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***Past and Future* Backgrounder:**

SOCRATES AND PLATO IN HISTORIC CONTEXT: FROM DIALOGUE TO DIALECTIC

Topics

- ***Socrates and Plato***
- ***Socrates: The Investigative Way of Life***
- ***The Range of Platonic Thought***
- ***The Republic***
- ***From Dialogue to Dialectic***
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Abstract:

This overview of the thought of Socrates and Plato begins by placing them and their sources in their historic content, situating Socrates as an active citizen of Athens. Socrates' investigative way of life is explored, assessing how this led to a wide range of ideas and texts that were developed by his student, Plato. Specific philosophical methods, including elenchus, dialogue and dialectic, are explained, followed by a brief exploration of the wider significance of Plato's *Republic*, a book which has sometimes been misunderstood as straightforward political blueprint. The main legacies Socrates and Plato have given us are the commitment to, and engagement with, the process of achieving true understanding, and providing approaches whereby we can continue this journey to explore the nature of love, justice, and the Good.

1. Socrates and Plato

It is impossible to begin to give justice to these two seminal thinkers in one short document. We can outline some of the central issues raised by these two philosophers, and a few of the problems concerning them in their historical context.

One of the most difficult problems we face is distinguishing the thought of Socrates (circa 470-399 BCE) from that of Plato (circa 429-347 BCE), who was his student, rapporteur (through the dialogues he wrote with Socrates as the main voice), systematiser (Kraut 2022) and perhaps implicit revisor. Socrates himself has not left any of his own writings, but mainly passed on his ideas verbally through teaching and dialogue. Most of what we have of his thought comes from the dialogues written by Plato, his pupil, by a brief memoir written by another pupil, the historian Xenophon, and by more limited references in other sources such as playwrights and later indirect sources. Plato's accounts of Socrates and his thought were probably all written after Socrates' death in 399 BCE, and it is very hard to know to what extent Plato put his own more developed ideas into Socrates mouth. Certainly, the dialogues which have tentatively been regarded as 'later' Platonic works present a highly developed system.

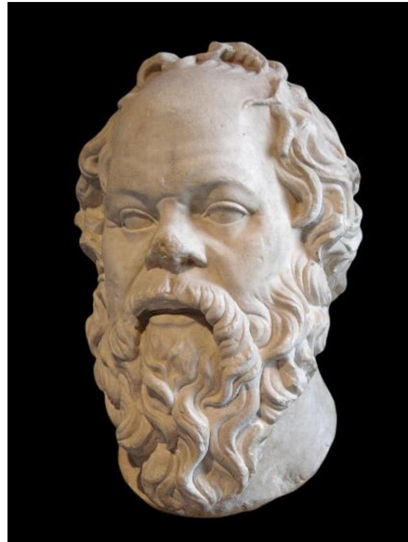
A work such as Plato's *Protagoras*, on the other hand, seems to portray in a more 'dramatic' way the kind of intellectual conversations that were current during Socrates' lifetime (Guthrie 1956, p7).

A dominant and systematic theory of knowledge is also lacking in this dialogue: it is possible that this work reflects more of Socrates' questioning approach rather than the extended metaphysical system later developed by Plato. Karl Popper, for example, in his work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* argues that Socrates' vitality had been warped by the older Plato into a conservative and implicitly totalitarian world-view. Dr Kai Hahlweg (formerly of Bond University), argued that Plato betrays a great concern for the discovery of perfection, which in its political aspect becomes an emphasis on elite leadership and an obsession with the static stability of the ideal state (*personal communication*).

However, arguments based on a clear-cut distinction between the views of Socrates and Plato face the danger of circularity. Since our only substantial source for Socrates comes through Plato, and the various dates for his works are based on assumptions about the type of material we would expect from Socrates verses Plato, the entire argument remains hypothetical. Such hypotheses remain useful as exploratory tools, but should not be confused with definitive historical assessments. Furthermore, Plato's most famous (or infamous) political work, *The Republic*, has been often been treated in a straightforward way, rather than looking at the different levels of meaning this complex text. Fortunately, the writings and other sources do show us something about the way Socrates conducted his life, as distinct from the particular beliefs Plato attributes to him.

