

The method of hypotheses in Plato's *Phaedo*

Alex Long, University of St Andrews
School of Classics, St Andrews, KY16 9AL, UK
agl10@st-andrews.ac.uk

Readers of the earliest Greek philosophy cannot help but be struck by the audacity with which it raises and answers question after question about the natural world. Consider for example the series of promises in the part of Parmenides' poem now called the *Doxa*.¹

You will know the nature of the upper air, and all the signs in it,
and the hidden works of the radiant sun's
pure torch, and from where they came into existence.
You will learn the wandering works of the round-eyed moon,
and her own nature. As for the heaven, that surrounds them,
you will know from where it arose, and how Necessity guided it
and fettered it to hold the limits of the stars. (B10=D12 Laks/Most)

Ambitious though this sounds, it is not a complete prospectus. We know from other sources that Parmenides also tried to explain sexual reproduction and the material basis of human thought.

The most widely studied heir to this tradition to have survived from the ancient Greek world is the Aristotelian corpus, where each of the many questions packed into a Presocratic poem or treatise, such the generation of animals and the motions of the celestial bodies, is given an entire treatise to itself. It may seem a deeply non-Platonic kind of writing, quite unlike the dialogues in each of which Socrates grapples with a single definitional question without ever reaching an answer that satisfies him. And yet there are two parts of Plato's writing where a broadly similar project is ventured or at least outlined: the wide-ranging account of the natural world and the human organism in the *Timaeus*, and a much shorter passage near the end of the *Phaedo* (96a–107b), the topic of this paper.

In that part of the *Phaedo* Socrates says that he was in his youth smitten with what people call 'inquiry into nature'. He had a restless curiosity to match that of a Presocratic (our term, of course, not his), and it carried him from one question to another, about the cause of life, the cause of sensation, phenomena in the sky, and so on. His initial attempts were unsystematic and led only to confusion. Then he heard about another philosopher, Anaxagoras, who was reported to have found a way to answer a lot of questions efficiently: intelligence or mind has caused 'everything'. Socrates expected Anaxagoras to say more than that in his book: surely, he thought, Anaxagoras will show in each case how intelligence had disposed things in the best way. But on reading the book Socrates was disappointed. After these misadventures he has settled on his own way of satisfying his curiosity and getting answers to whole range of questions. Those answers do not need to share content, such as 'intelligence caused it', but are connected by a relation that he calls 'harmonizing' or 'according'.

It is usually said that Socrates has committed himself to a 'method of hypothesis'. He has a method, and 'hypothesis' transliterates one of the words he uses in the Greek, but I aim to show

¹ I set aside the tricky question of Parmenides' level of commitment to the answers. For examples of recent approaches see Laks 2025 and Pulpito 2025, each of which has references to previous scholarship.

that this is nonetheless a misleading label. He has a method of *hypotheses* (plural). The use of ‘hypothesis’ in modern technical writing is an unhelpful parallel: unlike a modern scientist, Socrates is not putting forward a single hypothesis with a view to ascertaining its truth. (The difference with modern science was shown already in Robinson 1953, pp. 112–13, but it should be continually reaffirmed.) He answers one question and then moves on to the next, with the same restlessness he has had since his youth, and his positions on those various questions are, in the Greek, his *hupotheseis*. The singular ‘hypothesis’, in the phrase ‘method of hypothesis’, obscures the fact that Socrates is striving to collect many of them.²

Before I present the evidence for this, let us consider what it is and is not implied when a character in Plato is said to adopt a *hupothesis*, as it will be important for considering the implications of the number of *hupotheseis* Socrates has.

1 *Hupotheseis* in Plato

Recent research on hypotheses in Plato, such as Benson 2015, has prioritized three dialogues: *Meno* 86d–87c, *Republic* Books 6 and 7, and this part of the *Phaedo*. (Although the *Parmenides* has the longest illustration of something that could be called a method of hypothesis, introduced at 135e–136c, that passage is usually reserved for separate treatment.) But there is a much wider range of Platonic passages where someone is said to have *hupotheseis*, or, with the verb *hupotithesthai*, to set something down as a *hupothesis*. A few examples will show the range of attitudes that are consistent with so doing, and that a *hupothesis* is only sometimes, not always, the premise of an argument. Sometimes a *hupothesis* is put forward as a conclusion.

