

I Introduction to the Study of Plato

David Ebrey and Richard Kraut

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

We are most grateful to Terence Irwin, Constance Meinwald, and Ian Mueller for their helpful comments on drafts of the first edition of this chapter, and Jonathan Beere, Emily Fletcher, and Suzanne Obdrzalek for comments on drafts of the second edition.

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,³ 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.⁴ 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).⁵ Plato's writings are almost without exception in dialogue form.⁶ 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).⁷ 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.⁸ 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).⁹ This is the only group to include dialogues that do not feature Socrates as a main speaker.¹⁰ 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*.”¹¹ 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*.¹⁴ 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

a search for an answer to a “what is it?” question, but this then leads into a very different sort of conversation. Plato’s *Theaetetus*, a middle dialogue, is also devoted to a “what is it?” question, in this case, “what is knowledge?” Although the *Theaetetus* has many elements of the middle dialogues, it also builds on the standard features of the Socratic dialogues. Socrates takes a leading role in asking questions and raising difficulties, but he says that he is like a barren midwife who can only help others give birth by testing their ideas to see whether they are viable; he cannot produce wisdom of his own.

In Socratic dialogues not devoted to answering “what is it?” questions, Socrates typically explores more specific ethical questions, or interrelated sets of questions. For example, the *Protagoras* is structured around the question of whether virtue is teachable, the *Hippias Minor* around whether we can do wrong willingly, and the *Gorgias* around a set of interrelated questions having to do with rhetoric, power, desire, and the doing and suffering of wrongs. Moreover, every Socratic dialogue one way or another addresses questions about expertise. In questioning whether his interlocutor has an expertise, Socrates frequently raises questions about what this expertise is, how one can tell if someone is an expert, and what expertise allows one to do. For example, Socrates argues in the *Ion* that Ion, a professional reciter of poetry, must do what he does from divine inspiration, rather than from any sort of expertise.

In some of the Socratic dialogues, Socrates speaks to a promising teenager (*Charmides* and *Lysis*), in others to an adult who has a distinct claim to expertise (*Euthyphro*, *Ion*, *Laches*). A special type of conversation with a proclaimed expert occurs when Socrates speaks to a leading sophist of his day – one of the itinerant intellectuals who traveled through the Greek world offering lessons for a fee (*Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, and *Protagoras*). Only the *Crito* offers a conversation between Socrates and one of his close companions; however, Crito is not presented as one of Socrates’ more intellectual companions, and their conversation focuses on the very practical question of whether Socrates should escape from jail to avoid execution. Differences between

Socratic dialogues can often be traced back to a difference in the interlocutors. For example, Charmides does not claim that he has knowledge – making the *Charmides* unlike the other dialogues that examine a “what is it?” question. But this is what one would expect from a teenager like Charmides, as opposed to a general like Laches or a professed religious expert like Euthyphro. Similarly, while most Socratic dialogues are short, the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* are longer (the *Gorgias* is the third-longest Platonic dialogue), and these are where Socrates engages with leading sophists and their followers. The dialogues not only show how Socrates argues with different sorts of people, but also how he carefully responds to their emotions and other reactions as he tries to lead them to the sort of conversation he thinks they should have. While he clearly takes his task quite seriously, there is at the same time a lightness and joviality underlying the Socratic dialogues, which are often full of playful banter.

Because Socrates himself denies having any knowledge of ethical matters, he typically draws on his interlocutors’ claims to argue against their proposals. He offers suggestions of his own, but thinks it important that they agree to them before proceeding. Although these works portray Socrates as someone who raises questions to which neither he nor his interlocutors find answers, it would be a mistake to see him as a purely negative thinker with no convictions of his own. On the contrary, he defends theses – often arguing from his interlocutors’ own views – that are radically at odds with the common sense of his time (and ours). For example, he holds in the *Apology* that the worse person cannot harm the better person (30 c–d) and that the unexamined life is not worth living (38a). Both in the *Apology* and in other Socratic dialogues he argues: that human well-being requires putting virtue above wealth, power, and fame (*Ap.* 29d–e); and that to possess the virtues requires intellectual mastery over a distinct subject matter (*La.* 199c–e). In Socratic dialogues other than the *Apology*, he argues that everyone desires the good (*Grg.* 467e–468b) and that all of the virtues are identical, and are a form of wisdom (*Prt.*). Since Socrates is, in these dialogues, engaging with ordinary members of the public or

antagonistic intellectuals, he often starts from claims that seem acceptable to most readers. This is part of what makes a pedagogical reading of Plato's dialogues natural – and why courses on Plato typically start with them, whether or not the teacher accepts the developmental hypothesis.

One unusual feature of the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* – especially surprising to those who come to Plato from traditional modes of philosophical argumentation – is the prominent role given to myths.¹⁵ These play an important role in many of Plato's dialogues, Socratic, middle, and late. They are typically either creation myths or describe the soul's journey after death. While they seem to have different functions in different places, one common feature is that they allow the speaker to provide a detailed account that fits with his overall philosophical views without needing evidence that these details are correct. In this way, they allow us to see how a view could be fleshed out, even if we are not in a position to be certain of the details. For example, the myth in the *Protagoras* offers an account of the creation of human beings that explains Protagoras' thesis that nearly everyone can teach virtue. Without needing to take Protagoras' myth literally, it suggests one way in which human nature could be complex and how there could be a fundamental difference between virtue and ordinary craft knowledge. The myths at the end of the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* offer different accounts of a view that Socrates is committed to throughout many dialogues: that the souls of good people will fare better after death than those of the bad. In Plato's late *Timaeus*, Timaeus says that his overall account of the cosmos – which takes up most of the dialogue – is a type of myth, despite being extremely detailed natural philosophy that aims to explain the cosmos as we observe it. What he means by this is a matter of considerable debate.¹⁶

III THE MIDDLE DIALOGUES

The middle dialogues include the *Cratylus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theaetetus* (the last three of

which are often considered “late middle period dialogues”).¹⁷ Socrates presents views in them that seem incompatible with those of the Socratic dialogues. For example, in the *Protagoras* he seems to hold that one will always act in accordance with what one believes to be good, whereas the *Republic* seems to allow that one could rationally believe that something is good, but have a stronger non-rational motivation that leads one to act contrary to this belief.¹⁸

Although the Socratic dialogues apparently present some views that are incompatible with those in the middle dialogues, the greatest contrast between these groups of dialogues lies in their different emphases and scope of topics. While Socrates maintains his profession of ignorance in the middle dialogues, he spends much more time developing positive theories than showing others that they lack knowledge. Further, the Socratic dialogues focus almost exclusively on questions of ethics and politics, whereas in the middle dialogues Socrates repeatedly argues that addressing his ethical interests requires sustained treatment of a broad range of topics covering epistemological, metaphysical, psychological, and methodological issues. Again, these differences can be explained by the developmental hypothesis, the pedagogical hypothesis, or in terms of the characters and internal aims of the discussions. In the middle dialogues, Socrates’ main interlocutors typically are sympathetic intellectuals who acknowledge that they lack ethical knowledge. This leaves him free to propose new accounts, since he need not do the preliminary work of getting his interlocutors to admit their ignorance.

