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METHODS OF INTERPRETING  
PLATO AND HIS DIALOGUES

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EDITOR'S PROLOGUE

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1. Introduction

THE following papers grew out of a conference on 'Methodological Approaches to Plato and his Dialogues' organized by the Philosophy Department of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in March 1988. The conference covered only some of the possible methodological approaches to Plato, and the following papers represent only some of the viewpoints presented on that occasion. Nevertheless, the papers included here cover a diverse set of topics, such as ancient interpretations of Plato, Plato as a literary figure, Plato's arguments and characters, and Plato's use of the dialogue form. Though much Platonic research has been carried out by analytic philosophers, they have been relatively unconcerned to reflect on methodological issues. This volume shows some analytic philosophers and some classicists at work on this task.

2. Philosophical writing styles and their significance

Most philosophy has been and continues to be written in expository prose: the author states and argues for (what he or she takes to be) particular truths, and possibly also responds to certain objections. None the less, there have been notable exceptions to this style, neither beginning nor ending with Plato—the oracular aphorisms of Heraclitus, Parmenides' poem, the poem of Lucretius, the *Confessions* of St Augustine, Descartes's *Meditations*, the dialogues of Berkeley and Hume, the varied works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche's diatribes, the

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In revising this prologue I have benefited, perhaps insufficiently, from comments by Bill Cobb, GailAnn Rickert, and Nick Smith.

plays and novels of Sartre, and Wittgenstein's *Investigations*.<sup>1</sup> We often forget the wide variety of styles that have been used.

Why have those writing about philosophical issues sometimes jettisoned the expository prose form? No doubt the reasons differ from author to author. But we may distinguish between those cases in which the non-standard style was designed simply to present the philosophical material in an interesting or attractive manner, and those cases in which the style was in some sense integral to or inseparable from the material. Practitioners of a non-standard style as merely a vehicle or container of philosophical content would (fairly uncontroversially) include Lucretius, Berkeley, and Hume. Practitioners of a non-standard style as (partially) embodying philosophical content would (perhaps more controversially) include Heraclitus, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. It has not been easy for traditional philosophers to understand what it means for a style to be integral to philosophical material. We tend to think of literature as that realm in which style of writing is absolutely crucial to content, and philosophy as that realm in which style is irrelevant to content—or, rather, in which style should be as transparent or neutral as possible.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Kierkegaard

<sup>1</sup> Norman Malcolm reports: 'Wittgenstein once said that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of *jokes* (without being facetious). Another time he said that a philosophical treatise might contain nothing but questions (without answers)' (*Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd edn. [Oxford, 1984], 27–8). In 1933 or 1934 Wittgenstein himself wrote: 'I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*. It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do' (*Culture and Value* [Chicago and Oxford, 1980], 24).

<sup>2</sup> One especially clear form of the contrast has been articulated by philosophy's most renowned contemporary writer of fiction, Iris Murdoch. Concerning philosophy and literature, she has said: 'These two branches of thought have such different aims and such different styles, and I feel that one should keep them apart from each other.' She goes on to say: 'Of course philosophers vary and some are more "literary" than others, but I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration. Of course this need not exclude wit and occasional interludes; but when the philosopher is as it were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold clear recognizable voice' ('Philosophy and Literature: Dialogue with Iris Murdoch', in B. Magee (ed.), *Men of Ideas* [New York, 1978], 265). This contrastive view has been most vigorously and recently opposed by Martha Nussbaum (e.g. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* [Cambridge, 1986], ch. 1).

and Nietzsche have lain outside the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy.

In some people's minds, reflection on Plato's dialogues calls into question the very distinction between literature and philosophy. Such reflection offers us the opportunity to rethink these concepts. No one thinks it is necessary, or even useful, to ask 'Why did Aeschylus write tragedies?' Why, then, should we wonder why Plato wrote dialogues?