2. Socrates: The Investigative Way of Life

In general, the written sources do indicate the kind of social practice Socrates was involved in. Whether in the dialogues, e.g. the *Crito*, or the memoir by Xenophon, or the few references in Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds*, it is clear that Socrates was engaged in asking troublesome questions. In particular, he questioned people about how they knew things, and how they decided on proper courses of conduct. He did this in many settings and locals, but was not a professional teacher and did not receive fees (Plato *Apology* 19d-c) or take formal classes. He is portrayed as saying that he was like a biting gadfly, pushing the city of Athens on as if it were a horse that needs to be awaked (Plato *Apology* 30e). We do have some details about his life: he was the son of a stonemason, he had at least one wife (perhaps two), three children, and, according to later statues was an ugly looking man (for debates on these issues, D'Angour 2019). He had many friends and de facto students, and mixed in a wide number of different classes and circles, including that of the Athenian general Pericles and his brilliant female companion, Aspasia, as well as engaging in music, exercise and wrestling activities (Plutarch *Alcibiades* 7; D'Angour 2019). Socrates was also a valiant and confident fighter, having fought in Athenian campaigns such as Delium (424 BCE) and Amphipolis (422 BCE), while during the Battle of Potidaea (northern Greece) he saved the wounded young aristocrat Alcibiades on the battlefield (Plato *Symposium* 221b; Plutarch *Alcibiades* 7; D'Angour 2019).



Marble Bust of Socrates from the Louvre Museum
(1st century CE Roman artwork, perhaps a copy of a lost bronze statue made by Lysippos)
[Photo By Sting, CC BY-SA 2.5, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=96296061]

Nor should we think of Socrates as a cold, remote and academic figure. In his younger days he seems to have liked dancing, exercise and wrestling, and as an adult served as a hoplite soldier for Athens, that is, a heavy infantry armed with large round shield, spear and sword (D'Angour 2019). This means he did not come from a poor family, and had the means to buy the panoply of armour needed for this role – any apparent poverty later on was a choice of lifestyle and not driven by lack of means (D'Angour 2019). Works such as the *Symposium* make it clear he was willing to attend Athenian drinking parties, while Plutarch (a first century CE biographer) outlines his strong relationship with the young aristocrat Alcibiades, twenty years his junior, though this may not have been a carnal one (Plutarch *Alcibiades* 5-6; D'Angour 2019). Relationships between an older and a younger male were common in Greek society, with the older man often being a role model or patron to the younger man (for one effort to delineate acceptable sexuality vs distained penetrative sex among males in ancient Greek society, see Kershaw 2022, pp19-20, 206-207).

This relationship is confirmed in the *Symposium* where the character of Alcibiades explains his great attraction to the words and ideas of Socrates, and then goes on to explain Socrates' great self-control:

> The Socrates whom you see has a tendency to fall in love with good-looking young men, and is always in their society and in an ecstasy about them . . . but once you see beneath the surface you will discover a degree of self-control of which you can hardly form a notion, gentlemen. Believe me, it makes no difference to him whether a person is good-looking – he despises good looks to an almost inconceivable extent – nor whether he is rich nor whether he possesses any of the other advantages that rank high in popular esteem; to him all these thinks are worthless, and we ourselves of no account, be sure of that. (Plato *Symposium* 216a-217b)

Indeed, a revisionist biographer has suggested that these human engagements helped shape the path that Socrates took in searching for a systematic path to truth and justice (see D'Angour 2019). That Alcibiades is significant in the life of Socrates is also confirmed by the dialogue attributed to Plato and called *Alcibiades I*, in which Socrates and the young man are the two discussants, though it is in the main considered as spurious work by modern writers despite having philosophical value (Smith 2004; D'Angour 2019).

Socrates lived during a period (5th century BCE) of regular interstate conflict, serving as a hoplite (heavy infantry) for Athens. The jar (amphora) above, made circa 530 BCE, shows close-quarter combat of such soldiers armed with shields, spears, breastplates, helmets, grieves and swords.
(Public Domain image courtesy of the Metropolitical Museum, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254872)

Certainly, in Socrates' way of life there was an implicit criticism of the existing state of affairs in the public life and political system of Athens, but this was only a small part of Socrates' wider ambit. His main aim was to cut away fallacies and inaccuracies to get closer to the truth, and to understand what constituted the 'good' (see further below). This was largely done by critical questioning of existing beliefs and conduct, and also by sustained use of irony. One of the most amusing recountings (or recreations) of this irony is found at the opening of *The Apology*, where Socrates was defending his life before a hostile Athenian jury. It opens: -

> I do not know what effect my accusers have had upon you, gentlemen, but for my own part I was almost carried away by them; their arguments were so convincing. On the other hand, scarcely a word of what they said was true. I was especially astonished at one of their many misrepresentations: I mean when they told you that you must be careful not to let me deceive you - the implication being that I am a skilful speaker. (Plato *Apology*, 17A, p45)

Socrates, then, was certainly engaged in a certain type of social action, and in particular a critical questioning which led to limited but secure knowledge. In this respect he might be regarded as one of the fathers of the Cynic philosophers, as well as of the entire Platonic tradition of thought. It was this critical approach to public and private life at Athens, as well as unfortunate associations with aristocrats such as Alcibiades and Critias (one of the Thirty Tyrants) which contributed to popular prejudice against him (Vlastos 1983a; for the controversies around these persons, see Nails 2002). This does not necessarily mean, however, that Socrates really was anti-democratic in a general sense: George Grote and Gregory Vlastos, for example, interpret the dialogue called the *Crito* as indicating that Socrates was a supporter of the Athenian constitution, but a critic of the way individual Athenians operated in public life (Valstos 1983a).