The *Meno* is often considered a “transitional” dialogue – between Socratic and middle – in part because it nicely illustrates features characteristic of each group.¹⁹ The first third is similar to the *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, or *Charmides*, beginning with a typical Socratic question – what is virtue? – and revealing that Meno, like Socrates, does not have an adequate answer. However, Meno then raises a pair of questions (80d) – traditionally called “Meno’s Paradox” – that challenge our ability to acquire knowledge through inquiry. This turn in the dialogue illustrates how Socrates’ search for ethical knowledge

requires grappling with general epistemological questions. Socrates responds to Meno's challenge by proposing a radical theory of learning according to which the soul is born with the ability to recollect what it learned before birth (81a–e). He defends this theory by showing that someone who has not been taught geometry, a slave from Meno's household, can make significant progress toward understanding how to solve a specific geometrical problem, if asked the right questions (82a–86a). It is widely believed that the historical Socrates did not develop any such account of learning as recollection – an account that arises again, in somewhat different forms, in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*. The geometrical problem of the *Meno* reflects Plato's deep interest in mathematics, which is evident in several middle and late works, but nearly absent from the Socratic dialogues.²⁰ The extent to which the Socratic dialogues reflect the historical Socrates – his ideas, interests, and way of engaging with people – is disputed. But views found only in the middle or late works are likely to be Platonic inventions, ones which draw on a variety of intellectual influences and are inspired by some of Socrates' questions and concerns.

Although the *Phaedo* portrays the last conversation and death of Socrates – and therefore forms a dramatic unity with the *Euthyphro* (Socrates on his way to court), *Apology* (on trial), and *Crito* (refusing to escape from prison) – it is in many ways quite different from those Socratic dialogues. Like the *Meno*, the main conversation is prompted by a typical Socratic ethical concern: how a philosopher should approach death. But Socrates argues that defending his view requires considering a wide range of topics outside of ethics. Unlike the *Meno* or any of the Socratic dialogues, it is a prolonged conversation between Socrates and some of his closest intellectual companions, who agree with Socrates on many basic points that many other interlocutors would not accept. The *Phaedo* covers a significantly wider range of topics than does the *Meno*, not only epistemological and methodological topics, but also about the nature of the soul, the afterlife, causation, and natural science, as well as Plato's famous

commitments about the “forms.” “Form” is Socrates’ term for what one is searching for when one asks a “what is it?” question. He argues in the *Phaedo* that the forms are utterly different from the things we perceive: they are changeless,²¹ revealed to us by thought rather than sensation, and eternal (65d–66a, 78d–79d).²² Socrates argues that the form of equality, which he sometimes calls “the equal itself,” cannot be identical to equal sticks or any other observably equal objects (74b–d). The equal sticks are in some way inferior to the form of equality, though when Socrates makes this claim (74d–e) he does not say explicitly what it is about them that is defective, and why equality does not share this deficiency. The defectively equal sticks “participate in” the form of equality and are “called after” that form, but they are not equality itself.²³

Across the dialogues, including the Socratic *Euthyphro* and the “transitional” *Meno*, Socrates uses the Greek terms “*eidos*” and “*idea*,” conventionally translated “form,” to designate what one is searching for when one asks the “what is it?” question about something like justice or virtue.²⁴ So, when one asks, “what is holiness?” one is searching for the form of holiness; this is what a correct account would refer to. The Greek word “*idea*” gave rise to our word “idea,” though Plato does not view these entities as thoughts or any other creations of a mind, and their existence is not dependent on being known or thought. While the Socratic dialogues focus on such questions as “what is temperance?” – and, according to Aristotle, Socrates was the first to engage in this sort of inquiry²⁵ – those dialogues show no interest in a further series of second-order questions raised in middle dialogues like the *Phaedo*: these things we are searching for when we ask “what is it?” – the forms – can they be detected by means of the senses? Can they change or perish? How is it possible for us to learn about them? How are they related to each other? Do they exist independently of human beings?

Plato’s views about forms in his middle dialogues are often called his “theory of forms,” but this name is misleading, since it suggests that he developed a dogmatic system that gave definitive answers to important questions that can be asked about the forms.²⁶

On the contrary, Socrates is presented as developing and perhaps revising his views in different dialogues in ways appropriate to the demands of the specific conversations. In general, the claims he makes about the forms in any given passage are the ones needed for the argument in that passage, rather than a statement of a complete theory. For example, in the *Phaedo* he appeals to the forms to explain why philosophers do not use their senses to investigate (65d–66a), and why the soul exists before birth and after death (73b–77d, 78b–80d, and 99c–107b). One reason to focus on the differences between forms and perceptible things in this dialogue is that these differences are needed for the dialogue’s arguments. By contrast, the primary questions of the *Cratylus* are whether names reveal the nature of things, and what we can learn from names’ etymologies. Cratylus argues that names reveal the truth of a Heraclitean view of the world, which holds that all is in flux. Near the end of the dialogue (439b–440d), Socrates brings in the forms to argue against this Heraclitean view. Here the stability of forms, rather than their being non-sensible, is what is relevant for his arguments. In the *Symposium*, as in the *Cratylus*, forms are not discussed as frequently as they are in the *Phaedo*, but again they arise at a key point. Socrates endorses a view he attributes to Diotima: that the form of the beautiful is the true object of love – rather than beautiful bodies, beautiful souls, beautiful laws, or any such thing (210e–212a). Here, the description of the form of the beautiful provides what is needed by Diotima’s theory: it reveals how different the ultimate, true object of love is from its lower objects.