In the fourth book of the *Republic* Socrates formulates a law of non-opposition that will underpin his psychological theory: one and the same item cannot act or be acted upon in opposite processes simultaneously, in the same relation, and so on. He deals with some apparent counterexamples to the law, declares it his *hupothesis* (*hupothemenoi*, 437a), and moves on to psychology, but not before he has acknowledged that if there are genuine exceptions to the law, they will have to abandon their commitment to the psychological theory that is made on the basis of it. There are, at this stage, two unfinished tasks—constructing the psychological theory in which the *hupothesis* will be a crucial premise, and putting the *hupothesis* itself beyond reasonable doubt—and the second of these is never undertaken within the *Republic*. The law is not merely offered as superficially plausible: Socrates has shown how to dispense with at least some difficulties that might be raised against it. But, he admits, he has not been comprehensive, and the law might yet be overturned.

Contrast that passage with the end of the *Protagoras*, where the sophist and teacher of virtue Protagoras is said to have adopted a *hupothesis*. The *hupothesis* is that virtue is teachable (*Protagoras* 361b). At the time of taking that position the sophist had no doubts and defended virtue’s teachability with a very long speech (320c–328d). Whereas Socrates’ *hupothesis* in the

² Ebrey 2023, Benson 2015, ch. 7, Van Eck 1996 all hold that the method of hypothesis, as described at *Phaedo* 100a, involves only one hypothesis. Gallop (1975, p. 179) and Rowe (1993, 1996) take there to be a single composite hypothesis (that Forms exist and that other things gain properties by participating in Forms), which Gallop calls the ‘Form-reason hypothesis’. At one point Rowe anticipates a claim of this paper and acknowledges that these may be separate hypotheses (1996, p. 234 n.22). The paper that anticipates mine most closely is Kanayama 2000, which takes there to be a wider range of hypotheses than other studies do.

Republic is a premise in his psychological theory, Protagoras' *hupothesis* is his speech's conclusion. His adopting the position was not the end of the story, however, for he then had to submit to Socrates' questioning, in the course of which he found himself, in effect, contradicting it (or so Socrates says at 361b–c). The teachability of virtue was Protagoras' 'initial' position only in the sense that he took it at the start of a long exchange in which he had to explain his conception of the virtues; at the time of adopting the *hupothesis* his own attitude was not at all cautious or tentative, and he defended it with an imposing set of arguments.³

The poet Simonides is another doubt-free adopter of a *hupothesis* in the same dialogue. Simonides set down as a *hupothesis* (*hupetheto*, 339d) that it is hard to become good, but then he had to complete the rest of his poem without contradicting that claim, a task in which, as Protagoras himself complains, the poet failed. There is no sign of tentativeness when Simonides says that it is hard to become good (the lines are quoted). From the poet's own point of view, at the time when the *hupothesis* is explicitly adopted, there is labour that lies ahead, but it is to make it to the end of the poem with his position intact, not to ascertain its truth.

When Parmenides' pupil Zeno explains the point of his arguments, he says that he shows, to those adopting the *hupothesis* (128e) that more than one thing exists, that their own position has absurd implications. These opponents do not harbour doubts about their pluralism or see it as in need of further confirmation; they are said in the same passage to ridicule monism. In this case, as in that of Protagoras, the further work is imposed not by the owners of the *hupothesis* but by somebody else: Zeno, who makes them consider what their position implies.

In the *Charmides* Socrates says that he and Critias both took the *hupothesis* (*hupetihemetha*, 171d) that temperance is knowing what one knows and does not know. At the time of adopting that position they seem to have different attitudes: Critias endorses it, with no sign of doubt, but perhaps with little to offer by way of support from it apart from his short speech about the specialness of temperance (166b–c); Socrates for his part instantly raises the question whether such knowledge is really possible and beneficial (167a–b). And presumably the two men also differed in their expectations about the work that lies ahead: for Socrates it is to put the definition to the test, whereas for Critias it is to make the definition withstand Socrates' irritating objections. The passage shows neatly that the Greek words allow for a range of attitudes.

The constant across all these passages is that the people adopting a *hupothesis* have work ahead of them that is related to it. 'Hypothesizing is positing with a view to future action', as Robinson put it in a survey that remains unsurpassed, at least in English (1953, p. 98), although I would not myself speak of 'positing', at least if that is taken to exclude offering an argument for one's *hupothesis*, which, as we have seen, Protagoras does. Sometimes that future work is self-imposed, but sometimes it has an external source, such as the challenges of an interlocutor, and the nature of the work also varies: sometimes it is to think through the implications of the *hupothesis*, sometimes to answer direct objections to it or questions that in some way bear on it, sometimes to use it as one premise among several in constructing an argument or theory, and so on. Establishing that a proposition is adopted as a *hupothesis* tells us much less than might be