Kenneth Seeskin has assessed Socrates as 'not an analytic philosopher, a phenomenologist, a pragmatist, or an existentialist. He is a unique person embarked on a mission which he invented' (Seeskin 1987, p150). This mission, however, began as a pursuit of knowledge, truth and virtue, including the invention of the methodologies to approach these issues. This project, which we can loosely call philosophy (literally, 'love of wisdom'), has continued in different forms for 2,500 years. This mission at once shaped the way a person might lead their own life, but also was held to be a demonstrable and public means of seeking and defending the truth as the rudder for ethics and politics. It is this critical type of thinking which is presupposed in the writings of Plato, and then taken up in different ways from the Hellenistic period down in the Renaissance, when neo-Platonic academies remained important. This 'mission' was both practical and theoretical at the same time.

3. The Range of Platonic Thought

The range of Platonic thought, in part due to the impetus provided by and problems set by the Pre-Socratic thinkers, is enormous. Alfred North Whitehead's notion that Western philosophy has been little more than a 'series of footnotes to Plato' (North 1955, p63) is only a slight exaggeration. Early Western philosophy was in large measure a dialogue between the divergent ideas implicit in the systems of Plato and Aristotle. Plato's ideas had an enormous influence on thinkers such as Plotinus and St. Augustine, and formed one of the dominant traditions throughout the Medieval and Renaissance period. We can see the impact of Platonic and Socratic thought on a later thinker such as Nietzsche (in his *The Birth of Tragedy*); -

> Anyone who has ever experienced the pleasure of Socratic insight and felt how, spreading in ever-widening circles, it seeks to embrace the whole world of appearances, will never again find any stimulus towards existence more violent than the craving to complete this conquest and to weave the net impenetrably tight. (trans. by W. Kaufman, N.Y., Random House, 1976, p97, in Seeskin 1987, p12)

Platonic thought, and the issues raised by Platonism, are still alive and influential in many areas of modern philosophy, whether in the kind of process metaphysics envisaged by A.N. Whitehead, or ethical systems which try to derive their validity from views of implicit constraints and emergent values found in physical or natural systems, which still use organic metaphors as part of their explanatory systems. Likewise, the attempt to built grand theoretical systems incorporating physics, biology, sociology and politics are also implicit in the Platonic system, which indeed attempts to make a cosmos out of a myriad of different things, ideas and experiences. It tends to focus, however, on ideals and types which are held to be universal truths from which particular cases or policies may be deduced (see further below).

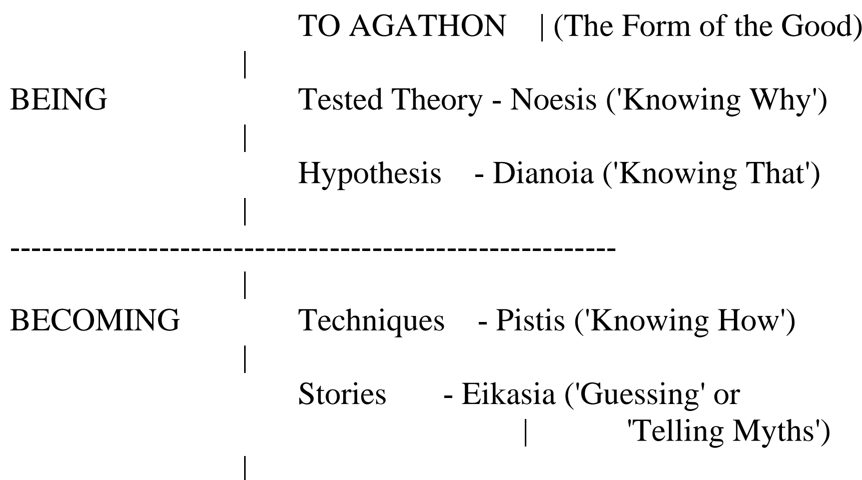
The range of Plato's thought can be assessed by a brief (and therefore rather limited) listing of some of the topics covered in a few of his writings: -

Title	*Topics Discussed Include:*
Apology	Death of Socrates; Search for true knowledge
Crito	Obedience to Law
Euthyphro	Definition of Justice and Piety
Laws	Constitutions and Law Codes for Greek Cities
Meno	Remembrance of Knowledge
Phaedo	Immortality of the Soul
Protagoras	Whether Virtue Can be Taught

Republic Justice and Ideal States
Sophists Issues of nothingness, otherness and change
Statesmen Evaluation and administration
Symposium Nature of Love

Plato tried to unify the ideas from previous, emerging efforts of Greek mathematics, science and philosophy, as well as his own investigations into a ‘general theory of value’ (Brumbaugh 1981, p143) which would not only explain why the world exists as is does, but also tell us how to live and act. Plato himself schematised his theories in *The Republic Book* VI (section 511A). This schema has been reconstructed by Robert Brumbaugh as four paths to knowledge.

