

## What did Plato say? Interpreting Plato

© 2020 by Erik Nis Ostenfeld, Univ. of Aarhus, erikostenfeld@gmail.com

Almost all reasonably educated people know a little about Plato (c. 428-348 BC): that he was a student of Socrates (c. 469-399 BC) and a very significant ancient Greek philosopher who believed in a world of forms, as well as believing that we have an immortal soul. According to the mathematician and philosopher A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947), the philosophy of Western Europe consists of ‘footnotes to Plato’ (1929, 62/1978, 39). In fact, however, Plato is nothing like other philosophers – he is difficult to handle. He wrote dialogues in which everyone but himself took the floor. He himself is hidden. Yes, he is the author, but who was he? What exactly is his writing? Why did he write dialogues almost exclusively? What did Plato say, i.e., *mean*? Did he even have a philosophy? And why should we continue to study him today after almost 2,500 years?

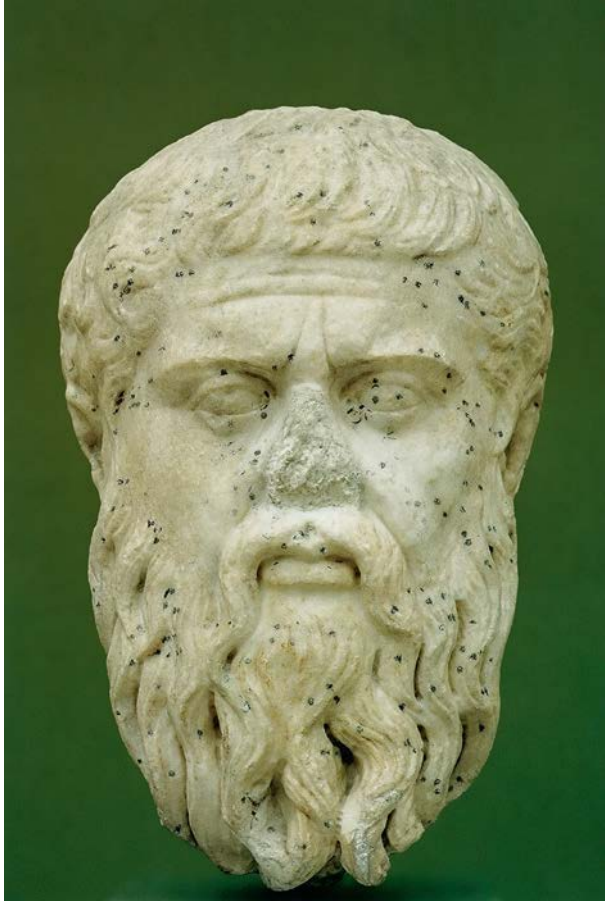
Given the difficulty of entering this important and unique work, after describing Plato’s life and works, we will first discuss how to understand and read Plato with the form and content problems of his work. This discussion started in ancient times and is still ongoing. And there is progress on this front! Then, with the right tools, we will try to draw up what might be described as Plato’s own ‘philosophy’, but which in reality should be more correctly called Plato’s ‘project’.

### Our sources regarding Plato’s life

The main sources, in addition to Plato’s 7th *Letter*, are fragments in the Herculean *Index Academicorum*,<sup>1</sup> in the earliest preserved *vita* in Apuleius (c. 125-180), and later in Diogenes Laertius (D.L.)(3rd cent. AD),

---

<sup>1</sup> Mekler ed. 1902/1958 p. 6, col. 10. *History of the Academy* recently attributed to Philodemus (by publisher Tiziano Dorandi 1991).



**Fig. 1** *Portrait of Plato. Roman replica of a Greek statue from about 350 BC. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen*

in the *Life and Opinions of Famous Philosophers* and Olympiodoros the younger (6th cent.). Critical of Plato are Athenaeus (2nd cent. AD), who follows, among others, the historian Theopompus (c. 375-320 BC), and the music theorist and philosopher Aristoxenus (c. 360-300 BC), who claimed that almost all of the *Republic* existed in the sophist Protagoras

(c. 481-411 BC) (D.L. 3.37). Other material is found in the essayist and biographer Plutarchus (c. 45-120 AD) and in the biographer C. Nepos (c. 100-24 BC) in their biographies of Dion (c. 409-354 BC).

Plato came from one of Athens' better families. He was the son of Ariston (c. 465-424 BC) and Perictione. Critias (c. 460-403 BC) was the cousin and Charmides is the brother of Perictione, both members of the junta, the thirty tyrants (404-403 BC). Plato had two older brothers, Adeimantus and Glaucon. He was a student of Socrates who walked around at the agora in Athens and interviewed young sons of the better bourgeoisie.<sup>2</sup> It was the last decade of the 5th century and of the Peloponnese War (432-404 BC), which ended disastrously for Athens with the demolition of the walls and the installation of a Spartan junta. In other words, Plato grew up in a period of war, the degeneration of democracy into mob rule, and the political turmoil that followed Athens' defeat to Sparta. Perhaps most importantly, he was the most famous student of Socrates. After Socrates' death in 399, Plato travelled to Megara and then (perhaps) to Egypt and (probably) to Archytas in Tarentum (c. 430-365 BC) in southern Italy and in 387 BC to Syracuse, where he spent some time with the tyrant Dionysius I (c. 430-367 BC) and his brother-in-law Dion. After returning home, Plato founded the world's first university in Academus' grove on the outskirts of Athens. Here he wrote (among other things) his *magnum opus*, the *Republic*, which is also a main work in a European context, where the idea is that the ideal state requires either that the ruler becomes a philosopher, or that we have a 'philosopher on the throne'. He was invited by Dion on his second trip to Sicily after Dionysius I's death in 367 BC, where he taught his son Dionysius II (c. 396-337 BC) philosophy. Dion was driven out and Plato was imprisoned, but he returned home in 365. Plato undertook one last unsuccessful trip to Sicily in 361 BC. Dion returned to Syracuse in 357 BC and expelled Dionysius but was murdered soon after. Plato sent his 7th *Letter* (our main source) to Dion's followers.

## Plato's writing

What Plato found valuable was the interaction with Socrates and his students. This is reflected in his writing, which is unique in consisting almost

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 7th *Letter*, Plato's famous student for 20 years, Aristotle and Diogenes Laertius.

entirely of dialogues. It is all preserved, about 25 genuine dialogues (several illegitimate ones were added in antiquity after his death), the *Apology* and 13 letters (the authenticity of which has been constantly disputed, although the autobiographical 7th *Letter* is fortunately generally accepted today). The work (*Corpus*) was published by Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257-180 BC, chief librarian in Alexandria c. 190) ‘arbitrarily’ in 5 *trilogies* (groups of three) (D.L. 3.61) and ‘dramatically more than philosophically’ divided into the categories dramatic, narrative and mixed (D.L. 3.50). A few hundred years later, the dialogues were published by Thrasyllus (Tiberius’ astrologer) in 9 *tetralogies* (groups of four) as the works of tragedy writers (D.L. 3.56), for instance *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo* (=the life of the philosopher). In D.L. (3.62) there is a list of works which were already considered spurious in antiquity. The following works in Thrasyllus are widely considered spurious today: *Alkibiades II*, *Hipparchos*, *Rivals*, *Minos*, *Theages* and *Cleitophos*. In addition, the authenticity of other dialogues such as *Hippias Major*, *Epinomis*, *Alkibiades I*, *Ion* and *Menexenus* is still being debated.<sup>3</sup>

The chronology and associated development of Plato’s philosophy is debated, for instance involving the inclusion of stylistic studies (stylometry), most recently by L. Brandwood and G.R. Ledger. But others use literary considerations such as vivid style in *Phaedrus*, direct conversation as opposed to reported conversation and considerations of content, including cross-references as well as references to external events. According to L. Brandwood (1990), the following four groups can be isolated (the internal chronology of Groups I and II is unresolved):

- I: *Apology*, *Crito*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, *Protagoras*, *Ion*, *Gorgias*, *Meno*
- II: *Lysis*, *Hippias Major*, *Euthydemus*, *Cratylus*, *Menexenus*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*

---

<sup>3</sup> Plato’s writings have recently been published in a Danish translation in 6 volumes edited by J. Mejer and G. Tortzen (2009-2015). They follow Thrasyllus’ division into 9 *tetralogies*, as opposed to the previous Danish translation (1932-1941) edited by C. Høeg (1896-1961) and H. Ræder (1869-1959), which followed an assumed chronological order, defended by, e.g., Hans Ræder (1905). The division into tetralogies may derive from an earlier Alexandrian or even an Academic edition (Lesky 544).

III: *Republic, Parmenides, Theaetetus, Phaedrus*

IV: *Timaeus, Critias, Sophist, Politicus, Philebus, Laws, Epinomis, Letters*

More recently, as we shall see, the idea of development in authorship has come under criticism, and there has been a return to the previous unitarian notion that authorships should be seen as a whole and a unity. But the main features of the above-mentioned chronology are hard to dispute. Therefore, it is maintained here and can be seen as follows:

### *Early inconclusive (aporetic) dialogues*

Socrates wants definitions and tests the interlocutor's moral concepts with examination and refutatory conversation (*elenchus*): what is X (e.g., justice)? Y! (e.g., helping friends and bothering enemies). But Y (e.g., if you are mistaken by friends and enemies) leads to Z (e.g., helping the bad and harming the good), which goes against common opinion, which the interlocutor cannot drop. So, -Y. Well, then it must be Q. Same procedure again. Usual result: puzzlement (*aporia*).