When literature and philosophy are seen as aiming at the same goal—the shaping of human ideals—they can be made to compete with one another. In Plato's time this competition was already apparent in the (even then) 'ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry' (*Rep.* 607b). One realm in which this ancient quarrel remains pressing is in the interpretation of Plato's dialogues. Analytic philosophers have tended to view the dialogue form as little more than a (dispensable) vehicle for the conveyance of Plato's substantive philosophical theories. (This tendency has an ancient pedigree, which I shall examine in the next section, dating back to Plato's errant student, Aristotle.) Some others—including many classicists, political scientists, and some philosophers—have viewed the dialogue form as an essential ingredient in Plato's approach to philosophical issues.<sup>3</sup> According to this interpretation, reading Plato's attitude towards a philosophical issue out of a dialogue is no easier than reading Aristophanes' attitude towards a political issue out of a play.<sup>4</sup> If we insist on looking for Plato's views, we may be missing what is most significant about the dialogues.

If we understand the motives of the historical Socrates, the purpose of his conversations was never (simply) to convey philosophical truths. Rather than writing (or lecturing) for the general public, he focused on a particular person holding a particular set of beliefs. He claimed to know (almost) nothing. To what extent can we suppose that Plato's motives and concerns are those of the historical Socrates? Plato seems to be more willing to be dogmatic than the historical Socrates—but that is only indicated by the fact that the character 'Socrates' in the

<sup>3</sup> The first modern statement of the view that Plato's dialogue form is inseparable from the philosophical content seems to be by Friedrich Schleiermacher. See his *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. Dobson (New York, 1973), 14. (The introductions, along with translations of the dialogues into German, were originally published beginning in 1804.)

<sup>4</sup> For whatever help it might offer here, I note that Diogenes Laertius reports: 'Aristotle remarks that the style of the dialogues is half-way between poetry and prose' (3. 37, trans. R. D. Hicks).

middle dialogues is more dogmatic than what we think of as the historical Socrates. (Of course our picture of the historical Socrates derives mainly from Plato's dialogues.) Whether the character 'Socrates' is revelatory of Plato's motives is one of the central issues in question.

### 3. The historical evidence concerning Plato

Can we take Plato to be expounding his own philosophical and political theories in the dialogues, largely though not exclusively through the character 'Socrates'? This raises two separable issues: (1) Does Plato expound his own, as opposed to the historical Socrates', views? (2) Does Plato expound his own views, as opposed to not expounding *views* at all? The first question has long been discussed, and there is general, though not complete, agreement concerning it: in the 'early' dialogues the character 'Socrates' represents fairly accurately the historical Socrates, whereas in the 'middle' and 'later' dialogues the character 'Socrates' expounds the (evolving) views of Plato. The second question has generated controversy only relatively recently, and has not produced widespread agreement (indeed, it is a theme of this collection).

In some cases, perhaps the immortality of the soul, there is good evidence, internal to the dialogues themselves, to warn us away from inferring anything about Plato's views from the statements of the character 'Socrates'. In such cases it seems best to withhold judgement concerning Plato's own view, and instead to take Plato's dialogues to be raising the issue for, and subjecting it to, serious but inconclusive consideration.

On other issues, however, perhaps the theory of the Forms or the nature of the ideal state, there does not seem to be significant internal tension (except what could be accounted for by the evolution of Plato's thinking), and the question arises whether we should take these views expounded by the character 'Socrates' to be Plato's own—despite the fact that Plato never endorses them in his own voice, *in propria persona*, in the dialogues.

What evidence, if any, is there to help resolve the second question, evidence which is external to the dialogues themselves? In fact there is some such external evidence, which may for convenience be divided into four kinds:

1. Historical evidence concerning Plato's activities.
2. Statements allegedly made by Plato *in propria persona* about his own views.
3. Ancient testimony concerning Plato's views that has some basis external to the dialogues.
4. Ancient literary genres that may have influenced or constrained Plato's writing.

I shall briefly sketch some evidence that can be gleaned from these sources, but it must be acknowledged from the outset that it is limited and controversial.