Diagram I: Four Kinds of Platonic Knowledge (After Brumbaugh 1981, p143)



‘Knowing That’ involves partial systemisations, using hypotheses, generalisations, and exact descriptions to help provide predictive knowledge. ‘Knowing Why’ aims at complete system incorporating tested theories which include the meaning and value of the part to the whole (Brumbaugh 1981, p145). Ultimately, from this viewpoint, questions of fact become questions concerned with both meaning and value.

Notice that at the highest level we have the conception which is a summation all other forms of knowledge. This is called the Form of the Good, and through it Plato explains how the other forms of knowing fit together. Before proceeding, however, it will be necessary to briefly explore the Platonic conception of a Form (sometimes called a Universal or an Idea). A Form is that which allows two different objects to be the same type of thing, e.g. two squares of differing size are both squares because they partake in the Form of a Square. Even though there may be thousands of differences between the two instances of a square (and indeed, many may be drawn perfectly), we can say that both of them are squares at the same time. For Plato, this ‘squareness’ is much more than a single shared property. It is the ‘intrinsic reality’ which constitutes its only proper definition. In Platonic thought this Form is more Real than any single object, since the Form has coherence, permanence and completeness. Furthermore, from Plato’s point of view, knowledge of the Form provides us with certainty, since any individual object can be destroyed or changed, while the Form cannot. This can be summarized in another famous diagram: -

Diagram 2: The One and the Many (Forms and Particulars) - (After Crantor, head of the Platonic Academy 3rd century B.C., and Brumbaugh 1981, p158)

	THE GOOD	
	*	
	* *	Many Systems of Form
BEING	* *	
	* *	Many Forms and Laws

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	* *	
BECOMING	* *	Many Physical Objects
	* *	
	* *	Many Phenomena: Shadows,
	*________ *	Reflections, Appearances

The Form of the Good, in fact, allows Plato to hypothesise a universal order that creates a cosmos out of a mere collection of things. Indeed, the higher levels of knowledge subsume the lower in a one over many relationship, with the apex held by the Form of the Good, which is also the One, that is, the ‘God’ Plato speaks of in his later dialogues. This last doctrine, however, was held to be intelligible only to those who had received years of philosophical, mathematical and dialectical training (Gaiser 1980, p14 following *The Republic* VII, 536 B-540 C & Parmenides 136 E). Apparently, the one occasion when Plato gave a public lecture on this topic most of the audience left before the end of his address. Konrad Gaiser (1980, pp23-28) argues that Plato gave this purposively complex lecture in order to dispel public opinion which may have turned democratic Athens against his Academy, where private lessons were given to advanced students. If so, the lecture would not have helped ordinary people acquire a positive view of the Academy either.

Using the theory of Forms, the differing facets of the world, from astronomy to geometry, from biology to mind, physics to ethics are all placed as part of the same order. It is for this reason that Plato could not specialise in one area and ignore the rest - they are all directly interconnected. The Form of the Good also provides a connection between the world of mind and matter. As expressed by Robert Brumbaugh: -

> The Form of the Good is the highest form and cause: it operates both in our thoughts and in fact, and gives reality its complex systematic order. (Brumbaugh 1981, p150)

We can perhaps look at this from another perspective. Plato states that there are three kinds of things, using a famous example where he is discussing the nature of ordinary objects, using the example of a bed (Plato *The Republic* 595a-607a). The first bed exists in nature and is created by God. Now for Plato this is not just any bed, it is the ideal, or perfect form from which all other examples of a bed are derived. There is only one of these ideal forms, which is a kind of template or ideal plan of a bed. There is a second bed made by the carpenter, which is the physical bed. There can be numerous different examples of this kind of bed, but they all share the essential properties of the bed which are found in the ideal form. It is the carpenter’s skill, his special craft or *techne*, which constitutes a genuine knowledge about ‘beds’, but only in so far as he understands and can reproduce the necessary and appropriate functions of a bed. The third ‘bed’ is its representation as created by the painter or artist. The artist is not really an artificer or a maker, he only imitates what has already been created. This means that his imitation must be inferior, since it is twice removed from the true knowledge of the bed. The imitator is, in the words for Socrates, 'a long way off the truth’ (Plato *Republic* X, 598) For this reason, poets and artists actually deceive their audience and should be banned from having too much influence on areas of knowledge in

which are really ignorant (see Plato *Apology* 22c), e.g. in politics, a view developed in detail in Plato's *Republic* and in his *Laws*.