³ 'Hypothesizing in the dialogues is not necessarily an absolute beginning of deduction. It is merely a beginning relative to some more or less separable train of thought' (Robinson 1953, p. 96). Gorgias is another specialist in rhetoric who adopts a *hupothesis* and then faces question about it from Socrates (*Gorgias* 454c). Wolfsdorf 2008 also argues that *hupotheseis* in Plato need not be (in the modern sense) hypothetical, but his study has the disadvantage of not analysing the cognate verb, and the range of uses tells against his verdict that *hupotheseis* are all 'cognitively secure', as Ebrey notes (2023, p. 233 n.67).

expected about its owner's level of certainty, its logical position in their argument or arguments, and the strength of the case they can make in support of it. A contemporary way of making the point is that any academic who takes a position in a paper and then faces challenges to it from the audience has thereby, in Platonic Greek, a *hupothesis*.

Expressions like 'the status of a hypothesis' have an air of precise epistemic grading, but, as far as Platonic usage is concerned, it is bogus. Such precision as is available is provided by examples, context or further specification in the passage, not the Greek word itself. At the end of *Republic* Book 6, in the so-called Divided Line, Socrates ranks various levels of cognition, and the use of *hupotheseis* seems at first glance to be a constitutive feature of the level called 'dianoia'. But, as Benson has shown (2015, ch. 9) Socrates does not say that *any* use of *hupotheseis* relegates thought to this level: he explains that he has in mind the particular way of relying on *hupotheseis* displayed in contemporary geometry, where the inquirers take themselves to have knowledge even though they do not have any explanations of the *hupotheseis* (510c–d).

I will keep at arm's length the connotations of 'hypothesis' in English by using the apparently gratuitous transliteration '*hupothesis*' for the Greek noun. There is no perfect solution for the verb, but I will use '*hypothesize*' and leave it to the italics to indicate the gap between Greek and English.

2 The number of Socrates' *hupotheseis* in the *Phaedo*

What is the evidence that in *Phaedo* 96a–107b Socrates not only starts from a *hupothesis* but tries to gain more of them? I begin with the short passage where he introduces his procedure.

'In any case, that is how I started out: on every occasion I ***hypothesize*** (*hupothemenos*) whatever theory I deem most robust, and then I ***hypothesize*** (*tithēmi*) as true whatever I think harmonizes with it (*sumphōnein*)—both about cause and about everything else—and as false whatever doesn't. I want, though, to tell you more clearly what I'm talking about. I think that at the moment you don't understand.'

'Indeed I don't,' said Cebes, 'not altogether.' (*Phaedo* 100a3–9)

I will refer to this cryptic passage, where Socrates' interlocutor is unable to follow him, as his 'summary'. Socrates' meaning will be clarified by the long illustration that follows.⁴ Above I quote from the translation that I prepared with David Sedley (2011), but with a crucial modification at the second word in bold. Our published translation suggested a distinction between the two stages ('I hypothesize whatever ... I set down as true...'), as do all the predecessors that I have checked, at least in English.⁵ On the face of it, the distinction suggested

⁴ I follow Benson in taking the passage after 100a to be an application of the method (2015, pp. 192–3, 198 n.47).

⁵ 'Taking as my hypothesis... I would consider as true' (Grube 2002); 'hypothesizing ... I put down as true' (Gallop 1975); 'I assume ... I put down as true' (Hackforth 1955). Compare the German translation of Ebert 2004: 'Ich nehme ... als Voraussetzung an setze ich als wahr an...'. The one exception I have found is the French translation by Monique Dixsaut: 'en chaque cas, je **pose** un raisonnement que je juge avoir une très grande force, et tout ce qui me paraît consonner avec lui, je le **pose** comme étant vrai...'.

by the English words in that published translation is puzzling: ‘set down’ sounds more committal than ‘hypothesize’, but why should anyone feel greater confidence in (b) than (a) when (b) has been adopted on the basis of its relationship with (a)?

In the Greek Socrates uses first a compound verb, with the prefix *hupo-* and then the simple verb, and this has been taken to show that the only the proposition adopted at the first stage is a *hypothesis*.⁶ But it is a recognized feature of ancient Greek (as well as Latin) that a compound verb is sometimes repeated with the relevant simple verb without any change to the semantic force.⁷ Such abbreviated iteration is not a mark of sloppy or informal writing, for it is found in legal prose. In his article on the phenomenon Calvert Watkins cites the following Attic inscription from Plato’s own day (378/7 BCE), where we find the same verb as that translated ‘*hypothesize*’ above, but now with a financial meaning.

