I Introduction to the Study of Plato

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I APPROACHING PLATO’S DIALOGUES

Plato (424/3–348/7 BCE)\(^1\) stands at the head of the Western philosophical tradition, the first to write on a wide range of topics still discussed by philosophers today under such headings as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political theory, and the philosophies of art, love, language, mathematics, science, and religion. He may in this sense be said to have invented philosophy as a distinct subject, for although all of these topics were discussed by his intellectual predecessors and contemporaries, he was the first to give them a unified treatment. He conceives of philosophy as a subject with a distinctive intellectual method, and he makes radical claims for its position in human life and the political community. Because philosophy scrutinizes assumptions that other studies merely take for granted, it alone can provide genuine understanding; since it discovers things inaccessible to the senses and yields an organized system of truths that go far beyond and frequently undermine common sense, it should transform the way we live our lives and arrange our political affairs. It is an autonomous subject and not the instrument of any other subject, power, or creed; on the contrary, because it alone can grasp what is most important in human life, all other human endeavors should be subordinate to it.\(^2\)

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This conception of philosophy and the theories that support
it were controversial from the very start; although there have been long periods during which some form of Platonism flourished, there have always been at the same time various forms of opposition to Plato’s astonishingly ambitious claims. For this reason he can be considered not only the originator of philosophy but the most controversial figure in its historical development. For one cannot argue that philosophy must limit its ambitions without understanding the almost limitless hopes that gave birth to the subject and explaining why these – all of them or some – are misguided or unachievable. If we are forced to retreat from his ideal of a comprehensive and unitary understanding that transforms our lives and society, we must decide what alternative intellectual goal to put in its place. Thus, Plato is an invaluable standard of comparison: our conception of what philosophy should be (and whether there should be any such thing) should be developed in agreement with or opposition to alternatives provided by the history of the subject, and so inevitably we must ask whether the ambitions of the subject’s inventor are worthy and capable of fulfillment.

Many of Plato’s works are masterful works of literature. They are also an invaluable source for historians interested in many aspects of ancient Athens. But they are first and foremost philosophical works, and for most readers their greatest interest lies here. Of course, they were not created in a vacuum, and so to understand how he arrived at his views we must take account of the intellectual currents of his time. His attitudes toward political developments in Athens and Sparta and his reaction to the intellectual issues raised by the science, speculation, and poetry of the fifth and fourth centuries decisively shaped his philosophical development. The Sophistic movement, Pythagorean and Orphic religious practices, contemporary mathematics, the theory of flux advocated by Heraclitus and Cratylus, the unchanging and unitary being argued for by Parmenides – each of these played an important role in his thinking. But the intellectual influence that was
paramount was Socrates, a man who wrote nothing but whose personality and ideas were so powerful that no one who came into contact with him could react with indifference. For Socrates, to philosophize was to reason together with someone about how best to live; because the ideas he expressed and the questions he raised were seen as threatening – and perhaps because he associated with some of those who became Athens’ thirty tyrants – he was tried, convicted, and put to death on the charges of refusing to recognize the gods of the city, introducing new divinities, and corrupting the youth. While Socrates was alive, Plato was one of many young people who admired him, and so great was his influence that Plato made him the central figure in most of his works, which were likely composed after Socrates’ death in 399 BCE, when Plato was between twenty-five and thirty years old (depending on how one understands the conflicting reports about his dates). Plato’s writings are almost without exception in dialogue form. He did not write a part for himself in these dialogues; rather, when they put forward philosophical ideas and arguments, it is typically the character named “Socrates” who advances them. And so newcomers to Plato’s dialogues naturally ask how to understand the relationship between the character, Socrates, and the author, Plato.