### *Transitional and middle dialogues (constructive dialogues)*

The format is indirect (account of previous interview). Refutation (*elenchus*) is abandoned as the only method, and the questions are now leading, not real. The dialogue in, for example, the *Republic* is fictitious, as it was written some 50 years after a dramatic date when Plato was only 5-6 years old. The subjects are the doctrine of ideas (the transcendent forms, that is, structures) and our knowledge of this doctrine, as well as morality, philosophy of society and immortality. Thus, the *Republic* is full of Platonic 'presentations' on everything: ethics, politics, psychology, metaphysics, art, religion, education, medicine, etc., but it constitutes in particular an association of ethics and metaphysics.

### *Late dialogues*

The indirect format is abandoned. Socrates slides into the background as the keynote speaker. The topics are now: being/not being and the communion of the most important all-pervading forms of existence, sameness and difference, and motion and rest, a more concrete, realistic political philosophy, cosmology

and the good life in practice. Plato seems to revise the doctrine of forms and introduce a new philosophical method, the method of division.

## Dialogue form

The form of dialogue was common among Socrates' students and reflects Plato's view of what philosophy (dialectic) is. Plato does not write in the first-person singular (I) and does not act himself ('Platonic anonymity'), but may have named the dialogues after relatives and friends.<sup>4</sup> Behind the picture of Socrates in the early dialogues, we seem to have the historical Socrates with the provocative, inconclusive conversations. In the middle dialogues, Socrates (if anywhere) seems to be Plato's mouthpiece in advancing constructive ideas; while later in *Timaeus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman* he is a subordinate figure, and in the *Laws* he is non-existent. In these, the Pythagorean Timaeus, the Eleatic Stranger or the Stranger of Athens leads the way.

Socrates, with his critical moral conversations with the young aristocrats, became a thorn in the side of contemporary democracy and, in particular, the restored democracy after the junta's eight months of intermezzo (404-403 BC). Then came the time of soul-searching to put an end to what went wrong in the last years of the war, and despite a general amnesty Socrates still became a victim. He was *not* accused of treason, but of corrupting young people and godlessness. And he was sentenced to death in 399 BC after a self-conscious and provocative defense in the 501-member jury. One can read about this in the famous *Apology*.

It was against this dramatic background that Plato chose the dialogue as his medium. He could have chosen matter-of-fact prose like the early Ionic philosophers, aphorisms such as Heraclitus (c. 540-480 BC), or hexameters such as Parmenides (c. 540-470 BC) or Empedocles (c. 484-424 BC). But perhaps he chose the form of dialogue for several reasons. Here he could most vividly recount what he had experienced as a youngster in conversations with Socrates: discussions of moral and political issues, and, of course, without appearing himself. An author can afford to remain anonymous. And perhaps it suited Plato well to remain anonymous. Among other things, it may have been a precaution: the authorities could not come after him with accusations claiming that his statements made *him* harmful

---

<sup>4</sup> We have references to several (well-known) named dialogues already in Aristotle (Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus* 598 ff.).

to society, because Plato himself was not saying anything directly. His writings are fictional, and he is therefore hidden behind his dialogue characters. A bit like Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) hiding, for other reasons, behind pseudonyms. A third reason for choosing the form of dialogue is that Plato is an artist. Plato writes mimetically (that is, mimicry and drama, as in tragedy and comedy (*Republic* 394c)), although he prefers a mixture of narrative and *mimesis* (as in epic poetry), and is mimetically restrictive and only accepts imitations of good persons (*Republic* 396c-e, 398a8-b8). Stylistically speaking, the dialogue lies somewhere between poetry and prose, according to Aristotle (384-322 BC) (D.L. 3.37); and like drama it is filled with irony, myths, poetry and rhetoric. This all appealed to Plato's artistic nerve (see D.L. 3.47-66 on the dialogue genre and interpretation). But in addition, there is a fourth philosophical reason for choosing dialogue:

### **Criticism of writing**

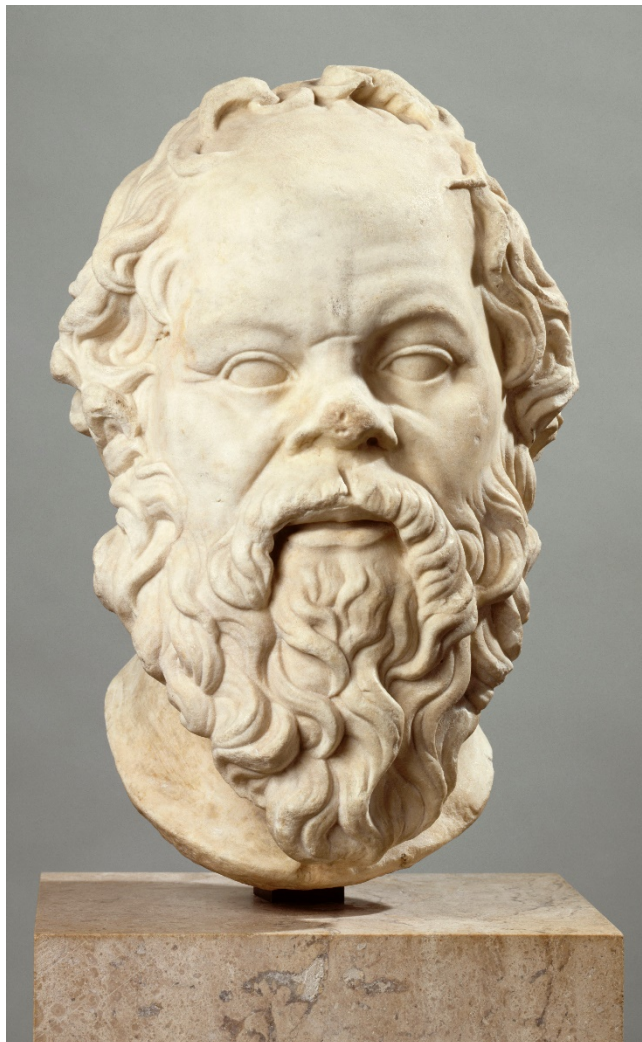
Plato perceives writing as inferior (a paradox: an author condemning the book!). The written text is secondary, contains nothing clear and reliable: the written *logos* (statements) resembles a painting, as it is a helpless depicting of the living *logos* (speech, conversation, dialectic) that is knowledge 'written' in the soul of the learner (*Phaedrus* 276a5-6).

The author who knows about justice, beauty and the good 'sows his literary garden', that is, writes down for his own pleasure reminders for the knowledgeable and for those who will follow him when he plays with words and tells myths of justice and the like (*Phaedrus* 276d). However, the oral dialectic is preferable, because it 'sows' *logoi* (statements or arguments) with knowledge in an appropriate soul. These arguments can defend themselves and develop and make the possessor happy (*Phaedrus* 276e-277a).

Plato concludes his presentation in *Phaedrus* by saying that any written work (rhetorical, political, etc.) is objectionable if the author believes that it contains important lasting truths. All writing is necessarily pleasure literature, and no work of poetry or prose must be taken seriously, nor what has been said and performed for the sake of persuasion, without any reference to questioning and teaching. The written text can only be a reminder for those who already know. Clarity perfection and seriousness belong only in what is learned and said to inform and truly written in the soul about justice, beauty and goodness. This is *logoi* that arise and grow in the soul itself and are its true property (277d-278b). Socrates (and the



interlocutor Phaedrus) empathically agree with this view. Is that not, therefore, for once Plato's serious view? In writing?



**Fig. 2** *The marble portrait of Socrates. Considered to be a replica of a bronze head created by the famous Greek artist Lysippus around 330 BC. ©RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski*



Socrates ends his play with *logoi* (speeches, texts) with this message to rhetors, poets and legislators: if they have written with knowledge, can defend their work and are aware of the inferiority of the written, they are philosophers (278cd). This also saves Plato's own dialogues from a contradiction!

The 7th *Letter* seems (at first sight) more dismissive of writing and speech: 'There does not exist and will not exist any writing by me on this subject [that is, the truth]. For it (truth) is not communicable in words (*rheton*) like other studies, but after much interaction between teacher and student about the subject matter and living together, it suddenly arises in the soul as a light that is lit by a leaping spark, and then nourished by itself' (*Ep.* 7, 341cd).

The truth is not suitable for writing or saying (*rheton*) to the broad public (341d5). Such a presentation will only benefit the few who can discover the truth themselves with a little help (e2-3). Others will be filled with either unbecoming disgust or foolish expectation (341e3-342a1, cf. *Ep.* 2, 314a). Moreover, the first and highest principles are easy to remember because they are 'in the shortest form' (344e). That is why they do not have to be written down either. The letter does not even allow writing down for the sake of remembrance. Writing and public oral lectures are therefore worth little compared to dialectic, and – as we shall see – the letter contains (and this is new) a philosophical justification for this low assessment.

Are Plato's own dialogues affected by this criticism? There are several possible interpretations here: 1) the dialogues are not to be interpreted as technical works, 2) they do not directly contain Plato's own opinions, and 3) they certainly do not contain Plato's deepest thoughts (*spoudaiotata* 344C6). Now, it is obvious that the dialogue genre is different from monological non-fiction and therefore does not fall into the category from which Plato distances himself. In the context of the second option (the dialogues are not Plato's opinion), we must remember that Plato himself does not speak in his dialogues (they are not treatises) and that Plato can therefore, in a sense, claim that there is no writing by him. But the third option should also be considered: the fact there is no writing on this subject (the deepest truths: the good, the beautiful and the just) is true enough, because such writing is not possible. According to Plato, language is weak because it cannot get hold of the nature of things, only

their special characteristics. The good, the beautiful and the just cannot be expressed in the ‘unchangeable’ (written) words (343a1). Both nouns and definitions have uncertain references, and words are ‘unclear’ (343b6 f.) and are only as specific as the actual being we seek (342e, 343c).