1. The historical evidence that we have concerning Plato's activities comes primarily from the letters that were traditionally ascribed to him, though Plutarch seems to provide some independent information and confirmation.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have focused their attention primarily on the *Seventh Letter*. In it Plato is described as first journeying to Sicily, where he met Dion, when he was about forty years old. Dion was interested in philosophy and became convinced by Plato's political ideals. According to Plutarch the two together tried to convert the tyrant Dionysius I to philosophy. This attempt was unsuccessful, and, under circumstances that remain unclear, Plato was sent away. After the death of Dionysius I, some twenty years later, Dion sparked an interest in philosophy in the new ruler Dionysius II. Plato was then invited by Dionysius II to return to Sicily to be his tutor and, as Dion and Plato thought, to carry out the programme of the *Republic*. After considerable hesitation because of his scepticism concerning the possibility of success of such a venture, Plato eventually consented and came to Sicily. The venture did indeed fail, but it is clear that Plato is represented as hoping to institute in real life some sort of ideal society, presumably along the lines he had described in the *Republic*. If this is accurate, it may justify us in taking seriously the idea that in the *Republic* Plato is making genuinely political proposals. At 502B Plato makes Socrates ask: 'And surely one such individual, if his city obeyed him, would be sufficient to bring about all the measures which now seem incredible?' and Adeimantus respond: 'He would be sufficient'.

The authenticity of Plato's letters was never seriously disputed until the nineteenth century. Now it is widely acknowledged, however, that

<sup>5</sup> My account of the *Seventh Letter* derives mainly from Ludwig Edelstein's monograph, *Plato's Seventh Letter* (Leiden, 1966). The evidence from Plutarch comes from his *Life of Dion*.

most of them are spurious, having been written after Plato's death. The *Seventh Letter* has received the most vigorous defence, but even it is not uncontroversially authentic. Yet even if the letter is judged to be spurious, it might still serve as legitimate evidence concerning Plato's activities.

Contemporary scholars who reject the *Seventh Letter* as spurious have done so on grounds that cast no doubt on the main course of events as I have described them above. What is suspicious in the letter is the style of writing, the writer's excessively negative assessment of Dionysius' character, his too positive assessment of Dion's, and his characterization of Plato as a vigorous political activist. These attitudes can best be understood as apologetic projections on to past events by members of the Academy after Plato's death. But there seems to be no doubt that the author was writing about events that took place basically as described.

Though Plutarch's account of events seems largely derived from the *Seventh Letter*, it differs from it in some of its judgements, and adds some details not found in the letter. These deviations suggest that it may depend on some sources independent of the letter, and so constitute some confirmation of the broad outline of events.<sup>6</sup>

So even a spurious *Seventh Letter*, along with Plutarch, may provide some historical evidence, independent of the dialogues, that Plato meant the character 'Socrates' to be articulating something like Plato's own political ideals.

2. The largest body of extant statements seemingly made by Plato *in propria persona* concerning his own philosophical views comes from the *Seventh Letter*. Yet, as I indicated above, the authorship of the letter is very controversial. If we assume the letter is spurious, written by a member of the Academy after Plato's death, then it could at best constitute the third kind of historical evidence, which I discuss below. On the other hand, even if the letter is authentic it might still require interpretation in the manner of the dialogues. The letter purports to represent Plato speaking *in propria persona*, but it does not follow that he is doing so. Were a character purporting to be Aristophanes to appear in the parabasis of a play written by Aristophanes, even if the character were played by Aristophanes, we could not simply assume that the character reported Aristophanes' own views about anything. So too, if a character named 'Plato' had spoken in any of the dialogues,

<sup>6</sup> This is argued by Edelstein at pp. 41, 57-9.

all the same issues would arise concerning the relationship between his statements and the views of the author of the dialogue himself. (This sort of issue is explored by Michael Frede in his contribution to this volume.)

