

Plato and Platonic Philosophy

One question strikes the modern reader of Plato's works immediately, why did he choose to write using dialogues? To approach a reasonable answer to this question, there are a number of textual and philological questions that also must be addressed prior to finding a reasonable solution to this question.

Any account of Plato must rely primarily on the Platonic dialogues. We have strong evidence from antiquity that Plato himself wrote these works, and any understanding of Platonic philosophy must ultimately rely on them as the main source of Platonic thought. If we are to use the dialogues as evidence of Plato's views, we must decide, at least in a preliminary way, how we ought to read them.

First, in what order should we read the dialogues? Since there is insufficient external evidence to settle their absolute or relative dates, we must turn to whatever evidence we can find in language, style, and literary form. Anyone interested in the issue of stylometry and chronological approach to the dialogues, I refer you to the article written by Leonard Brandwood, "Stylometry and Chronology" printed in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, edited by Richard Kraut. 1992. This paper provides a strong starting point for understanding the mire of problems associated with this approach.

Second, should we read them as expressions of Plato's views? Since the dialogues often present conversations between interlocutors who hold opposed positions, we ought not to assume that all these views are Plato's. Have we any good reason to suppose that Plato identifies his views with those of any of the speakers in any of the dialogues?

A special question about Plato and his characters arises about the character called "Socrates". This is also the name of a historical figure known to us from other sources. What is the relationship between the Platonic character and the historical figure? And what is the relationship between either of these and Plato's own views?

We cannot set out to interpret Plato's dialogues without some preliminary answers to these questions. Our more considered answers to these questions will partly depend on our interpretation of the content of the dialogues. If, for instance, the views expressed by the character Socrates on fundamental questions fluctuate wildly from one dialogue to another, even in the dialogues that appear close in date, that is a reason for denying that the dialogues are meant to express Plato's settled views. We must, therefore, begin with some account of the order and the character of the dialogues that seems initially plausible, but we must keep it open to revision in the light of our interpretation of the dialogues.

One interpretive strategy is to examine the points of comparison between the historical Socrates and Plato. There is a body of evidence that allows us to enter into these dialogues from that point of departure: namely, Aristotle's work. Aristotle presents the first account of Socrates' and Plato's doctrines that is available to us. He includes Plato in his history and criticism of philosophical developments among his predecessors and contemporaries, and he often mentions

or refers to Plato in his own discussions, both agreeing and disagreeing with him. Moreover, he was a member of Plato's Academy for the last twenty years of Plato's life. Aristotle is not infallible, and readers have often found reasons to challenge his interpretations of his predecessors. But he was in a better position to know about Plato's intentions than we will ever be; and his views deserve to be taken seriously until we find some specific reason for rejecting them.

Aristotle had evidence for Plato's views that was not confined to the dialogues. He refers to Plato's unwritten doctrines (*Phys.* 209b13 - 16), and to oral comments (*NE*1095a32-b1). He mentions Plato's early associations with Cratylus (*Met.* 987a32-b1), which is not mentioned anywhere in the dialogues and could not be inferred from reading the *Cratylus* or any other dialogue. Since he was in a position to compare the dialogues with other sources of information about Plato, namely from Plato himself at the Academy, we ought to take very seriously the fact that his approach to the dialogues is firmly doctrinal: he regularly treats the dialogues as evidence for Plato's views, and regularly attributes some of the views of the Platonic Socrates to Plato, without seeing any need to explain or defend the attribution.

In the course of criticizing Plato's Theory of Forms, Aristotle mentions the *Phaedo* (*Met.* 991b3-4) and 'Socrates in the *Phaedo*' (*GC*335b9-17). In mentioning Plato by name he alludes to passages in the *Phaedrus* (*Met.* 1071b22-23), the *Theaetetus* (*Met.*1010b11-14), the *Sophist* (*Met.*1024b14-15), and the *Philebus* (*NE*1072b28-32). He considers a question, already disputed by his contemporaries, about what Plato actually meant in his account of creation in the *Timaeus* (*DC*279b32-280a3). In criticizing Plato he contrasts the view taken in the *Timaeus* with the view taken in the unwritten doctrines, without suggesting that either is to be taken more or less seriously as a statement of Plato's view (*Phys.* 209b11-16). Aristotle's criticism of the *Republic* and the *Laws* in *Politics* II provides a striking example of his identification of Plato with the Platonic Socrates. After speaking of the Socrates in the *Republic*, Aristotle goes on to speak of the *Laws* as another 'Socratic discourse' (*Pol.*1265a10-13), even though Socrates is not a speaker in the *Laws*. He then goes on to treat both the *Laws* and the *Republic* as evidence of Plato's views (*Pol.*1266b5, *Pol.*1271b1, *Pol.*1274b9-10).