As we will see, this is a complicated question and in general one need not answer it to engage fruitfully with Plato’s works. The greatest philosophical interest of Plato’s dialogues lies in working through their ideas and arguments, regardless of to whom we should attribute them. Nonetheless, it is important to think about the character Socrates that Plato makes the lead figure in most of his dialogues. Authors other than Plato offer reports about Socrates (including Plato’s pupil, Aristotle) and many others wrote dialogues with Socrates as the main character (but only Xenophon’s survive intact). Aristophanes wrote a satirical play, the Clouds, whose main character is Socrates. The evidence from these other accounts is often difficult to assess, but the consensus among scholars is that the historical
Socrates’ interests were primarily ethical, rather than epistemological, methodological, cosmological, or metaphysical. Scholars also agree that Plato is not offering a verbatim account of what the historical Socrates said, but is rather shaping his own character, Socrates, who is nonetheless based on the historical figure who deeply inspired him.

Most of Plato’s dialogues are conversations between Socrates and a broad array of his contemporaries, including elite young men, major intellectuals of his time, and his close companions. In general, each dialogue is a self-contained philosophical conversation, prompted by a question or offhand comment, in which the interlocutors make progress, but leave many questions unanswered and puzzles unsolved. It is important to examine the ideas and arguments in a given dialogue first and foremost within the context of that dialogue. Plato’s dialogues are not a contrived puzzle that must be decoded to reveal his unified theory; instead, they show how Socrates (and other characters), when speaking to specific people and asked specific questions, responds with relevant questions, puzzles, arguments, and theories. Many difficult interpretive questions that arise in a dialogue can be answered by attending to its details and overall structure – how its conversation develops, what arguments come earlier and later in the dialogue, and how the different characters respond to the evolving discussion. Moreover, Plato seems to portray Socrates differently in different dialogues; this raises difficult questions about how to understand the relationship between the dialogues. Half of the articles in this collection focus on just one dialogue, thereby illustrating the fruitfulness of examining a work on its own. At the same time, Plato puts clear cross-references in some of the dialogues, and given the overlapping ideas, arguments, and topics in them, it is natural and inevitable to ask how they relate to one another. Our suggestion is that this should be done after one has carefully thought through each dialogue on its own terms, and that one should continue to keep the unity of each dialogue in mind when thinking through how the ideas and arguments from one dialogue relate to those in another.
When beginning to study Plato, it is useful to have an overview of his large corpus. Our first step is to divide the dialogues into three groups.

The “Socratic dialogues,” as they are often called, correspond more closely to Socrates’ account of himself in Plato’s *Apology*. In this work, Socrates says that although his whole life has been devoted to the discussion of virtue, he has not been able to acquire knowledge of this – instead, his merely human wisdom consists in realizing that he has no knowledge of such things. In this group of dialogues, Socrates typically converses with people who claim to have such knowledge but who, Socrates shows, do not. At the end of these dialogues, Socrates reiterates his ignorance, but insists that progress has been made by bringing his interlocutor’s ignorance to light. These dialogues are generally shorter than the others.

Let us for now skip over the second group of dialogues to the third, which are widely viewed as having been written late in Plato’s life. The main reason they are viewed as a single group are the studies of Plato’s style of composition, called “stylometry,” that have been undertaken since the nineteenth century (described by Brandwood in chapter 3 of this volume). This is the only group to include dialogues that do not feature Socrates as a main speaker. In fact, only in one of the works that stylometry indicates is late – the *Philebus* – is Socrates a main speaker, and this dialogue does not thematize his profession of ignorance. The late dialogues cover a wide variety of topics, some that fit with the historical Socrates’ interests in ethics and politics, but others that do not.

Finally, there is a group of dialogues that are more or less the remainder: not Socratic dialogues and not stylometrically categorized as late. The discussions here cover ethical and political matters, but also a wide range of other subjects, including psychology, epistemology, methodology, natural philosophy, and metaphysics. In them, Socrates typically argues that examining his ethical interests requires discussing these other, non-ethical topics. The *Republic* is a classic example of such a work. As in the Socratic dialogues, here too
Socrates denies that he has knowledge, but he devotes much more time to developing his own theories than to showing others that they lack knowledge. Many scholars think that Socrates presents views in these dialogues that are incompatible with those in the Socratic dialogues, although this is a controversial issue.

