Abstract

Becoming Philosophers: Plato’s challenge in the *Crito*

I offer a novel reading of Plato’s *Crito*. I argue that in the dialogue, Plato challenges us, as readers, to judge whether Crito has become a philosopher, and then to ask ourselves whether we have become philosophers.

Many commentators on the *Crito* have focused on questions of political obligation – whether Socrates has a moral obligation to obey the laws of Athens, or whether citizens are under such an obligation generally. Through a close reading of the dialogue, I argue that its central question actually concerns what it takes to become a philosopher. On my view, the questions of political obligation in the dialogue serve as examples: they are the particular context in which a general question is teased out, namely, whether Crito will become one of the philosophical few before his teacher and friend, Socrates, goes to his death. On my reading, the narrative and philosophical drama of the dialogue is not whether Socrates will die – the dream tells us that he will – rather, it is whether Crito will live well in the absence of his teacher.

Having sketched this interpretation of what occurs within the narrative frame, I then step one textual frame ‘outwards’, arguing that Plato represents the question of whether Crito has become a philosopher in order to pose a challenge to the reader: have we become one of the philosophical few, or do we remain among the many? I note a number of features of the text that lend credence to this interpretive move. I contend that Plato intends that the act of engaging with Crito’s example might change us as we read. That is, Plato is not just representing a conversation for us in the *Crito*. Rather, he is trying to use the dialogue to challenge and shape us, so that we might become philosophers.
Becoming Philosophers: Plato’s challenge in the Crito

I argue that in the Crito, Plato challenges us, as readers, to judge whether Crito has become a philosopher, and then to ask ourselves whether we have become philosophers. In pursuing this thesis, I extend an interpretation of the dialogue presented by Eugenio Benitez. He contends that one of the key themes of the Crito is how to deliberate well.¹ The extension that I am proposing on Benitez’s argument is to move one textual frame ‘outwards’: where his argument primarily operates within the narrative world of the dialogue, mine asks what Plato, as the author, is saying to the reader.

The literature on the Crito contains at least two major strands. First, many critics have taken the Crito to be primarily concerned with the question of political obligation, and so have focused on interpreting the arguments within the dialogue on that question.² Second, scholars have been concerned with resolving a perceived inconsistency between the (alleged) absolutism of Socrates’ obedience to law in the Crito and his (apparent) willingness to disobey laws in the Apology.³ As far as my argument goes, I am largely agnostic about the debates in the first strand; my interpretation seeks to situate the arguments about political obligation within their narrative context, and tries to take seriously what the dialogue as a whole might be saying to the reader, without presupposing that it is primarily about political obligation. I have nothing to say about the second strand, as my focus is just on the Crito.

I proceed in three sections. First, I clear a modest patch of interpretive ground, arguing that some critics’ conclusion that Crito is one of the many is too quick. I maintain that whether Crito has become one of the philosophical few or remains amongst the many is a salient question in the dialogue. Second, I borrow some resources from others in order to set up my argument, drawing on Benitez’s work on deliberation, and on the literature on Platonic irony. Third, building on the preceding

---

sections, I argue that Plato challenges us to consider whether Crito has become a philosopher, and whether in reading the dialogue, we have become philosophers. In the second part of §3, I suggest that my interpretation fits well with some tricky aspects of the dialogue, and that it is therefore a compelling way to read both what happens within the narrative frame, and what Plato says to the reader.

1. Crito and the many

Crito and his appeals to Socrates to escape from prison have not been held in high regard by some commentators. Gary Young advanced the thesis that “Crito is one of the many…[f]or this reason, there is an abyss between Crito’s opinions and those of Socrates.” R E Allen argued that Crito’s appeals to Socrates in his opening address (44b-46a), drawing on considerations of shame and reputation, are not only disorganised and typically rhetorical in style, but are rooted in popular Greek morality; and “popular morality was many things, not one, and in its incoherence combined surface decency with sinister depths.” Melissa Lane wrote of “Crito’s obduracy”, and noted that “[t]he text leaves nicely open whether [the apparent failure of joint deliberation in the dialogue] is due to willful blindness or intellectual incapacity” on the part of Crito. More recently, Antony Hatzistavrou sought to rescue Crito’s intellectual and reasoning abilities from his detractors (arguing that Crito and the many can understand Socratic principles), but still ultimately concluded that the instability of Crito’s commitment to Socratic principles in the face of fear shows him to be among the many, not the philosophical few.