*Phaedrus* concludes the written critique with a self-reference to Socrates/Plato that a serious writer does not ‘write in water’ about justice, morality and values, since everything in writing about anything contains much play (*paidia*) and only a little seriousness. The same applies to everything performed orally to persuade without questioning and instruction, while clarity, perfection and seriousness exist only in the dialectic. At best, a text contains reminders for the knowledgeable (276a-277a, 275d1, 278a1). This not only provides room for the dialogues, but may also contain a reference to and characterisation of them.

The 7th *Letter* concludes the written critique with similar general considerations (344c1-e2), which are directly said to apply to Plato’s own dialogues (344d7-8): a serious writer does not exhibit his innermost thoughts in print. Plato does not write about his innermost thoughts and principles. Fortunately, however, we still find no rejection of the possibility of writing entertaining dialogues, although their usefulness as memos for informed individuals is now rejected (344e). The fact that *all oral* communication is also dismissed as a medium for serious thought makes the the conception of *logos* of the 7th *Letter* more rigorous than of the *Phaedrus*, which rejects what is *said for persuasion* (monological rhetoric). Moreover, the rejection of all oral expression of the supreme principles means that the letter cannot be used by the esoterics<sup>5</sup> to support the theory of a secret oral doctrine.

The 2nd *Letter* is most strict: avoid all writing and memorise, no treatise (*synggramma*) of Plato exists or will exist (cf. *Ep.* 7, 341c), and the treatises that already exist belong to a Socrates who has become beautiful and young or new (314c). The meaning of this statement is a conundrum. Naturally, it relates to Plato’s remarkable anonymity. He is apparently distancing himself from what is available by attributing previous publications to a

---

<sup>5</sup> This refers to the so-called ‘Tübingerschule’, which finds a secret ‘ungeschriebene Lehre’, a doctrine of principles only communicated orally. The authenticity of the 7th *Letter* is debated but is generally accepted. A recent attempt to reject it (Burnyeat/Frede) seems too speculative to carry conviction. It could have profited from consultation of H. Raeder’s solid philological defense (cf. n.8 below).

‘Socrates’ who is in some sense new (*neos*). The reference is then to the Socrates of the dialogues (not the historical figure).<sup>6</sup> Morrow sees the letter as unintelligent forgery, depending on the 7th *Letter* and *Timaeus*.<sup>7</sup> But Bentley, Raeder, Friedländer, Harward and others accept the letter as genuine, *inter alia* because of its (moderate) use of hiatus avoidance and vocabulary.<sup>8</sup>

We find criticism of writing elsewhere in the late Plato: the written laws are imitations of truth (*Statesman* 300c), and it is impossible that a generally simple principle can be adapted to circumstances that are always complicated (294c). Writing laws is an old man’s sobering play (*Laws* 685a).

Then why *did* Plato write, unlike Socrates, who wrote nothing? If we are to take his own words at face value (which is dangerous!), he does so as a game, and to remind himself and others who follow him and know what he is talking about (*Phaedrus* 276d, 278a). Contributing reasons may have been that the existing culture had increasingly become dependent on writing, and that Plato, unlike Socrates, ran a research institution where at least some of the dialogues could be used in teaching.

But why exactly dialogues? Apart from the reasons that have already been mentioned here, it is because they come closest to dialectic, which is the way to knowledge. But why is there a trend towards less (genuine) dialogue in the *Corpus* (*Statesman*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, *Laws*)? This is partly explained by Plato’s age and distance in time from Socrates (who is passive and, in the *Laws*, absent). Plato does not discuss. He lectures! As an elderly professor would. But he still does this under the cover of the dialogue form.

## Substantive problems

In addition to the purely formal dialogue problem, there are a number of *content issues* that make it difficult to understand Plato’s dialogues. They fall into two groups:

---

<sup>6</sup> In *Parmenides* Plato’s Socrates is ‘still young’ (130e), i.e. has not yet thought through his own theory of forms. Cf. Friedländer 1969, 379n10 on the combination of *kalos* and *neos*. If *Ep.* 2 can be dated to the late 360’s (between the last two trips to Sicily or just after the third trip), Plato could claim that he is not the author of his earlier work, having Socrates present his thoughts. Later he has other characters discuss his views. In this way this passage favours an early date and thus the genuineness of *Ep.* 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Plato Epistles* pp. 109-118. Surprisingly, he does not consider the solution above. Cf. also Guthrie 1975, 65 f.

<sup>8</sup> *Rheinisches Museum* N.F. LXI (1906), 440 ff., 537. Friedländer 1969, 241-245.

A. There are problems and conflicting methods and opinions *in* different dialogues, including:

*Crito*: Whose point of view represents the Laws who address Socrates?

*Laches*: Courage is perseverance, but neither foolish nor wise. Or courage is knowledge of the terrible/hopeful, that is, *part* of morality, but also knowledge of *all* the good and evil, that is, *all* morality.

*Hippias Minor*: Only the good can be criminal!

*Protagoras*: Socrates believes that morality cannot be learned, while Protagoras believes that it can be learned. After the conversation, Socrates believes that morality is knowledge and can be learned, while Protagoras believes it cannot be learned as it is not knowledge. In addition, there is a remarkable defense of hedonism (unlike *Gorgias*).

*Meno*: What is morality when it is neither innate nor acquired nor miraculous? Is the method logical refutation (*elenchus*) or provoked remembrance (*anamnesis*)?

*Symposium*: Who is Diotima, who speaks to Socrates about the higher mysteries? No individual immortality?

*Phaedo*: Socrates 'proves' immortality, *inter alia* with forms as *hypothesis*, but still feels a need to tell an eschatological myth.

The *Republic*: Socrates in book i (refutatory conversations) is different from Socrates in the following books (abstract dialectic). Meaning of the *Republic* myth (376d, 501e) and the eschatological myth (bk. x)?

*Phaedrus*: Socrates' great speech (244a-257b) will supposedly be untrustworthy for the wise (myth rationalists 229c-230a), and believable for the (truly) wise. The speech is a mythical anthem that uses an image of *eros* which is not entirely implausible, but with an element of truth. The soul's view of the forms runs counter to the logical conception that the forms are intertwined in the same dialogue. The question is, what is the truth here about forms, tripartite soul, *anamnesis* and reincarnation. If most of it has in fact been abandoned, then the purpose of the speech is not so much to convey the content as simply to *inspire* to philosophy (cf. *Parmenides*?).

*Parmenides*: Parmenides criticises Socrates' (!) form doctrine and suggests a double hypothetical method (what follows if x is or if x is not)

(135e f.). Is the criticism valid? If so, is Plato's own form doctrine or only a misunderstood version of it hit? Is it a self-criticism? What is the solution?

*Theaetetus*: This dialogue is aporetic (doubts about knowledge), and is also a late dialogue that so far does not agree with other positive late dialogues.

*Sophist*: The Stranger from Elea argues against the friends of forms that being (the all) must have reason, life, soul and movement (248a-249d). Is this a self-criticism? Who is the Stranger? Has there been a reversal in Plato's philosophy, including the classification and sharing method, which implies that forms have many interrelationships (they are no longer uniform)? Here we also find the discovery of the important logical difference between identity and predication statements.

*Timaeus*: What is the point of a Pythagorean advocating Platonic (?) physics? What is the meaning of the myth of the world's creation? Is it a real creation or just an educational ploy?

*Philebus*: Why does Socrates reappear here as a conversation leader?

*The Laws*: Who does the Stranger from Athens represent?



**Fig. 3** *Socrates listens to the priest Diotima. In Symposium, Socrates recounts what he heard about Eros from Diotima. Bronze relief from Pompeii, 1st cent. BC, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.*

B. There are also different and conflicting methods and opinions *between* the dialogues, including:

*The Apology/Crito* on civil disobedience

*Apology/Symposium/Phaedo* on the afterlife (agnosticism or belief in personal (?) immortality)

*Protagoras/Gorgias/Republic/Philebus* on pleasure

*Phaedo/Republic/Phaedrus/Timaeus* on soul (unitary or tripartite)

*Protagoras/Republic* on analysis of weakness of will

*Meno/Republic* on opinion and knowledge (same subject matter?)

*The Republic/Laws* on constitution, laws and philosophy

*Gorgias/Phaedrus* on rhetoric

*Euthyphro/Phaedo/Symposium/Republic/Sophist/Parmenides* on forms (was Plato always or ever a Platonist, that is, subscribing to the two-world philosophy that posterity has attributed to him?)

In addition, there are problems of anonymity and mouthpiece, absurd conclusions, myths, irony and humour. I would like to touch briefly on each of these problems, which are linked in interesting ways. For instance, the mouthpiece problem, myths and irony change with the new dialectic (Socrates *versus* Plato?).

**Anonymity:** Plato never appears himself, but is mentioned in three places (*Apology* 34a1, 38b6, *Phaedo* 59b10). The author is hidden, like the author of *Either-Or* (Kierkegaard 1906, vol. 13, p. 410). So what is Plato's opinion of, for example, *Hippias Minor* (absurd conclusion), *Lysis* (inconclusive dialogue on friendship), *Protagoras* (Socrates and Protagoras swapping opinions),



*Parmenides* (Socrates criticised), *Theaetetus* (inconclusive late dialogue on knowledge) and *Timaeus* (Pythagorean world-view)?

