The Cambridge Companion to Socrates

The Cambridge Companion to Socrates is a collection of essays that provides a comprehensive guide to Socrates, the most famous Greek philosopher. Because Socrates himself wrote nothing, our evidence comes from the writings of his friends (above all Plato), his enemies, and later writers. Socrates is thus a literary figure as well as a historical person. Both aspects of Socrates’ legacy are covered in this volume.

Socrates’ character is full of paradox, and so are his philosophical views. These paradoxes have led to deep differences in scholars’ interpretations of Socrates and his thought. Mirroring this wide range of thought about Socrates, this volume’s contributors are unusually diverse in their background and perspective. The chapters in this volume were authored by classical philologists, philosophers, and historians from Germany, Francophone Canada, Britain, and the United States, and they represent a range of interpretive and philosophical traditions.

Donald R. Morrison is Professor of Philosophy and Classical Studies at Rice University. He has also been a Rockefeller Fellow at the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University, a Junior Fellow of the Center for Hellenic Studies, and a visiting professor at the University Paris I-Sorbonne. His publications have appeared in edited collections and scholarly journals, including Polis, Ancient Philosophy, and History of Political Thought.
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The Cambridge Companion to
SOCRATES

Edited by
Donald R. Morrison
Rice University
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Contributors

Hugh H. Benson is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. He was a Samuel Roberts Noble Presidential Professor from 2000 to 2004. He is the editor of Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates (1992) and A Companion to Plato (2006) and author of Socratic Wisdom (2000). He has also published various articles and book chapters on the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and he has been the recipient of ACLS and Howard Foundation fellowships.

Richard Bett is Professor of Philosophy and Classics at Johns Hopkins University. His scholarly work has focused particularly on the ancient skeptics. He is the author of Pyrrho, His Antecedents and His Legacy (2000) and has translated Sextus Empiricus’s Against the Ethicists (1997, with Introduction and Commentary) and Against the Logicians (Cambridge, 2005, with Introduction and Notes). He is editor of The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism (2010). He has also published articles on Plato, Socrates, the Sophists, the Stoics and Nietzsche.

Chris Bobonich is Professor of Philosophy at Stanford University. He has written a number of articles on Greek ethical and political philosophy and psychology. He is the author of Plato’s Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics (2002) and coeditor, with Pierre Destrée, of Akrasia in Greek Philosophy: From Socrates to Plotinus (2007).

LOUIS-ANDRÉ DORION is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Montreal. He is the author of Socrate (2004) and of various French translations of Aristotle (Les réfutations sophistiques, 1995), Plato (Lachès and Euthyphron, 1997; Charmide and Lysis, 2004), and Xenophon (Mémorables, livre I, 2000). He is currently working on the second (and last) volume of the new edition of Xenophon’s Memorabilia (Les Belles Lettres), which will appear in 2011.


MELISSA LANE is Professor of Politics at Princeton University. Previously, she taught political thought as a member of the History Faculty of Cambridge University, where she received her PhD in Philosophy, having received her first degree in Social Studies from Harvard University. She is the author of a new Introduction to the Penguin edition of Plato’s Republic (2007); of Plato’s Progeny: How Plato and Socrates Still Captivate the Modern Mind (2001); and of Method and Politics in Plato’s Statesman (1998), as well as a number of specialized articles on Greek political thought and the modern reception of the Ancients.
Contributors

A. A. LONG is Professor of Classics and Irving G. Stone Professor of Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. His recent works include *Stoic Studies, The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, and *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*. Forthcoming works include *Greek Models of Mind and Self* and an annotated translation of Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*, with M. Graver.


DONALD R. MORRISON is Professor of Philosophy and Classical Studies at Rice University. He is the author of numerous articles and *Bibliography of Editions, Translations, and Commentary on Xenophon's Socratic Writings, 1600–Present* (1988). He has published in a variety of fields within ancient philosophy, including Aristotle's metaphysics, Xenophon's Socrates, skepticism, political philosophy in Plato and Aristotle, and late ancient philosophy of science.