These works are typically called “middle period dialogues,” although that terminology itself is contentious. This name comes from the hypothesis, accepted perhaps by most but certainly not by all scholars, that Plato wrote these dialogues in the middle of his career, after the Socratic dialogues (sometimes called “early dialogues”) and before the late dialogues. Those who accept this hypothesis typically think that Plato began by writing dialogues whose protagonist, Socrates, was closely modeled on the historical Socrates. However, having written such dialogues for several years, Plato wanted to present more of his own positive ideas; because he viewed these as continuous with the questions and interests of the historical Socrates, he presented Socrates as holding these views. It is important to note that stylometry does not provide any significant evidence in favor of (or against) seeing the middle dialogues as coming after the Socratic dialogues. However, some important evidence in favor of this developmental hypothesis is that Aristotle, who spent twenty years in Plato’s academy, regularly refers to views found in the Socratic dialogues as belonging to Socrates, whereas those in the middle period dialogues – although expressed by the character “Socrates” – he attributes to Plato or to “Socrates in” a specified dialogue, for example “Socrates in the Phaedo.”

So as not to take a stand on chronology, we will refer to these as “middle dialogues.”

Before the development in the nineteenth century of the practice of dividing Plato’s dialogues into early, middle, and late, they were often organized by their pedagogical function, rather than by a perceived shift in their author’s views. According to this way of grouping them, their differences are explained by whether they are more appropriate for beginners or advanced readers and what one can learn by working through specific dialogues. Perhaps Plato wanted his
audience to work through the Socratic dialogues first, as a necessary preliminary step toward understanding certain issues. Differences between early and middle dialogues can, on this hypothesis, be understood as reflecting what Plato thought should be taught to a beginning student as opposed to a more advanced one.¹²

A third option is to understand the differences between dialogues in terms internal to the composition of the dialogues themselves. In the Socratic dialogues, Socrates rarely speaks to close companions or sympathetic intellectuals; instead, he generally speaks to a young member of the educated elite, or someone with a claim to expertise [a military general or a sophist, for example]. By contrast, in the middle dialogues, he typically speaks to sympathetic intellectuals who already acknowledge their ignorance and are eager to learn from him. Speaking to a rhapsode like Ion or a general like Laches would not have led to a conversation like the one in the Republic. In fact, the Republic nicely illustrates how Socrates’ interlocutors influence the conversation. Most of the first book of the Republic is a conversation between Socrates and the sophist Thrasymachus. This heated discussion ends with Thrasymachus deeply disagreeing with Socrates but refusing to discuss the topic any further; however, once Plato’s two brothers take over the conversation, it continues for another nine books, leading Socrates to develop many positive theories.

Note that these three explanations are compatible with one another. Plato could have started writing the Socratic dialogues, thinking they would be a good way to introduce someone to philosophy, and then as his ideas developed he wrote dialogues for advanced readers that explore new ideas. He may have thought it appropriate in these dialogues for Socrates to speak to different sorts of interlocutors, given the topics discussed. Of course, one can also accept some of these explanations without others. Some scholars think that the dialogues do not show any development in Plato’s views, but they can still group them according to their pedagogical function, or according to the sort of interlocutors involved in the conversation.
While the most significant differences are between dialogues from one group and those from another, it would be a mistake to assume that the views within each group are clearly consistent with one another. Here it is especially worth considering the possibility that Plato himself was not firmly committed to the views that he presents Socrates (and the other main speakers) as defending. As we will argue at the end of this chapter, it is likely that Plato shared the same basic commitments that he ascribes to Socrates. For example, throughout the dialogues Socrates is committed to the value of discovering the truth; surely Plato is too. But such broad commitments are compatible with Plato thinking that some ideas are worth thinking through and considering – they may well be right – without being firmly committed to them. For example, in the Phaedo Socrates says that so long as he is embodied he cannot acquire the wisdom that he seeks, but that a philosopher, suitably prepared, has reason to hope that he can acquire such wisdom in the afterlife. In the Republic he says that in a truly just city – which currently does not exist and may never exist, but is at least in some sense possible – a properly trained philosopher could acquire the greatest wisdom. These two views are incompatible: either it is possible to acquire the greatest wisdom while embodied or not. But note that these views share the same broad commitments that genuine wisdom is extraordinarily difficult to achieve and requires rigorous philosophical preparation. One possibility is that Plato changed his mind. Another is that he thought each account deserves serious consideration, and so explored each in separate dialogues.