**Mouthpiece theory:** This is related to the dogmatic view that Plato expresses his own opinion in his work. Antiquity seemed certain, apart from a brief period, that we have Plato's opinion. Aristotle, Plato's student through 20 years, has no doubt that, for example, the *Republic* and the *Laws* reflect what Plato meant.<sup>9</sup> The anonymous commentary on *Theaetetus* (papyrus from around the beginning of our time) is against a sceptical interpretation of Plato and finds that Plato and Socrates have positive opinions (*dogmata*). But Socrates is a midwife and only an indirect mouthpiece. Plutarchus agrees: 'Plato says...' (*Questiones Platonicae, De animae procreatio*), but finds no mouthpiece in the early Socratic dialogues. In his history of philosophy (3.52), Diogenes Laertius says that there are four mouthpieces: Socrates, Timaeus, the Athenian Stranger (in *the Laws*), and the Eleatic Stranger (in the *Sophist*).

But in antiquity other dialogue characters were also regarded as promoting discussion. For instance, in *Noctes Atticae* (10.22), Gellius (c. 125-180) finds *value* in Callicles' attack on philosophy (in *Gorgias* 484c-485e). And he also likes Pausanias' speech in *Symposium*. In the commentary on *Gorgias* (458b and d), Olympiodorus also sympathises with Gorgias' keeping promises and consideration of the feelings of the spectators. And Plutarchus considers Socrates and Protagoras to be on an equal footing in *Protagoras*.

However, not everything can be equally attributed to Plato. For example, it would be sensible to distinguish between the historical Socrates (most evident in the *Apology* and *Crito*), Plato's Socrates and Plato himself. And more recently there have been protests against the mouthpiece theory. More than one hundred years ago, in his prize essay on Plato's development, our famous and still cited Platonic scholar Hans Raeder said that Plato speaks neither through Socrates nor through Parmenides in *Parmenides*, nor through the Eleatic Strangers or the Friends of forms in the *Sophist* (1905, pp. 22-24). And later: Plato is above his persons (1950, 22). Swedish literary scholar E.N. Tigerstedt

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, *Politics* II i-vi in general, and especially 1266b5, 1271b1, 1274b9. In addition, see *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 3219 (drama-oriented, older than Diogenes Laertius and dependent on Aristophanes from Byzantium's school with a division of the dialogues into dramatic, narrative and mixed dialogues).



(1887-1925) argues: there is no mouthpiece because there are conflicts in the dialogues (1977, p. 98 f.). More recently, David Wolfsdorf has argued something similar: Socrates holds self-contradictory views, including the *Lysis*, and he starts with conventional definitions (1999, 20). Gerald A. Press, who has edited a collection of articles entitled *Who Speaks for Plato?*, argues that the Eleatic Stranger, Timaeus and Parmenides are not mouthpieces, since Socrates is present (Press 2000, p. 125). Similarly, neither Hamlet, Julius Caesar nor Lear are the mouthpiece of Shakespeare (Press 2000, p. 147). It may be objected that all the characters in a dialogue are the expression of Plato's thoughts, his reflection on various themes.<sup>10</sup> This does not preclude the possibility that some opinions, expressed by the dialogue person Socrates and others, appeal more to Plato, and that he changes his mind over time. But he tests the opinions of Socrates through much of his writing. Does Plato distance himself from Socrates, or does he invest more in him? In *Meno*, refutation (*elenchus*) presupposes knowledge (*anamnesis*); and in *Phaedo* and in the *Republic* after Book One, Socrates employs another method, incorporating the elenctic method into a hypothetical-deductive method.

It can also be noted that there are both likeable and unlikeable (often caricatured) individuals in the dialogues (e.g. Thrasymachus). Plato's 'meaning' is naturally more evident in the former. But even among these, there are opponents of Socrates: e.g., Protagoras, Gorgias, Callicles and Hippias, who were considered positive, thoughtful debaters even back in antiquity.

But basically Plato only cares about what is said, not who says it: 'in the old days, people could enjoy listening to oaks or stones, if only it were true, but you, Phaedrus, might think it is important who speaks and where he comes from. Don't you wonder if it's right or not?' (*Phaedrus* 275c). The better the human being, the greater the value of his support. However, the characters themselves are otherwise irrelevant. The stranger from Elea is only looking for the truth (*Sophist* 246d). But the truth itself is perhaps unspeakable (*Ep.* 7, 343a). Only 5 out of 20 dialogues in which Socrates is the keynote speaker give an answer (*Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Philebus*). The message is hidden behind the text or between the lines. For example, even the doctrine of forms is a *hypothesis*.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ostenfeld 2000.

**Irony:** Irony understood as a gap between appearance and reality is also basic for Sophocles (495-406 BC) and not unknown to Euripides (480-406 BC). Aristotle explains that unlike the braggart, the ironist denies possessing good qualities or underplaying them, avoiding the puffy (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1127a22, b22).

Hegel (1770-1831) understands the Socratic method as irony and midwifery (1836 II, 59-67). Irony is ‘indirect communication’ for Poul Martin Møller (1794-1838) and Kierkegaard, who, incidentally, agrees with Hegel in simply defining Socrates’ method as irony and dialectic (cross-examination). For Kierkegaard the *Apology* is the pinnacle of irony (1906 vol. 13, p. 133): the proposed sentence involves dining at the town hall and a small fine, as well as urging the jury not to make any noise when he tells them the truth! Socratic irony is often disguised as flattery. However, it is only hidden from the victim, not from the surroundings (and readers)!

‘Ignorance’ is special to Socrates. He asks questions but does not answer them. Socrates cannot speak directly about the Good, only as ironically ignorant (*Republic* 506b-e). He is ironic about the ideas (*Phaedo*), ironic about the truth (*Apology*, *Symposium* 199ab). The irony is Plato’s way of announcing his own opinion (‘indirect communication’), e.g., his view on the sophists in *Protagoras*. Or about Meno in the *Meno*. Or about Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. However, we should distinguish between *verbal* (Socratic) and *dramatic* (Platonic) irony (Griswold 1986, p. 12 f.). The first irony lies in what Socrates says in the dialogue itself, while the second is based on Plato the author’s distance to the characters of the dialogues, in other words his anonymity. Kierkegaard speaks of a double irony, a Socratic irony that breaks down, and a Platonic irony that teaches, and which Hegel according to Kierkegaard mixes up (1906 vol. 13, p. 340). The irony is obviously closely related to the Socratic ‘play’ and humour.

**Play:** Socrates has spoken ironically all his life, that is, pretended ignorance and played with people (*Symposium* 216e, 198a). The fact that Socrates pretends to be excited about Lysias’ speech and not knowing anything is play. In other words, irony is play (*Phaedrus* 234d)! It is just entertainment and a beautiful game to play with words when you are telling myths about righteousness and all that Socrates talks about (*Phaedrus* 276c-e and 277e). The *Phaedrus* conversation ends with a comment that now we have toyed with *logoi* (278b). In the middle and late dialogues we find scattered allusions to and uses of play. Laws are an old man’s appropriate play (*Laws* 685a). The dialogue in

the *Republic* is itself a myth (376d, 501e and therefore a game (536c). The second part of *Parmenides* with its logical unravelling is a ‘strenuous play’ (137b), the *Timaeus* myth of the creation of the world is a pleasure that should not be regretted, a restrained and sensible play (59d), and in the *Statesman* the myth of the world’s ages is the introduction of play (268de). This also illustrates the link between play and myth.

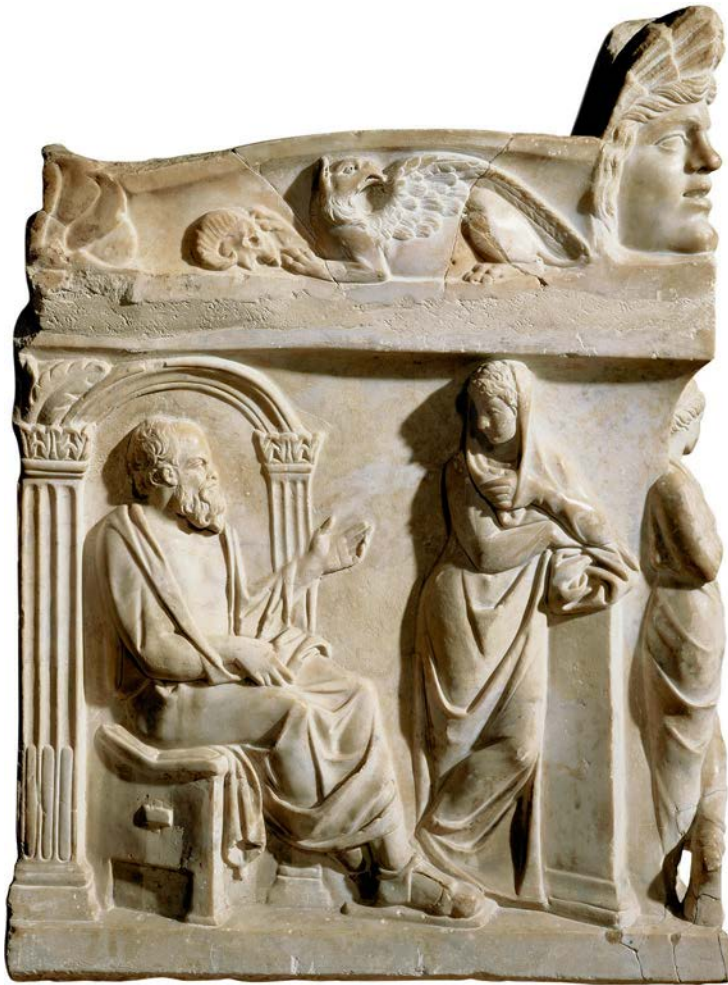
**Myths:** A myth is a story of certain beings, actions, places or events *outside our experience* (gods, heroes, afterlife, distant past, world creation). And Plato’s myths are of great variety. For example, there are myths about the creation of the world, but Plato’s myths are most often about the nature, destiny and morality of the soul. It is, as we have seen, a very beautiful play by someone who can play with words when he tells myths of righteousness, the beautiful and good (*Phaedrus* 276e). The dialogues themselves perceived as myths could well be in Plato’s mind here.