It shall not be permitted either privately or publicly to any of the Athenians to acquire in the territory of the allies either a house or land, either by purchase or by taking security (*hupothenenō*) or in any other way. If anybody does buy or acquire or take as security (*tithētai*) in any way at all, it shall be permitted to whoever wishes of the allies to denounce it to the representatives of the allies. (*IG II² 43.36–44*)⁸

In Plato’s *Sophist* we find the same sequence of compound and then simple verb for one and the same action: monists are first described as adopting the *hypothesis* of monism (*tēn hupothesein hupothenenō*)—another instance, by the way, of *hypothesizing* without doubt—and then are said to ‘set down’ (that is, I suggest, ‘*hypothesize*’) that only one thing exists (*themenon*, 244c4–9). In the *Euthyphro* Socrates employs the simple verb twice in quick succession when referring to what he also calls ‘*hypothesesis*’. He compares Euthyphro’s unstable answers or *hypothesesis* to the self-moving statues of Daedalus – or, rather, he suggests that such a comparison would be witty if he himself, the son of a stonemason, were giving the answers.

Your statements, Euthyphro, seem to belong to my ancestor, Daedalus. If I were stating them and putting them forward (*etithemēn*), you would perhaps be making fun of me and say that because of my kinship with him my conclusions in discussion run away and will not stay where one puts them (*thē*). As these propositions (*hypothesesis*) are yours, however, we need some other jest, for they will not stay where one puts them, as you say yourself. (11b9–c7)⁹

The notes on her translation suggest that she sees a contrast between the noun *hypothesis* and the verb *hupotithemai* (1991, p. 375).

⁶ See, for example, the philosophical reconstruction of Benson 2015, ch. 7 (especially p. 195 and n. 61), which distinguishes between Socrates’ ‘hypothesis’ and his ‘thesis’.

⁷ See Adams 1992 and Watkins 1967. That *tithemai* sometimes picks up *hupotithemai* in Plato was recognized already by Robinson (1953, p. 96), but (significantly, given the enduring influence of his discussion) it does not affect his own translation and account of 100a in ch. 9.

⁸ I quote the translation provided by *Attic Inscriptions Online*, www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGII2/43.

⁹ I quote Grube’s translation, but change ‘will not stay put for you’ to ‘will not stay where one puts them’. The shift between middle and active voice is a parallel for the use of middle and then active in *Phaedo* 100a.

I cannot find any passage in Plato where *hupotithēmi* (or *hypothesis*) and *tithēmi* are used in close proximity to refer to taking an attitude to propositions and a difference in meaning is suggested.¹⁰ In passages where a difference between *hupotithēmi* (or *hypothesis*) and *tithēmi* is detectable, the action described with the simple verb is performed upon a name ('assign a name to', *Statesman* 289a) or a law ('lay down a law', *Laws* 705e), or an answer is 'attributed' or 'assigned' to someone else (*Theaetetus* 183b). The default reading of *Phaedo* 100a, Socrates' summary, should thus be that he both starts with a *hypothesis* and gains more *hypotheses*; we would need strong reasons, philosophical or otherwise, to resist it.

Later there is explicit evidence in the *Phaedo* that Socrates is bringing together more than one *hypothesis*. I quote the end of the whole passage.

[Simmias:] '... because of the magnitude of the issues discussed in our arguments, and because of my low regard for human weakness, I'm compelled still to keep some doubt in my mind about what has been said.'

'Yes, not only that, Simmias,' said Socrates, 'but you're right to say so, and, besides, even if you all (*humin*) find the **first hypotheses** (*tas ... hypotheseis tas prōtas*) trustworthy, nonetheless you should consider them more clearly.' (107a9–b6)

The most straightforward reading of the passage is to suppose him to have by this point at least three *hypotheses*: at least two primary ones (otherwise why the plural?) and at least one secondary or subsequent *hypothesis* (otherwise why add, for the sake of explanation, 'the first', or 'the first ones, I mean'?).¹¹ There have been attempts to explain the plural, but, so far as I can see, nobody has been prompted to ask what the subsequent *hypotheses* are. 'First hypothesis' was not at this point a common expression in Greek, akin to our 'basic assumption' and 'starting assumption', expressions we might use without having any non-basic or non-initial assumptions in mind. On the contrary, this is its earliest surviving use in the whole of Greek literature (the next is also in Plato, *Parmenides* 127d). When Aristotle calls his claims about primary motions and simple bodies 'first hypotheses' in *De Caelo* (274a34; see also 274b11), they are not the only *hypotheses* he has advanced (see 269b20); 'first' marks off a subset.