We turn now to the *Republic*, which in many ways represents the height of Plato’s ambition for philosophy. We noted at the beginning of this chapter a number of topics that Plato included within philosophy and that still fall under it today. All of these are discussed in the *Republic*: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political theory, and the philosophies of language, art, love, mathematics, science, and religion. We will discuss this dialogue at length here, not because it is significantly more important than the others, but because it is frequently read early in one’s study of Plato and it brings together so

many different strands in his thought. This wide-ranging, complex work again emerges from the typical Socratic failure to find a satisfactory answer to an ethical question – in this case, “what is justice?” But this failure takes up only the first of ten books of the *Republic*; the remainder are structured by one of the interlocutors, Glaucon, challenging Socrates to show that justice is beneficial in its own right, independently of any instrumental benefit it may provide. This challenge requires Socrates to develop his own account of justice, which he does using the full range of philosophical topics mentioned above. What follows is a unified metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political, and psychological theory that goes far beyond the views of the Socratic dialogues. At the same time, its range of topics is still determined by what is needed to respond to Glaucon’s challenge. For example, the afterlife is discussed only briefly and at the end of the dialogue (608c–end), after Socrates has completed the main argument of the dialogue, since responding to Glaucon requires explaining the value of justice in its own right, not in terms of any future reward after death.

Socrates provides his account of what justice is and why it benefits an individual by first examining justice in a city and then arguing that justice in the soul is analogous. His argumentative strategy requires an account of the structure of a just city, and the parallel structure within our soul, which he presents in Book IV. In developing this account, he presents a sophisticated political theory alongside a sophisticated moral psychology. He famously argues that a just city would have to be guided by those who know what is good and just, and that only philosophers can have such knowledge; hence, the noble city (*kallipolis*) would have to be run by philosopher rulers. He also argues that the stories told by poets must be heavily censored, because otherwise children will be raised internalizing bad ethical views. This censorship is part of an overall educational program in the *kallipolis* that stems from the idea that merely having rational beliefs about the good does not ensure that one will act well; the non-rational parts of the soul must be developed as well.

In Book VII of the *Republic* we find Plato's well-known and powerful image of the human condition: people that are untouched by philosophical education are likened to prisoners in a cave who are forced to gaze on shadows created by artificial light and cast by artifacts paraded by unseen manipulators (514a–521c). Their conception of what exists and of what is worth having is so severely distorted and the deception by which they are victimized is so systematic that they cannot even recognize that they are confined, and would not regard an interruption in their routine ways of thought as a liberation. Here Plato is of course thinking of the psychological resistance Socrates encountered to his questioning (517a); but he is also making a far more audacious claim, downgrading the reality of the ordinary world of sensible objects.

Let us first consider a feature of Plato's political philosophy highlighted by the cave: that those who lack genuine knowledge are limited in their conception of what is worthwhile, are not the best judges of their own interests, and can be expected to resist initial efforts to improve their lives. A political system requires the consent of the governed, but this alone does not make it good, for if false values are prevalent people may willingly accept only those political systems that perpetuate their confinement. A good political community, Plato thinks, must promote the well-being of the citizens as a whole; and if the citizens fail to understand where their own good lies, then political leaders should educate them. Although Plato is therefore in favor of giving extraordinary powers to rulers who themselves have a philosophical understanding of the human good, he is concerned with the possibility that such power might be misused or arouse resentment, undermining broad agreement about who should rule, which is crucial for having a good city. It is partly to avoid such misuse of power that private wealth and the family are abolished in the ruling class: these powerful sources of political corruption and favoritism are eliminated (416d–417b, 457c–d), providing some assurance to those who are ruled that they are not being exploited by those who are more powerful. This helps to insure one of the key features of the ideal city,

according to Plato: in such a society there must be a deep feeling of community among all the citizens, in spite of the fact that they cannot all share an equal understanding of the human good. The ideal city is not designed for the maximal happiness of the philosophers or any other group; instead, institutions must be designed so that there is a fair pattern of benefits for all (419a–421a). Although there is much in the political philosophy of the *Republic* that we rightly reject, there are also good reasons to accept elements of it. It offers an attractive vision of a community in which no one is favored by traditional privileges of wealth, birth, or gender; one in which no one's well-being is ignored and no one is allowed to be indifferent to others; one in which every member of the community leads a life that is objectively worthwhile.

Let us turn to the metaphysical aspects of the cave. Just as the shadows cast on the wall of the cave are less real than the objects of which they are images (515a–e), so, when the prisoners make progress, leave the cave, and come to understand the forms, they recognize the existence of objects that are more real than the things that made the shadows in the cave (516c–517c). Similarly, in Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates distinguishes three types of thing to which the word “bed” can be given – a painting of a bed, a bed created by a carpenter, and the form – and he holds that they constitute a series of increasing reality. The painter does not make a real bed, but only an image of a bed, and similarly the product of the carpenter is not completely real either. It is only the form that is “really real” (596e–597a). It would be a mistake to think that Socrates is here trying to cast doubt on the *existence* of things in the sensible world. After all, in saying that the painter's image of a bed is not a true bed, he is not expressing doubts about the existence of the painting. Instead, one thing he seems to be doing is pointing out that the painter's image is in some way derivative from or dependent on the object he is representing. It is this same relationship of dependency that he thinks exists between the visible bed of the carpenter and the form: beds depend on there being something that it is to be a bed. The forms provide the standard by which we judge

a perceptible thing to be a bed, to be beautiful, or any other ordinary features, despite the fact that the perceptible thing is radically different from the forms. Philosopher rulers must grasp this objective standard provided by the forms in order to properly rule their cities.