Socrates is (unlike Plato) not a mythologist (*mythologikos*), that is, he does not create myths himself but takes them over (*Phaedo* 61b). Socrates does not have time to deal with myths and interpret them when he does not yet know himself. But he follows common practice (*Phaedrus* 229c-230a). Later in *Phaedrus*, however, he tells a myth of the ascension of the tripartite soul (the famous charioteer with a pair of steeds). This is where Socrates has become Plato. A distinction must therefore be made between traditional myths and Plato’s own myths. Kierkegaard has formulated it thus: in the early dialogues the myths come unmediated, while in the middle dialogues they are integrated.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Socrates takes over traditional myths, and Plato fabricates them for specific purposes.

Like the *Protagoras* myth of the rise of society, a myth can be a *contrast* to philosophical argument (*Protagoras* 320c, 324d). But it may also be *identical to or instead of* an argument: e.g., the ideal state is a myth (*Republic* 376d, 501e; *Tim.* 26c), as is the world’s creation (*Timaeus* 29d, 59c, 68d) and the ages of the world (*Statesman* 268e-274e), and the epistemological digression of the 7th *Letter* (342a-344d) is an ‘exploratory myth’ (344d). The Gyges story (*Republic* 359d-360b) about the invisible actor is used (by Glaucon) as proof that nobody is just with his good will, while the myth of the birth of social classes from mother earth (the land of the fatherland) and their genetic differences (414d- 415d) is used for political purposes.

---

<sup>11</sup> 1906, vol. 13 pp 184ff., cf. Friedländer 1969 pp. 172f.



**Fig. 4** *Socrates and the muse of philosophy.* Roman sarcophagus from the middle of the 2nd century AD ©RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski

The eschatological myths of *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* (246a) complete philosophical theories of justice, forms, the nature of the soul and *anamnesis* (immortality and reincarnation). Certain key subjects such as the true nature of the soul (*Phaedrus* 246a ff., see 253C7) and afterlife can only be set forth in myths. The same goes for love,<sup>12</sup> the past (*Critias*' Atlantis myth) and the creation of the world (*Timaeus*).

Images and parables are related tools. The tripartite being (many-headed monster, lion and man in human form *Republic* 588 b ff.) is thus a vision of the human being in brief. Metaphors like the 'ship of the state' are another viable conception of the nature of the state (*Republic* 488; *Laws* 758a; *Statesman* 302a). Socrates attempts to convince the sophist Callicles with images of a person trying to fill a leaking jar with a sieve, or of a man seeking to fill cracked vessels, or of a life as a greedy bird (*Gorgias* 493a-494b). The three famous parables of the *Republic* (*Sun*, *Line* and *Cave*) constitute a whole theory of knowledge.

For Plato, myths (including myths for young children) are false but have elements of truth and can lead to truth (*Republic* 377a; *Phaedrus* 265bc, 276e; *Timaeus* 29d, 59c). The explicit lie (*pseudos*) can be *useful* and is used, for example, either in practice as a drug (*pharmakon*) against the inappropriate behaviour of enemies or friends (cf. propaganda); or in theory when we do not know the truth about the past, but can make a fiction which is as similar as possible to the truth and which is therefore useful (*Republic* 382cd, cf. the Atlantis myth in *Critias*). This is based on scepticism as to whether man can grasp truth without, for example, Socrates' long 'mythical anthem' about the immortal soul (*Phaedrus* 244a-257b, cf. 265b), or the 'likely narrative' of the creation and design of the world (*Timaeus*).

Plato does not regard myths as evidence ('a likely afterlife' *Phaedo* 114d). They are different from serious dialectic. For example, morality can be treated both dialectically (e.g., in *Gorgias* and *the Republic*) and 'mythically' (in *Gorgias*' and *Republic*'s eschatology). But myths *make us better* (e.g., the myth of immortality and *anamnesis* *Meno* 86b, and the class myth *Republic* 414b-415d, cf. 382cd). In *Gorgias*, Socrates calls the eschatology a 'beautiful story' (*logos*), although Callicles will probably perceive it as a 'myth'. It shows, Socrates believes, that justice is also preferable after death (*Gorgias* 526d ff.), and that faith in myths will save us if we believe in them (*Republic* 621c).

---

<sup>12</sup> See the birth myth of *eros* in *Symposium* 203b-204c; and a mythical anthem in *Phaedrus* 244a-245a.

So, are myths different from reason, or an extension of or part of reason? This is a difficult question whose answer depends on what lies in the concept of reason. The second alternative is supported by the fact that, according to Plato, we must work discursively towards the truth in order to *see* the truth: knowledge is a mental state (intuition). Hence Plato uses a visual terminology for the forms: *idea*, *eidos* (*Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, 7th Letter). Myths also enable us to *see* the truth. However, *mythical* vision is sensuous in a way that distinguishes it from the intellectual vision of ideas. So far, at least, myth is different from reason.

Aristotle says that the myth lover is in a way a philosopher, since myths consist of wonders, and humans both now and in the beginning began to philosophise because of wonder (*Metaphysics* 982b18, cf. *Theaetetus* 155d). This could lead to the perception that the myths of Plato are pre-philosophical or contain primitive philosophy. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) advanced such a view: Plato first puts forward a myth in which truth is hinted at, then he clarifies its meaning dialectically. However, this is not supported by the actual presentation in the dialogues. Often myths are inserted when dialectic comes to an end (e.g., eschatological myths, theoretical myths). Elsewhere we get a clarifying myth along the way (about a golden age and alternating world ages, *Statesman* 268e-274e). Or we must for obvious reasons just settle for a myth (*Timaeus*). We must conclude that Plato interweaves dialectic, myth and images in a unique way, so that it would be simplifying to say that myths or images are irrational. The very making of an ‘untrue’ myth is deliberate and an approximation to the truth. It is a question of what philosophy is and what purpose it has. For Plato, philosophy and knowledge have a moral purpose. Here myth and images have a central place. The philosopher is like a painter, using the state and the behaviour of men as a canvas and the divine as a model and first making a sketch and then, mixing the ingredients, completing the foundation of the state (*Republic* 500e-501b).





**Fig. 5** This Roman mosaic is said to depict Plato's Academy, and is probably a copy of a mural that was known from Athens in the 4th cent. BC. The figure in the middle is usually considered to be Plato. From T. Simmius Stephanus' villa at Pompeii, early 1st century. BC. National Archaeological Museum, Naples

However, as a poet and philosopher, Plato is also at odds with himself. The philosopher warns against *mimesis* ('imitation'), of which the dialogues as *drama* are full (*Republic* 596d ff., cf. 395c). You could say that his relationship to myth and *mimesis* is as strained as his relationship to writing. And just as writing is accepted with certain reservations, myth is accepted with reservations. With the same caveat: it must not be taken seriously. It is, in a sense, fake even though it is entertaining and has a hint of truth. The truth, namely, that cannot be expressed directly in words, only indirectly in images, mediated by words.



## History of interpretation:

### Debate over literalness (*dogmatizein* D.L. 3.51)

Historically, since antiquity Plato has been understood ‘literally’, in the sense that everything Socrates in particular said was Plato’s opinion. Proponents of this so-called ‘dogmatic’ reading of the dialogues were Plato’s immediate successors in the Academy and his greatest student, Aristotle. The publication and systematisation of Plato’s work started with Xenokrates (c. 396-314 BC), the second successor, and continued with Aristophanes of Byzantium, head of the Library of Alexandria, and Thrasylos. As mentioned above, Thrasylos following an earlier edition divided the *Corpus* into nine groups of four dialogues each (nine tetralogies), which are used to this day. Behind these publications lies a recognition that the dialogues are inherently different, e.g., investigative or instructive. The dialogues were also divided into dramatic, narrative or mixed dialogues respectively (D.L. iii 49-50). It is noted that the dialogues were different, but that they all expressed Plato’s opinion: ‘Plato has many voices, not, as some believe, many opinions’.<sup>13</sup>

After a short period of scepticism (about 200 years) during the middle and new Academy, the dogmatic understanding was resumed in middle Platonism (approx. 25 BC-200 AD) and Neoplatonism (about 200-600). The latter considered that Plato had a hidden system which was not formulated. This view was to be of enormous importance in European thinking, and was evident in the resurgence in Plato studies with Schleiermacher’s translation (1804-1828) and subsequent unitarians (the system is ‘static’), most recently with the esoterists (the ‘unwritten teaching’ of the Tübingerschule). But it is also behind developmentalism in Plato exegesis (the system is evolving). Here, the Anglo-American analytical approach was dominant in the second half of the 20th century.