Between this point and the introduction of his method back at 100a Socrates has made several groups of claims. He starts with the existence of Forms (explicitly called a *hypothesis* at 100b5–6). He then makes two sets of causal claims: one (accepted by both his interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes) concerns the responsibility of Forms, the other (accepted by Cebes alone) concerns the responsibility of other items, not Forms but similar to Forms in that they essentially possess a property, such as hotness. Following Sedley 2018, I will call this latter group the 'essential bearers'. Socrates then argues that all essential bearers are incapable of taking on the relevant opposite property, such as coldness in the case something essentially hot. Soul essentially bears the property 'alive', and the characterization of essential bearers is used to show its immortality.

Among these claims, where does he draw the line between primary and secondary *hypotheses*? As the above quotation of 107a–b shows, at the point where he mentions the first *hypotheses* Socrates has not been asked to explain the structure of his argument or the relationship between parts of his exposition. He is responding to Simmias' expression of doubt. And the only clue he gives to the identity of the first *hypotheses* is his comment that *both*

¹⁰ I set 50 words as the limit in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

¹¹ See Smyth's note on attributive adjectives (1956, p. 293, §1158).

Simmias *and* Cebes (the word ‘you’ is in the plural, hence the translation ‘you all’) may find them trustworthy, but should investigate them further nonetheless. So both the context and the content of Socrates’ comment suggest that the difference between primary and secondary *hypotheses* is not that between premise and conclusion, or some other point of logic, but that his interlocutors (especially Simmias) have shown greater commitment to some than others. We can now arrange Socrates’ groups of claims in a table. (In the fourth row I anticipate results of the rest of this section.)

Group	Example	Accepted by	First or subsequent <i>hypothesis</i> ?
(a) Forms’ existence	There is a Form of Beauty.	Cebes (100c) and Simmias (64d, 74a–b, 91d–e)	First <i>hypothesis</i>
(b) The Forms as causes	The Form of Beauty causes other things’ beauty.	Cebes and Simmias (102a)	First <i>hypothesis</i>
(c) Other essential bearers as causes	Fire causes hotness.	Cebes	Subsequent <i>hypothesis</i>
(d) Essential bearers cannot take on the opposite property	Fire cannot become cold.	Cebes	?
(e) Application of (d) to the soul	The soul cannot become dead, and so it is immortal.	Cebes	?

A far harder question to answer is where, if anywhere, Socrates distinguishes between subsequent *hypotheses* and other claims. Are the subsequent *hypotheses* all of (c), (d) and (e), or only one or two of them? In the summary quoted at the start of this section, he describes himself as *hypothesizing* the theory he deems strongest ((a) in this case, the existence of Forms) and then *hypothesizing* whatever ‘harmonizes with it’ (*sumphōnein*). So the issue turns on whether (c), (d) and (e), or only one or two of them, ‘harmonize’ with (a). Unfortunately for our purposes, the single most controversial question about the passage is precisely the nature of the ‘harmonizing’ relation!¹² Most scholars now hold that it cannot be either deducibility or consistency, for the reason that on those options Socrates ends up with an unworkable method. As Robinson influentially argued (1953, pp. 126–7), Socrates should not set down as true anything that is consistent with his initial *hypothesis* (or, as it is usually called, ‘his hypothesis’), but he should not set down as false anything that is not deducible from it.¹³ But there is no consensus beyond that.

¹² See, among many other discussions, Sedley 2021, pp.55–9, Bailey 2005 and Kanayama 2000, 62–6.

¹³ It is not certain, however, that ‘set down as false’ quite captures Socrates’ real meaning. When he illustrates the method at 101c–102a he *dismisses* other explanations and leaves them for wiser people to use, as Kanayama observes (2000, p. 59).

But this is where our inquiry into the number of Socrates' *hupotheseis* starts to bear fruit: we have gained a new constraint on interpretations of *sumphōnein*. The 'harmonizing' relation must hold between (a) and (b), as they are *hupotheseis* adopted successively within the framework of the method. But Socrates has additional, non-primary *hupotheseis* within (c), (d) and (e), and this same relation, *sumphōnein*, must hold between (a) and at least one of that trio. So we are looking for a relation with (a) shared by (b) and at least one of them. This gives (c) stronger *prima facie* plausibility than the other two, given its similarity to group (b).

Evidently the existence of Forms is thought to have this relation with claims *not* about Forms, such as the agency and properties of fire and the soul. So let us start by considering the bearing of a Form's existence not on its own agency and so on, but on other questions. Beautiful things are obviously very diverse, and so it is tempting to say that beauty in a sunset is redness, beauty in a face is symmetry, beauty in a utensil is practicality, and leave it at that. But the existence of the Form of Beauty bars an analysis that leaves beauty exclusively object- or context-relative: there must be a single characteristic or set of characteristics isolated from (and, in thought, isolatable from) the contexts and the objects in which it is found. The property does not fragment upon close inspection, or, as Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, beauty is 'one' (476a).