The Forms, then, are both principles which allow the proper generation of the particulars which partake of their properties, but also the means through which the rational cognition of the true Form can be achieved. For Plato, an understanding of the Forms is required for a proper understanding of truth, beauty, and justice, whether in public or private life (Plato *The Republic* VII, 517).

4. The Republic

One of Plato's most famous and contentious works is the book we know as *The Republic* (a Latinized title added by later Roman scholars). It has been claimed as one of the first political treatises outlining the proper management of an ideal state. Critics, on the other hand, claim that the formulation of this ideal state is really an argument for authoritarianism, for elite rule and even totalitarianism. It is true that the book does contain criticisms of democracy, for example in Book VIII (562), Plato has Socrates arguing that: -

> The democratic city is athirst for the wine of liberty, and they that are set over it to fill its cup with that wine may be evil; and so I fancy it takes more of unmixed liberty than is proper and gets drunk, and then if its rulers are not absolutely obliging in giving it liberty in plenty, it chastises them and accuses them of being wicked oligarches." (*The Republic,* 562)

These words sound elitist to modern readers, but the turbulent events of Greek history through 415-399 BCE reveals the political crises suffered by Athenian democracy and the risks of a radical, direct democracy. Plato's alternatives are very conservative, but there were limitations on its elitist and totalitarian strands. For Plato, the state still had to be based on a level of consent by the ruled. *The Republic* can be more freshly approached if we bear in mind a few issues.

First, the book was never known to Plato as *The Republic*: this is of course a Roman translation of one of the main themes of the work. Aristotle had apparently referred to the work as the *Politea*, that is, a work on the political life of the Greek city-state and criticized it view of a only single cycle driving political change (Aristotle *Politics* V 1316a-b; Bates 2014). However, it does not seem to have been given this title by Plato at all. This should not surprise us because the main theme is not the *polis* (city-state) itself, but the definition of justice. In order to try to accomplish this task, Plato moves the discussion from the individual to what would constitute a just state, arguing that the lineaments of justice would be more readily detected by looking at an organism on a larger scale. The implicit assertion, of course, is that justice will only be found in a proper relation of the parts to each other within a harmonious whole, whether this whole is an individual, a state, or the cosmos. Out of 10 books, the political description of this ideal state is central only in books II-IV, and peripheral in books V-VII.

Furthermore, justice is not sufficiently defined by a just society. Plato, in Book IX, shows that the just life is established by three proofs - the effects of justice and injustice on society, the constitution of the human soul, and the nature of reality and truth. As such, the political structures suggested in the *Republic* are more of a thought experiment that the design of a working constitution.

Indeed, for Plato virtues such as courage, justice, wisdom, and temperance have, in the words of Brumbaugh, 'intrinsic value through the right order they give to the combination of appetite, ambition, and intellect which characterizes a human soul' (Brumbaugh 1981, p157). This is not a

golden mean, as argued by Aristotle, but a dynamic balance required for the soul to remain in its own state of 'natural justice.'

In summary, a just man can only be so because he is attempting to live in a society where justice can have some place in accordance with an appropriate knowledge of both the nature of man and the means of thinking. For Plato these natures are neither conventional nor contingent. *The Republic* presupposes a theory of the nature of being and a theory of how we come to experience and understand invariants in the world. Indeed, a great deal of the book is spent establishing the way we can come to understand virtues such as justice, truth, courage and beauty. This is required because appearances can change and also be initially deceptive. No mere description of them can substitute for a genuine understanding. Furthermore, mistakes in naming and reasoning, even if backed up by a persuasive rhetoric, will nonetheless lead to false conceptions and to an improper conduct of life, e.g. see the sophist Thrasymachus in Plato's dialogue, the *Protagoras*.

The Republic, then, is an exercise in the methods of arriving at a proper means of analysing political life - it was not envisaged as the particular constitution for any particular city. This is clearly expressed at the end of Book IX (section 592): -

> 'You speak of the city whose foundation we have been describing, which has its being in words; for there is no spot on earth, I imagine, where it exists.'
> 'No, I said; ' but perhaps it is laid up in heaven as a pattern for him who wills to see, and seeing, to found a city in himself. Whether it exists anywhere or ever will exist, is no matter. His conduct will be an expression of the laws of that city alone, and of no other.' (Plato *Republic* 592)

In other words, *The Republic* provides an insight into justice and just behaviour, not into a pragmatic city constitution. This view is verified by a comparison with the constitution that Plato developed for the actual use of a new city-state in Crete in his work called the *Laws*. In the *Laws* we do not find elite guardians to run the state, nor philosophers-kings, but rather the rule of Law is emphasised as the only way to avoid corruption and ruin: -

> The Lesson is that we should make every effort to imitate the life men are said to have led under Cronos; we should run our public and private life, our homes and cities, in obedience to what little spark of immortality which lies in us, and dignify this distribution of reason with the name of 'law'. (Plato *Laws* IV, 714)

Indeed, the following section of the text (IV, 714-5) reads as an explicit refutation of the kind of arguments reported by the historian Thucydides for Athen's justification of imperial power as found in the Melian debate, i.e. 'might is right.' Plato rejects this as the incorrect view that justice is 'whatever serves the interest of the stronger'.