Merely being dependent on the forms does not seem like it would be enough to downgrade the reality of perceptible things; after all, each of us is dependent on our parents, and in a different way on breathable air, and yet neither of these are thereby more real than us. Another factor in Socrates' downgrading of the reality of perceptible things seems to be that in the *Republic*, as well as in other dialogues like the *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, and *Symposium*, he holds that perceptible things manifest what scholars call "the compresence of opposites": they are both large and small, hot and cold, moving and at rest, etc. They manifest this for a variety of reasons. In some cases, it is because something is large in relation to one thing, small in relation to another. In other cases, it is that something has a feature at one time, the opposite feature at another time. Socrates does not think that the same thing can have opposite features at the same time, in relation to the same thing, in the same respect (*Rep.* 436b). Instead, he thinks that the fact that perceptible things can have opposite features at different times, or in relation to different things, or in different respects, shows that perceptible things are by nature very different from the forms, which cannot have such opposite features.²⁷ The form of equality is never unequal, whereas sensible equal things are both equal and unequal (*Phaedo* 74b–c, 78c–e) and every sensible double is also half (*Rep.* 479b). This compresence of opposites seems to be part of why Socrates holds in the *Phaedo* that perceptible things are inferior to forms, and why he holds in the *Republic* that forms are more real than perceptible things.²⁸

In the *Republic* Socrates hints at a few different ways that the forms do not exist isolated from one another, but rather are somehow interrelated, forming an ordered *kosmos* (500c). The very thing we must strive for both in our souls and as members of a political order – the unification of diverse elements into a harmonious whole – is

something that the forms possess by their very nature. Socrates does not provide much clarification in the *Republic* about the structure possessed by the forms, perhaps because he says that he lacks knowledge of them. One tantalizing suggestion that he makes has to do with the central role of the form of the good. After emphasizing his ignorance about the good and saying that he cannot give even the sort of account of it that he has given of justice (506c–e), he says in the sun analogy that the form of the good is responsible for the being and knowability of all the other forms (508d–509b).

Questions about the relationships among the forms are taken up in a number of other dialogues. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates assigns to the dialectician the tasks of finding unity in a diversity of forms and diversity in a unity, and uses his conception of love as one kind of divine madness to illustrate such a structure (265d–266b). The *Parmenides* offers a complex treatment of the relationship between unity, on the one hand, and sameness and difference, motion and rest, limited and unlimited, on the other. If Plato equates goodness and unity – and there are some reasons to believe that he does²⁹ – then the elaborate treatment of unity found in the *Parmenides* could be read as a continuation of Plato's preoccupation with the good. And in the *Timaeus* the entire sensible world is viewed as the product of a divine craftsman who looks to the forms and shapes the recalcitrant and disorderly stuff at his disposal into a good (29a–30b), though far from perfect (46d–e), cosmos. The exploration of such relationships plays an especially important role in several of Plato's stylistically late dialogues: the *Statesman*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*. Hence, the ideas briefly suggested in the *Republic* – that the forms constitute a structured whole, that the good is foremost among them, that the goodness of a complex group of objects is connected to their unification – continue to guide Plato's thoughts in his late works.

The *Republic* is in one sense the centerpiece of Plato's corpus, since no other single work brings together so many different strands of his interests; but at the same time it provides an incomplete treatment of many of his ideas, because nearly all of the dialogue's central

topics are discussed at greater length, in response to different questions and concerns, in other dialogues. Love is discussed at greater length in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, language in the *Cratylus* and *Sophist*, the existence of the soul after death in the *Phaedo*. Abstract metaphysical topics are explored at greater length in the *Parmenides* and *Sophist*; epistemological puzzles in the *Theaetetus*; pleasure, knowledge, and the good life in the *Philebus*; feasible institutions for a good political community are most fully described in the *Laws*; and his thoughts about moral psychology are developed in different ways in the *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*. Rather than seeing the *Republic* as the statement of Plato's overall views, it is better seen as the fullest example of how Plato regards these topics, questions, and concerns as systematically and tightly interconnected.

An account of the forms strongly reminiscent of Socrates' in the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* is challenged in the first part of the *Parmenides* (126a–135d). There, Socrates as a young man puts forward an account of the forms that Parmenides criticizes in several ways that the young Socrates is unable to answer. In fact, these objections receive no explicit answers in this or any other dialogue. Aristotle thought that one of them, the so-called “third man objection,” was fatal to one of the basic ways for arguing for the existence of Platonic forms, and sought to avoid a similar problem for his own conception of forms as immanent universals.³⁰ Did Plato modify his views of the forms in the light of the challenges recorded in the *Parmenides*? Although many scholars think that the *Parmenides* was written after the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, it is not late by stylistic measures. In the late *Timaeus* Plato presents a view of the forms that seems very similar to the one in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. Moreover, the *Parmenides* is a conversation between Parmenides and a very young Socrates. Together these suggest that Plato did not view these puzzles about the forms as being as problematic as Aristotle did, but rather as puzzles that could be solved, and that we too should work through before accepting the forms' existence.³¹

IV THE LATE DIALOGUES

Studies of Plato's style, initiated in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present, begin with the point, about which there is universal consensus, that the *Laws* is a late work.³² A good deal of cumulative evidence has pointed to the conclusion that there are five other works that are closely related to the *Laws* as measured by a variety of stylistic features. These are (to list them alphabetically) the *Critias*, *Philebus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Timaeus*.³³ Within this group, it is clear that the *Statesman* was written after the *Sophist*, since it refers back to it several times,³⁴ and that the *Timaeus* precedes the *Critias*, since the latter's depiction of the lost island of Atlantis is obviously a sequel to the account of Atlantis in the *Timaeus*. Any further attempt to order their composition is more conjectural. Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theaetetus* are often thought of as "late middle period" works, although the evidence for this on the basis of stylometry is weaker. This view mostly rests on the fact that they seem to develop ideas found in the late dialogues and respond to material found in some of the other middle dialogues.

The late dialogues treat many of the questions that Plato raises in the early and middle works, but they are also marked by an apparently new set of interests. The process of collection and division – a means of coming to answer the "what is it?" question – is thoroughly explored in the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*. While examples of division seem to occur in the Socratic dialogues (e.g., *Euthyphro* 11e–12e), and a version of it is described in the *Phaedrus* (265d–266c), it is explored in much greater depth in the late dialogues. Like the middle dialogues, the late dialogues continue to show how apparently distinct topics and questions are connected; however, each tends to focus on a smaller number of topics: sophistry, being, non-being, and falsehood in the *Sophist*; pleasure, knowledge, and the good life in the *Philebus*; the expertise needed to govern in the *Statesman*; the constitution and legal code of a good society in the

Laws. Although the *Timaeus* covers a wide range of seemingly disparate topics, from the nature of time to moral psychology, these all contribute to its main topic: a general account of the origin and structure of the cosmos and the place of human beings within it.

