RESIDUAL AMBIGUITY IN PLATO’S *STATESMAN*

Books that have been read, interpreted, and argued about for centuries, enduring books that come to be called “great” or “classic,” are characterized by a mixture of under- and over-determination. They are underdetermined: there is not enough textual “data” to yield a definitive interpretation of them, for at critical junctures it is impossible to know for sure what the author (or the text) exactly means. After all, if the meaning, content, or teaching of the text were unambiguously available, there would be one account of it agreed upon by all good readers, and the discussion would be over. But, of course, about such books the discussion never ends. As a result, they are also overdetermined: more than one plausible and coherent interpretation can be generated.¹

For at least four reasons, the Platonic dialogues are extreme examples of the hermeneutical situation just sketched. First, the text is often breathtakingly sparse. Think, for example, of the divided-line in Book VI of the *Republic*. The philosophical reader longs to understand the metaphysical relationship between mathematical objects such as “the odd and the even, the figures, and the three forms of angles” (510c), and the Forms that stand above them on the line. Socrates, however, says virtually nothing about it. Instead, he describes the work of the mathematicians who treat these mathematical objects “as known” and who then employ them as “hypotheses” in their demonstrations (510c). Such thinkers use sensible objects as images of mathematical originals, but “don’t think it worthwhile to give any further account of [these originals] to themselves or others, as though they were clear to all” (510c). Presumably, this task of clarification is reserved for practitioners of “dialectic” who “make the hypotheses not beginnings but really hypotheses –that is steppingstones and springboards– in order to reach what is free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole. When it has grasped this, the argument now depends on that which depends on this beginning and in such fashion goes back down again to an end; making no use of anything seen in any way, but using forms themselves, going through forms to forms, it ends in forms” (511b). Again, the philosophical reader is eager to have dialectic explained, but instead is treated only to another complex image, that of the “cave.”²

This example suggests the second reason why the dialogues are paradigms of underdetermination: Plato’s characters make extensive use of images instead of conceptual argumentation. In a related vein –and this is the third reason– his characters, such as the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*, often tell strange myths or stories. The fourth reason is the simple fact that the dialogues are themselves stories; they are dialogues. Plato never articulates a theory he unequivocally tries to defend in his own voice. Regardless of how confident a reader may be that either Socrates or the Eleatic

¹ The hermeneutical situation just sketched need not imply a crude form of relativism. Even if there is no definitive interpretation of a text, some readings can still be superior to others. Even if the text refuses to yield the entirety of its meaning, it nonetheless functions as a stable object by which to evaluate various readings. Rather than being the measure of the text, a good reader is measured by, and so must be responsible to, the text.