Obedience to law is also a justification for Socrates' action in not escaping his death sentence at the hands of the Athenian court in 399 BCE, a theme extensively developed in the dialogue called the *Crito* and in the *Apology* (see Plato *Apology* 19a). Indeed, his comments are not critical of the greatness or beauty of Athens (Plato *Crito* 52e-53a), but rather that its people are too focused on reputation, honour and getting money, rather than seeking true understanding or perfecting their souls (Plato *Apology* 29d). His also highly critical of the emotional and oratorical methods used in the Athenian courts, and rejects them in his own defence (Plato *Apology* 34c-35d, 38d-e). His critique reaches the height of Socratic irony when he suggested the penalty he should receive once he has been found guilty: he suggests 'strictly in accordance with justice, I suggest free maintenance by the state', i.e. free dinners as if he were an Olympic victor (Plato *Apology* 37a). It is not surprising that he was eventually condemned to death by drinking hemlock, though there is some modern debate about the poison actually used. In any case, Socrates, it seemed, was not only

willing to live by these ideals, but was willing to die by them as well. For him, 'philosophy was the greatest of the arts' and it was this art that he was obliged to practise (Plato *Phaedo* 61a).

The Death of Socrates, painting by Jacques-Louis Daivd, 1787
- a famous theme in the European imagination
(Image by Gordon Johnson, used courtesy of Pixabay)

Indeed, for Plato, the only way we can discover the reality behind otherwise conventional notions such as justice, truth, and the Good was through a specifically philosophical method called dialectic.

5. From Dialogue to Dialectic

As part of the background to this issue, we must note that for Plato all useful knowledge forms part of a specific body of knowledge directly relevant to a particular task or function: that is, a *techne*, which can only be pursued with appropriate training and skill. The difficulty arises, however, when we ask what kind of *techne* is required for a creator of constitutions or rulers of states.

Furthermore, the particular expressive form used to communicate ideas is highly significant. In the past philosophy had used poetry, epigrams, maxims, in the case of Pythagoras diagrams and geometry. In the period of Plato some had begun using prose and a form in some ways similar to drama - the philosophical dialogue. As noted by Brumbaugh, it became apparent that any given idea should use an appropriate form of expression (Brumbaugh 1981, p137). Which form of expression and discovery was most appropriate for philosophical discourse?

We might first notice that most of the works of Plato that are accepted as genuine take the form of dialogues, though the *Apology* is represented as the reported defence speech of Socrates (Kraut 2022). There are a few letters attributed to Plato, but their genuineness is much debated. In the philosophical dialogues known characters speak in turn, giving differing viewpoints. For Socrates

knowledge was a living experience derived from a real involvement with the ideas and with viewpoints being expressed in intense debate between a small group of individuals. One of the few ways that this commitment to mental engagement could be imitated in a document would be through the use of a dialogue, which provides that give and take, the flow back and forth of a real discussion between disputants. Though 'second best', the written dialogue did provide Plato with a wider audience than his students or those he could debate with face to face (Guthrie 1956, p10). However, there is a certain irony here - the dialogues of Plato are already one step removed from actual dialectical process where truth is explored: thus they are one-step removed from 'real' knowledge than the kind of activity promoted by Socrates.

To write these works as monologues, as the straightforward expression of a thesis and proof, would have been to lose this movement between question and answer, and the critical re-assessment of that answer that is the basis of the dialectical process. It hones and tests arguments and counter-arguments in order to achieve a true understanding. For Socrates and Plato, a philosophical work should adopt those educational tools and practises which it recommends. The dialogue is perhaps the closest written form to the process of dialectic itself. Furthermore, the dialogue also allowed some presentation of the type of characters involved, with their foibles and particular viewpoints. This form gives complex philosophical debate a lively and personal touch, and often expresses complex ideas using everyday observation and language.

There is more to the matter than these psychological and rhetorical dimensions (Seeskin 1987). First, the use of characters to represent certain viewpoints allows the reader to sympathise with and follow a given line of argument more closely. This is important - especially if this line of reasoning is one which the literary Socrates is about to destroy. When talking to Protagoras and Thrasymachus (in the *Protagoras*), Socrates insists that they should say what they really think, and not assent to any statement out of the desire to be agreeable, or engage in a purely hypothetical debate. Socrates insists that debating from positions which you really support is crucial for genuine learning, and for the process of dialectic, to occur.