As noted earlier, the *Philebus* is the only late dialogue in which Socrates is the main speaker. In the others, he plays either a minor role (the *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*) or is completely absent (the *Laws*). It is clear why Plato chose a different main speaker in the *Timaeus*: in the *Apology* Socrates says that he does not discuss topics of natural philosophy, and so it makes sense for someone else to present Plato's great work on that subject. Similarly, it makes sense that Socrates is the main interlocutor in the *Philebus*, since it is devoted to a central Socratic topic: the place of pleasure and knowledge in the best human life. It is less clear why Socrates is not the main speaker in the other late dialogues. While there are differences in the views defended, there are certainly many continuities between these late dialogues and the Socratic and middle dialogues. For example, in the *Laws* the main speaker, the Athenian stranger, maintains the Socratic thesis, proposed in several Socratic dialogues, that no one does wrong willingly (731c, 860d–e).

One possible explanation for Socrates not being the main speaker relates to the kind of conversation they dramatize, as opposed to the views defended. In the *Statesman* and *Sophist* the main interlocutor is the Eleatic stranger, who tries to coax answers out of his young interlocutors, but who is also very willing to act as a teacher. He explicitly asks to converse with someone who is easy to handle and not a troublemaker (*Sph.* 217d). Unlike Socrates, he makes no profession of ignorance. Similarly, the Athenian stranger in the *Laws* simply puts forward a legal code without a Socratic profession of ignorance. The respondents in the late dialogues are not hostile – unlike the sophists whom Socrates speaks to in the Socratic dialogues and *Republic* I – nor are they sympathetic intellectuals who develop significant objections and concerns of their own, as one often finds in the middle dialogues. The *Philebus* begins after a truly hostile

interlocutor, Philebus, has left, replaced by someone who can defend, in a good-willed and earnest way, Philebus' position that pleasure is the good. The other late dialogues are much closer to being the promulgation of theories (*Timaeus* and *Laws* V–XII) or a joint inquiry led by someone with developed views (*Sophist* and *Statesman*, *Laws* I–IV) than to a debate. The respondents are good-willed, but have not thought deeply about the issues, and, in comparison with the Socratic and middle period dialogues, the conversations are driven far less by the personalities of the characters and contain far less banter.

The *Timaeus* is the only late dialogue in which Plato continues to emphasize several central claims about the forms that play an important role in the middle dialogues. He maintains there that they are changeless, and contrasts their invulnerability to alteration with the constant fluctuation of perceptible things; because of these radical differences, the forms are capable of being known, whereas objects of perception are not.³⁵ Furthermore, the forms are described in the *Timaeus* as paradigms³⁶ – objects to which the divine craftsman looks in creating the sensible world, and to which we must look in order to acquire knowledge – and this too is a central view in the Socratic and middle dialogues.³⁷ However, there is no emphasis on these features of the forms in the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*. They do not play a crucial role at climactic points in these dialogues, as they do in the *Cratylus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. Does this reflect a shift in Plato's thinking, or is this simply not relevant to the projects of those dialogues? In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic stranger attempts to find middle ground between the "friends of the forms" (as they are called there) and those who think that the only things that are real are what they can touch and see (246a–249d). Perhaps, then, Plato did not change his mind about the importance of the forms, but rather turned his attention to finding a common argumentative ground with those who do not accept them. This is not to say that he stops investigating the forms altogether. His explorations of them continue, and may reflect his changing his mind about their features. For example, several late dialogues contain arguments that the

compresence of opposites found in the sensible world also applies to the forms (e.g., *Philebus* 14d–15c). This is elaborated in greatest detail in the *Sophist*, where the Eleatic stranger discusses the interweaving of the “greatest kinds” (categories that contain everything) with one another.

It is remarkable that, after giving in the *Republic* an elaborate blueprint for an ideal society, Plato took up a similar project near the end of his life and devoted his longest work – the *Laws* – to the development of a complex political system and legal code. Some of the main doctrines of the *Republic* are preserved intact here: Moral education is the principal business of the political community, and there is no toleration for those who put forward doctrines that would undermine the virtue of the citizens. But there are also striking differences between the ideal community of the *Republic* and the more easily realized ideal depicted in the *Laws*: No specialized training in mathematics or dialectic is prescribed for an elite group of citizens, and instead of assigning total responsibility and power to one small group of decision makers, the functions of government are widely distributed, with an elaborate system of safeguards against the abuse of power. Although power is unevenly divided, no citizen is completely deprived of a legislative or judicial role. Does this mean that in his later period Plato came to be less opposed to democratic ideas than he once had been? It may be that in the *Laws* he accepts limited democratic features and envisages a smaller role for philosophers because in this work he is merely describing a second-best political community (739a–740a); if that is the proper explanation, then he might have continued to believe that ideally philosophers would have absolute control over political matters.

V ARISTOTLE'S TESTIMONY AND THE LIMITATIONS OF WRITING

We are remarkably fortunate to have so much from Plato's own hand; in fact, we seem to possess every philosophical work he ever composed, in the form of copies made during the medieval period, which

derive ultimately from the rolls of papyrus on which Plato's works were originally circulated. (By contrast, the vast majority of Greek tragedy and comedy, as well as almost all earlier Greek and later Hellenistic philosophy, are entirely lost to us. While we have many of Aristotle's works, many others are lost, including all of the works he wrote for the wider public.) Are there any other sources of information relevant for the study of Plato? The last potential sources to consider are the reports from Aristotle and later philosophers about Plato's teaching in the Academy. The value of these reports for our understanding of Plato is, however, considerably less clear.

Before turning to these reports, we should take note of Plato's recognition, at *Phaedrus* 274b–278b, of the limitations of the written word and his insistence upon the superiority of speech as an instrument of teaching and learning. For some scholars have thought that, in view of Plato's low opinion of writing, it is a matter of urgency that we try to interpret the reports we have about his oral teaching.³⁸ Socrates points out in the *Phaedrus* that when one discusses philosophy with another person, one has an opportunity to respond to questions and defend one's assertions. In addition, what one says to one person may be different from what one says to another, and to some one should say nothing at all – presumably because some listeners will be less sympathetic or prepared than others, and will therefore raise different challenges or obstacles. Written philosophy lacks this flexibility; it says the same thing to everyone, and leaves the questions of its audience unanswered (275c–276a). Furthermore, the existence of philosophical books can lead to a deterioration of memory, if they are used as a substitute for understanding; and they entice students into thinking that reading by itself creates wisdom (275a–b). They are no substitute for the give-and-take of dialogue, for this alone, and not the mere spouting of doctrine, can give rise to understanding and wisdom.

