different meaning from what it has in our everyday use of the term; for Socratic politics is enigmatic precisely because it refuses to remain confined within the structures of public institutional authority in which politics has traditionally been practiced. This book is thus in part an investigation of the enigmatic contours of the topology of Socratic politics. However, the course of that investigation has uncovered another, albeit intimately connected, practice of politics at play between the text and its readers. This other politics may be designated the *topography* of Platonic politics: the *topos* of Platonic writing, *graphein*, a space that opens between us and the Platonic text in which the things Plato writes are able to cultivate in us habits of thinking and imaginative response capable of transforming our relationships with one another.

Once the investigation into the topology of Socratic politics uncovered the topography of Platonic politics, it became clear that the research for a book that began in dialogue with students could not itself grow and flourish in isolation. The collaborative readings that seeded the idea of the book would need to be cultivated in public dialogue with a

¹ Tigerstedt, *Interpreting Plato*, 98.

wider community of scholars. Thus, with the help of a Teaching and Learning with Technology Summer Faculty Fellowship in 2009, we created the *Digital Dialogue*, a podcast dedicated to cultivating the excellences of dialogue in a digital age, by inviting a diversity of scholars and students to engage in dialogue about a range of issues connected to the ideas articulated in this book. My thanks go to Cole Campese, then Director of Education Technology Services (ETS) at Penn State, and the team of ETS staff who were part of my Socratic Politics in Digital Dialogue project: Allan Gyorke, Matt Meyer, and Ryan Wetzel, whose early support made the *Digital Dialogue* possible. This book has been enriched by the more than sixty conversations that make up the *Digital Dialogue* podcast at the time of this publication. In a book that argues for an understanding of politics as practiced between individuals and of Platonic politics in particular as practiced between and among a community of readers, it was important to weave the *Digital Dialogue* into the fabric of this book itself. These dialogues ought not to be heard as supplemental to the written text but as integral to establishing a central contention of the book itself: that in collaborative readings attuned to cultivating the excellences of dialogue, truth finds articulation and our relationships with one another can be enriched. Such collaborative readings, however, only become political when they are translated into our everyday life as a committed willingness to engage one another in dialogue animated by those erotic ideals – of justice, the beautiful, and the good – with which Socrates himself remained always concerned. This book, then, with these its dialogues, is offered as an invitation to enter into our continuing dialogue concerning the issues raised here in the hope that such a dialogue will enrich an ever-growing community of readers. Every digital community, however, needs an identifiable and lasting gathering space. To that end, a DOI, or Digital Object Identifier designed to identify, manage, and provide a permanent space of dialogue, has been created for this conversation: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/9781139628891.cplong>.

We begin, thus, neither with a preface nor an introduction, but with an overture, an opening that aims at enriching existing and establishing new relationships. The invitation with which we here begin is supported and facilitated by an online space of communication and collaboration designed to continue the discussion of the issues with which this book is

concerned and, indeed, to put the ideas articulated here into concrete practice. The *Digital Dialogue* podcast will continue to be produced as one dimension of this ongoing digital community of readers, but to it will be added responses, be they written, heard, seen, or experienced through other modes of digital and interpersonal communication related to the questions about dialogue, politics, and the power of words raised by this book. In this sense, the book itself has been written not only as a product of academic scholarship, which I hope it shows itself in any case to be, but as a “seed from which others grow in other places.”

A DIALOGICAL HERMENEUTIC

If the methodology according to which this book unfolds must be identified here at the beginning, it is perhaps best to speak in terms of a dialogical hermeneutic. Although in suggesting this here, it is advisable to pause a moment to recall the words from Hegel's famous *Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*: "For the thing itself [*die Sache Selbst*] is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about."¹ One might extend this by suggesting that with reference to this book, the thing itself is not only the result together with the process through which it came about but also the process and the result together with the relational possibilities the thing itself opens for the future. If reading, as will be heard, is a collaborative practice, political in nature, the writing of this book must become an invitation to the practice of collaborative reading. The book has, in a sense, been written in collaboration with its potential community of readers and in ongoing and living dialogue with the texts handed down to us under the authorship of a certain "Plato." To turn in earnest to these texts is, however, a matter of depth and complexity, for they do not only speak for themselves. They are appropriated, inevitably, by each new generation, and with each generation comes a new set of concerns, new ears to hear and eyes to read, together.