This then imposes a demand on explanations. An explanation of an object's beauty must not leave it mysterious why it shares the property with other, apparently very different, beautiful objects: if in other contexts redness makes no difference to beauty, or even makes an object ugly, pointing to the redness of a sunset will be insufficient to explain its beauty. Socrates reveals in his autobiography that he has long imposed this sort of demand on explanations: if an object or process sometimes causes the *opposite* of a property, it is no good as an explanation of an instance of that property (96e–97b). And he continues to impose the demand now, with the result that he rejects attempt to explain beauty with reference to colour: 'Suppose someone tells me why something or other is beautiful, and says that it is because it has a vivid colour or shape, or some other such thing. I ignore those other explanations...' (100c–d). The existence of a Form of Beauty justifies that demand: he is not being beguiled by a merely specious or nominal unity.

Now the demand for such an explanation is met if the object held responsible itself has an essential connection with the property shared by all instances, and transmits the property by virtue of that connection. It is impossible to specify precisely how this applies to beauty and the Form of Beauty without taking a position on the issue of a Form's so-called self-predication, but that there is an essential connection between the Form and its property is uncontroversial. But the demand can also be met by objects other than Forms that essentially possess the relevant property. Although Socrates has used beauty as an example so far, he does not point to a physical object that is itself beautiful and consistently causes beauty. Instead he shifts his ground and uses fire and hotness as one of his examples: fire is essentially hot, and whenever it exists it has a property shared by all hot items, and it is its possession of that heat that makes it a cause of heat. And so fire is a satisfactory explanation of heat in other objects. Explanations with reference to Forms and to this special class of other objects, the essential bearers, *both* meet a demand for explanations that is justified by the existence of Forms. That, I suggest, is how they both, in Socrates' jargon, harmonize with it. But as the demand justified by (a) concerns *explanations* specifically, the further, non-explanatory claims about essential bearers (groups (d) and (e) above) are not candidates for harmonizing with it. The non-primary or subsequent *hupotheseis* are thus those in (c) alone.

I do not pretend to have offered the only plausible account of the harmonizing relation, but the above has the merit of explaining why it is thought to hold both between (a) and (b) and

between (a) and one or more of (c)-(e). It leaves open the question whether (b) and (c), both of which harmonize with (a), also harmonize with one another. Perhaps, if I may mix the metaphors, Socrates allows for both vertical and horizontal kinds of harmonizing: a vertical relation between the source of a demand and a claim that meets it, and a horizontal relation between two groups of claims that both meet the demand. Some of Socrates' later wording suggests that he does ('consider its consequences and see whether or not you found them harmonizing with one another', 101d), but, as my main concern is to determine where Socrates' *hupotheseis* begin and end, I leave it to another occasion the task of working through the detail.¹⁴

3 Implications and new possibilities

3a Socrates' 'lucidity' at 101c-d

The account offered above creates new options for old exegetical problems. The following passage has been seen as especially challenging for interpreters, even though—or, rather, precisely because—within the dialogue others respond to it as if Socrates spoke with foolproof clarity ('he put that wonderfully lucidly, even for someone with little intelligence' according to Echecrates at 102a).¹⁵ The context is a discussion of how to explain why things are two in number. Taking the position that the cause is 'having a share of twoness', Socrates encourages his interlocutors to do the same.

You'd loudly exclaim that you don't know any other way of each thing coming to be except by getting a share of the distinctive being of each thing in which it gets a share; that in these cases you have no cause of coming to be two other than getting a share of twoness; that those things that are going to be two must have a share of this; and that whatever is going to be one must have a share of oneness. But as for those divisions and additions and the other such ingenuities, you'd ignore them and leave them for those wiser than yourself to answer with. (i) But you for your part would, as the saying goes, be scared of your own shadow and inexperience, and you'd cling to that safe thing, the *hupothesis* (*echomenos ekeinou tou asphalous tēs hupotheseōs*), and answer accordingly.¹⁶ (ii) But if someone clung to his *hupothesis* itself (*ei*

¹⁴ Two demanding questions, which I do not have space to address here, are whether the method as reconstructed here is used earlier in the *Phaedo*, such as the passages where *hupotheseis* are mentioned (92d, 94b), on which see e.g. Benson 2015, pp. 186–9, Palmer 2021, Sedley 2021, Ebrey 2023, pp. 241–4, and whether it is the same as the methods described in the *Meno*, *Republic* and *Parmenides* (further discussion in Benson 2015, ch. 5, Ebrey 2023, p. 234). The range of speakers who adopt *hupotheseis* in Plato, a sample of whom were mentioned in Section 1, shows that use of the Greek word is not in itself decisive.

