The method of hypotheses in Plato's *Phaedo*

> 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. (Parmenides B10=D12 Laks/Most)

Socrates' wide-ranging curiosity: 'Well, Cebes,' he said, 'when I was young I became incredibly eager for the sort of wisdom that they call research into nature. That used to strike me as quite sublime: to know the causes of each thing, why each one comes to be, why it perishes, and why it is. Time and again I would shift in different directions, considering first the following sort of questions. Is it when the hot and the cold start to decompose, as some people were saying, that living things grow into a unity? Is it because of blood that we think, or air, or fire? Or is it none of these, but is it rather the brain that supplies the senses of hearing, seeing and smelling, and do memory and opinion come to be from them, and when memory and opinion become stable, does knowledge come to be from them along these same lines? Next I considered the way in which these things cease to be, and the events that affect the heaven and the earth. And in the end I myself came to think that I was uniquely unqualified for this inquiry.' (Plato *Phaedo* 96a-c)

***Hupothesis* as tentatively adopted premise**: "Then no argument of this kind will put us off, and moreover it will not persuade us in any way that one and the same thing would ever undergo, be or even do opposing things at the same time and in the same respect."
"It wouldn't affect me, at any rate," he said.
"Nevertheless," I said, "in order not to be forced to go on at great length about all such differences of opinion by going through them in detail and confirming that they are not true, let's go ahead on the basis [***hypothesizing***] that what we've said before is the case (**ὑποθέμενοι** ὡς τούτου οὕτως ἔχοντος εἰς τὸ πρόσθεν προΐωμεν), after agreeing that, if at any time it appears not to be the case, then everything that results from our inquiry will have been invalidated." (*Republic* 436e-437a, Loeb translation by Emlyn-Jones and Preddy)

Hupothesis* as confidently adopted conclusion:** [Socrates:] 'Our discussion, in its present result, seems to me as though it accused and mocked us like some human person; if it were given a voice it would say: "What strange creatures you are, Socrates and Protagoras! … Protagoras, on the other hand, though at first he claimed [hypothesized***] that virtue was teachable, now seems as eager for the opposite (Πρωταγόρας δ' αὖ διδακτὸν τότε **ὑποθέμενος** νῦν τοὐναντίον ἔοικε σπεύδοντι), declaring that it has been found to be almost anything but knowledge, which would make it quite unteachable?"' (Protagoras 361a-c, Loeb translation by Lamb)

***Hupothesis* as obvious common sense:** [Zeno:] 'What you mentioned is a mere accident, but in truth these writings are meant to support the argument of Parmenides against those who attempt to jeer at him and assert that if the all is one many absurd results follow which contradict his theory. Now this treatise opposes the advocates of the many and gives them back their ridicule with interest, for its purpose is to show that their **hypothesis** (ὑπόθεσις) that existences are many, if properly followed up, leads to still more absurd results than the hypothesis that they are one.' (*Parmenides* 128d, Loeb translation by Fowler)

One *hupothesis*, different attitudes. Socrates and Critias are both said to have adopted the *hupothesis* (ὑπετιθέμεθα) that temperance is knowing what one knows and does not know. (*Charmides* 171d).
Critias: 'Why, I mean,' Critias said, 'that temperance alone of all the sciences is the science both of itself and of the other sciences.'
'So then,' I said, 'it will be the science of the lack of science also, besides being the science of science?'
'Certainly,' he replied. (166e, Loeb translation by Lamb)
Socrates: '…let us consider afresh, in the first place, whether such a thing as this is possible or not—to know that one knows, and does not know, what one knows and what one does not know; and secondly, if this is perfectly possible, what benefit we get by knowing it.'
'We must indeed consider,' he said.
'Come then,' I said, Critias, 'consider if you can show yourself any more resourceful than I am; for I am at a loss.' (167b)

'Hypothesizing is positing with a view to future action' (Robinson *Plato's Earlier Dialectic.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, p. 98).

Socrates' summary of his method in the *Phaedo*
'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*) ['set down', Long & Sedley; 'put down', Gallop, Hackforth] 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)
ἀλλ' οὖν δὴ ταύτῃ γε ὥρμησα, καὶ **ὑποθέμενος** ἑκάστοτε λόγον ὃν ἂν κρίνω ἐρρωμενέστατον εἶναι, ἃ μὲν ἄν μοι δοκῇ τούτῳ συμφωνεῖν **τίθημι** ὡς ἀληθῆ ὄντα, καὶ περὶ αἰτίας καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἁπάντων, ἃ δ' ἂν μή, ὡς οὐκ ἀληθῆ. βούλομαι δέ σοι σαφέστερον εἰπεῖν ἃ λέγω· οἶμαι γάρ σε νῦν οὐ μανθάνειν.
Οὐ μὰ τὸν Δία, ἔφη ὁ Κέβης, οὐ σφόδρα.

Parallels: 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 (ὑποθεμένῳ) or in any other way. If anybody does buy or acquire or take as security (τίθηται) 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* II^2 43.36–44)

C.Watkins 'An Indo-European Construction in Greek and Latin', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 71 (1967), pp.115–19.