Of course, these assertions of the supremacy of speech and reservations about the value of philosophical writing do not lead Plato to reject the written word completely. As we have seen, he did

a great deal of writing after the (middle dialogue) *Phaedrus*, and so we cannot take this dialogue as a farewell to the written word or a repudiation of the value of writing philosophy. Plato does say in the *Phaedrus* that writing, when properly used, can come to the aid of a memory weakening with age, and can be helpful to the students with whom one discusses philosophy (276d). Moreover, his dialogues, taken together, are very useful in modeling how one engages in philosophical conversations, illustrating how these conversations differ depending on who the interlocutors are. The point is that written works can serve a purpose, but only so long as they lead to philosophical examination, rather than substituting for it. It is no mystery, then, that Plato wrote voluminously. The *Phaedrus* gives us no good reason to doubt that Plato put into writing views that he himself took seriously; nor does it provide evidence that he deliberately refrained from putting some of his convictions into writing.

Some of Plato's letters express stronger misgivings about writing, but there are significant doubts about their authenticity. The misgivings in the letters about writing are expressed briefly in the second letter (314b–c) and more fully in the seventh (341b–345a); the former is widely agreed not to be authentic and there are many reasons to doubt the latter's authenticity.³⁹ In the *Seventh Letter*, the author writes that he (supposedly Plato) is greatly annoyed because he has heard that Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, recently composed a work based on philosophical discussions they had had. Plato is eager to dissociate himself from anything Dionysius may have written, and to do so he says that the matters he discussed with Dionysius are ones he never has and never will commit to writing (341c). Why not? Several of the reasons coincide with those found in the *Phaedrus*. The *Seventh Letter* adds that the few who are capable of understanding his views will be able to discover the truth without relying on a written exposition (341d–e) and seems to suggest that certain thoughts are not to be expressed either orally or in written form, because words themselves are matters of convention and this makes them ill-suited instruments for grasping true being (341c, 342e–343c).

If this were Plato's view, it would mean that any reports of his oral teaching would also not help us understand what he saw as the deepest truths. Hence, even if authentic, the *Seventh Letter* would not give us reasons to expect to understand Plato's fundamental ideas from his oral teachings.

Aristotle frequently looks to Plato's dialogues for his information about what Plato thought; he never suggests that because of Plato's views about the defects of writing he communicated his deepest philosophical thoughts only in speech. He refers at one point to Plato's "so-called unwritten opinions" (*Phys.* IV.2 209b14–15) but when he refers to them, he says that they provide the same views as in the *Timaeus*, only expressed differently. Elsewhere, Aristotle attributes to Plato views without assigning them to any particular dialogue, but also without saying explicitly that these opinions were unwritten. For example, in the *Metaphysics* he says that according to Plato there are, between perceptible objects and forms, mathematical objects which differ from sensible objects in that they are eternal and unchangeable and from forms in that they are many and alike (Alpha 6 987b14–18).⁴⁰ In addition, he attributes to Plato the doctrine that the two elements of the forms are (1) the great and the small – which Aristotle describes in his terminology as constituting the matter – and (2) unity – which is its substance (987b18–21). This latter passage is especially significant, for according to it, the forms are not the most basic entities for Plato, but are in some way derived from something else.

But on what basis does Aristotle attribute this view to Plato? And is this a view that Plato held onto for a long period of his life? Aristotle does not say. The report is only valuable for understanding Plato if it was one of Plato's central views that he did not commit to a dialogue, but we have no way of knowing whether it was. Furthermore, it is not clear that such a view would help us better understand any of Plato's dialogues. Again, the dialogues are not mere window dressing for presenting a theory, but rather are coherent discussions spurred by some specific questions. Of course,

if we can make sense of some otherwise obscure part of a dialogue using these later reports, then they will have proven to be of great worth. At present, it is fair to say that very few scholars have found them useful in this way.⁴¹

VI THE DIALOGUE FORM

We have maintained that the greatest interest of Plato's dialogues is to be found in working through the ideas and arguments put forward in them, regardless of whether Plato accepted these views. But, returning to the opening question of this chapter, it is natural to wonder whether he did accept the arguments he has Socrates and others put forward. When we read a play of Sophocles or Euripides, we recognize that what the characters say need not represent the beliefs of the author. And so why should we make a different assumption when we read a Platonic dialogue? Why think that some figures in these works present views that reflect Plato's own thinking? Some scholars, using this analogy between a dramatic work and a Platonic dialogue, hold that Plato's thought is no more contained in the words of any one interlocutor than the beliefs of dramatists are revealed by the words of any of their characters.⁴²

But the comparison between Plato's dialogues and dramatic works is misleading in a number of ways, in spite of the fact that in each genre there is dialogue among two or more characters. Plato is not assigning lines to speakers in order to compose a work that will be considered best by official judges or an immense audience at civic religious festivals, as were the plays of the Greek tragedians and comedians. If it suits the playwright's purpose to have his main characters express views that differ from his own, he will do so. But Plato's dialogues seem like they were meant, at least at first, to help people remember or come to understand Socrates, a person who was deeply committed to working with others to discover the truth and to improve their souls. It is difficult to believe that Plato would devote his dialogues to preserving and developing this legacy if he did not

himself share those ideals. The parts of the dialogues that seem most likely to help with these aims are Socrates' arguments – or the arguments of the other primary interlocutors – and so it is at least a good working hypothesis that he wanted us to take them seriously.

Of course, just because Plato shares Socrates' commitment to truth and to the value of philosophy does not mean that every argument that he has Socrates present is one that Plato himself was convinced by. It is clear from the discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus*, and from the composition of the dialogues themselves, that Socrates presents different sorts of arguments to different sorts of interlocutors. Thus, the reasons that Socrates provides in a dialogue for a given conclusion may not be the reasons that Plato himself accepted this same conclusion, or the reasons that Plato thinks a true philosopher should ultimately accept this conclusion. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Plato's serious commitment to truth is compatible with his exploring different theories that he thinks are serious possibilities, or options that are well worth exploring to find the truth. If Plato himself thought he lacked genuine knowledge of the important matters – as he presents Socrates as believing – then it seems all the more likely that the dialogues are serious explorations that work within some settled convictions. When the dialogues are read in their entirety, there is development and perhaps there are reversals, but there is at the same time the kind of sincerity and continuity that, in our view, strongly suggests that Plato takes these views to be ones that we should take seriously as well. And regardless of what Plato thought or what he may have wanted us to think, more than a hundred generations of readers have found them valuable when approached in just this way.