Aristotle's ascription of the views of the Platonic Socrates to Plato is especially impressive once we notice that in many of these passages he is engaged in criticism of Plato. If Aristotle's original audience (during Plato's lifetime or at almost twenty-five years after his death) had believed that Plato did not accept the views attributed to his character Socrates, then Aristotle's approach would have been both totally unfair and absurdly self-defeating; a defender of Plato would only have had to remind Aristotle that the Platonic Socrates was not meant to represent Plato's views. If there had even been a dispute about whether the Platonic Socrates expressed Plato's views, Aristotle would have been unwise to cite the Platonic Socrates, without further comment, as the target of his criticism of Plato. The fact that Aristotle sees no need to justify his assumption, and that (as far as we know) no one thought of questioning his assumption, this gives us good reason to believe that Plato's contemporaries and successors took the views of the Platonic Socrates to be Plato's views.

The doctrinal approach of Aristotle and (apparently) his contemporaries is not the only possible approach to the dialogues. We might believe that the dialogues are primarily exploratory and that

they expound and examine certain views that Plato thinks worth discussing, without necessarily committing himself to them. If we accept this 'aporetic' approach, we will not insist that the position of the leading speaker in different dialogues must be consistent or that it must develop along lines that would be reasonable in the thought of a single person; 'Socrates' (and so on) may simply be the mouthpiece of the views that Plato chooses to discuss at different times. Then again, we might think that Plato writes the dialogues in the light of some views that he does not express there. According to this 'esoteric' approach, these unexpressed views provide the background against which he assesses the views that he discusses and against which we can assess the views attributed to Socrates. This last approach would privilege certain passages from Plato's letters, especially *Letter 7* and *8*, where Plato claims that he never has and never will express his own views on these subjects.

It should be noted that these other approaches conflict sharply with Aristotle's doctrinal approach that treats the main speakers in the dialogues, including the character of Socrates, as expressing Plato's views. Examination of the dialogues might convince us that Aristotle is wrong; we might find that the views of the Platonic Socrates are so lacking in internal coherence or intelligible development that they are most unlikely to be Plato's own considered views. In that case we would have to try another approach to the dialogues. But until we have shown that Aristotle's view breaks down, it deserves to be our working hypothesis.

The doctrinal approach can accommodate some aspects of the other approaches. Plato may well sometimes be genuinely puzzled and want to explore a position for its own sake without having firmly made up his mind; to this extent the aporetic approach insists on an important possibility. Equally, we may find reason to suppose that in a particular dialogue Plato is influenced by the views he has not completely worked out in the dialogues; to this strictly limited extent the 'esoteric' approach might contain a grain of truth. I would like to return to this aspect of the doctrinal approach later.

Still, when we read the Platonic dialogues, our initial acceptance of any one of these three approaches as our dominant approach will make a difference to our view of the dialogues; and since they are incompatible, we must choose between them. One additional item needs to be mentioned in this context. If one accepts the Aristotelean doctrinal approach as the model for reading the Platonic dialogues, one notices that Aristotle himself distances the historical Socrates from the Platonic Socrates. This places some restrictions on how one reads Aristotle as well. Namely, when Aristotle makes the claim that Socrates asked epistemological questions but did not answer them, for he confessed that he did not know (*DSE* 183b7-8), Aristotle never attributes a similar disavowal of knowledge to Plato. Similarly, with respect to ethics, we find a similar distancing between the historical Socrates and the Platonic Socrates. How this affects our reading of Aristotle is that he disagrees with Plato's attempts to answer these Socratic questions, and that he, Aristotle, actually answers them.