This was exactly the sticking point for most sophists of the time, who were willing to use any argument to get to any preselected end. This was one of the repeated charges made against sophists in their teaching of oratory to politicians in Athens. They could argue black is white on one day, and that white is black (or any other colour) the next. In contrast, identification of particular arguments with particular persons, then, indicates the way these ideas were actually owned and articulated in life.

Second, these ideas were not viewed by Plato as mere matters of academic opinion or pragmatic utility which might be accepted or rejected at will. Rather, they represent knowledge which is used in choosing both political actions and personal codes of conduct - that this, they are the basis of ethics and politics. This linking of ideas, characters, and their political and social implications within the dialogue form is quite intentional. In spite of later misconceptions on this point (see Vlastos 1983, pp495-6), Socrates did not view himself as a sophist (refuted in the *Apology* 19b-c), but had theories of knowledge and morality directly opposed to sophists such as Thrasymachus and Gorgias, (though he may have had more respect for Protagoras). Hence Plato has Socrates state to his friend in the *Protagoras* dialogue: -

> "But wouldn't a man like you be ashamed" said I [Socrates], "to face your fellow-countrymen as a Sophist?" (Plato *Protagoras,* 312A)

The use of the dialogue form, then, is based both upon an attempt to recreate the Socratic method, but also upon a particular way of relating ideas and their criticisms, theses and antitheses. Two particular philosophical methods are embedded in these dialogues.

The first is a method called *elenchus*. This involves a series of questions to which a respondent is forced by his own reason to give a series of negative responses. This process cuts away what something *is not* until we can arrive more closely to what *it is*. Elenchus is generally defined by Colin Flew: -

> In Socratic dialectic, a form of cross-examination that refutes an opponent's thesis by drawing out contradictory or otherwise intolerable consequences from him. Aristotle uses the word to mean 'refutation' . . . (Flew 1979, p103)

However, the notion is much more precise than this. Seeskin has observed that elenchus 'means to examine, refute, or put to shame' (1987, p1). It thus requires a dialogue, and in that dialogue people must be intimately connected with the positions they take up. Elenchus places moral as well as intellectual demands upon the respondent (Seeskin 1987, pp1-3). That elenchus relies so strongly on negative argumentation implies that after all falsity has been stripped away, the truth will remain. Indeed, Plato suggests in the dialogue *Meno* that the discovery of truth is actually a remembrance of things which the soul already knows (see also Plato *Phaedo* 76d-e). An appropriate set of questions are merely required to draw forth this knowledge. Likewise, Socrates suggested that knowing one's ignorance and not assuming false knowledge was a crucial starting point in searching for the truth (Plato *Apology* 21d).

The second method discussed by Plato is that of dialectic itself. Dialectic should not be confused with mere argument or conversation - though it can be viewed as a special type of dialogue. It represents a particular way of using arguments and counter-arguments in order to achieve a true understanding. Further, dialectic is presented as a model for effective thought as well. Seeskin expressed this approach effectively: -

> Plato frequently describes thinking as a dialogue the mind carries on with itself. In this way, conversation becomes a paradigm. Even when one is engaged in silent reflection, the model Plato looks to is that in which two people secure agreement before moving ahead. . . . In a Platonic context, it is not enough to have a thesis, antithesis, and synthesis: there must be people willing to defend them. (Seeskin 1987, p23)

In *The Republic*, dialectic is discussed in relation to other lesser studies such as music and geometry. Plato's Socrates says: -

> "Then, Glaucon, . . . is this not at last the real melody played by dialectic? It is intelligible, and its copy is the power of sight which we described as at length endeavouring to look at the real animals, then at the real stars, and finally at the real sun. So too when anyone tries by dialectic through the discourse of reason unaided by any of the senses to attain to what each reality is, and desists not until by sheer intelligence he apprehends the reality of good, then he stands at the goal of the intelligible world, as the man in our simile stood at the goal of the visible." (*The Republic* VII, 532).

Dialectic then, is the only means of truly apprehending reality, and it must constitute the basis of any attempt to define the good, whether in ethics, politics or art. Seeskin, however, has noted that this method of dialectic remains problematic: -

> After being told that dialectic is a systematic way of discerning the essence of things, Glaucon asks for a fuller description of its nature, forms, and method (*Republic* 532d-e). But Socrates refuses, claiming that Glaucon would not be able to understand such a description for it would no longer be

> an image of what they are talking about but the reality. It is not clear what to make of this remark. . . . Is it impossible to give an account of dialectic without also giving an account of the things whose essence it apprehends. (Seeskin 1987, p39-40)

In other words, the only sufficient way to define dialectic is by performing it, and in doing so one must always be addressing another object and not itself, just as the eye cannot directly see itself but only its reflection (a view implied in Seeskin 1987, p43).