In this section, I argue that one of the dialogue’s central questions is whether Crito remains among the many, or has become a philosopher. By drawing on recent work by Iakovos Vasiliou, repurposing some of Hatzistavrou’s analysis, and doing some text-work of my own, I show Crito is not so dim as some have supposed, and that whether he becomes a philosopher is a genuine question. None of this will serve to decisively refute the views I have just canvassed – it is still open to make an argument that at the conclusion of the dialogue, Crito remains amongst the many. But all I need to establish for my purposes is that the text does not allow us to readily assume that Crito is amongst the many. Only a considered argument could license that conclusion.

---

4 Gary Young, ‘Socrates and Obedience’ (1974) 19(1) Phronesis 1, 6.
5 I adopt the standard practice of referring to Stephanus page and section numbers when citing the Crito. All citations are from Plato, The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo (Hugh Tredennick trans, Harold Tarrant ed, Penguin Classics, 2003).
6 Allen, above n 2, 67-70. See also, Iakovos Vasiliou, Aiming at Virtue in Plato (CUP, 2008), 61.
I begin with Vasiliou. In contrast to those who dismiss Crito’s arguments as disorderly and un-Socratic, Vasiliou holds that Crito’s “problem is not that he brings in intrinsically irrelevant or un-Socratic considerations, but that he does not keep that aim of acting virtuously (and not acting viciously) supreme in his deliberation.”9 On this view, Crito’s worry at 44c about what people will think of him (and of Socrates’ other friends: 45e) is not inherently un-Socratic or characteristic of the many.10 Care for one’s reputation can be an appropriate consideration in Socratic deliberation – so long as we care only for what “the expert in justice and injustice says” (as Socrates puts it: 48a). Vasiliou notes that in this aspect of his argument (and others), Crito appeals to considerations that Socrates relied on in the Apology11 – so easy dismissal of Crito’s arguments as un-Socratic and obviously grounded in the morality of the many just won’t do. The crucial question for Socrates is whether the “argument that seems best on reflection” (46b) leads to the conclusion that it would be just to escape from prison (48b-c). On Vasiliou’s reading, Crito’s appeals to considerations like cost (44e-45c), where Socrates would go if exiled (45b-c), the fate of Socrates’ children (45c-e), and reputational concerns are all potentially relevant to the justice or otherwise of escaping; but “[w]hat Socrates will … have no part of … is consideration of the financial cost [and other factors] independently of aiming at doing the just action or avoiding the unjust one.”12 The take-away lesson for my argument is that Crito’s arguments are not obviously un-Socratic or characteristic of the many; they may not be persuasive, but they are put in sufficiently Socratic terms that they elicit a point-by-point response from Socrates.13

Next, I consider Hatzistavrou’s recent careful reading of the Crito, agreeing with much of it, and suggesting that an implicit aspect of his argument supports my contention that the question of whether Crito is among the many or the few is a salient one. In response to commentators like Lane and Young who take a low view of Crito’s intellectual and moral capacities,14 Hatzistavrou argues that Crito in fact possesses typical “reasoning and cognitive abilities”.15 Like Vasiliou, Hatzistavrou examines Crito’s arguments, and finds them to be “coherent and reasonable, at least from the point of view of the many’s moral framework.”16 (Notice, though, that Hatzistavrou’s language might be read as betraying an assumption that Crito is one of the many.) Further, Hatzistavrou finds no basis in the dialogue for thinking that understanding Socrates’ moral framework is beyond Crito;17 indeed, I will propose shortly that the fact that Socrates invites Crito to reflect on whether it would be just to escape is evidence of Socrates’ belief that Crito might be able to become a

9 Vasiliou, above n 6, 61.
10 Contra Young, above n 4, 5-6.
11 Vasiliou, above n 6, 62.
12 Ibid, 59.
13 Ibid, 62; contra Young, above n 4, 5.
14 Hatzistavrou, above n 8, 580, 582.
15 Ibid, 587.
16 Ibid, 583.
17 Ibid, 584-7.
philosopher (46b-d, 48d-e). So far, then, I have drawn a similar point from Hatzistavrou’s analysis as from Vasiliou’s: Crito and his arguments are not obviously unphilosophical, so we should reject the views of critics who would quickly bundle them in with the many.