Recently, however, we have witnessed a break with the dogmatic reading, which has roots back in certain ancient publications and which, with its non-dogmatic angle, also resembles the short-lived ancient scepticism. Interest in dialogue as art was revived by Schleiermacher in his translation of Plato and in today’s non-dogmatic, literary, dialogical approach, starting with Paul Friedländer (1928/1954/1975) and continued by mainly American

---

<sup>13</sup> Arius Didymus, 1st century BC, e.g., at Stobaeus, 5th cent. AD, *Eclogae* 2.55.5-6.

scholars such as Charles Griswold and Kenneth M. Sayre. It is now possible to ask seriously whether Plato was a Platonist. What matters is not what dogma Plato has and what the arguments are. Now the focus is on artistic elements such as the dialogue genre and its persons, anonymity, irony, humour, myth, ambiguity and criticism of writing. What other meaning does the text have than the dogmatic one? Is it, for example, educating, protreptic (stimulating to philosophy), majestic (delivering) or simply entertaining? Tigerstedt (1977, p. 98) and K. Sayre (1995, p. 195) believe that there are in fact two dialogues at stake in the dialogues: the dialogue between Socrates and an interlocutor, and the dialogue between Plato's dialogue (the text) and the reader (us). This says everything about the difficulty of answering our initial question: what did Plato say?

Griswold, for example, does not believe that stylistic grouping shows chronological grouping (Plato was an artist and could consciously change style). And even if that were the case, chronological grouping would not increase our understanding of Plato. Because the unity of the dialogue is greater than the unity of *Corpus*, the primary subject of interpretation is the dialogue. Knowing the place of a dialogue in the *Corpus* does not help us to understand individual dialogue. Instead, Griswold emphasises a dramatic grouping. Development is accepted, but against the developmentalists he argues that their arguments for development are often circular.<sup>14</sup> And that it is overlooked that dialogue is also literature. The emphasis now is on the work of art and the distinctiveness of the dialogue. Great emphasis is placed on the importance of all sorts of artistic hints. Woodbridge and Randall see the dialogues as dramas that offer a vision rather than a doctrine. The dialogues do not give doctrines in response to the riddle of life, but imitate it (L. Strauss). But the modern interest in the dialogic and literary is in danger of becoming arbitrary (uncontrollable) and ending in scepticism: Plato is just a literary writer!

E. Tigerstedt considers Plato studies to be dominated until recently by a Neo-platonic dogmatic vision (1974, p. 58 et seq.), while others trace the dogmatic trend back to Plato's successors. According to the developmentalists, Plato simply develops his dogma. The focus has been: what doctrines does Plato have, and what are the arguments, and are they good or bad? Only in recent years has the focus been on the dialogue, and

---

<sup>14</sup> Chronology dependent on philosophical understanding and *vice versa*.

therefore on anonymity, irony, humour, ambiguity and criticism of writing. To summarise, there is a strong trend in Plato exegesis reaching back to Schleiermacher's emphasis on the artistic and dramatic uniqueness of the dialogue. No Plato student with any self-respect can now fail to consider who says what to whom, where, when and why; and how. And you have to look at the whole dialogue, not just the arguments.

## **An answer to the problem of interpretation**

The problem for the interpreter now is to reconcile *dogma*, the message, with dialogue in a fruitful way, to explain how *dogma* is modified by or interacts with the literary. What does it mean for the *dogma* who speaks to whom and how, and when and where things are said? Since there are two dialogues, *in* the dialogue and *between* the dialogue and the reader, the reader must think further (e.g., in the unsuccessful aporetic dialogues, and in *Meno*, *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus*). What other philosophical meaning can the dialogues have apart from dogmatic meaning? What order of dialogues is relevant to understanding: chronological, dramatic, or reading/teaching order? The literary and dramatic characteristics (persons, myths, humour, irony, etc.) must be clarified. One must assess the style, language and importance of the syntax for the meaning. Does the text have a role beyond the didactic role, as educational, protreptic (motivating) or entertaining? Is the text exotic (popular) or esoteric (professional), with different forms of knowledge (not just scientific knowledge) and different assessments of arguments (e.g., *ad hominem* arguments that go after the man)? Should the interpretation be aimed at single dialogues or also at the *Corpus*? The single dialogue must be the focus of attention. There are very few references in the dialogues to other dialogues. But we must also consider the *Corpus* and its possible meaning (orientation). And of course, the fundamental question is: Does Plato have an opinion? Or a project? Or does he merely discuss different opinions? Interpretations of Plato must deal with two issues:

### **A. Consideration of form**

**Stylistics:** Many dialogues are direct dramatic dialogues (*Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*), but there are also narrative dialogues with a frame story especially in the middle dialogues (*Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides/Theaetetus*, where it is

abandoned *Parm.* part ii, *Tht.* 143bc). Late dialogues, to some extent, drop the dialogue. Some scholars believe that this is evidence of the presence of three groups of dialogues of different dates. In addition, the results of stylometry include hiatus avoidance and certain *clausulae* rhythms in late dialogues. This too points to development (in addition to the psychological and philosophical reasons such as the contradictions and differences in the application of Socrates and his method).

## B. Consideration of content

The problem of what Plato says and means is linked to the mouthpiece problem, which in turn has to do with the relationship between the historical Socrates, Plato's Socrates and Plato. Perhaps this question is best approached by answering another question: How does Plato the author use 'Socrates', and indeed other characters? In earlier dialogues 'Socrates' is used as an 'ignorant' ironic interrogator. Socrates is not a mouthpiece, but a philosopher's model. In the middle dialogues 'Socrates' appears as a non-Socratic metaphysician. Here and only here could 'Socrates' be conceived as the mouthpiece of Plato. In the late dialogues he is questioned, passive or absent, and others take over the mouthpiece function: Parmenides, the Pythagorean Timaeus, the Eleatic Stranger and the Athenian Stranger. However, the problem of mouthpiece(s) is a misconception, as it presupposes (1) that in a given dialogue, only one person is the mouthpiece, and (2) that the mouthpiece expresses Platonic opinions. As we have seen, both assumptions are unfounded.

The interpretative problem regarding Plato's 'opinion' is the whole point for Plato. He thinks *we* ought to ask what the answer is to the questions raised! As readers of the dialogues, we are in conversation with Plato, who sows seeds in our soul. These seeds then grow through continued reading and preferably also through philosophical conversation with other readers. First, we recognise that we are puzzled (*aporia*). Later, we acknowledge that we must ourselves find the truth, which has been 'sown in us.' The idea is that we should think for ourselves instead of having finished opinions served for us. The interpretation of Plato involves not reproduction, but creation (Tigerstedt 1977, p. 101, following Leo Strauss). But it is not enough to say that the dialogues are protreptic, a stimulus to philosophy. They are, of course; but they also have a content, reflections on the material and immaterial, on the soul, on morality and on politics, which is chosen by Plato

and which we are challenged to think about. We are like the prisoners in the Cave! Plato leads us up. The rest is up to us.

### **So, what did Plato say?**

The answer to our introductory question, ‘What did Plato say?’, is therefore a reformulated question: ‘What proposals for further consideration and debate did Plato come up with?’ A distinction must be made here between methodological and content presentations. A large part of his authorship is preoccupied with methodological questions: How do you do philosophy? Or simply: What is philosophy?

## **1. Method**

In fact, the early dialogues, precisely because they end up without a positive result and must be rethought by the reader, contain nothing but ‘presentations’ in a very preliminary sense. They certainly cannot be said to contain *positive* outcomes, but are rather illustrations of certain views and, importantly, of what philosophy is and how philosophy can and should be done. A *Socratic conversation* involves Socrates asking his interlocutor what a moral quality, such as justice, is. The answer could be that it is ‘to benefit friends and harm enemies’. Then Socrates draws some consequences, starting with the ‘concept of damage’ (part of *definiens*): e.g., that if animals are harmed, animals become worse animals, and people who are harmed become worse, i.e. unjust people (dubious step). This means that the definition implies that it is just to make others unjust. Then Socrates identifies certain agreements on the concept of ‘justice’ (*definiendum*): craftsmen cannot use their crafts contrary to their purpose. But since it is assumed that justice is a craft, the just cannot make people unjust. The function of the just is therefore to do good, not to harm others (the example is from *Republic* I). The method here, aided by the analogy of craftsmanship, is to show that the proposed definition contains a self-contradiction. Socrates reduces it to absurdity. Another example is the following: What is piety? What the gods love! And impiety is hated. But (as all Greeks know!) the same things are loved and hated by the gods, who have different preferences. So, the definition, *via* some intermediaries, leads to the contradiction that piety and impiety are identical (absurd). Therefore, piety is *not* what the gods love (example from *Euthyphro*). Here, Socrates reduces the answer to absurdity by means of a general religious belief. This, of course, led to some reluctance (to put it mildly) on the part of the interlocutor. Socrates reasons similarly in the early

dialogues and thus demonstrates how moral philosophy should be practised. Since the proposals for definitions do not come from Socrates and are typically refuted, it cannot be said that anything will result apart from negative 'knowledge': we are told what justice, courage, temperance, piety, etc. are *not*. This is not entirely uninformative. But it led to Plato being regarded as a sceptic in Hellenistic times. However, it should be observed here that the scepticism of those concerned (Arcesilaus (c. 316-242 BC) and Carneades (c. 215-129 BC) meant something more radical and was more extensive than for their model, Plato's 'Socrates,' who, after all, knew that he knew nothing and, a little surprising, also more substantial things, such as the fact that a good man cannot be harmed. Finally, the situation is quite different in transitional and middle dialogues, the so-called constructive dialogues. The dialogue entices us into the *drama*: as pointed out above, the dialogue contains two dialogues: between Socrates and the interlocutor, and between the dialogue and the reader. The form of dialogue is an attempt to transcend the limitations of writing. The dialogues stimulate questions and sow seeds of philosophy in us.

