

AN EXAMINATION OF PLATO'S DOCTRINES

I. Plato on Man and Society

I. M. Crombie

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by
I. M. Crombie

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	page viii
INTRODUCTORY NOTES	xi
1. PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS	
1. Plato's life	1
2. Plato's writings	9
3. Dating of the dialogues	9
4. Authorship of the <i>Letters</i>	14
5. The problem of interpretation	
a. The difficulties of dialogue form	14
b. The problem of fallacies	23
c. The problem of Socrates	27
2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLATO'S THOUGHT	
1. Introductory	31
2. Plato's picture of Heracliteanism	33
3. Plato's picture of Socrates' work	37
4. The ontological status of physical things	42
a. in the light of the scientific interpretation of flux	43
b. in the light of the metaphorical interpretation of flux	46
5. Occupants of the status of <i>onta</i>	49
6. Knowledge of physical things and of forms	54
7. The principle of counter-inductiveness	56
3. THE 'REPUBLIC'	
1. Introductory	73
2. Synopsis of the argument; the introductory discussion; the first book	77
3. The problem re-stated; the second book	85
4. The first part of Socrates' answer	
a. The construction of a just city	89
b. Education	90
c. The ruling classes	92
d. The fourth book; the city's goodness	93
e. The individual's goodness	95
5. The metaphysical interlude	
a. Relations between the sexes; the fifth book	100
b. That philosophers must rule; and what is a philosopher?	101

CONTENTS

<i>c.</i>	The excellence of philosophers; the sixth book	103
<i>d.</i>	Training the philosopher-rulers	105
<i>e.</i>	The Analogy of the Sun	111
<i>f.</i>	The Line	112
<i>g.</i>	The Simile of the Cave; the seventh book	113
<i>h.</i>	The lesson of the three analogies	121
<i>i.</i>	Training the rulers	127
<i>j.</i>	Further questions about the place of mathematical studies in the curriculum	132
6.	The second part of Socrates' answer	
<i>a.</i>	Kinds of badness; the eighth book	133
<i>b.</i>	The ninth book; the judgment between the lives	135
<i>c.</i>	Comment on the discussion of pleasure	139
7.	The Coda; the tenth book	
<i>a.</i>	Attack on representational art	143
<i>b.</i>	That the soul is immortal; and therefore unitary	150
<i>c.</i>	The myth	153
4.	POLITICS	
1.	General discussion	156
2.	Types of constitution	
<i>a.</i>	The <i>Statesman</i>	162
<i>b.</i>	The <i>Laws</i>	169
3.	Social dynamics	178
4.	Social conditions	180
5.	The social contract theory of political obligation	181
6.	War	182
5.	BEAUTY, ART, IDEOLOGY, RHETORIC, EDUCATION	
1.	Beauty and art	183
<i>a.</i>	Plato's theory of sexual attraction	183
<i>b.</i>	Plato's accounts of beauty	186
2.	Art and ideology	193
3.	Rhetoric	196
4.	Education	199
6.	ETHICS	
1.	Introductory	203
2.	Early dialogues	
<i>a.</i>	<i>Euthyphro</i>	209
<i>b.</i>	<i>Charmides</i>	211
<i>c.</i>	<i>Laches</i>	214
<i>d.</i>	<i>Meno</i>	217
<i>e.</i>	<i>Euthydemus</i>	223
<i>f.</i>	<i>Lovers and Hippias Minor</i>	225