But Hatzistavrou’s argument has a further turn. A key line motivating his argument is in 49d, where after eliciting Crito’s commitment to the principle of non-retaliation, Socrates says:

> Now be careful, Crito, that in making these single admissions you do not end by admitting something contrary to your real beliefs. *I know that there are and always will be few people who think like this*; and consequently between those who do think so and those who do not there can be no shared deliberation; they must always feel contempt when they observe one another’s decision. (emphasis added)

Hatzistavrou follows Gregory Vlastos in noting that the second half of the quote cannot mean that Socrates cannot argue with the many; rather, “[h]is point concerns only *practical* deliberation” – ie, reasoning towards an action. But what exactly does Socrates mean in the italicised phrase? He might mean that few people will ever come to believe his principle. On Hatzistavrou’s view, this is not Crito’s problem: Crito has understood the principle of non-retaliation; he has heard and accepted it before (49d-e). The problem is that faced with his anxiety (43b) and fear of “losing a friend whom [he] can never possibly replace” (44b), he has grown unstable in his commitment to the principle. And this instability is typical of the many. Though Hatzistavrou’s reading merits further discussion, for my purposes, I just want to note something implicit in his argument. A striking feature of Hatzistavrou’s analysis is the complexity of his treatment of what it takes to be one of the few or of the many. Extrapolating from his argument, I contend that there are at least three questions that we need to ask to determine whether Crito (or anyone else) is among the few: do they understand the principles of the few?; if so, are they committed to those principles?; and is their commitment stable? This complexity implicit in Hatzistavrou’s argument offers some support for my contention that the question of Crito’s status as a philosopher matters. This is because the complexity indicates that the question of whether Crito is among the many or the few cannot be answered glibly. Any persuasive answer will require a multi-step analysis, supported by reasons and evidence.

---

18 Ibid, 586 (emphasis in original).
19 Ibid, 594.
20 Ibid, 590-4.
21 Ibid, 594.
Finally, I note two features of the text that support my claim that the question of whether Crito remains among the many, or becomes one of the philosophical few, is a salient one.

First, Socrates’ language shows that he is inviting Crito to engage in a joint process of reasoning. In framing their discussion, Socrates uses inclusive language, often employing first-person plural pronouns. At different points, he says: “we should consider whether we ought to follow your advice or not” (46b); “I should very much like to inquire into this problem, Crito, with your help” (46d); “Ought we to be guided and intimidated by the opinion of the many or by that of the one – assuming that there is someone with expert knowledge?” (47c-d); “Our real task, I fancy, since the argument leads that way, is to consider one question only…: shall we be acting justly…or…unjustly in doing all this?” (48c-d); “Let us look at it together, Crito…” (48d). All this suggests that it is an open question as to whether Crito is among the many, or among the philosophical few. If Crito’s status as a philosopher (or not) is a foregone conclusion, then we face the awkward problem of explaining why all of Socrates’ apparently sincere invitations to discussion are in fact disingenuous. Further, notice that in the quotation from 47c-d just mentioned, Socrates implicitly distinguishes himself from the many (as he does not share their opinion and does not take it as a guide for action), and in his inclusive language, invites Crito to similarly distinguish himself. That this invitation is extended implies that at least at this stage of the dialogue, it is an open question as to whether Crito is among the many or the few.

Second, I suggest that Socrates’ claim in 49d (that so intrigued Hatzistavrou) is not only philosophically striking, but also points to a dramatic tension that only makes sense if the question of whether Crito is among the many or the few is an open one. Whether there can be shared deliberation between these two old friends, or whether Crito will ever after “feel contempt” for Socrates’s decision, is a question of personal significance in the dialogue. Socrates is dear to Crito (see, eg, 44b), and Socrates says, again apparently in earnest, “I am very anxious to obtain your approval before I adopt the course which I have in mind; I don’t want to act against your convictions.” (48e) If Crito is relegated to the many from the outset, then again, we are faced with an awkward interpretive problem of how to read this apparently sincere line. If, on the other hand, it is an open – and for Socrates, urgent – question as to whether his friend is among the philosophical few or not, then we are relieved of this awkward problem.

