Welcome to the *Plato Paradigm* — a paradigm shift in reading Plato's dialogues.

In this podcast, I'm going to read through Platonic dialogues to show how they should be read — and not the way they have been read for the last two and a half thousand years.

People have long had a problem with the Platonic dialogues, because Plato does not appear in any of them. He does not express his own opinions, and that makes it very difficult to discover what Plato himself thought.

From the time of Plato onwards — in fact right up to today — people have dealt with this by assuming that one or other of the characters speaks for Plato. This may be Socrates — as is usually the case in the early dialogues — or it could be the Athenian Guest, or the Eleatic Guest, or, in one particular dialogue, Timaeus.

The problem with this is that all of these characters contradict themselves, and they contradict each other — and that's important. If they are all supposed to be mouthpieces of Plato, they should not contradict one another.

To deal with this, a further solution is introduced — irony.

Socrates in particular says things which I might agree with, and when he says those things, I say: that's Plato speaking. But there are many places where Socrates says things that contradict what he says elsewhere. In those places, we say that Socrates is being ironic — that he is not saying what he really thinks.

In this way, the problem is "solved". To understand Plato's philosophy, all I have to do is collect every sentence in the dialogues where I decide that Plato is speaking, join them together, ignore everything else because it is ironic — and that becomes Plato's philosophy.

This works extremely well, because it guarantees consistency. Anything inconsistent is simply dismissed as irony.

The only problem is that we end up with many different "Platos", because everybody agrees with different things. Everybody selects different passages as genuine. For anyone serious about Plato, this is obviously bad methodology, and we should be looking for something else.

I am not the first to be dissatisfied with this approach. Others have taken a different route: they say that the dialogues do not reach conclusions, and that this is what matters.

This view goes back to Arcesilaus in the third century BC. When a dialogue does not end in a clear conclusion — or ends in a conclusion that is obviously wrong — or when Socrates says that he does not know something — these are taken as signs that Plato himself advocated scepticism: that no conclusion can be reached, that it is better not to reach a conclusion, and that wisdom lies in recognising one's ignorance.

I do not find this convincing either. For that to work, one or two dialogues might suffice — but we have thirty-five or thirty-six, depending on which we take to be authentic.

I have spent over forty years analysing Platonic dialogues as philosophical dramas, and that was quite successful. I arrived at conclusions which did not contradict one another from dialogue to dialogue.

But it was only when I examined the central dialogue — the *Politeia*, or *Republic* — that I realised something important. It is so large because much of it is taken up with discussions which are, on the surface, completely irrelevant to the main subject.

The explanation is that the surface discussion is not the real point. The characters represent ideas.

Now, ideas themselves cannot be dramatised. You cannot dramatise justice; you cannot dramatise the good. But you can dramatise a concrete representation of something as close as possible to the idea — for example, a just man or a good man.

So Plato's first step is to construct what I call a *paradeigma*.

Before turning to Plato, we should look at ordinary Greek usage.

Imagine a potter in classical Athens who wants to make a series of pots of a particular type — say an amphora or a krater. One way to do this is to work from a basic model.

This model is not shown to customers. It gives only the essential form — the shape.

The pots that are actually shown are the finished products. In Greek, "to show" is *deiknūmi*, and what is shown is a *deigma*. The plural is *deigmata*.

The underlying model — the one beside the *deigmata* — is the *paradeigma*.

Each *deigma* includes additional features — decoration, variation, detail — but all derive from the same *paradeigma*.

Plato works in the same way.

He begins with an idea, constructs a concrete representation of it — a *paradeigma* — and then creates characters, which are *deigmata*.

For example, a good man who appears bad, and a bad man who appears good. These are *paradeigmata*. Plato then finds figures who can embody them.

Socrates, for instance, is a good man who appears bad. Many Athenians thought him so, and Plato can dramatise this.

The *deigma* includes all the incidental features — man, Greek, Athenian, ugly, and so on. These details are ultimately irrelevant. The *deigma* allows us to reach the *paradeigma*, and the *paradeigma* points us towards the idea.

When Plato sets such figures in conversation — an extreme good man who appears bad and an extreme bad man who appears good — the discussion will be chaotic.

And that is exactly what we find. The dialogues often look philosophically unsatisfactory. But that is because the philosophy is not in the surface arguments. It lies in the characters — in so far as they reflect the *paradeigmata*.

That is what we are meant to grasp.

This is a very different way of reading Plato's dialogues, and it is different enough to justify calling it a paradigm shift.

From the next episode onwards, I will begin reading dialogues to show how much is missed when philosophers focus only on what they take to be the philosophy of the discussion.

We have to read the whole dialogue. Only then can we construct the *deigmata*, move to the *paradeigmata*, and finally reach the ideas for which Plato wrote the dialogues.

In the next episode, we begin with *Hippias Minor*.