CONTENTS

3. The question of hedonism	225
4. A hedonist dialogue? The <i>Protagoras</i>	232
5. Anti-hedonist passages in the <i>Gorgias</i> and the <i>Phaedo</i>	246
6. Hedonism and anti-hedonism in the <i>Republic</i>	250
7. Final thoughts about pleasure: the <i>Philebus</i>	252
8. Ethical doctrines in other later dialogues	269
9. Development in Plato's ethical views	272
10. Plato and the 'Naturalistic Fallacy'	273
11. Plato on free-will and responsibility	275
12. A criticism	281
13. <i>Republic</i> and conclusion	281
 7. PHILOSOPHY OF MIND	
1. Introductory	293
2. Immortality in the earlier dialogues	301
3. Immortality in the <i>Phaedo</i>	303
4. The treatment of the soul in the later dialogues	324
a. In the <i>Phaedrus</i>	325
b. In the <i>Laws</i> and <i>Epinomis</i>	329
c. In the <i>Timaeus</i>	331
d. The interpretation of the treatment of the soul in the later dialogues	337
5. The doctrine that the soul is tripartite	
a. In general	341
b. In the <i>Republic</i>	344
c. In the <i>Phaedrus</i>	357
6. Some further problems	
a. The line between <i>sôma</i> and <i>psychê</i>	359
b. Immortality in the <i>Symposium</i>	361
c. The science of psychology	363
d. Conclusion	363
Appendix; <i>Republic</i> 436-7, the principle of potential conflict	365
 8. THEOLOGY AND RELIGION	
1. Introductory	369
2. In the <i>Euthyphro</i>	371
3. In the <i>Apology</i> ; 4. In the <i>Phaedo</i>	372
5. In the <i>Gorgias</i> ; 6. In the <i>Republic</i>	373
7. In the <i>Timaeus</i>	375
8. In the <i>Phaedrus</i>	377
9. In the <i>Statesman</i> ; 10. In the <i>Philebus</i>	379
11. In the <i>Laws</i> and the <i>Epinomis</i>	380
12. Conclusion	388
 INDEX	 393

PREFACE

'PLATONISM' tends to be a word of abuse among contemporary students of philosophy, standing for the practice of trying to solve logical problems by postulating metaphysical entities. Hence the well-known quip that the function of Occam's Razor is to shave Plato's Beard. I have long been dissatisfied with this estimate of Plato's philosophical work, and this book is my attempt to discover and state the reasons for this dissatisfaction. Scholars are, of course, aware that 'Platonism' misrepresents Plato, but their writings are not always very accessible to the general reader. This is the gap which I have tried to fill. The ideal way of filling it would have been to state in simple terms what exactly it was that Plato believed. This, however, is something that nobody could do, not even if he was very much more learned in Platonic scholarship than I could claim to be. The question what Plato believed is inevitably and highly controversial. The most therefore that one can attempt is to offer to the general student of philosophy *an* account of Plato's thought which does him more justice than that which tends to pass current among those who have spent little time on reading him. I have tried, of course, to offer not just any account, but rather one which I hope may possibly be correct; but I am well aware, and the reader is asked to bear in mind, that many people who are much better qualified than I am will disagree with me on many points. The consolation is that they will doubtless also disagree with each other. Because nobody can hope to hold the attention of the everyday student of philosophy and at the same time to engage in controversy with the learned, I have almost entirely ignored the opinions of others in my text. I have purloined their opinions, but I have not discussed them. In reading and trying to understand Plato I have made use of many of the best known books and commentaries, and I have found them immensely helpful—especially those of Taylor, Cornford, Ross, Murphy, and Robinson. I have neither acknowledged what I have taken from such writers (books exist to be learnt from) nor drawn attention to the points over which I disagree with them; this, not from disrespect, but because controversy would be out of place in a book such as this. For

PREFACE

the most part I have tried to back up the opinions which I have formed by giving as objective an account as I can of the passages of text on which I have based my interpretations, and by trying to display the reasoning by which I get the interpretation out of the text in each case. It should go without saying, however, that objectivity in this matter is almost unattainable, and that one cannot eliminate the possibility that one's exegetical bias will influence the passages which one selects for attention and also the summary of them that one offers. But this is only to say that a book about Plato can never be a substitute for reading him, and can at best set out to be of some assistance in that process.

What is offered here, then, is an interpretation of Plato's doctrines. The work of trying to formulate this interpretation has modified it; the picture of Plato's work that I have now is not the picture with which I started. In consequence, most of the book has been rewritten at least once, some parts more often. I have tried to render the final version reasonably consistent; I hope that no plain contradictions remain in it. But there are certainly differences of emphasis between passages which come from different layers of composition. My excuse for allowing these differences to stand is that it seems that to try to get rid of them in one place is (so long as one's mind remains flexible) to introduce them somewhere else.