JOSIAH OBER is the Constantine Mitsotakis Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford University, where he holds appointments in Classics and Political Science, and in Philosophy by courtesy. He has authored a number of books, including *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (1989), *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (1998), and *Democracy and Knowledge* (2008). His current research explores relationships between institutions, values, knowledge, and authority.

DAVID K. O'CONNOR has been teaching at the University of Notre Dame since 1985, where his work focuses on ancient philosophy, ethics, and philosophy and literature. He is a faculty member of the departments of Philosophy and Classics. His recent publications include an edition, with notes and introduction, of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 translation of Plato's *Symposium* (2002) and “Rewriting the Poets in Plato's Characters” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic* (2007).
TERRY PENNER is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, and was, for a time, Affiliate Professor of Classics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In spring 2005, he was A. G. Leventis Visiting Research Professor of Greek at the University of Edinburgh. His previous publications include *The Ascent from Nominalism: Some Existence Arguments in Plato's Middle Dialogues* (1986) and numerous articles on Socrates.

CHRISTOPHER ROWE is Emeritus Professor of Greek at the University of Durham; he was Leverhulme Personal Research Professor from 1999 until 2004. His previous publications include commentaries on four Platonic dialogues; he edited *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (with Malcolm Schofield, 2002) and *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient* (with Julia Annas, 2002), and provided a new translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to accompany a philosophical commentary by Sarah Broadie (2002).

PAUL WOODRUFF is Darrell K. Royal Professor in Ethics and American Society at the University of Texas at Austin. He has published extensively on Socrates and on various sophists. His recent books include *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* and *First Democracy, the Challenge of an Ancient Idea*.
Socrates is the patron saint of philosophy. Although he was preceded by certain philosophical poets and surrounded by some learned sophists, he was the first real philosopher. If you wish to know “What is philosophy?” one good answer is that philosophy is what Socrates did and what he started.

Socrates was a revolutionary. He revolutionized the intellectual method by searching for rigorous definitions of concepts such as “courage” and “justice.” He revolutionized values by arguing that what matters most to human happiness is not money or fame or power, but the state of one’s soul. He revolutionized ethics by insisting that a good person will never harm anyone. He was a spiritual revolutionary who remained obedient to the law; unjustly condemned to death, he refused his friends’ offer to break him out of jail and lead him to exile.

Socrates was a revolutionary who began a tradition. He wrote nothing. What we know of him comes from several sources. He had the good fortune to number among his devoted followers one of the greatest geniuses, and most gifted prose stylists, of all time – Plato. Socrates is the major character in most of Plato’s dialogues. The historical person Socrates exerted his greatest influence on history by way of the literary figure “Socrates” in Plato. The greatest of Socrates’ followers was Plato; Aristotle was a dissident Platonist; later, the Stoics and Skeptics saw themselves as heirs of Socrates; many of the Church Fathers christianized Plato; and so on through history.

Plato is not our only source for Socrates. Our earliest substantial source for information about Socrates is Aristophanes’ comic play Clouds. In addition to Plato, other followers of Socrates wrote Socratic dialogues. Xenophon wrote a memoir of Socrates and other Socratic works that have survived intact. From the other followers of Socrates – often described as “the minor Socratics” – we have only fragmentary remains. Aristotle was only one generation removed from Socrates, and so his reports about Socrates’ philosophy are important evidence. Among various later sources, the most important is the life of Socrates by the late ancient historian of philosophy Diogenes Laertius.
What do we know about the real, historical Socrates who lies behind this varying literary evidence? The “problem of the historical Socrates” is a famous scholarly crux, akin to the problem of the historical Jesus. Chapter 1 is devoted to this problem. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 discuss the main contemporary sources other than Plato. The concluding essay in this volume, Chapter 15, covers later sources – that is, the reception of Socrates in later Greek philosophy.