But why, then, did he not simply write philosophical treatises? First note that Plato is arguably the first to develop the subject of philosophy as we understand it. While philosophical prose and poems had been written before Plato, he clearly saw himself as doing something new, and the dialogue format may have seemed perfect for this new subject. At the same time, Socratic dialogues were a new genre,

to which many other authors contributed.⁴³ Plato likely began writing dialogues to give expression to the philosophy and way of life of Socrates. He clearly regarded Socrates as a model of wisdom and insight, and wanted others to have an enduring portrait of this remarkable man. Since Socrates is above all someone who engages in dialogue with others, the dialogue form is the most appropriate medium for this portrait.

The misgivings expressed in the *Phaedrus* about writing may have added to Plato's reasons for retaining the dialogue form. Oral exchange is the essential tool of philosophy, yet reading books can entice one into thinking that arguments are not tailored to particular people, or that the written word is by itself sufficient for wisdom. So it is appropriate for Plato to put into his writing something that reminds the reader that insight comes through discussion with others and not through mere reading. Moreover, this form provides a natural way to air challenges some reader might make to the theories under discussion; assigning an objection to a speaker is a vivid way of clarifying and defending the views being presented. Finally, the dialogues give Plato an opportunity to use his considerable literary talent to support his philosophical ends.

Forty years ago, scholars focused on Plato's arguments often did not give much attention to the distinctive characters, setting, and other literary features of the dialogues. On the other hand, those who focused on these literary features often used them as a way to try to undercut the claims that Socrates and other interlocutors put forward in the dialogue.⁴⁴ Today, in our estimation, the situation is much better. It is much more common for scholars to pay close attention to both, seeing Plato as carefully choosing the literary aspects and the ideas and arguments to complement one another. Each are worth studying and each should be understood in light of the other.

So we are led back to a recommendation near the outset of this chapter: focus first and foremost on understanding the dialogues in their own right, situating their characters, ideas, and arguments within their larger intellectual contexts. Begin by taking each

dialogue on its own, to understand how its parts form an organic whole, and then carefully draw the dialogues together. This is not an a priori view about how Plato must be read, but rather a successful working hypothesis confirmed by its fruitfulness. The dialogues are the material that we have, and it is deeply rewarding to work through them carefully, thinking through the questions, ideas, and arguments that they contain, as well as the approach to philosophy that they dramatize. Reading Plato in this way allows us to make use of whatever material is in the dialogues – along with their cultural and intellectual context – to contribute to our understanding of them.

There is a special joy in reading Plato. One is reading philosophy by a masterful writer, one whose considerable literary talents are used to complement the philosophical goals of the dialogues. The dialogues exhibit a stunning attention to detail even as they grapple with some of the most fundamental questions ever posed about who we are, how we should live, the nature of the world around us, and how we can come to know it. It is easy to become absorbed in the details and the way they are systematically connected to each other; happily, this attention to detail often is rewarded, clarifying the fundamental questions, ideas, and arguments that draw one to Plato in the first place. We hope that this collection will be a guide to exploring the dialogues and will foster or further nourish a love of these fascinating works.

NOTES

- 1 The ancient sources conflict on the dates for Plato's life. We provide here the dates defended by Nails 2002: 243–7. The more traditional view is 427/8–347/8.
- 2 Plato's name for the subject described in this paragraph is *dialektiké* ("dialectic"); Socrates argues in the *Republic* that the philosopher will study or master this subject (509d–11d, 531d–4e).
- 3 The school Plato founded (c. 384 BCE), called the Academy after a park located on the outskirts of Athens and sacred to the hero Academus, was in continuous existence until 86 BCE, but the members of the

- Academy typically disagreed with Plato on significant matters. In the early first century BCE the rise of “Middle Platonism” and then, with Plotinus (204/5–70CE), “Neoplatonism,” marked a long period in which many philosophers thought that Plato was fundamentally right.
- 4 For two excellent accounts of the trial of Socrates, see Brickhouse and Smith 1989 and Reeve 1989.
 - 5 See note 1.
 - 6 The possible exceptions are the *Apology* and the *Letters*. The former is a speech that includes a short dialogue. As for the latter, modern scholars generally think that the seventh letter is most likely to be authentic, but recently a sustained set of serious doubts have been raised about it by Burnyeat and Frede 2015.
 - 7 For the existence of a genre of Socratic dialogues, see Aristotle’s *Poet.* 1447b11; c.f. *Rh.* 1417a20; *On Poets* fr. 72. For translations of fragments from other Socratics, see Boys-Stones and Rowe 2013.
 - 8 This is not to say that Socrates had no interests in these topics. Xenophon, in particular, attributes to Socrates a type of creationist argument from design. For a defense of attributing this to the historical Socrates, see Sedley 2007a: ch. 3.
 - 9 For an account complementary to Brandwood’s, but with a different emphasis, see Kahn 2003.
 - 10 The possible exceptions are the *Symposium* and *Parmenides*. In the *Symposium* there is no primary speaker, but rather a series of speeches; nonetheless, Socrates’ speech seems marked as the most important of them. In the *Parmenides* a young Socrates is questioned by Parmenides. Socrates speaks at some length, offering an account of the forms, but the primary speaker is Parmenides.
 - 11 For “Socrates in the *Phaedo*” see *GC* II.9 (335b10). However, in *Politics* II.6, after Aristotle says that the *Laws* is a late work of Plato’s, he ascribes its views to Socrates, who does not appear in the dialogue. Evidently, he was not always careful in his attributions. For a discussion of the evidence from Aristotle about Socrates, see Smith 2018.
 - 12 Kahn 1996 offers a modern defense of such a reading.
 - 13 In the last twenty-five years there has been less discussion of methodology among Plato scholars, although there have been significant shifts in the way many approach Plato. We see one of the original contributions of this introduction as articulating, and to some degree defending, an approach