It seemed best to discuss Plato's doctrines topic by topic rather than dialogue by dialogue. This has led to a good deal of repetition, but I was unable to think of a lay-out which would not have equal drawbacks. The plan has been to include in Volume 1 topics of more general interest, more technical philosophical topics in Volume 2.

Anybody who teaches philosophy for Greats in Oxford learns a great deal about Plato from his pupils and colleagues. I have many such debts for which I hope that this general acknowledgment will be sufficient. It would not be sufficient in the case of my especial indebtedness to two colleagues, Mr. B. G. Mitchell and Mr. J. C. B. Gosling, with both of whom I have often discussed Plato very much to my advantage. Mr. Gosling, in particular, has pointed out to me a great deal that I should otherwise have missed, and has disabused me of several bad ideas that I had formed. His help has been invaluable, and has gone far beyond the points mentioned in the text. Professor Ayer originally invited me to write a book about Plato, and has sustained its execution with generous and patient encouragement. I am very grateful to him for this, and also for the very valuable criticisms that he has made of my manuscript.

My thanks are also due to Mrs. Steer for doing the typing most

PREFACE

efficiently, and to the publishers and printers for their care with the later stages. They are due also to the Warden and Fellows of Wadham College, who gave me sabbatical leave to get the book started, and to my wife, who made it possible for me to carry on.

I. M. CROMBIE

Oxford,
January, 1962

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

TEXT AND REFERENCES

Except where otherwise stated, I have followed Burnet's Oxford Text of Plato; translations are from and references are to this text. References are given in the customary form of a number followed by a letter followed by a number where the reference is to a line (e.g. *Phaedo* 90 b 2), or a number followed by a letter only, or even by nothing, where the reference is to a rough area (e.g. *Phaedo* 90 b or *Phaedo* 90–92). The first number refers to the page of the edition of the younger Stephanus, Henri Estienne, of Paris 1578, the letter refers to the sections into which Stephanus divided his pages, and the second number refers to the line in the Oxford text. Stephanus' numbering is to be found in the margin of almost all editions and translations, and the letters (sometimes capitals, sometimes lower-case) in many. Where they are missing, their position can be guessed on the principle that Stephanus divided his page normally into five sections (A–E) of roughly equal length.

TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Where the meaning of a passage seems to me to be plain I have tried to translate into normal English; where something hinges on what precisely certain words mean I have aimed at a literal rendering of those words. Where a cited passage is quoted in inverted commas I claim to be translating the actual text; where the inverted commas are missing my only claim is that I am giving a *précis* or paraphrase of what the text says.

Greek words or phrases which I have used or quoted have been transliterated into the latin alphabet. In the case of proper names I have followed the traditional, Roman, system of transliteration which gives us *Pythagoras* for *Puthagoras* and *Plato* for *Platôn*; elsewhere I have abandoned it, writing *psuchê* instead of *psychê*, and so on.

There are roughly two systems of pronouncing Greek words in vogue in England, the 'old' or 'insular', and the 'modern' or 'international'. The old system, which is probably slowly dying, consists for the most part in pronouncing Greek vowels as we pronounce the

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

corresponding vowels in English; thus *tauté* is pronounced *tawtee*. The modern system has many variants, but one can roughly indicate it by the injunction: pronounce all vowels and consonants in the 'international' manner. The following suggestions will enable the Greekless reader to produce a reasonable approximation, not to the sounds which the Greeks used, but to those which schoolboys mostly learn nowadays.

Consonants

As in English, except

g always as in *get*, never as in *giant*.

ch always as in *loch* or as in *chasm*, never as in *church*.

Initial *ps*, *kt*, etc.; sound both letters.

z as *dz* in *adze*.

Vowels and Diphthongs

a the ordinary English *a* sound when before two consonants (as in *hand*) or when slurred (as in *extra*); elsewhere *ah* as in *Mahdi*.

(A circumflex on an *a* will denote that it is long, but its absence will not denote that it is not long.)

ai, *eye*, as in *Mainz*.

au, *ow* as in *Faust*.

e as in *get*, or as in *the sack*.