Of course, layers of interpretive sediment stand between us and the Platonic texts. This sediment cannot but determine the lens through which we ourselves read, a lens that refracts the light and so inevitably

¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 2.

frustrates the dream of unhindered access, of pure vision and ultimate insight. At the same time, however, it is only through this refracted lens that the texts are accessible to us at all. So if we are to turn in earnest to these texts, it will have to be with an acute awareness of our own historicity, of the extent to which we too will, in reading them, contribute to the history of their appropriation – which means we will contribute as much to their alteration as to their preservation. To appropriate, indeed, is to attempt to articulate what is proper to the text itself. But this does not mean simply to take over what is proper to the text for one's own purposes; rather, it means to enter into relation with the text in a way that allows the text to articulate what is proper to it. Reading is thus always a kind of propriation – the attempt to articulate what is proper to each thing; and a good reading is one animated by an attuned and attentive engagement with the text rooted in a concern to do justice to what is articulated there.²

To recognize the historical context in which our readings of these texts necessarily unfold, however, is not to mute the voice they articulate. Indeed, the hermeneutic recognition of finitude is the only possible basis from which the texts can be permitted to speak to us *for themselves*. Although this hermeneutical approach is dialogical, its structure is threefold; for it emerges from the complex site of textual interpretation in which the interpreter takes up a text that is itself already somehow at work in the history within which it is encountered.

First, from the side of the interpreter, there is always a certain prejudice that conditions all understanding. This is not, of course, the blind prejudice that so often stands between beings to inhibit genuine understanding. Rather, it is what Gadamer has called “justified [*berechtigte*] prejudices productive of knowledge.”³ Such justified, or as Richard Bernstein calls them “enabling,”⁴ prejudices point to the finite

² For a discussion of the notion of propriation in the sense used here, see Martin Heidegger, “The Way to Language,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1993). There Heidegger plays on the vocabulary of *das Eigene*, that which is a thing's “own,” in order to develop the notion of *Ereignis*, which names the event of presencing in which each thing expresses itself as itself. See too Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth*, 36–8, 249.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 279.

⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 128.

way we humans exist in the world. We enter each encounter – be it with another living or inanimate being or, indeed, with a written text – with a certain pre-understanding that itself serves as the basis for new knowledge. Gadamer calls this “*eine berechtigte Vorurteile*,” a justified prejudice, because it has been tested – indeed risked – in genuine encounter. Yet this risk always involves the possibility that the very prejudice that enables understanding can become a blind, disabling prejudice when it closes itself off from the voice of that which it seeks to understand. Thus, from the side of the interpreter, there is always a dimension of prejudice operative in the hermeneutic encounter with the text, a prejudice over which we must remain vigilant if what enables understanding itself is not to become precisely what prevents it.

A second dimension of a dialogical hermeneutics thus emerges from the side of the text; for there is a certain authority that arises from its inability to respond dynamically to the encounter with its interpreter. Plato makes Socrates speak to this issue in the *Phaedrus*:

In a way, Phaedrus, writing has a strange character, which is similar to that of painting, actually. Painting’s creations stand there as though they were alive, but if you ask them anything, they maintain a quite solemn silence [*semnōs panu sigai*]. Speeches are the same way. You might expect them to speak like intelligent beings, but if you question them wanting to learn something about what they’re saying, they always just continue saying the same thing. Every speech, once it’s in writing, is bandied about everywhere equally among those who understand and those who’ve no business having it. It doesn’t know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not. When it’s ill-treated and unfairly abused, it always needs its father to help it, since it isn’t able to help or defend itself by itself.⁵

The persistent, repetitive response of written texts is equated here with a kind of silence, indeed, a “solemn silence” (*semnōs panu sigai*) in response to insistent questioning. The solemnity of this silence gives rise, strangely enough, to a certain authority. Although the authority of the text is often transferred to that of the author, whose intentions are allegedly legible in the text itself, the authority of the text derives not