The only other evidence we have concerning Plato's statements about his own philosophical views is fragmentary reports concerning Plato's infamous lecture 'On the Good'. The fact that Plato gave such a lecture at all already distinguishes him from his teacher Socrates, who would never have been so presumptuous. On the other hand, the audience certainly did not get what it came for—advice on a silver platter. Aristoxenus, a pupil of Aristotle's, reports the following:

This, as Aristotle was always saying, was the experience of most of those who heard Plato's lecture 'On the Good'. Each of them attended on the assumption that he would hear about one of the recognized human goods—such as wealth, health, strength, and in general some marvellous happiness. When Plato's lectures turned out to be about mathematics—numbers, geometry, astronomy—and, to crown all, about the thesis that the good is one, it seemed to them, I fancy, something quite paradoxical; and so some people despised the whole thing, while others criticized it.<sup>7</sup>

According to Simplicius the lecture was, however, attended by some philosophical associates of Plato—among them Speusippus, Xenocrates, Aristotle, Heraclides, and Hestiaeus—who reported in general outline that Plato maintained that the first principles of all things, including the Forms and sensible things, were the One and the indefinite dyad (also called the unlimited or the great and small). However, they also reported that the lecture was delivered in an enigmatic style.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle also attributes similar views to Plato in the *Metaphysics*.

Generations of scholars have had difficulty identifying precisely these doctrines in Plato's dialogues and have concluded that either Plato's own views (on this matter) were never revealed in the dialogues (the 'Esoteric View' that Plato revealed some of his views only orally),<sup>9</sup> or else Aristotle is an unreliable guide to understanding Plato (an issue I shall address below).

<sup>7</sup> Aristox. *Harm.* 2. 30-1; collected in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes [Barnes], ii (Princeton, 1984), 2397.

<sup>8</sup> Simplicius *In Phys.* 151. 6-11, 453. 25-30; collected in Barnes, ii. 2398, 2399.

<sup>9</sup> A summary of our knowledge of Plato's lecture and a conjecture as to its circumstances and motivation are offered by K. Gaiser, 'Plato's Enigmatic Lecture "On the Good"', *Phronesis*, 25 (1980), 5-37.



If the esoteric view of Plato were correct, then the dialogues would constitute something more akin to philosophical exercises for initiation into the kinds of problems and the style of thinking that interested Plato. However, Kenneth Sayre has recently argued that the allegedly esoteric views can be found in a somewhat modified form in the *Philebus*.<sup>10</sup> Yet Sayre does not conclude that the character 'Socrates' is a mere mouthpiece for Plato. Rather, he holds that Plato's views—divulged in the *Lecture on the Good*—must be gleaned from the dialectical and dramatic structure of the dialogue as well as from the arguments of 'Socrates'. (Sayre elaborates this interpretative strategy in his contribution to this volume.)

3. There is considerable ancient testimony concerning Plato's views. The key questions are how trustworthy the testimony is, and whether it is independent of the dialogues. Since Plato formed the Academy, where a number of philosophers worked (with Plato?) on philosophical issues, it seems reasonable to assume that these members of the Academy had an understanding of Plato's views that has some basis independent of the dialogues themselves. Foremost among these Academicians was Aristotle, who studied there for some twenty years. And Aristotle is by far the most significant source of ancient testimony concerning Plato's views.

In discussing Plato's views Aristotle regularly attributes to him views found in the dialogues and articulated by their leading characters—for example, the theory of the Forms and the political proposals of the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In assessing Aristotle's attributions two issues must be distinguished: (1) How accurately do Aristotle's attributions match the positions articulated by the leading character of the dialogue in question, and what are we to make of any differences that we discern between the two? (This issue is discussed in Gail Fine's paper.) (2) Can we trust Aristotle when he attributes to Plato anything like views articulated by the character 'Socrates' in the dialogues? It is the latter question that concerns me here.