ê, *ay*, as in *suede*.

ei as in *rein* or as in *Eisenhower* (optional).

eu as in *Euston*.

i as in *hit*; sometimes long, as in *Tito*.

o as in *got*, *ô*, *owe*, as in *dote*.

oi as in *boil*.

ou, *oo*, as in *mousse*.

u as in *put* or as in *puce*.

âi, *êi*, *ôi*; in these ignore the *i* which is 'subscript' (written below the line) in Greek.

In all other combinations of vowels, sound both.

SPEAKERS

Socrates is the chief speaker in all the dialogues except:

Sophist chief speaker Eleatic Stranger

Statesman „ „ Eleatic Stranger

Parmenides „ „ Parmenides

Timaeus „ „ Timaeus

Critias „ „ Critias

Laws „ „ Athenian Stranger

Epinomis „ „ Athenian Stranger

Symposium various speakers, but the main philosophical interest is in Socrates' speech

I

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

PLATO was born in or about the year 427 B.C. the son of Ariston and Perictione; he had two brothers and a sister, and was himself probably the youngest of the family.

The Athens into which Plato was born was a metropolitan and indeed an imperial city. In the first two decades of the fifth century the Persian Kingdom, having subdued the Greek cities of the Ionian seaboard of Asia Minor, attempted the conquest of mainland Greece; and the successful resistance to Persia was led, and the brunt of it largely borne, by Athens and Sparta. Of these two powers Sparta was a conservative community with an ancient oligarchal constitution. Its small body of free, landowning citizens owed its wealth to the labours of helot and Messenian serfs, and its power to a rigorous and somewhat grotesque system of military training and discipline. Xenophobic, traditionalist, proverbially taciturn, and enormously tough, the Spartans cultivated the martial virtues, regarded peace as preparation for war, and ignored the growing stream of Greek culture, content to dominate the Peloponnese and preserve the ancient rural life. Athens, on the other hand, at the time of Marathon and Salamis had already begun to develop towards the Athens of Pericles. The ancient settlement under the Acropolis, immemorially the market town of the district of Attica, was already a city, already commercially active, living under a recently introduced, moderately democratic constitution. Commerce by sea was already active, though Athens was hardly as yet a naval power. If the main centres of Greek culture were still in Ionia on the one side, and Sicily and South Italy on the other, foreigners were already beginning to come to Athens; and Aeschylus, for example, the first of the great Athenian tragedians, was already of military age.

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

Emerging from the Persian Wars with enhanced prestige and naval power, Athens shortly became, largely by consent of the other members, the chief city of a League or Confederation of cities on the Ionian seaboard and the Aegean islands. Gradually, by steps we need not trace, the so-called Delian League became to all intents and purposes an Athenian Empire. Concurrently Athenian commerce grew, and Athens became a cultural and political metropolis, with an increasingly radical outlook, and a more fully democratic constitution. Rivalry with Sparta was inevitable, and eventually in 431 the Peloponnesian War between the two powers began. The chief political figure in Athens was Pericles, a figure much venerated by most Athenians (though not by Plato) as a wise and prudent statesman, and a patron of artists and philosophers.

The Peloponnesian War falls, for our purposes, into two phases; the first from 431 to 421 and the second from 415 to 404. In 429 Pericles died, and for three years from 430 to 427 Athens suffered from a mysterious and highly lethal epidemic. For these two reasons, in the opinion of many, the war did not go well for Athens. However in 421 a tolerable peace was concluded. The next six years had their military incidents, but the war did not begin again in earnest until 415, when it was re-kindled by an Athenian attack on Syracuse begun largely on the advice of Alcibiades. This phase of the war lasted until the final defeat of Athens in 404.

The Athens, then, into which Plato was born was an imperial city which regarded itself, in Pericles' words, as the educator of Greece; and he was born into it at a time when the jealousies excited by its commercial greatness and its imperial pretensions were about to deprive it, for a while, of all but cultural pre-eminence. The family from which he came was high-born and presumably well-to-do; there were important ancestors, including, indeed, on the father's side the sea-god Poseidon, and on the mother's Solon. While Plato was a boy his father died and his mother married a man called Pyrilampes who had been a friend of Pericles; so that it is reasonable to suppose that public figures will have been well known to Plato from childhood. As he must have been eighteen in or about 409, he presumably saw military service, probably in the cavalry, until the end of the war. It is also probable that he saw further military service in the period 395 to 391.