Str. It is plain, Theaetetus, that he who maintains their *hupothesis* (τῷ ταύτην τὴν **ὑπόθεσιν** ὑποθεμένῳ) will not find it the easiest thing in the world to reply to our present question or to any other.
Theaet. Why not?
Str. It is rather ridiculous to assert that two names exist when you assert [*themenon*] that nothing exists but unity. (Τό τε δύο ὀνόματα ὁμολογεῖν εἶναι μηδὲν **θέμενον** πλὴν ἓν καταγέλαστόν που.) (*Sophist* 244c)

Your statements, Euthyphro, seem to belong to my ancestor, Daedalus. If I were stating them and putting them forward (ἐτιθέμην), 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 (ὅπου ἄν τις αὐτὰ θῇ). As these propositions (*hupotheseis*) are yours, however (νῦν δὲ σαὶ γὰρ αἱ ὑποθέσεις εἰσίν), we need some other jest, for they will not stay where one puts them, as you say yourself. (*Euthyphro* 11b9–c7)

At least three *hupotheseis* in the *Phaedo:* [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 *hupotheses*** (*tas … hupotheseis tas prōtas*) trustworthy, nonetheless you should consider them more clearly.' (*Phaedo* 107a9–b6)
ὑπὸ μέντοι τοῦ μεγέθους περὶ ὧν οἱ λόγοι εἰσίν, καὶ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ἀσθένειαν ἀτιμάζων, ἀναγκάζομαι ἀπιστίαν ἔτι ἔχειν παρ' ἐμαυτῷ περὶ τῶν εἰρημένων.
Οὐ μόνον γ', ἔφη, ὦ Σιμμία, ὁ Σωκράτης, ἀλλὰ ταῦτά τε εὖ λέγεις καὶ **τάς γε ὑποθέσεις τὰς πρώτας**, καὶ εἰ πισταὶ **ὑμῖν** εἰσιν, ὅμως ἐπισκεπτέαι σαφέστερον·

Group	Example	Accepted by	First or subsequent *hupothesis*?
(a) Forms' existence	There is a Form of Beauty.	Cebes (100c) and Simmias (64d, 74a–b, 91d–e)	First *hupotheseis*
(b) The Forms as causes	The Form of Beauty causes other things' beauty.	Cebes and Simmias (102a)	First *hupotheseis*
(c) Other essential bearers as causes	Fire causes hotness.	Cebes	[Subsequent *hupotheseis*]
(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	?

Existence of Forms (a) as a *hupothesis*:
Well, I'll set about giving you a demonstration of the sort of cause which I've pursued. I'll go back to those things that have been our frequent refrain, and start from them, **hypothesizing** that there are such things as a Beautiful alone by itself, and a Good, a Large, and all the rest. (*Phaedo* 100b)
ἔρχομαι γὰρ δὴ ἐπιχειρῶν σοι ἐπιδείξασθαι τῆς αἰτίας τὸ εἶδος ὃ πεπραγμάτευμαι, καὶ εἶμι πάλιν ἐπ' ἐκεῖνα τὰ πολυθρύλητα καὶ ἄρχομαι ἀπ' ἐκείνων, ὑποθέμενος εἶναί τι καλὸν αὐτὸ καθ' αὑτὸ καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ μέγα καὶ τἆλλα πάντα·

Socrates' lucidity: Echecrates: Indeed, Phaedo, and reasonably so. For I think he put that wonderfully lucidly (ἐναργῶς), even for someone with little intelligence.
Phaedo: Quite so, Echecrates, and everyone there thought so.

Echecrates: Yes, and so do we, who weren't there but are hearing it now. Anyway, what was said after that? (*Phaedo* 102a)

An example of his lucidity (?): [Socrates:] 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. (ii) But if someone clung to his/the ***hupothesis*** itself (*ei 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… (*Phaedo* 101c2–d8)
καὶ μέγα ἂν βοῴης ὅτι οὐκ οἶσθα ἄλλως πως ἕκαστον γιγνόμενον ἢ μετασχὸν τῆς ἰδίας οὐσίας ἑκάστου οὗ ἂν μετάσχῃ, καὶ ἐν τούτοις οὐκ ἔχεις ἄλλην τινὰ αἰτίαν τοῦ δύο γενέσθαι ἀλλ' ἢ τὴν τῆς δυάδος μετάσχεσιν, καὶ δεῖν τούτου μετασχεῖν τὰ μέλλοντα δύο ἔσεσθαι, καὶ μονάδος ὃ ἂν μέλλῃ ἓν ἔσεσθαι, τὰς δὲ σχίσεις ταύτας καὶ προσθέσεις καὶ τὰς ἄλλας τὰς τοιαύτας κομψείας ἐᾷς ἂν χαίρειν, παρεὶς ἀποκρίνασθαι τοῖς σεαυτοῦ σοφωτέροις· σὺ δὲ δεδιὼς ἄν, τὸ λεγόμενον, τὴν σαυτοῦ σκιὰν καὶ τὴν ἀπειρίαν, ἐχόμενος ἐκείνου τοῦ ἀσφαλοῦς τῆς **ὑποθέσεως**, οὕτως ἀποκρίναιο ἄν. εἰ δέ τις αὐτῆς **τῆς ὑποθέσεως** ἔχοιτο, χαίρειν ἐᾷς ἂν καὶ οὐκ ἀποκρίναιο ἕως ἂν τὰ ἀπ' ἐκείνης ὁρμηθέντα σκέψαιο εἴ σοι ἀλλήλοις συμφωνεῖ ἢ διαφωνεῖ· ἐπειδὴ δὲ **ἐκείνης αὐτῆς** δέοι σε διδόναι λόγον, ὡσαύτως ἂν διδοίης, ἄλλην αὖ ὑπόθεσιν ὑποθέμενος ἥτις τῶν ἄνωθεν βελτίστη φαίνοιτο, ἕως ἐπί τι ἱκανὸν ἔλθοις…

A parallel for the definite article: 'It is strange too that a man should consider **his** brothers a liability because he cannot have their possessions as well as his own…'
θαυμαστὸν δὲ καὶ τοῦτο, εἴ τις **τοὺς** μὲν ἀδελφοὺς ζημίαν ἡγεῖται, ὅτι οὐ καὶ τὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν κέκτηται… (Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.3.2)