If we accept the Aristotelean approach to reading the dialogues, then it is reasonable to ask, as did the ancients themselves, why Plato wrote dialogues? One answer to this question is suggested by the dialogues themselves. This suggestion has been summed up by an ancient commentator on Plato.

Plato adopted the dialogue form because it imitates dialectic. For just as dialectic proceeds by

question and answer, so the dialogue is composed of characters questioning and answering. In order, then, that, just as dialectic compels the soul to reveal the labors it undergoes (for according to Plato the soul is like a writing tablet with nothing written on it), so also <the dialogue may compel the reader> to assent to things being said, for this reason he used this type of composition. (Anon. *Prol.* 15.40-47)

This is a reasonable answer to this question. Whether it holds up to close examination is another matter, but it is a reasonable starting point for approaching the dialogues at an initial stage.

One matter remains for us to address, that is, the order of the dialogues. Some commentators divide the dialogues into three stages: Early or Socratic dialogues, Middle, and Late. The middle dialogues are characterizable by the Platonic Socrates remaining as the central speaker, but doing things in a highly uncharacteristic way: namely providing answers to the questions asked at the beginning of the dialogue. The late dialogues either have some other central speaker besides Socrates, who is either present but does not carry the conversation, or mentioned, or completely absent, and is the case with the *Laws*. Although a number of scholars have recently challenged whether a particular dialogue is early or middle, the scheme itself has not been called into question. I would suggest that, at this initial stage, one not make any particular claim to the order of the dialogues. We know which dialogue was the last one, that is the *Laws*, because ancient commentators have told us that Plato died before finishing it. The copy that we possess was taken off of wax tablets: a device used for early composition without committing one's ideas to expensive papyrus. Only when a particular work was completed was it transferred from wax tablets to papyrus. All of the remaining dialogues and their order of composition is a highly debated issue. At best, we get relative dates for these dialogues either from their content, or from the dramatic setting and the events mentioned within them. But a word of caution is needed in this connection. Even with these factors added into the equation, all we get are relative dates for the dialogues, not firm ones. One should be suspicious of any scheme of arrangement of the dialogues, and attend closely to the evidence presented to support that arrangement. There may be ideological reasons for any given arrangement, and this can tip the careful reader of the interpretive strategy the author is using in his or her dating scheme.

One might at this stage wonder why we need a dating scheme at all? Each dialogue seems to be a self-contained discussion concerning one particular topic. One problem immediately emerges from this sort of approach, that is, there are internal references to other dialogues within some of them. The *Timeaus* refers to the discussion found in the *Republic*. The *Sophist* refers to the discussion in the *Theaetetus*. And there are other such references. This approach also does not address the aporetic nature of the so-called early dialogues. But, what evidence is there that compels us to assume that the early dialogues necessarily contain only the views of Socrates? As I have said before, some commentators have held the view that in the early dialogues, Plato was writing history, that is, simply recording various conversations in which the actual Socrates took part. This suggestion is highly unlikely, but to prove that this is unlikely is part of the task at hand. As an aside, I also reject the weaker thesis that, while acknowledging Plato as the one who wrote and constructed the dialogues, the positions that are taken in the early dialogues are faithful reproductions of positions held by the historical Socrates.

Proof that the historical or literalist interpretation of the early dialogues is false is as follows. If

the early, and to some extent, the middle dialogues are an attempt on the part of Plato to record the teachings of the historical Socrates, then in order to understand these teachings, it will be important to attend to the background information provided by Plato to address the ordering of the dialogues. Hence, we can see immediately one serious problem. In the *Republic*, Socrates holds the view that the soul is a compound of three parts. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates holds the view that in order for the soul to be immortal, it must be a unity, or, in other words, the soul has no parts. Since the *Phaedo* is the last conversation that Socrates had, under this interpretative approach, either we must infer that Socrates held both the tripartite conception of the soul as an earlier view and the unitary conception of the soul at the end of his life, or that he held both views, making him inconsistent, or that the tripartite conception of the soul, one that is used in many other dialogues (*Phaedrus*, *Timeaus*, etc) is rejected or abandoned by Socrates on his deathbed? Rather than choose between any of these, I would argue that the better explanation is that it is Plato, not Socrates, who worked out these views, and that the unitary conception of the soul found in the *Phaedo* was Plato's view prior to writing the *Republic* and the other later dialogues. There may be evidence within the *Republic* to account for this change in position. Nevertheless, it makes more sense to conclude that it is Plato, not Socrates, who is working out these positions. One aside, it might be a better interpretative strategy to assume that Plato is providing the best argument he has for these problems at each stage of his development. This interpretative strategy is not without problems too, but it makes more sense out of some of the differences found in the dialogues on specific problems. Another possibility is that, for specific problems, Plato does not need to use the more sophisticated view of the soul found in the *Republic* to answer the challenge found in the *Phaedo*. But to defend this interpretative strategy here would take us far afield.