This however was about the extent of his public services to Athens. Why this was so he tells us himself in an open letter (*Seventh Letter*, p. 324 sqq.). 'Like many young men,' he writes, 'I intended to turn to public affairs as soon as I could achieve self-mastery, and things seemed to work out favourably for this purpose. For, after widespread dissatisfaction with the existing order, there was a revolution

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

. . . and thirty men took supreme power, some of them being relations or friends of mine. I was invited by them, as an obviously suitable person, to work for them. I thought—understandably enough in a young man—that they were going to recall the country from the wrong course to the right, and so I carefully watched their proceedings. But it was not long before they made the pre-revolutionary order seem a golden age. There was for example the case of Socrates, an elderly man and a friend of mine, whom I do not hesitate to call the most righteous man of his time. Being determined to implicate him in their actions, they tried to send him, with others, to arrest a citizen who was to be put to death. This he refused to do; he was ready to face whatever might come rather than have anything to do with their unholy acts. I could not help objecting to this and other similar things I observed, and so I kept aside. Soon after this the Thirty fell, and their constitution with them, and my political ambitions were slowly reborn. In the disturbed times that followed there was much that one could object to; as always happens in revolutionary situations, people took savage revenge on their enemies; but in general those who returned to power were very reasonable. But then, by various chances, some of those in authority charged our comrade Socrates with blasphemy. This was a most unholy charge to bring against Socrates of all men; but the jury found him guilty and he was put to death, notwithstanding his earlier refusal to take part in the arrest of one of their own partisans when they were out of power. Seeing these things, seeing the kind of men who were active in politics, their legislation and their behaviour, the more I considered it and the older I got, the harder it seemed to me to achieve anything in politics. One could do nothing without friends and loyal comrades; and where could one find these? There were none to hand because our ancestral way of life had been abandoned, nor could they readily be created. There had been so much disruption of laws and customs, the situation was so unstable that my early enthusiasm for public life ended in complete bafflement. I continued to watch for improvement in the political situation, and to look out for opportunities of action, but eventually I came to the view that all cities nowadays are badly governed and their institutions so corrupted that without great labour and good fortune nothing can be done about it. And so I was forced to proclaim the unique value of genuine philosophy, by which alone one can see what is right in public or private affairs; and to assert that the human race will never cease from travail until either true, genuine philosophers come to hold political power, or rulers, by some divine dispensation, give themselves in earnest to philosophy.'

This is, in all probability, Plato's own statement; made indeed to be read by friends in Syracuse in explanation of the role he had played

in Syracusan affairs, and therefore something of a political document, but no doubt as reliable as a man's account of his own actions and motives ever is. Since it is our only real source for Plato's earlier years, it cannot be disregarded.

The picture it paints is reasonable. A brilliant young man of good family, educated no doubt in the customary Athenian way; growing up during a long-drawn-out war. He presumes, and his friends presume, that he will take to public life. Discontented, as many must have been, with a state of affairs in which crucial decisions of foreign policy, and even of strategy, are taken in an unwieldy popular assembly, he is prepared to entertain revolutionary proposals of an anti-democratic kind. So are many of his relatives, including his uncles Critias and Charmides. When however the oligarchic revolution came, it came at the dictate of the victorious Spartan leader Lysander (the Thirty ruled for the best part of 404, after the defeat of Aegospotami and the dismantling of the Athenian fortifications). Critias was the leader of its most violent wing, and the arrest of Leon, in which Socrates would have no part, was by no means the only crime which they sponsored.

Evidently Plato was too much of a Periclean democrat, or of a patriot, or simply of an honest man to stomach these tyrannical proceedings; and probably much of his revulsion was due to the enigmatic and ambivalent influence of Socrates. This we must now consider.