---

22 For reasons that will become apparent in §§2.1 and 3, I carefully avoid saying that Crito is invited to deliberate with Socrates.
23 On friendship in the Crito, see, eg, Christopher Moore, ‘Socratic Persuasion in the Crito’ (2011) 19(6) British Journal for the History of Philosophy 1021, 1023-5.
24 Though I follow Benitez’s reading that Socrates is representing a deliberation to Crito (as opposed to deliberating with him), there is no problem for my argument here. We can read Socrates’ concern about shared deliberation (or, alternatively, contempt) in terms of whether Crito comes to understand the reasons for Socrates’ decision, even if he was not involved in the process of deliberation.
In this section, I have cleared some interpretive ground, arguing that commentators who quickly label Crito as one of the many have erred. I have argued that Crito’s status as a philosopher is an important question in the dialogue. That does not mean that it is an unanswerable question. Rather, after borrowing some resources from others in §2, I will argue in §3 that attempting to answer the question of whether Crito has become a philosopher is an aspect of the challenge that Plato addresses to us as readers.

2. Borrowing some resources

Here, I briefly draw out two argumentative resources from others’ work. First, I sketch Benitez’s view on the significance of deliberation in the Crito, which I will extend in §3. Then, I glance at work on Platonic irony in order to establish that Plato sometimes addresses the reader.

2.1 Benitez on deliberation

In the context of a search for Plato’s views on deliberation, Benitez argues that the Crito is an obvious starting point. This is because it depicts Socrates “as wondering or having wondered what to do, coming or having come to a conclusion, and doing or preparing to do x because of coming to that conclusion.” Benitez pursues a sensitive argument that cuts fine distinctions between moral expertise and excellence in deliberation, and between Socrates and a moral expert. For my purposes, I am just going to focus the part of his argument that addresses the question of “[h]ow is the Crito concerned with deliberation?”

Benitez contends that in the Crito, we see a rehearsal of a deliberated decision: “Socrates teaches Crito why he chooses to die rather than escape.” Socrates, on this view, has already “deliberated the principles on which his reasoning about escape is based”. This is why, Benitez says, Crito is reminded throughout the dialogue of past conversations he and Socrates have shared. That Socrates’ mind is already made up, and his fate secured, is reinforced by the prophetic dream that precedes the conversation, informing Socrates of his looming death (44a-b), and by Crito’s “comically late realisation” that “it’s past the time [for making plans] now; the decision should have been made already” (46a). What we encounter in the dialogue is a representation of a deliberation: Socrates has reflected on his “method of reaching a decision”, and tries to step Crito through it. In doing so, Socrates’ has two aims: to

26 Ibid, 29-35.
27 Ibid, 29.
28 Ibid, 33.
29 Ibid, 33.
convince Crito of the justice of his decision to accept death, and to show him that this
decision is a model of good deliberation.31 This model is an application of the
principle that Socrates articulates in 46b – “that it’s always been [his] nature never to
accept advice from any of [his] ‘friends’ except the argument that seems best on
reflection.” A good deliberator is therefore someone who applies this principle in their
practical reasoning. Benitez concludes that “[t]he Crito is about deliberation because
it presents a view of what good deliberation consists in and then illustrates that view
in a particular instance.”32

2.2 Platonic irony

There is a large literature on the use of irony in Plato’s dialogues. All that I need to
take from that work is a simple point: sometimes, Plato employs irony that “is
appreciated by no character in the dialogue, but only by the reader”.33 Generalising,
the significance of this for my argument is straightforward: in appropriate
circumstances, it is plausible to interpret Plato as addressing the reader, and using the
dialogue form to induce some response in the reader.34

3. Plato’s challenge for Crito and for the reader

In this section, I bring together my work from §§1 and 2 in order to advance my thesis
directly. I argue that Plato challenges us, as readers, to judge whether Crito has
become a philosopher (the question from §1) as part of a process of self-examination,
in which we ask whether we become philosophers. I proceed in two parts. First, I
flesh out my thesis. Second, I seek to justify it by showing how it fits with four tricky
aspects of the text.