For Plato, then, the only way to understand the form of the Good is through the process of dialectic. And it is only from an understanding of the form of the Good that issues such as justice, truth, dialectic, education and ethics can be appropriately decided upon. Dialectic is the *techne* of the philosopher, but it is also much more than a mere 'knowing how.' It is also a way of creating and testing hypotheses which provide a sure knowledge of how things are, why they exist and why certain relationships exist between the parts and the whole. This knowledge is especially required in the governance of the states, and it is precisely for this reason that statesmen should be philosopher kings or at least be informed by philosophers and critical thinking.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that Plato was deeply interested in education. In *The Republic* he outlines an entire curriculum for philosopher-rulers, including martial training, gymnastics, music, geometry, and dialectic. Furthermore, he set up a research and teaching institute in Athens called the Academy - this name derives from the public garden named after the hero Hekademas which was near the institute (Brumbaugh 1981, p140). There, a wide range of detailed researches were undertaken, as well as lectures and educational programs. Topics included mathematics, astronomy, ethics, pure philosophy, and what we would call politics and constitutional law. The Academy also sent out consultants to help colonies set up new law codes (see Plato's *The Laws* as an example of this kind of work). The Academy was the precursor of all Western advanced research centres, as well as to a certain extent the university system.

The question we might now ask, however, is whether The Republic is truly dialectical? Plato is leading the reader through a series of questions to a foregone and already established conclusion. Compared to what seem to be the earlier dialogues (e.g. *The Symposium*, *The Protagoras*), Socrates' speeches are much longer in *The Republic* and the role of the second main speaker, Glaucon, is little more that of a sounding board. Glaucon is rather like the slave boy in the *Meno* dialogue, being led towards an understanding of justice by agreeing to or denying a set of propositions which Socrates puts forward as a series of conceptual steps. The text, then, is based on the process of elenchus. However, from Book VI on *The Republic* verges on being a philosophical monologue, working out the issues implicit in the earlier sections.

As such, the *Republic* itself is not fully dialectical, though it may be the offshoot from an earlier dialectical process. As a written account, of course, it could do little more than imitate and intimate the central nature of dialectic. For this reason, Socrates in the version given us by Plato wisely declines trying to define dialectic - it could only be defined in the action of mind apprehending not just the relationship between two opposites, but in apprehending the process of understanding itself. Furthermore, any definitions must remain incomplete, since the definition itself could be refuted and modified through dialectical process. For this reason, Plato has to rely upon allegories such as that of the Cave (Republic VII, 514-520), where what we see falsehoods and partial truths as reality when they are mere shadows, and the *metempsychosis* myth, concerned with rewards in the after-life after repeated cycles of incarnation and death (for augments that the soul must exist prior to its physical birth, see Plato *Phaedo* 76e).

Plato is aware of some of these limitations. Plato was somewhat suspicious of the writing of philosophy, as it was a static form which could not defend itself and as such can fall into the hands of the 'wrong; people (Seeskin 1987, p4, Plato *Phaedrus*, 275 d-e). Philosophical and dialectical training should therefore only be given to mature persons who had first studied or at least were studying other disciplines, especially geometry and mathematics. It is only through this extended interaction between students and teachers that 'precise and universal knowledge' is attainable (Gaiser 1980, p15, following *The Laws* XII, 968 c-e). As noted by Konrad Gaiser, it was for this same reason that his advanced lecture 'On the Good' was never given a definitive published form in a dialogue or letter (Gaiser 1980, p21).

Plato's writings themselves, then, can never stand in for dialectic itself. That they are mistakenly used as definitive formulations to support or attack current political and social institutions merely indicates their 'sophisticated' misuse. The specific solutions formulated in the dialogues, whether the guardians of the ideal state, or the idea of ruler-kings, are mere footnotes to more pressing and central concerns. They inform rather than instruct. Nor can any straightforward reading of such texts stand in for philosophical thinking and actual dialectical processes.

In the same way we might now glimpse the real legacy which Socrates passed on to Plato - a particular way of approaching knowledge, a 'knowing how' which leads on not only to a 'knowing that', but towards a 'knowing why'. Seeksin argues that: -

> Socratic method is neither subject, nor object, nor situation neutral: it requires a dialogical encounter in which the moral worth of the participants is at stake. To the degree that this encounter is the paradigm for understanding thought in general, discovery, intellectual advancement, always has had a practical dimension. If Socrates is right, there is no special branch of learning devoted to moral education. All education worthy of the name imposes moral tests . . . (Seeskin 1987, p149-50)

Socrates emerged as a heroic exemplar in his dedication to the philosophical life and his search to understand the nature of love, justice and wisdom (D'Angour 2019). The real legacy Socrates and Plato have given us is this commitment to, and engagement with, the problem and process of achieving true understanding, and providing approaches whereby we ourselves can continue this journey.

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