Even if Aristotle is an unreliable and polemical interpreter of his predecessors in details, can we really accuse him of complete misrepresentation of Plato's intentions? Grounds for suspicion might be found in Aristotle's interpretation of Heraclitus. Aristotle prosaically interprets Heraclitus as rejecting the law of non-contradiction and as proposing that the material *aitia* of all things is fire. Indeed, these

deflationary interpretations of Heraclitus have influenced the Western philosophical understanding of Heraclitus ever since. Yet another reading of what little we have from Heraclitus suggests that he was not making such pedestrian assertions at all, but was trying to be provocative and to see deeply into difficult issues. Could Aristotle have seen this and, still, wilfully deformed Heraclitus' oracular aphorisms for his own purposes? If Aristotle could do this to Heraclitus, it is not inconceivable that he could do the same to Plato.

It seems to me that in that case the offence to Aristotle's own mentor would be too great and unforgivable.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, so far as we know no dissenting tradition of Platonic interpretation seems to have sprung up in opposition to Aristotle. (The Sceptical interpretation of Plato, discussed by Julia Annas, has no claim to any authority that is independent of the dialogues themselves.) And even if the *Seventh Letter* is spurious, it at least provides early ancient reinforcement of Aristotle's interpretation of the dialogues as presenting Plato's own views concerning central philosophical and political issues.<sup>12</sup>

4. Plato was not the only person in fourth-century Athens who wrote dialogues, nor, for that matter, was he the only writer of Socratic dialogues (in the sense of dialogues in which Socrates was the main characters).<sup>13</sup> If there were conventions regarding the understanding of these dialogues, that might give some clue as to the intention with which Plato wrote his Socratic dialogues.

Unfortunately, this tactic offers little assistance. Besides Plato, we know of three others who wrote Socratic dialogues—Xenophon, Aeschines, and Antisthenes.<sup>14</sup> We know very little about the dialogues of Aeschines and Antisthenes. They seem not to have had any biographical purpose (regarding Socrates), but to have been written with the apologetic purpose of defending Socrates against the prejudice that he was responsible for the corruption of Alcibiades.

We know more about Xenophon's Socratic dialogues because we

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *NE* I. 6, 1096<sup>a</sup>11–16.

<sup>12</sup> For later ancient affirmation see D.L. 3. 51–2, who takes account of the Sceptical interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> Athenaeus (9, 505<sup>c</sup>; collected in Barnes, ii. 2419) cites Aristotle as testifying to the existence of at least one writer of dialogues (though not, apparently, Socratic dialogues) before Plato—Alexamenus. For more on this issue see Michael W. Haslam, 'Plato, Sophron, and the Dramatic Dialogue', *Bulletin of the Institute for Classical Studies*, 19 (1972), 17–38.

<sup>14</sup> My account of non-Platonic Socratic dialogues derives from G. C. Field, *Plato and his Contemporaries: A Study in Fourth Century Life and Thought*, 3rd edn. (London, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Late Ontology: A Riddle Resolved* (Princeton, 1983).

have some of them—e.g. *Memorabilia*, *Symposium*, and *Oeconomicus*. They seem to have been written with a variety of purposes. The *Memorabilia* is apologetic without being clearly biographical. The *Symposium* seems to be nothing more than a naturalistic slice of life. And the *Oeconomicus* seems to present some common views on husbandry, first through the character of 'Socrates' and then through another character.

By far the greatest evidence we have concerning the nature of Socratic (or any) dialogues derives from Plato's own works, the interpretation of which is the centre of this controversy. In any case, we know of no standard or conventional purpose governing the writing of Socratic dialogues in fourth-century Athens that might have put constraints on what Plato could be understood to be trying to do in his compositions. (Frede's paper explores the understanding of the dialogue form in later interpretative traditions.)

Plato does, however, seem to have been influenced by another related genre of literature, the mime. According to Diogenes Laertius, 'Plato, it seems, was the first to bring to Athens the mimes of Sophron, which had been neglected, and to draw characters in the style of that writer; a copy of the mimes, they say, was actually found under his pillow.'<sup>15</sup> Mimes, like Plato's dialogues, were concerned with character and situation rather than action. But unlike the dialogues, their subject-matter was the events of everyday life rather than the beliefs of individuals.