- that fits with these trends. For another contemporary approach, see Kamtekar 2017: ch. 1.
- 14 The *Euthydemus* is often studied by those interested in the ethics of the Socratic dialogues, although it includes ideas that are widely acknowledged as characteristic of the middle dialogues, and many would put it after the *Republic*, although this goes against the stylometric considerations mentioned in note 17.
 - 15 For a general discussion of myths in Plato, see Partenie 2009. Socrates denies in the *Gorgias* that what he is offering is a myth (523a).
 - 16 The recent debate was initiated by Burnyeat 2005 (reprinted in Partenie 2009). See also Johansen 2004: ch. 3, Broadie 2012: 31–8.
 - 17 See note 14 on the *Euthydemus*. For the *Meno*, see this section, below. There are stylometric reasons for treating the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theaetetus* as later than the other Socratic and middle dialogues. While not as strong as the reasons for grouping the late dialogues together, they are still significant. For a discussion of this, see Brandwood’s chapter in this volume.
 - 18 In *Magna Moralia* 1182a15–28 the author (either Aristotle or one of his followers) says that Socrates neglects the irrational part of the soul, and that Plato corrects this error. Here, in line with the developmental hypothesis, the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* are taken to present the thought of Plato and the *Protagoras* that of Socrates.
 - 19 For a recent discussion, see Scott 2006: 6–7 and 200–8. Scott notes that developmentalist views have sometimes had the unfortunate result that scholars have not treated the *Meno* as a unified whole.
 - 20 For this contrast, see Vlastos 1991: ch. 4. He discusses mathematical texts in Socratic dialogues on pp. 271–3.
 - 21 It is a frequent refrain of Plato’s dialogues that, by contrast with the forms, perceptible things are always becoming and never remain the same. See *Phd.* 78e; *Rep.* 508d–510a; *Ti.* 27d–28a, 37e–38b, 49d–50d, 52a, cf. *Smp.* 211a–b; *Rep.* 479a–e.
 - 22 For the idea that the forms are eternal in a way that is prior to time, and perhaps outside of it, see *Ti.* 37c–d.
 - 23 See *Phd.* 100c, 101c, 102b; *Smp.* 211b; *Rep.* 476c–d; *Prm.* 130b, 130e–131a.
 - 24 Plato frequently uses these terms also to refer to other things, for example the “form” – i.e., appearance – of a young man (e.g., *Lys.* 204e, *Cha.* 154d). Another example is that he uses “*eidos*” sometimes simply to refer to

- a class of things; for example, in the *Phaedo* he says that the visible things and the unseen things are each an *eidōs* (79a).
- 25 See *Met.* A6 987b2–4, M4 1078b17–19, M9 1086b2–5. Cf. *Parts of Animals* I.1 642a25–31.
 - 26 For an opposing interpretation to the one provided here, see Shorey 1903. For a recent general account of the theory of forms, aimed for a general audience, see Sedley 2016.
 - 27 As we discuss in the next section, in the late dialogues forms too are described as manifesting compresence of opposites.
 - 28 For further discussion of degrees of reality in Plato, see Vlastos 1981: chs. 2 and 3. For further discussion of the verb “to be,” see Brown 1999, Kahn 2004.
 - 29 The closest he comes to such an identification is at *Philebus* 65a, where Socrates says that even if the good cannot be captured by means of one characteristic, it can be understood in terms of beauty, measure, and truth. The first two members of this triad are tied by Plato to some notion of unity. Beauty and measure result when a limit is placed on what is unlimited and excessive (*Phil.* 24a–26b), and so goodness (insofar as it involves beauty and measure) is conceptually connected with unity (insofar as what is limited is thereby unified).
 - 30 See *De Sophisticis Elenchis* 179a3, *Met.* A9 990b17, Z13 1039a2. Aristotle says that Plato, unlike Socrates, separated universals and thereby went astray (*Met.* A6 987b1–10, M4 1078b30, M9 1086b2–7), but it is controversial what Aristotle means by “separation.” In general, Plato does not speak in terms of “universals” or “separation.” The exception is at *Prm.* 130b ff., where Socrates agrees that the forms exist separately, and although this separate existence is not treated as one of their problematic features, neither is it explained. Whether separation is implicit in the term *auto kath' auto* is a matter of some dispute. See Vlastos 1991: 256–62.
 - 31 This is the approach defended by Prior (1985: 2) and Meinwald (1991, e.g., 171).
 - 32 Some of the evidence for the lateness of the *Laws*: Aristotle says in the *Politics* (1264b26) that it was written after the *Republic*; Plutarch (*De Is.* 37ff.) says that Plato wrote it when he was an old man; a battle referred to at *Laws* 638b is often identified as one that took place in 356 BCE (nine years before Plato died). Diogenes Laertius (III 37) suggests that work on the *Laws* was not entirely finished when Plato died, but in the same paragraph he reports a story that the *Phaedrus* was Plato’s first dialogue, so

- his chronological information does not inspire confidence. For further references, see Guthrie 1978: 322.
- 33 For a summary of this evidence, see Brandwood in this volume. Owen (1953) famously argued against *Timaeus* being a late dialogue, but this view is rarely defended by modern scholars. Cherniss (1957) is an influential reply to Owen. Both are reprinted in Allen (1965).
- 34 *Pol.* 257a, 258b, 266d, 284b, and 286b.
- 35 *Ti.* 27d–28a, 51e–52b, cf. 37e–38b, 49b–50d.
- 36 *Ti.* 29b, 48e–49a, 50d, 52a.
- 37 E.g., *Euphr.* 6e, *Rep.* 500c–d, 540a–b; *Prm.* 132d.
- 38 This view, associated with the “Tübingen School,” has become much less common. For an introduction to the problem and a guide to some of the literature, see Guthrie 1978: ch. 8.
- 39 See note 6 above. Even if it is not settled that the seventh letter is inauthentic, it is now incumbent upon anyone who wishes to rely on its authenticity to address the serious doubts that have been raised about it.
- 40 Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Mu and Nu describe differing opinions about mathematical objects that seem to come from Plato’s Academy. Plato’s first and second successors as head of the Academy, Speusippus and Xenocrates, departed from Plato’s views in significant ways. For an account of their views, see Dillon 2003.
- 41 Gerson (2013) is a rare modern author who thinks Aristotle’s reports are important for our understanding of Plato’s views. Note that he does not think that the dialogue format undermines our ability to know Plato’s own views.
- 42 For a sympathetic treatment of this idea, see Blondell 2002.
- 43 See note 7 above.
- 44 This way of reading Plato is suggested by Strauss (1952: 22–37), and followed by many Straussians since. For criticism of Strauss’s methodology, see Burnyeat 1985; later issues of the *New York Review of Books* contain replies by Strauss.