3.1 Becoming philosophers

As a starting point, what criteria might we use to answer my question from §1,
namely, whether Crito has become a philosopher? We can find such criteria by
bringing together my work with Benitez’s: to answer my question, we should ask
whether Crito has understood the model of deliberation that Socrates presents to him.
And ‘understanding’ here should be cashed out in terms that parallel the two aims that
Benitez attributes to Socrates: does Crito understand Socrates’ arguments as to why
going to his death is just? And does Crito understand that the decision is a model of

31 Ibid, 34.
32 Ibid, 35.
7(13) Arhe 15, 20.
34 Benitez gives an example from the Phaedo: ibid, 21-2. See also: Philip Merlan, ‘Form and
Content in Plato’s Philosophy’ (1947) 8(4) Journal of the History of Ideas 406, 411; Iakovos
Vasiliou, ‘Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues’ (1999) 49(2) Classical Quarterly 456,
472.
good deliberation? We need to tread carefully here. These criteria for determining whether Crito has become a philosopher do not address the issue of whether Crito has deliberated well – after all, Crito does not have to decide whether to escape. Rather, the criteria for determining whether Crito has become one of philosophical few go to whether he has successfully engaged in a philosophical and pedagogical (though not deliberative) task. Socrates says as much when he says that the task for Crito is to help Socrates “to see whether the argument will appear in any different light to [him] now that [he is] in this position, or whether it will remain the same.” (46d) So in assessing whether Crito has a become philosopher, the appropriate criteria concern his understanding of Socrates’ deliberation, both in its substance and as a model.

Next, building on the resources in §2.2, I argue that in posing the question of Crito’s status as a philosopher to the reader, Plato is challenging us to ask the same question of ourselves. This involves applying the same criteria to ourselves as we apply to Crito, but it also involves a further step. Crito is presented with an instance and model of deliberation, and asked if he understands it. We, as readers, are presented with that same deliberation, but are also presented with the post-game tapes of another team in the same league as us (team Crito), from which we are invited to learn before taking the field ourselves. Again, we should tread carefully. I am not saying that Plato wants us to hold particular doctrines about the question of political obligation: the question of whether we (and Crito) understand the substance of Socrates’ deliberation is distinct from whether we agree, on reflection that it is where the best argument leads in the particular circumstances that Socrates faced.35 Rather, my thesis is that Plato wants his readers to consider whether they have adopted a certain principle of philosophical inquiry that is distinctive of the few – that of following the argument that seems best on reflection (46b).36 And transplanting the structure I extrapolated from Hatzistavrou’s analysis of the principle of non-retaliation, we might parse this task of self-examination into three parts: have we understood the principle of following the argument that seems best on reflection? Are we committed to it? And is our commitment stable? Only if we have understood the substance and model of Socrates’ deliberation, and are stably committed to the principle of following the argument that seems best on reflection will the Crito have made us philosophers.

3.2 Interpretive fit

I now consider four features of the dialogue, and suggest that my interpretation fits these features well.

First, take Socrates’ prophetic dream in 44a-b. As Burnet notes, the message of the woman in the dream (“To the pleasant land of Phthia on the third day thou shalt

35 See Kahn, above n 2, 35.
36 See Benitez, ‘Plato the Swan’, above n 33, 30-1.
come.”) echoes Achilles’ words in book 9 of the *Iliad*. There, Achilles speaks of returning home. Tarrant joins Burnet in reading the dream as a sign that Socrates will return ‘home’ on the third day – by dying. Accepting this, I submit that the significance of the dream’s place near the beginning of the dialogue is that it serves to reinforce that Socrates is going to die and the time for deliberation has already expired. Therefore, from the reader’s perspective, the urgent question of the dialogue is not whether Socrates is going to escape or not. Rather, it is whether Crito will become a philosopher before his model and friend is taken away. Or to appropriate Socrates’ terms from 48b, the important question is not whether Socrates will live (the dream tells us he won’t), but whether Crito will live *well* once his teacher is gone.