### **Knowledge: faith in reason**

What do we know and how do we gain knowledge according to Plato? We have already seen above that in the early Socratic dialogues Socrates assumed that the Socratic conversation, as outlined, might be the way to knowledge. This conversation ('dialectic' in the true sense of the word) deals with moral concepts (and questions) rather than specific experiences. Unfortunately, the result was typically negative. But negative results are also valuable. With sufficient negative results, the chances of finding the right answer are greater. And there is at least a belief that reason, not the senses, is the path to knowledge. If we turn to *Phaedo* and *Republic*, where Socrates still speaks and may be a kind of spokesman for Plato, it is again not the senses that provide knowledge. At most, they can stimulate reason to seek recognition by abstract thinking. Dialectic for Plato is now about a *hypothetical-deductive method* inspired by geometry, which was the most highly developed science of the time. When confronting a problem, one must assume a *hypothesis* as an explanation and then examine whether its consequences are 'consistent' (possibly 'implicating each other', i.e. 'consequences of each other'). If not, a more basic *hypothesis* must be agreed upon. In the



end, the form of the Good is finally achieved. This ‘way up’ takes place *via* Socratic conversation. It ends with complete understanding of the web of concepts. On the ‘way down’, this web is systematised by deduction. However, clarification of concepts is involved rather than the deduction of propositions as in the mathematician Euclid (c. 325-265 BC). Plato considers philosophy to be more basic than the geometry that works with axioms and postulates and relies on physical diagrams. Philosophical truths are informative (synthetic), but they are abstract (*apriori*) rather than being empirical (*aposteriori*). Philosophy can account for and defend what it knows, and it knows what each thing really is.



**Fig. 6** Plato's Cave, Jan Saenredam, 1604. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The method is illustrated by the famous Cave in the *Republic* book VI. We sit chained to our seats in a very special cinema and follow what the shadows on the canvas are doing, with no idea that they reflect a reality (here ‘the movie’) behind us, a reality that is itself a picture of the real reality, the living people and nature of the outside world. This is Plato’s image of our ‘false consciousness’, from which it requires a philosopher who has seen through the deception to deliver us. This saviour, who has been outside the cave, has been included in the Dutch engraving (Fig. 6 in the middle). He is apparently one of the group of philosophers who are philosophising in a circle (left).



Ordinary people are lumped together (right) and are preoccupied with the shadow game (far right) evoked by the dolls up on the wall and the fire behind them. Far back, outside the darkness of the cave, we can see what are probably philosophers who have reached 'up' into the bright world of forms and have not yet returned to the cave to fulfil their government duty and help humanity out of its state of deception. Note the Latin text above the engraving, in which the artist connects the setting with the Gospel of John (3.19): 'the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness more than the light.'

In the late dialogues, the method is the so-called method of division, in which higher 'rich' concepts are divided into lower, more specific concepts, which are again divided until the concept being debated is reached. This supposedly achieves the required demarcation and definition. And the division must be into 'true', that is, natural parts. So this is not an example of irrelevant conceptual gymnastics. The method also involves a prior collection of individual items and specific concepts relevant to the establishing of higher concepts which are to be divided. Examples could be definitions of plants or animals placed in a schema of *genera* and *species*. The method is developed and used to completely classify the subjects (*Philebus*). Here we have a precursor to the classifications of Aristotle and Carl von Linné (1707-1778). In spite of our generally non-dogmatic approach to the interpretation of Plato, there is no reason to doubt that the described methods of acquiring knowledge are Plato's own: this is what he does, not just what he says.

## 2. Content

### The forms

The four major dialogues *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* are constructive dialogues. Here if anywhere, Socrates acts somehow as a mouthpiece for Plato. In *Phaedo*, Socrates talks with his friends in prison about the immortality of the soul owing to its kinship with the forms. In *Symposium*, the mood is different, with a number of speakers trying to determine the nature of love in turn. The culmination is reached with Socrates' speech, which in various stages, including Diotima's contribution, determines that *eros* originates in deficiency, not just a physical, but a general longing for the good and immortality and ultimately a vision of the form of

beauty. *Phaedrus* is the second positive contribution on love, now in a mythical speech, determining it as divine madness, a force that drives the soul, here portrayed mythically as a pair of horses with a charioteer who, with varying luck, keeps the horses on the road to forms. Finally, there is the *Republic*, which is Plato's main work dealing with the ideal design of society and soul, based on the form of the Good, the most basic and most comprehensive 'reality' for Plato. Everything owes its existence and its knowability to the form of the good, just as life on earth and the earth itself owes its existence and visibility to the sun.

These notions of the immortality of the soul, of love and of morality and politics, all dependent on the forms, are commonly understood as Platonic philosophy: 'Plato says...', etc. On the one hand, it is (the Platonic) Socrates who speaks (not the historical Socrates, who was not so positive), though in one case the source is not Socrates but Diotima. On the other hand, all these ideas depend on the *hypothesis* of the forms, that is, the notion that reality is based on some independent structures that we cannot see but can only think about. Even if phenomena did not exist, the forms would still be there. They are timeless. One of the arguments for the existence of forms is the relativity of sense objects (e.g. relative size, point of view, etc.) and their instability (*Phaedo*, *Symposium*), and the difference between reason and sense perception (*Republic* 477e, *Timaeus* 51d). However, since this form of *hypothesis* is precisely a *hypothesis* of which Plato is critical, for example in *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, even this basic conception of a 'world of forms,' traditionally seen as Plato's main contribution to the history of philosophy, had better be regarded as a *proposal*. Plato himself sees this theory as being open to debate. The very nature of the forms is controversial: are they super things, or are they what have been called universals since Aristotle (attributes of many things)? The criticism in *Parmenides* suggests that forms were initially perceived as super things, and that the position in the later dialogues changes towards or approaches the universals that Aristotle found useful.

### **The soul and the view of man**

The human being is twofold, composed of an immortal soul and a body that pulls the soul 'downwards'. It is a question of 'looking the other way', that is, 'upwards' towards the forms, reality (*Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Republic*). The material physical world is a shadow world, and Plato likes to describe our present state as a dream we should be awakened

from. The incarnate soul is sometimes perceived as tripartite (reason, self-esteem and desire) (*Republic*, *Timaeus*), illustrated by the image of the charioteer with a pair of horses (*Phaedrus*). The notion of the immortal soul is the second great Platonic heritage (apart from Forms). It *blends* with and, as some (more recent Protestants) say, discolours Christianity. Several ‘proofs’ of the immortality of the soul are provided. But Plato is so uncertain about his case that he adds myths about the afterlife to remove doubt. The very fact that more evidence is needed shows that he does not dare to believe in a single proof, or for that matter several proofs.

### **Morality and politics**

Moral perception is naturally related to our view of man. If we have an immortal soul, there are consequences for how we should behave. As the immortal soul for Plato is a soul of reason (see, for example, *Phaedo*) with a craving for knowledge, a life devoted to knowledge is required. However, Plato (in *Republic* and *Phaedrus*) recognises that the soul has other needs and that the moral life involves disciplining these other needs, such as material needs for food and drink and sex, as well as the need for assertiveness, power and recognition. Plato acknowledges the legitimacy of these needs but recommends that they should be regulated by reason. Anything else makes us inhuman or animal and leads to misfortune. But Plato must struggle to convince his contemporaries (and us readers) that it is not happiness to follow one’s more material desires. In a thought experiment with Gyges (*Republic* ii, 359c ff.), he shows that if Gyges can get away with it (being invisible to others), he will follow all his ‘lower’ desires. The same applies to the tyrant with unrestricted power. So, what is human nature? Plato argues that such behaviour is *not* following one’s innermost nature and real desires. The people mentioned are not happy, because the natural balance of *the psyche* is not present. They are discordant and basically not ‘healthy’. The stroke of genius of the *Republic* is that the ideal constitution is used as an image of man’s ideal and good condition. Just as the ideal constitution is a balance between social classes, each having its own job, so is the good state of man (‘health’) characterised by the fact that *each part of the soul (reason, self-assertiveness and desire) performs its function without dominating the others*. In addition to its cognitive function, reason also has responsibility for

the balance and order of the whole soul. So, like Aristotle, Plato bases morality on and defines morality as *the functioning of the human being*. However, again we are warned that the ideal state (and soul) is a myth (376d, 501e) and a play (536c).

The late dialogues, *the Sophist*, *the Statesman*, *Philebus* and *Laws*, have, apart from *Philebus*, other discussion leaders than Socrates. The first two dialogues are illustrations of the division method, a method of defining concepts, while the last two deal with the good life and the good constitution respectively. However, the last two differ because Socrates reappears in *Philebus* as an interrogator in a dialogue that has a positive conclusion, namely that the good life is a mixture of reason and enjoyment; while in the *Laws* the Athenian Stranger leads the conversation in the striking absence of Socrates. The constitution must be as in Sparta (692a, 712d), a compromise between monarchy and democracy (701e, 756). The ideal, however, is enlightened absolute monarchy (712a, cf. *Statesman* 294a) and full-fledged community of property (739c). Laws are the necessary second-best solution to the political problem in the absence of an enlightened and good dictator (cf. *Statesman* 294d, 300c). The conception of a wise and good dictator's cooperation with a wise legislator (710, cf. *Statesman* 253a) contains a slightly veiled reference to Plato's attempt to implement the ideal state with Dionysius the younger in Syracuse (cf. introduction to 3rd *Letter*). The laws, like good doctors, must combine coercion with persuasion (in explanatory introductions 718b, 722b). They stand above the government, are about the good of all citizens and give the state unity (715). So, do the *Laws* express Plato's opinion? *Laws* is *mythologia* (752a), fiction (712a, 752a). And as the words come largely out of the mouth of the Athenian Stranger, Plato has once again distanced himself and guarded himself against taking the credit for a rather totalitarian project.