Socrates was an Athenian, born in about 470. According to Plato (and the picture in Aristophanes' *Clouds* confirms this) he was interested, in his earlier years, in physical science; but came to believe that the physical scientists were on the wrong track altogether. Since he was also sceptical of the conventional morality of his times, and had a low opinion of the religion and ethics conveyed in the Homeric poems (the staple Athenian educational material), he might at first sight be included in the 'Sophistic' movement of the latter half of the fifth century. The term 'Sophist' is a somewhat vague one applicable to anybody prepared to teach adults for a fee; but it was characteristic of the typical Sophists that they were prepared to teach young men how to be good citizens and get on in public affairs, and that, although many of them were competent expositors of scientific and other doctrine, and some of them did original work in these fields, their main interest, and the main interest of their pupils, was the art of living. In this Socrates resembled them; but he was not a Sophist. For one thing he was an amateur; but this is only the external consequence of the fact that he did not believe that the art of living could be taught by delivering lectures. This he disbelieved, not only for the obvious reasons, but also because he was convinced that it was

incoherent opinions, acquired without sufficient examination, and manifesting themselves in inability to offer clear analyses of crucial concepts, which was at the root of error, at all levels of sophistication. Accordingly the essential preliminary to all positive teaching was a process of refutation, producing a state of *aporia* or puzzlement, a conviction of one's own ignorance. It was his boast that he was a wise man at least in this, that although he knew nothing, he did at least know that he knew nothing.

For these reasons he was a unique figure. A man of great personal courage and moral integrity, and equally great eccentricity, he spent his time (if we may trust Plato's account) conducting a war on all fronts. The overall strategy was to induce people to re-think their opinions about life by making plain to them the incoherency of their ideas and the divorce between what they professed and the way they determined their actions. Re-thinking was indeed the vogue (the age was one of 'enlightenment'), but it mainly consisted, in Socrates' opinion, in the adoption of plausible formulae, sometimes high-minded but more often of an offensively cynical kind. The strategy therefore was to puncture, and the tactics adopted consisted in button-holing anybody who could be laid hold on and cross-questioning him. Socrates' victims, then, were of different kinds. There were the professional Sophists, who could be reduced to incoherence about the presuppositions of their activities; and a sub-class among them was the cynical Sophists, or their disciples, who needed a particularly stiff dose of the medicine. There were respectable *bien-pensants* who had to be shown that their conventional opinions would lead to consequences which they would themselves regard as morally objectionable in unusual combinations of circumstances, and who therefore had to learn that their professed opinions did not conform to their real beliefs. There were also men who had adopted a Socratic outlook (for although his method was mainly destructive, there seem to have been certain Socratic positions), but who had to learn that they had adopted it too easily, as a debating stance, and did not fully understand what it entailed. But there was also one class of victims which was particularly significant. Among the Athenian aristocracy romantic attachments between grown men and adolescents (encouraged in Sparta on the ground that it gave the young men somebody to look up to, but generally discouraged in Athens) had become fashionable. To this fashion, in a characteristically idiosyncratic way, Socrates conformed. His attachments were strictly 'platonic'; but he seems to have made a practice of taking under his wing any particularly promising young man and forming a close friendship with him. His purpose was, presumably, to foster in minds not yet debauched by public or Sophistic opinion, his own positive outlook, and through them to

influence the Athenian way of life in the direction of simplicity, virtue, and personal religion; that is, against the prevailing current.

For Socrates was himself an honourable man. His refusal to arrest Leon was not the only occasion when he risked his life for his principles. Earlier, after the naval battle of Arginusae (406), when the victorious Athenian generals had failed to rescue a large number of shipwrecked survivors, there had been a proposal before the assembly to impeach the generals in a summary and illegal fashion. Socrates happened (such things were determined by lot) to be one of the presidents of the assembly, and refused, although the situation was dangerous, to allow the motion to be put. Again, there is no doubt that he could have saved his own life if he had been prepared to take a more conciliatory attitude at his trial. It cannot be denied that he was a man of principle. But however excellent his intentions, perhaps because his outlook was an uncomfortable blend of intellectual progressiveness and social reaction, his influence upon some of his young men was disastrous; or at least they turned out disastrously. Alcibiades, who advocated the Syracusan expedition, and whose disreputable record included giving active support to Sparta after his exile, had been one of them. So too, it is generally believed, had Critias and Charmides. In general the practice of getting hold of promising young men of good family and disabusing them of conventional attitudes had had the effect (or could easily be thought to have had the effect) of destroying customary scruples and making them ready to defy public opinion and embark upon extremely unprincipled courses.