Another problem found in attributing to Plato the scheme of early, middle and late dialogues is that in the early dialogues, the character of Socrates asks questions about the nature of something. These are the so-called *ti estin* questions. One thing to notice about the list of "early" dialogues that are of this form is that the list is incredibly short. About five dialogues, *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, and *Greater Hippias*, are all there are of these *ti estin* works. There are a number of other, shorter dialogues that are generally held to be early: *Apology*, *Crito*, *Ion*, *Lesser Hippias* and a few others, that do not fit this pattern. Are these not "Socratic" dialogues? Socrates is the main interlocutor. If we focus on the list of five that are clearly of the *ti estin* nature, three of them focus on the nature of individual virtues: *Charmides* on the nature of temperance or *sophrosune*, *Euthyphro* on the nature of piety or *hosion*, and *Laches* on the nature of courage or *andreia*. The *Lysis* and *Greater Hippias* deal with value-laden notions (friendship and what is the noble (*kalon*) respectively). So, one problem associated with the early, middle, late dialogue interpretative structure is that you get two problems. 1. You get a set of dialogues that seem to be early but do not fit the structure of the *ti estin* pattern. 2. You need some account of the so-called "transitory" dialogues (*Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Euthydemus*, and *Cratylus*) which seem to share literary features of these *ti estin* dialogues, but, also, do not share the concerns of these dialogues. This leads to a quagmire of controversies.

So, chronologically speaking, where else do we turn to uncover the development of Plato's thought? There are three sources from antiquity that may be appealed to in order to answer this question. Aristotle's references to Plato and Socrates, Diogenes Laertius discussion of Plato's works, and Thrasyllus Canon.

Thrasyllus did separate some of the dialogues from others as genuine and spurious. Thrasyllus did provide us with the authoritative set of dialogues, and it is upon his set of dialogues that all later manuscripts stem. One problem is that Thrasyllus was working four hundred years after Plato lived. Thrasyllus did not provide us with any indication of where he obtained these manuscripts or what others, if any, he omitted as clearly not Platonic. Another problem with Thrasyllus is that he arranged the dialogues into tetralogies, or sets of four dialogues on the model of the ancient plays. So from his Canon, we do not get any indication of what came first, second, etc. We have discussed some of the problems associated with using Aristotle as our source of understanding the development of Plato's thought. But let's turn to Diogenes Laertius' discussion of these works before returning to Aristotle.