⁵ *Phaedrus*, 275d–e. All references to Plato throughout the text are taken from Plato, *Platonis Opera*, 1995. Translations are my own.

from the genius of its author but from precisely the absence of its so-called father, that is, from its fundamental inability to “defend itself by itself.”⁶ The authority of the text arises from its very helplessness, from its dependence, from what Emmanuel Levinas has called its “abasement.” In speaking of our relation to the “Other,” Levinas suggests the dynamic by which we might best understand how the authority of the text, its “height,” is rooted also in its abasement: “The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement – glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.”⁷ For Levinas, the urgent need to justify my freedom is the very expression of conscience: “Conscience welcomes the Other. It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself arbitrary and violent.”⁸ The authority of the text makes itself felt as resistance to my freedom, as a persistent, repetitive insistence that calls the arbitrariness, indeed, the violence of my freedom into question. As Gadamer reminds us, genuine authority is not based on blind obedience or an abdication of reason, but on an act of recognition and knowledge (*in einem Akt der Anerkennung und der Erkenntnis*).⁹ The text takes on solemn authority not because of our blind obedience but because of our conscientious recognition that it has something important to say to us, indeed, to teach us. The second dimension of dialogical hermeneutics thus involves entering into relation with the text prepared to be taught.

Finally, the historically determined context in which this teaching occurs draws into focus the third dimension of the threefold structure of

⁶ We do well, here, to attend, as Derrida suggests, to the metaphors deployed; for as he writes: “It is all about fathers and sons, about bastards unaided by any public assistance, about glorious, legitimate sons, about inheritance, sperm, sterility. Nothing is said of the mother, but this will not be held against us.” See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 143. The vocabulary of the “father” is here “so-called” in order precisely to raise the question of the mother or to call into question the manner in which the “father” functions as authoritative. For more on this, see Long, “The Daughters of Metis.”

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 251.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284.

dialogical hermeneutics. This dimension is a matter of great complexity insofar as it involves the long tradition from which the text emerges and within which it continues to operate. This tradition is not merely handed down, imposed upon us, or indeed given as something simply to be celebrated; rather, it must be conscientiously taken up, appropriated, criticized, embraced, and thus also preserved. Tradition does not operate with an inertia of its own; rather, it is a communal creation, inter-generationally maintained and transformed. The tradition into which we have been thrown thus presents itself to us as a task, or better in German, *als eine Aufgabe*, as an assignment to be done. In this sense, tradition indeed imposes itself upon us not merely as a burden passively borne but as a task actively undertaken, as a call that invites imaginative response; for it is only in this response, in our collective responses, that the tradition is preserved as transformed.

The dynamic relation articulated in the threefold structure of dialogical hermeneutics – interpreter, text, and context – expresses a kind of existential hermeneutical responsibility in which precisely the ability to respond to the things we encounter is the very process by which the past is appropriated, the present comes to presence, and new possibilities for the future are opened. Already here, something of the dynamic of dialogical encounter that animates Socratic politics may be discerned, for this is precisely what Socrates asks of each individual he encounters. Socrates seeks to cultivate in individuals an ability to respond critically to the ideas and opinions they have inherited in order to respond to the present situation in ways that open new possibilities for the future rooted in a concern for what is just and beautiful and good. Thus, in bringing a dialogical hermeneutic to bear on Platonic texts, we seek to cultivate in ourselves and with one another those excellences of dialogue at the root of the activity that is Socratic philosophy. These philosophical activities, however, set us on a decidedly political path only when we allow those cultivated hermeneutical habits of reading to inform our habits of acting.