Second, my interpretation makes good sense of the methodological remarks scattered throughout the dialogue. Benitez helpfully collects these, and notes that the “Greek text … is replete with words relating to advising, counseling, considering, choosing and persuading.” My interpretation explains why this language is so prevalent in the dialogue: the question of how to do philosophy (and how to be a philosopher) is central, both within the narrative frame and outside it.

Third, my interpretation offers a reason why the speech of the Laws (50a-54d) is unanswered. In my view, Crito’s inability to meaningfully test or answer the speech of the Laws is a provocation on the part of Plato. The reader is asked to consider, “is the speech of the Laws really the argument that seems best on reflection?” Further, the ongoing vibrancy of the scholarship on the *Crito* (and on the Laws’ speech in particular) indicates that this aspect of the dialogue *does* act as a provocation to philosophical reflection. Since Plato does manage to get “us to practice philosophy ourselves”, we might be attracted to an interpretation of the *Crito* that acknowledges that Plato intends to elicit this reaction.

Finally, my interpretation makes some sense of Socrates’ difficult final line, “Then give it up Crito, and let us follow this course, since God leads the way.” (54e) Without engaging with the interesting resonances between this line and lines in Sophocles’ and Euripides’ versions of *Electra*, I suggest that the final line is addressed not only to Crito, but also to the reader. On this view, the questions Plato poses to the reader at the close of the dialogue are whether they too would follow Socrates and Crito down this course, and whether following a course “since God leads

37 Burnet, above n 3, 175-6.
38 Ibid; Tarrant, above n 3, 223.
39 See Benitez, ‘Deliberation and Moral Expertise’, above n 1, 33.
40 “… the really important thing is not to live, but to live well.” (48b)
41 Benitez, ‘Deliberation and Moral Expertise’, above n 1, 27.
42 Benitez, ‘Plato the Swan’, above n 3, 23, 30-1.
43 See Benitez, ‘Deliberation and Moral Expertise’, above n 1, 42 n 50.
the way” is consistent with acting only on the argument that seems best on reflection.44

Conclusion

I have argued that in the *Crito*, Plato challenges us as readers to judge whether Crito has become a philosopher, and then to consider whether we have become philosophers. In §1, I cleared some interpretive ground, arguing that we should see the question of whether Crito is one of the many, or one of the philosophical few as central to the dialogue. In §2, I borrowed some resources from Eugenio Benitez and from the literature on Platonic irony. And in §3, I built on the preceding sections and argued that Plato is not just representing a conversation for us in the *Crito*. Rather, he is trying to use the dialogue to challenge and shape us, so that we might become philosophers.

44 Benitez suggests how it could be: ibid, 42 n 50.
Bibliography


Benitez, Eugenio, ‘Plato the Swan: Interpretation and the Hunt for Plato’s Doctrines’ (2010) 7(13) *Arhe* 15


Bostock, David, ‘The Interpretation of Plato’s *Crito*’ (1990) 35(1) *Phronesis* 1

Brickhouse, Thomas C and Nicholas D Smith, *Extracts from Plato’s Socrates*, in Thomas C Brickhouse and Nicholas D Smith (eds), *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies* (OUP, 2002), 235


Hatzistavrou, Antony, ‘Crito’s Failure to Deliberate Socratically’ (2013) 63(2) *Classical Quarterly* 580

Hecht, J, ‘Fair Play: Resolving the *Crito*-Apology Problem’ (2011) 32(4) *History of Political Thought* 543

Kahn, Charles H, ‘Problems in the Argument of Plato’s *Crito*’ (1989) 22(4) *Apeiron* 29

Kraut, Richard, *Extracts from Socrates and the State*, in Thomas C Brickhouse and Nicholas D Smith (eds), *The Trial and Execution of Socrates: Sources and Controversies* (OUP, 2002), 224


Merlan, Philip, ‘Form and Content in Plato’s Philosophy’ (1947) 8(4) *Journal of the History of Ideas* 406


Moore, Christopher, ‘Socratic Persuasion in the Crito’ (2011) 19(6) *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1021


Vasiliou, Iakovos, ‘Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues’ (1999) 49(2) *Classical Quarterly* 456

Young, Gary, ‘Socrates and Obedience’ (1974) 19(1) *Phronesis* 1