These complications about how to understand the relationship between dialogues provide further reasons to study Plato’s works first as individual whole compositions, aiming to understand the ideas in a given dialogue, at least initially, on their own terms. A further advantage to doing so is that it allows one to appreciate the literary unity of the work, and the way that its literary aspects are carefully connected to its philosophical discussion. In the last twenty-five years, there has been a growing reluctance among scholars to use the developmental
hypothesis to explain apparent discrepancies between the dialogues. Some scholars hold that there are no major developments in Plato’s thinking, but more often the idea seems to be that a fuller, subtler, and more satisfying account of the differences is available using the resources internal to each dialogue. Once internal considerations are taken into account, the different views in different dialogues become more nuanced and frequently turn out to be compatible with each other.¹³

Part of what makes it difficult to decide when to read one dialogue in the light of another is that although there are hazards in doing so, they do present a broadly consistent and mutually reinforcing set of views. In thinking through a view one finds in a dialogue, it is often productive to ask how well it fits with what is said in other dialogues – not in the first instance to see if Plato changed his mind or was inconsistent, but to explore the consequences and details of the views themselves. Questions that are set aside in one dialogue are sometimes taken up in another, bringing these together carefully can reveal a larger, interconnected set of ideas and arguments. And, of course, drawing on other works may help settle interpretive questions, once the resources of a given dialogue are exhausted. So, while it is good to begin by approaching each dialogue on its own terms, it would be a mistake, when thinking through a dialogue, never to draw on others. Furthermore, it is natural to wonder what views emerge from considering a number of Plato’s works taken together. Does he have basic commitments that underlie many dialogues? Do these commitments change in different groups of dialogues?

Most of the remainder of this chapter provides an overview of Plato’s corpus, focusing on those dialogues that are normally read first. This introduces some of the main ideas in Plato’s dialogues, situates the individual dialogues within the overall corpus, and hopefully will help those beginning to read Plato to decide which dialogues they would like to read. The next three sections discuss the three groups of dialogues we have identified (Socratic, middle, late) in turn. After this, we consider evidence about Plato’s views that come from outside his dialogues and
his reservations about writing. Lastly, we return to the question of which views in the dialogues, if any, can be attributed to Plato himself.

II THE SOCRATIC DIALOGUES

The Socratic dialogues include the *Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Menexenus,* and *Protagoras.* Of these, the *Apology* is the most important for understanding Plato’s portrayal of Socrates. It is Plato’s account of Socrates’ speech against the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth – for which Socrates was put to death. In a way, almost all of Plato’s Socratic and middle dialogues further defend him against these charges or help clarify why he faced them, and so the *Apology* is an important subtext to most other dialogues. Moreover, it provides a basic portrait of Socrates. He is deeply religious, but rather than simply accepting traditional religious accounts, he carefully scrutinizes them. He views it as his religious mission to persuade everyone to care about virtue and the state of their soul, and to recognize that they lack knowledge of virtue – knowledge they would need to make good choices about how to live. He has humiliated many of his fellow citizens by questioning them about these matters, revealing that they do not have the knowledge they assume they have. Socrates himself recognizes that he lacks such knowledge, and so devotes himself to the search for it.

In most of the Socratic dialogues listed above, Socrates is presented as questioning people about some ethical question, and, when they reveal that they do not have the knowledge that they suppose that they have, trying to get them to recognize this. Three of these dialogues, the *Euthyphro, Laches,* and *Charmides,* focus on answering a “what is it?” question about one of the virtues. Socrates’ interlocutors typically think it is obvious what this virtue is, but Socrates argues against several of their proposed accounts. This is presented throughout Plato’s dialogues as a typical Socratic conversation, and several other dialogues refer to this practice of searching for an answer to the “what is it?” question. The *Meno* and *Republic* begin with such