¹⁵ I take the point of the remark to be not self-congratulation on Plato's part but guidance for the reader: if you do not understand the method yet, stop, go back and read the passage again, as this is the clearest guidance you will get. The point about 'little intelligence' (*smikros nous*) may be a punning reference to the failure of Anaxagoras' explanations (there are more obvious puns at 97d and 98b–c, 'he made no use of his intelligence/Intelligence').

¹⁶ Here again and in the following I modify the translation published with David Sedley. I take the genitives *ekainou tou asphalous tēs hupotheseōs* to be in apposition, which we previously translated 'that safe part of the hypothesis'. Sedley 2021 presents an innovative interpretation based on that construal; for the influence of his account when it was as yet unpublished see also Benson 2015, p. 142. I now doubt that Plato would present such a key refinement (do not hold onto the *hupothesis* itself, but its safe part) so briefly, and without immediately explaining the lack of safety in the rest of the *hupothesis*.

de tis autēs tēs hupotheseōs echoito), you would ignore him and not answer until you had managed to consider its consequences and see whether or not you found them harmonizing with each other. (iii) When, however, you had to give an account of that ***hupothesis*** itself (*ekeinēs autēs*), you would do so in the same way, first giving again as another *hupothesis* whichever higher one seemed best, until you came to something sufficient... (101c2–d8)

If the instances of '*hupothesis*' in bold were all references to Socrates' initial position, on the existence of Forms, the passage would be far too obscure to justify Echecrates' enthusiasm about its clarity. Others are inclined to hold divisions responsible for the origin of pairs; it would be a strangely irrelevant response to them to say, in (i), 'no, I cling to the hypothesis that Forms exist'. The *hupothesis* mentioned in (ii) would be Socrates' own, and what problem is there if someone else clings to it? As has often been noted, the verb translated 'cling' has been used very recently, in (i), of adherence and acceptance, not the raising of objections.¹⁷ And what are the *hupotheseis* said in (iii) to be yet 'higher' than the existence of Forms? The dialogue has not given any clues about them.¹⁸

By contrast, if Socrates' method is to adopt first one *hupothesis* and then other *hupotheseis* on related questions, we gain a new way of making sense of the passage. The safe *hupothesis* mentioned in (i) need not be the existence of Forms; it could be the position that Twoness causes things to be two (belonging to row (b) in the table above). To the tempting proposal that divisions cause pairs, this would be a relevant retort. We can then read Socrates in (iii) as referring back to it when he speaks of 'that *hupothesis*': he is saying that if people challenge the causal claim about Twoness, or some other causal claim about Forms, they can be referred to the claims about Forms' existence and the demand on explanations that it justifies. Socrates would then have given a specific example of a higher *hupothesis* that might meet the interlocutors' needs. Again, the comment on his clarity would be far more deserved.

Socrates advises his interlocutors to stick steadfastly to their *hupotheseis*. But what if they met someone who did the equivalent, sticking to his or her own *hupotheseis* and refusing to give credence to alternatives? This is the reading of the brief interlude at (ii) that most straightforwardly allows Socrates' use of the verb 'cling' to point to a problem without an abrupt shift in meaning. The quoted Greek words have the definite article, underlined above, but often the article should be translated into English with a possessive adjective such as 'my', 'her' or 'your'.¹⁹ My account of Socrates' *hupotheseis* in section 2 above is not required for it – the crucial innovation is to translate the definite article with 'his' instead of 'the' – but it becomes easier to see it as a legitimate option once we let go of the assumption that every use of '*hupothesis*' throughout this part of the *Phaedo* refers to one and the same proposition.

3b Their status as *hupotheseis*

¹⁷ Ebrey 2023, pp. 238–9; Sedley 2021, p. 57; Benson 2015, p. 141; Robinson 1953, p. 130.

¹⁸ 'Perhaps Simmias, Cebes, and others familiar with Socrates' conversations might be expected to know of arguments that he used in support of the Form-hypothesis, but the same will hardly be hold "for any person even of small intelligence" (102a4)' (Rowe 1996, p. 238).

¹⁹ For a parallel (*ei tis* and then an article that should be translated 'his', not 'the') see Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.3.2 (*ei tis tous men adelphous ... hēgeitai*, 'if someone thinks that *his* brothers...'). Xenophon treats *tis* as sufficient to indicate that the sentence is now about this person's brothers, not the addressee's brothers.