The deepest problem facing the editor of a general volume on Socrates is the lack of a single subject-matter. Socrates is essentially contested territory. “Socrates” can of course mean the historical Socrates. But some scholars have thought that the historical Socrates is best found in the writings of Xenophon, others in Plato, and others only in certain dialogues of Plato. The portraits of Socrates found in our various sources partially agree: in all our sources, Socrates is intellectually brilliant and (by conventional standards) physically ugly. However, the sources also have clear disagreements: the Socrates in Aristophanes’ Clouds is devoted to cosmology and physics, whereas the Socrates of Plato’s Phaedo abandoned such studies in his youth. In other areas, the compatibility of our sources is unclear. Plato’s Socrates is known for his biting irony. Does Xenophon’s Socrates lack irony, or merely display it more subtly and less often? Can one speak of a “Socratic ethics” common to the dialogues of Xenophon and Plato, or not? These are disputed questions. Despite such complications, since Plato’s Socratic writings are the most extensive and philosophically brilliant of our sources, most scholars who write about Socrates have in mind Plato’s Socrates, or the Socrates of one or more particular Platonic dialogues.

My own response to this problem has been to invite a diverse group of contributors to define the Socrates who is the subject of their individual chapters differently. For example, Josiah Ober in Chapter 7 is concerned with the “Socrates constructed by the tradition.” Like Ober, Paul Woodruff in Chapter 5 and Mark L. McPherran in Chapter 6 draw on multiple sources for their Socrates. Richard Bett in Chapter 10 and Melissa Lane in Chapter 11 concentrate on Plato on the grounds that their topics appear almost exclusively in Plato’s writings. Hugh H. Benson in Chapter 8, Terry Penner in Chapter 12, and Christopher Bobonich in Chapter 13 restrict their attention to a range of Platonic dialogues regarded as written early in Plato’s career. Christopher Rowe in Chapter 9 focuses on two famous passages in Plato, one from the Apology, which may be the earliest of Plato’s writings, and one from a much later dialogue, the Phaedrus. Charles L. Griswold in Chapter 14 means by Socrates the character Socrates in all of Plato’s dialogues where he appears.

I would like to thank the following for kindly granting permission for the use of material appearing in this volume: Chapter 9, excerpts

This volume has been many years in preparation. The blame for delay is mine, and I apologize to the contributors. As a result of this delay, the bibliographies to some contributors’ essays are not fully up to date.

I thank Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for her patience, goodwill, and expert advice. For their painstaking labors, cheerful encouragement, and expert computer assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication, I am very grateful to Brandon Mulvey and Anthony Carreras, graduate students in Philosophy at Rice.
Abbreviations

I. ARISTOTLE

EN      Nicomachean Ethics
Met.    Metaphysics
Pol.    Politics
Rhet.   Rhetoric
Soph. El. De Sophisticis Elenchis

II. PLATONIC TEXTS

Alc.     Alcibiades
Ap.      Apology
Chrm.    Charmides
Cri.     Crito
Euphr.   Euthyphro
Euthd.   Euthydemus
Grg.     Gorgias
H. Ma.   Hippias Major
Men.     Meno
Phd.     Phaedo
Phdr.    Phaedrus
Phil.    Philebus
Prm.     Parmenides
Prt.     Protagoras
Rep.     Republic
Smp.     Symposium
Theag.   Theages
Tht.     Theaetetus

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III. XENOPHON

Apol. Apology
Cyrop. Cyropedia
Mem. Memorabilia
Oec. Oeconomicus
Symp. Symposium

IV. DIOGENES LAERTIUS

D.L. Lives of Eminent Philosophers

V. MODERN TEXTS

CPF Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini. Florence, 1989–.

VI. JOURNAL ABBREVIATIONS

AGP Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie
CQ Classical Quarterly
JHP Journal of the History of Philosophy
OSAP Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy
RhM Rheinisches Museum für Philologie
GRBS Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies
PBA Proceedings of the British Academy