Introduction

The most vexing problem for the student of Platonism is that of establishing the relation between Socrates and Plato. To this problem I can claim no comprehensive answer. But within the confines of the present topic some further details may be added to an already extensive literature. I propose to investigate two aspects of dialectic—certainly one of the links between Socrates and Plato—and to argue (i) that the Socratic eros serves a philosophic function later paralleled by Plato’s dialectical method and (ii) that Plato’s formulation of the dialectical method was the outcome of his reflection on the role played by the Socratic eros in philosophic inquiry.

Section 1

That Socrates employed a mode of argumentation, that of question and answer, and that this method is described frequently in terms of the verb ‘to converse with’ (διαλέγομαι), is so well known that there is no need to rehearse the evidence. One of the most evident of characteristics used to describe Socrates, and one found in Xenophon as well as in Plato, is his love of conversation. As Robinson and others have pointed out, the ‘What is X?’ question is typical of the Socratic method. In order to get at the answer to questions such as ‘What is friendship, piety, and the like?’, Socrates engaged a representative of nearly every class or type of Athenian. His especial interest was, however, with the youth. For it was when Socrates engaged them in such questions and...

1 Except for the addition of references and a few minor alterations, this is substantially the paper read before the Faculty Research Luncheon Group in May, 1958.
2 Apol. 33 A, 37 A; Phaedo 61 D, 63 D; Charm. 154 E, 155 C; Symp. 213 D, 217 B; Xen. Mem. I i, 16; vi, 1; II x, 1; IV v, 12. Cf. Crito 49 A, B πείρα ἀποκρίνεσθαι τὸ ἑρωτώμενον ... [pulio post] ἄνδρες πρὸς ἀλλήλους σπουδὴ διαλέγομενοι and Lysis 211 C (cf. n. 3).
3 Charm. 153 A (Socrates’ ἱνηθεὶς διατριβὰς); Xen. Mem. I i, 10. Cf. Lysis 211 C where to the request ὅθεν διαλέγουσα ἀνώτας Socrates replies διαλεκτέον and Symp. 217 B: ὅπερ εἶσθε διαλέγετις. The fact that Socrates was criticized several times for speaking on such homely subjects as cobbler’s and cooks (Symp. 221 E; Gorg. 490 E; cf. Xen. Mem. I ii, 32-37) must refer to a typical feature of his conversations.
4 Cf. R. Robinson, Plato’s Earlier Dialectic 2 pp. 49 sq. and K. W. Mills, Phronesis 2 (1957) 145-46. This characteristic was already recognized by Xenophon Mem. I i, 16.
forced them to re-examine the traditional mores, that we find the purpose back of his persistent questioning. This purpose, moral betterment, constitutes a second characteristic of the Socratic method.

When we turn from the early dialogues to the later ones, the second characteristic is no less evident despite the fact that Socrates ceases to be the central speaker. It should be noted, however, that regardless who the actual speaker or questioner might be, moral betterment is always assumed to be the outcome of the discussion. This is to be explained by the fact that Socrates' dialectical method has been modified by Plato in such a way as to preserve what he believed to be the nucleus of the method yet, at the same time, placing the entire method on a philosophic footing quite absent in the early dialogues.

One reason why Socrates was so successful in the method of question and answer was the extra-philosophic context within which his conversations were placed: Socrates, especially when conversing with the youth, enjoyed a close, intimate friendship beyond what can properly be termed a teacher-pupil relation. In the dialogues of the later period, when Socrates is no longer the main speaker, what is the mechanism that assures the success, morally and intellectually, of the joint inquiry typified by dialectic?

If we consider the middle-period dialogues we shall find the answer. It is only in these dialogues that the friendship which existed between Socrates and the youth receives a philosophical justification. The Symposium and the Phaedrus with their theory of eros ground friendship on a philosophic basis and supply as well the purpose of eros. Eros is grounded philosophically in these two dialogues in that it enables the lover to transcend the world of sense particulars and to reach the world of metaphysical reality. This is, of course, an oversimplification of two of Plato's richest dialogues. But for all its oversimplification the above characterization serves to bring out two important points, (i) an examination of eros is inadequate unless it reveals the hierarchical structure

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1 Euthyphro 2D; Laches 196B; Charm. 166D; Symp. 218E; Xen. Mem. I i, 15.
2 That this is one of the functions served by dialectic cf. Soph. 246D; Phaedr. 276E-277A and Skemp, Plato's Statesman p. 67.
3 Socrates is made to say on several occasions, "let us investigate together" (cf. Protag. 332D; Meno 87-88; Hipp. I, 293B. The belief that philosophy is a joint enterprise or κοινὴ σκέψις (Crito 48B; Charm. 158D; [Alcib. I], 124B) is as much a Platonic dogma as Socratic and persists even in the later dialectic, witness Pol. 258C. The Meno may be viewed, as Buchmann noted (Die Stellung der Menon in der platonischen Philosophie, Philol. Suppl.-bd. 29 (1936)) as a turning point in the emergence of a distinctively Platonic dialectic from the earlier Socratic dialectic of n. 2 p. 120. Cf. especially Meno 75D, 78C, 86D.