THE ITINERARY

The itinerary this book traverses leads from politics to philosophy only ultimately to return from philosophy to an expanded sense of politics. It begins by attending to the practices of Socratic political speaking in the *Protagoras*, where we find Socrates concerned both with the course of the life of his young associate, Hippocrates, and with the arc of his own. Here we discern the contours of the topology of Socratic politics as a situated space of appearing determined by a sense of the proper time. We turn, then, to the *Gorgias*, where Socrates attempts to establish a philosophical friendship with Gorgias and, in the process, performs the “true art of politics” of which he speaks in that dialogue.¹ This course of investigation leads us, then, to the *Phaedo*, which is itself the fulcrum of the book, because in it the practices of Socratic political saying are heard to be tightly bound up with the practices of Platonic writing, the two being decisively determined by what Socrates calls the “caring practice of dying,” namely, philosophy. If the path from the *Protagoras* through the *Gorgias* to the *Phaedo* traces the manner in which Socratic politics is itself a way of practicing philosophy, the path from the *Phaedo* through the *Apology* and into the *Phaedrus* traces the manner in which Platonic philosophical writing performs a kind of politics. The *Phaedo* presents us with Socrates as a Platonic ideal that finds further articulation in the *Apology*, a text crafted in ways that uncover how Platonic writing is able to cultivate in readers the political habits of attentive listening, critical distance, and comfort with ambiguity. This leads, finally, to the *Phaedrus*, where the transformative power of collaborative reading is

¹ *Gorgias*, 521d6–e2.

shown to have identifiable political implications. Having traversed this path of inquiry leading from the political practices of Socratic saying to those of Platonic writing, we will be in a position to suggest how the Socratic ideal informs the practices of Platonic political writing in ways that cultivate in us readers habits of thinking and imaginative response capable of enriching the possibilities of human political life.

This book has been a collaborative endeavor. As mentioned, it grew over time in discussion with a generation of college students in courses I have taught both at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and, since 2004, at The Pennsylvania State University. The book is dedicated to them because they taught me, year after year, to trust the power of words to transform the lives of individuals and the communities in which we live. My research for this book was further enriched by the many guests I have had on the *Digital Dialogue* podcast. I list them here in order of their appearance and thank them all for their willingness to risk engaging in public dialogue with me in a medium with which many were unfamiliar: Michael Brownstein, Joshua Miller, Marina McCoy, Leigh Johnson, Shannon Sullivan, Jill Gordon, Christopher Johnstone, Mark Munn, Sara Brill, John Christman, Holly Moore, John Lysaker, Rose Cherubin, Noelle McAfee, Adriel Trott, Michael Shaw, Axelle Karera, Nicolas Parra, students in my Fall 2009 PHIL200 course, Robert Bernasconi, Emma Bianchi, Jeremy Engels, Jaimie Oberdick, Kathryn Gines, Leonard Lawlor, Falguni Sheth, Richard Lee, Jr., Ryan Drake, Anne-Marie Schultz, Robert Metcalf, Sean Kirkland, Mark Shifmann, Matt Jordan, Sam Richards, Laurie Mulvey, Vincent Colapietro, Francisco Gonzalez, Walter Brogan, Sergio Ariza, Norman Mora, Josh Hayes, Cori Wong, Claire Colebrook, Karen Gover, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, Tom Tuozzo, Mark Fisher, Ronald Sunstrom, Jessica Harper, Vance Ricks, Christopher Moore, Catherine Zuckert, Cynthia Willet, Shannon Winnubst, Lee Skallerup Bessette, Jarah Moesch, Rebecca Goldner, and Craig Eley. The writing and research for the book were also facilitated at various stages by three research assistants: Sabrina Aggelton, Lisa Lotito, and Sara Treumann. Since much of this book was written during my tenure as Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies in the College of the Liberal Arts, special thanks go to my excellent

staff, who always handle their jobs efficiently and professionally and who always respected my need to continue my academic research, especially my assistant, Billie Moslak, who protected my “work time” and guarded my door like Cerberus, refusing to be charmed by any Orpheus other than the dean herself.

Of course, ultimately, this book and all my work and everything I do is for my wife, Valerie Long, and my two daughters, Chloe Aliza and Hannah Aveline. As this book developed and grew, so too did our two little girls, learning now to write and read themselves, always under Val’s patient, wise, and caring tutelage. During that time, we have read together many beautiful, magical stories, and I have learned in reading with them the power words have to open new possibilities of relation and enrich this finite life we share together.

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