The Greek word indicates further work for the position's owner. Now Socrates indicates more than once that he expects to face questions and challenges concerning the topics on which the positions are taken. (At any rate, he *usually* expects to face such challenges when applying the method: at this particular moment he has only a short time left to live.) Some of them will come from other people, some from himself, maybe immediately, maybe when his curiosity carries him back to a topic on which he already has a position. He talks about giving the 'safest' reply to himself and to others (100d–e), presumably in the expectation of receiving follow-up questions and objections; elsewhere he outlines the kind of counter-arguments that unsafe answers might receive (101a). Running the dialectical gauntlet is thus at least part of the work he envisages when he treats these positions as *hypotheses*.

But the negative outcomes of Section 1 above are also worth highlighting. First, the use of *hypotheses* does not in itself confine an inquiry and its findings to a specific epistemic level. In this part of the *Phaedo* Socrates does not say whether his use of *hypotheses* has yielded, or could yield, knowledge, and in the absence of such evidence interpreters have had to squeeze precision out of his description of the method as a second option or 'second sailing' (99d1).²⁰ But perhaps his vagueness is prudent. According to his own summary, in each case he starts with the theory he judges most 'robust', and it is possible that sometimes that initial theory enjoys only a marginal advantage over its competitors, whereas at other times those competitors can be shown to be non-starters. Applications of one and the same method may thus move up and down the epistemic ladder.²¹ At any rate, the number of Socrates' *hypotheses* does not give us further material with which to pin down the epistemic status of his account.

The second negative outcome concerns the speaker's subjective confidence and doubts. We saw in Section 1 the sheer range of speakers in Plato who adopt a *hypothesis*, some of them with strong confidence in it, such as Protagoras and the pluralists who oppose Zeno and Parmenides. Socrates' having more *hypotheses* than previous accounts have suggested does not engulf his pronouncements in a miasma of doubt.

Finally, we saw that a *hypothesis* is not necessarily a premise in an argument; sometimes, as in the *Protagoras*, it is the conclusion defended by its owner. When Socrates adopts a range of *hypotheses* we should not suppose that he sees each of them as a mere stepping stone to some further, 'non-hypothetical' conclusion, as if, qua *hypotheses*, they have only instrumental intellectual interest for him. Throughout his autobiography he has been stressing the sheer range of his curiosity, and his adopting positions or *hypotheses* on the strength of the harmonizing relation is his new means of satisfying it. Getting a reasoned *hypothesis* on a particular question is thus a worthwhile achievement in itself; maybe some of his *hypotheses* will shed light on further questions, such as the soul's immortality, but that is not the only value they have.

3c Socrates' usual method and the soul's immortality

If the account offered in Section 2 is correct, Socrates is using the method when he accumulates explanatory claims concerning Forms and the essential bearers, but he is no longer using it when he considers the properties and behaviour of the bearers themselves, and the

²⁰ E.g. Ebrey 2023, pp. 227–8, Kanayama 2000, 88–97. Ferber 2018 has a useful summary of previous discussions.

²¹ Broadie's book on the *Timaeus* offers a similar account of the 'plausible discourses' there, but with more detail and philosophical refinement (2012, pp. 48–50).

special case of the soul and its immortality. The last stages of this section, where he concludes that the soul is immortal, are not an instance of his usual method.

This should not be seen as a problem. Even though Socrates is about to die, he is not the one who has brought up the question of the soul's survival and immortality. Over the course of the dialogue his friends draw him back to it again and again (70a–b, 77a–c, 85b–88b), and it is to resolve their doubts that he returns to it one final time in this passage. When they first meet him in prison he starts to philosophize about a quite different topic, the relationship between pleasure and pain (60b–c). It seems that if Socrates' friends had all, like Plato (59b), been ill and stayed away, he might have spent his last few hours reflecting on a much wider range of philosophical questions, some unconnected to death.

Why Plato presents Socrates as less preoccupied with death and the soul's survival than his friends are is a question I cannot explore now. But I have observed before,²² while the *Phaedo* is famous for presenting philosophy as preparation for death (64a–69e), it does not say that the philosophy of death is preparation for death. In this respect it is quite unlike the Epicurean therapy that later emerged as a rival to it. In any case, there is no conflict with the rest of the dialogue in taking our key passage to show that, if Socrates had been left to apply his method of *hupotheseis* to explanatory questions in the way that suits his own interests best, he might have gone on adding to his list of essential bearers and not been drawn away from that to linger on the particular issue of the soul and death, even on the day of his own death.²³

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²² Long 2019, pp. 118–19.

²³ Many thanks to participants at the events in London and St Andrews where versions of this paper were presented, especially Margaret Hampson and Jason Carter.

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