It is hard to tell what, if anything, to make of this connection. Concerning the relationship between mimes and Socratic dialogues, Aristotle makes the following puzzling remarks:

There is further an art which imitates by language alone, and one which imitates by metres. . . . These forms of imitation are still nameless today. We have no common name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus and a Socratic conversation; and we should still be without one even if the imitation in the two instances were in . . . verse. . . . Even if a theory of medicine or physical philosophy be put forth in a metrical form, it is usual to describe the writer in this way [as a poet]; Homer and Empedocles, however, have really nothing in common apart from their metre; so that if one of them is to be called a poet, the other should be termed a physicist rather than a poet. (*Po.* 1, 1447<sup>a</sup>28–<sup>b</sup>19)

Aristotle seems to be saying that although mimes and dialogues have similar forms, their purpose or content is so different that we

<sup>15</sup> D.L. 3. 18. See also the discussion by Haslam (above, n. 13).

should keep them distinct. Thus, it is just as well that they have no common name. Though the issue remains murky, it seems reasonable to see mime as influencing Plato's style of presentation of philosophical issues, without that style becoming an essential ingredient in those issues.

These, then, are the four main types of historical evidence that might be brought to bear in interpreting Plato's dialogues. They seem to reduce to two main issues: Can we trust the author of the *Seventh Letter* to have truthfully represented Plato's relationship to and interest in the political situation in Sicily? And can we trust Aristotle to have truthfully represented the main thrust, even if not the details, of Plato's own views concerning the Forms and ideal political organization? I have not by any means discussed either of these issues in the depth they deserve. Rather, I want to raise them as worthy of attention and to sketch some plausible answers to them. In my opinion the evidence establishes a slight presumption in favour of the view that some of the main philosophical and political positions articulated by the leading characters in the dialogues do indeed represent the views of Plato himself.

However, since the historical evidence is weak and scarce, and since it is too vague to form the basis of any detailed interpretation, a final assessment of these issues must include an examination of the evidence internal to the dialogues themselves—dramatic aspects, literary form, characterizations, and arguments. We should therefore turn to the papers collected in this volume, and the dialogues themselves, before making any confident judgements about Plato's beliefs or his intentions in writing the dialogues.

#### 4. The meaning of texts

Even if it were established that Plato did intend the main character in his dialogues to represent his own views, literary critics are fond of warning of the 'Intentional Fallacy': the mistake of assuming that what a work of art means is identical with what the artist intended it to mean.

Avoidance of this assumption can lead in either of two apparently very different directions. On the one hand it can lead to so-called analytic interpretations of Plato, in which Plato is seen as a co-worker on the cutting edge of contemporary analytic philosophy. (This

'prospective' view of interpretation is elaborated and defended by Cohen and Keyt in their contribution to this volume.) On the other hand it can lead to post-structuralist, or so-called deconstructionist, interpretations of Plato, in which the meaning of Platonic texts is created by the interpreter. In fact, however, analytic interpretations are a form of creation (as Cohen and Keyt acknowledge), and so an example of deconstructionism. But they are a special example, in which the standards for evaluating the creation are the (allegedly) rigorous standards of contemporary analytic philosophy. It is harder to specify what the standards are, or whether there are standards, for the evaluation of creative literary interpretations. It is not too surprising that philosophers, who tend to be serious-minded, shy away from this open-ended sort of enterprise, and literary critics, who tend to be more free-spirited, gravitate towards it.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps it could be said that deconstructionists, including analytic interpreters, are more interested in what worth we can read into Plato's texts than in what meaning he may have put into them.

Some of the tension that has arisen over the interpretation of Plato is fuelled by the suspicion that others have a hidden agenda behind their approach, and could be eased if we were clearer, both with ourselves and with others, about why we read and reflect on Plato's work. It is not enough to say, with ~~Sir Edmund Hilary~~, 'because it is there'. If we articulated and confessed our motives, we might come to feel less at odds with one another.

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<sup>16</sup> My distinction between 'serious-minded' and 'free-spirited' derives from Ernest Sosa's paper 'Serious Philosophy and Freedom of Spirit', *Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (1987), 707-26.

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