### **'Natural science'**

The vision of nature of *Timaeus* is told by the Pythagorean Timaeus and is based on a mathematical concept of nature's basic components ('atoms'), consisting of regular *polyhedra* (multi-edged, uniform, three-dimensional shapes), which in turn are constructed of two kinds of triangles ('elemental particles'). The model and basis of these 'atoms' are *mathematical forms* or structures. The regular *polyhedra* (solids) and their conglomerates are placed in a universal container (a 'room') that, thanks to their movement, moves and

moves the *polyhedra* again. This will generate, with the help of the Demiurge,<sup>15</sup> the world as we know it. This mathematical physics has been a landmark for later natural philosophy and physics. For a time overshadowed by Aristotle, but with the Renaissance and Galilei (1564-1642) and later science, Plato's insight becomes apparent again. In our time, for example, the nuclear physicist Werner von Heisenberg (1901-1976) expressed admiration for the geometric, symmetrical beauty of Plato's physics in *Timaeus*. It is important, however, to understand that Plato here is issuing warnings once again against taking him at his word: not only is the speaker a Pythagorean from *Magna Graecia* (Southern Italy), but it is merely a 'probable narrative' because certain knowledge about the physical world is not achievable. And why not? Because accounts inherit the quality of what they describe (*Tim.* 29b-d). Certain knowledge is not achieved through the senses, only through pure reason, at work in intuition and logical reasoning.

## Conclusion

Any summary of what Plato said must be prefaced by a revision of a widespread assumption that Plato is like all other philosophers, and that one can therefore take his writings literally. Against this, it must be argued that the Platonic corpus should not be regarded as a list of finished doctrines that can be summarised in an article like this. The works are works-in-progress (working papers), meant as a stimulus to think further about the given presentations. But it is also clear that the presentations reveal a certain trend: *Plato has a project*. In the early dialogues and to some extent in some of the late dialogues, much attention is given to philosophical method, while the middle dialogues also (and in particular) contribute the thoughts that are commonly regarded as Plato's philosophy: the notions of an immortal soul and a world of forms in contrast to a view of the physical world as a shadow or dream world. Moreover, we are presented with an ideal state led by experts and several argued defenses of morality. And finally, in the influential mathematical natural philosophy of *Timaeus*, we find an upgrade of the physical world. But

---

<sup>15</sup> The Demiurge is a personification of the purpose of the world. The world is an organism that has forms as its model.

even here it must be remembered that these are presentations (hypotheses, myths, play and irony) on the part of the author. Plato would never write down his innermost thoughts. Not because they were supposed to be secret (as some believed and still believe), but because the truth must be acquired personally. One thing, however, is indisputably and unmistakably Plato's view: reason is the way to knowledge, and reality is rational.



**Fig. 7** Plato (left), with Timaeus under his arm, points up towards the ideas, and Aristotle (right), with Nicomachean Ethics under his arm, points towards the material world. Section of Raphael's painting 'School of Athens', 1509-10, Vatican Museum.

## References

### Primary literature

#### *Plato translations into English*

*Plato, Complete Works* 1997: John M. Cooper ed. with introd. and notes.

Indianapolis/Cambridge

*The Collected Dialogues of Plato* 1963: E. Hamilton and H. Cairns eds. with introd. and prefatory notes. Bollingen Foundation, NY

#### *Plato translations into Danish*

*Platons Skrifter* I-X 1932-1941: udgivet ved C. Høeg and H. Ræder. København.

*Platon, Samlede Værker i ny Oversættelse* I-VI 2009-2014: udgivet af J. Mejer and Chr. Gorm Tortzen. København.

#### *Plato translation into German*

Schleiermacher, Fr. 1855-61<sup>3</sup>: *Platons Werke* I-III. Berlin.

#### *Other translations*

Diogenes Laertius 1972: *Lives of eminent philosophers* I-II, transl. R. D. Hicks. London.

### *Greek texts*

*Platonis Opera* I-V 1900-07: *Oxford Classical Texts* (ed. J. Burnet). Oxford. vol. I 1995: new edition (eds. Duke et alii). Oxford.

*Plato: Respublica* 2003: new edition (ed. Simon R. Slings). Oxford.

*Index Academicorum* 1902/1958: edited by S. Mekler. Berlin.



## Secondary literature

- Annas, J. 2002: 'What are Plato's 'Middle Dialogues' in the Middle Of?' response by D. Frede in: J. Annas and C. Rowe (eds.) 2002: *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient*, pp. 1-23. Cambridge Mass.
- Brandwood, L. 1990: *Chronology of Plato's Dialogues*. Cambridge.
- Burnyeat, M. and Frede, M. 2015: *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*, ed. D. Scott. Oxford
- Cherniss, H. 1944: *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*. New York.
- Ferber, R. 2007: *Warum hat Platon die 'ungeschriebene Lehre' nicht geschrieben?* München.
- Friedländer, P. 1969: *Plato I, An Introduction*, (2nd revised edition, translated by H. Meyerhoff). Princeton.
- Friedländer, P. 1975: *Plato i-iii*. Berlin/New York.
- Gonzales, F. J. (ed.) 1995: *The Third Way, New Directions in Platonic Studies*. Lanham.
- Griswold, Ch. 1986: *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*. New Haven/London.
- Griswold, Ch. (ed.) 1988/2002: *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*. Pennsylvania.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. 1975, 1978: *A History of Greek Philosophy* vol. iv, v. Cambridge.
- Harward, J. 1932: *The Platonic Epistles*. Cambridge
- Hegel, G. W. F.: *Geschichte der Philosophie* i-ii. Berlin 1833/1836.
- Kahn, Ch. 1996: *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*. Cambridge.
- Kierkegaard, S. 1841/1906: *Om Begrebet Ironi, med stadigt Hensyn til Sokrates*. København.
- Kierkegaard, S. 1901-06: *Samlede Værker I-XIV* (udg. af A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg og H.O. Lange). København.
- Kraut, R. (red.) 1992: *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge.
- Ledger, G. R. 1989: *Re-counting Plato*. Oxford.
- Lesky, A., 1966: *A History of Greek Literature*, Transl. of 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1963. London
- Morrow, G. R. 1962: *Plato's Epistles*. Indiana/New York.
- Ostenfeld, E. 2000: 'Who Speaks for Plato? Everyone!' in: G. Press (ed.): *Who Speaks for Plato?*
- Press, G. (ed.) 1993: *Plato's Dialogues, New Studies and Interpretation*. Lanham.
- Press, G. (ed.) 2000: *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*. Lanham.
- Randall, J. H. 1970: *Dramatist of the Life of Reason*. New York.
- Raeder, H. 1905: *Platons Philosophische Entwicklung*. København.
- Raeder, H. 1906: 'Über die Echtheit der Platonischen Briefe' in: *Rheinisches Museum*, N.F. LXI.
- Raeder, H. 1950: *Platoniske Stadier*. Copenhagen.
- Sayre, K. 1995: *Plato's Literary Garden. How to Read a Platonic Dialogue*. Notre Dame.
- Shorey, P. 1903: *The Unity of Plato's Thought*. Chicago/London.
- Strauss, L. 1946: On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy. *Social Research* 13.
- Tigerstedt, E. N. 1969: *Plato's Idea of Poetical Inspiration*. Helsinki.

Tigerstedt, E. N. 1974: *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato*. Helsinki.

Tigerstedt, E. N. 1977: *Interpreting Plato*. Uppsala.

Vlastos, G. 1991: *Plato, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cambridge.

Whitehead, A. N. 1929/1978: *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. New York.

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, U. 1920: *Platon* i-ii. Berlin.

Wolfsdorf, D. 1999: Plato and the Mouth-Piece Theory. *Ancient Philosophy* 19.

## Credit lines:

Fig. 1: Portrait of Plato. Roman replica of a Greek statue from about 350 BC: © Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, København

Fig. 2: 92-001052 DE DIGITAL Portrait de Socrate 469/399 av J.C pour l'original Réplique romaine reproduisant peut-être la statue posthume en bronze du philosophe assis, oeuvre de Lysippe (vers 330 avant J. C.) décorant le Pompéion d'Athènes MA59 Localisation : Paris, musée du Louvre Photo ©RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski

Fig. 3: Socrates listens to the priest Diotima. Bronze relief from Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC © Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli

Fig. 4: 93-001149 DE DIGITAL Sarcophage des Muses Vers 150 MA475 Localisation : Paris, musée du Louvre Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski

Fig. 5: Roman mosaic: Plato's Academy? Probably a copy of a mural known from Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC. From T. Simmius Stephanus' villa at Pompeii, early 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BC © Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli

Fig. 6: Saenredam © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) licence.

Fig. 7: Section of Raphael 'School of Athens' 1509-10 © The Vatican Museum