In Book 3 of *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius devotes an entire book to Plato. There, he gives us some indication of how philosophers understood the differences in the dialogues during the third century of the common era. He says "of the Platonic dialogues there are two most general types, the one adapted for instruction and the other for inquiry. And of the former is further divided into two types, the theoretical and the practical. And of these the theoretical is divided into the physical and the logical, and the practical into the ethical and the political. The dialogues of inquiry also has two main divisions, the one of which aims at training the mind and the other at victory in controversy. Again, the part which aims at training the mind has two subdivisions, the one akin to the midwife's art, the other merely tentative. And that suited to controversy is also subdivided into one part which raises critical objections, and another which is subversive of the main position." Diogenes, then, indicates that he is not unaware that there are other ways in which certain writers classify these works. But he indicates that the main competitor uses criterion better suited to the stage than to philosophy. He, then, proceeds to divide the dialogues into these earlier classifications. Physics is represented by the *Timaeus*, logic by the *Statesmen*, *Cratylus*, *Parmenides*, and *Sophist*, ethics by the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium*, as well as by the *Menexenus*, *Clitophon*, *the Epistles*, *Philebus*, *Hipparchus*, and *the Rivals*, and lastly politics by the *Republic*, *Laws*, *Minos*, *Epinomis* and the dialogues concerning Atlantis. To the class of mental obstetrics belong the two *Alcibiades*, *Theages*, *Lysis*, and *Laches*, while the *Euthyphro*, *Meno*, *Ion*, *Charmides*, and *Theaetetus* illustrate the tentative method. In the *Protagoras* is seen the method of critical objections; in the *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias* and the two dialogues entitled *Hippias* that of subversive argument. Diogenes also provides us with some indication as to which interlocutors expound Plato's views: Socrates, Timaeus, the Athenian Stranger, and the Eleatic Stranger. These strangers are not Plato and Parmenides, but imaginary characters without names, for, even when Socrates and Timaeus are the speakers, it is Plato's doctrines that are laid down (DL:3.52). Even if we have reason to doubt that Diogenes Laertius is somehow wrong in this classification scheme, it does indicate that in the ancient world the notion of or concern for the exact historical ordering of the dialogues was not seen as important. I find this incredibly liberating. It would seem to suggest that the ancients were not concerned with finding the absolutely last word by Plato, but that the dialogues themselves served another purpose altogether. As I noted above, this classification system used by Diogenes Laertius reflects some of the concerns about the purpose of the dialogues, and seems to provide a point of departure into their study. It also allows us to understand part of the answer as to why Plato wrote dialogues and not some other form of text.

If we use both Aristotle's authority in order to identify Platonic thoughts in the dialogues, and the

classification system advocated by Diogenes Laertius for dividing the dialogues several important features appear. First, we can suspend judgment about milling out the historical Socrates from the early Plato. That is, we should be suspicious about identifying in the shorter works of Plato statements made by the character Socrates with the historical Socrates. If one is interested in knowing more about the historical Socrates, then one will need to consult, in addition to Plato's dialogues, other sources we have that discuss the historical Socrates. For our interests, we need to keep in mind that the Socrates that appears in the dialogues is a character written by Plato, and that the positions expounded by that character are positions that Plato is exploring. These positions may be Socratic in origin, or otherwise. Nevertheless, one need be cautious in attributing any given position found in the Platonic shorter dialogues to the historical Socrates without independent verification from the other non-Platonic sources and argument.

Second, although it would be interesting to know what is the exact order of composition of the dialogues, we need not be terribly concerned about this issue. A relative dating scheme may be the best and, in the end, the only one that is available to us. This is terribly liberating, because it allows us to focus on the real concern of the dialogues, namely an evaluation of the arguments used within each one. This breathes new life into reading the dialogues, and challenges the reader to puzzle through each problem along with the characters. Also, this allows us a point of departure for understanding some of the *prima facie* conflicts in comparing one dialogue with another.

Lastly, if we take seriously the classification scheme outlined by Diogenes Laertius, and use those dialogues classified as "mental obstetrics" as a point of comparison with the "positive" or more doctrinal dialogues, we gain the perspective of seeing how some arguments do not result in defining or identifying the important features Plato was interested in understanding concerning these ethical and otherwise value-laden notions. This might help us understand why these so-called "Socratic" dialogues end in *aporia*. It is on account of the faulty reasoning that we do not achieve the results promised by the method of inquiry.

So, let us return to the question that we commenced with, namely, why did Plato write dialogues? A tentative answer has been given, but it is one that deserves reiteration. Plato wrote dialogues for a number of different purposes. But, overall, it can be said that the dialogue format serves as an occasion for the reader to think along with the interlocutors. The reader is required by this form of presentation to puzzle over the arguments, to question whether the line of discussion has gone astray, to probe and wonder about generally accepted opinions. As the anonymous ancient commentator said, the dialogue imitates the dialectic, but it does so in a way that is dynamic. We could continue this line of reasoning and further probe reasons Plato might have held for writing dialogues, but it may be more important now to turn to the actual dialogues, and read them, and puzzle along with the characters in them. Since that is what Plato wanted us to do with them, we should oblige him.