That this was not the only effect which Socrates could have is shown by the case of Plato, whose attitude may have been unreasonably perfectionist and therefore pessimistic and defeatist, but whose conduct in troubled times was otherwise blameless. Plato had been a disciple of Socrates, for how long and to what extent we do not know. The phrase 'our comrade' in the passage from the *Seventh Letter* quoted above suggests a fairly close association; and in the *Apology* Plato represents himself as one of Socrates' three sureties, while in the *Phaedo* he says that he was ill in order to explain why he was not one of the group of friends who were present with Socrates in prison on his last day. There are indeed stories about Plato's 'conversion' when he came to know Socrates, which led him to burn his poems, including a tragedy which was to be entered in competition at a Festival; but these are probably fictions, because it is unlikely, given his family connections, that there was ever a time when Plato did not know Socrates. It is therefore probable that Plato was a fairly close associate of Socrates in the last years of the latter's life. Perhaps Socrates grew less reckless as he grew older; perhaps there were

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

always those on whom his effect was harmless or beneficial. At any rate there is no doubt that, whether before or after his death, he exerted an enormous influence on Plato, and that Plato did not become an oligarchic conspirator or a political adventurer, but saw Socrates as one who wanted to restore ancient ways not by reactionary violence, but by persuasion.

So the first important influence in Plato's life was that of Socrates, which turned him gradually from thoughts of a political career to the conviction that his vocation was to educate. It seems however to have been ten years or more from the death of Socrates before Plato exercised this vocation by anything more than writing. After the death of Socrates in 399 Plato and others of Socrates' friends, went, by way of refuge, to Megara as *protégés* of Euclides. Euclides was an Eleatic philosopher whose chief interest was probably in problems of logic and methodology. How long Plato stayed in Megara we do not know; there are stories of extensive travels, including a visit to Egypt. Being still of military age, he was presumably in Athens between 395 and 391 when Athens was again at war. Then, we learn from the *Seventh Letter*, Plato visited the Greek cities of Southern Italy and Sicily when he was 'about forty'; that is round about 387. In Italy he was shocked by the luxurious standard of living, but found at Tarentum the Pythagorean philosopher Archytas in a position of democratic authority. Archytas, with whom Plato became intimate, was a mathematician of importance, and may have exercised on Plato a considerable influence—though Plato does not say so.

From Italy Plato went to Sicily where, at Syracuse, he made an important friendship with a young man called Dion, brother-in-law of the reigning Tyrant, Dionysius I. To Dion Plato used to express his views about human life, finding him a ready listener, the keenest of all his pupils. Dion resolved to lead a life very different from that of the Italian and Sicilian cities, and to prefer goodness to pleasure and luxury. This conversion had important consequences both for Syracuse and for Plato. Immediately however (and now we rely not on Plato's own account, but on tradition) Plato was expelled from Syracuse for expressing his views on autocracy to Dionysius; and was even, according to some stories, sold into slavery and ransomed by a rich friend. At any rate, he returned home, and bought some land in the precinct of the hero Academus, where he founded the school known as the Academy. Here, with occasional interruptions, Plato spent the rest of his life as a bachelor Head of a College. The Academy itself remained intact and functioning until A.D. 529, the year in which St. Benedict founded the monastery of Monte Cassino.

Whether the Academy was the first university institution in Europe we do not really know; some scholars believe that the earlier Ionian

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

philosophers had had more or less permanent schools, and the Pythagoreans had some kind of common institutions; but it was certainly the earliest of which we know anything definite. It is evident that it was a place of teaching and research. Men of great distinction such as Eudoxus came to work there,¹ and young men such as Aristotle came to learn. From an amusing fragment of the comic poet Epicrates, describing Plato supervising some students who were classifying a pumpkin, we can infer that formal teaching was given and a general intellectual training aimed at. It was not a mere hot-bed for forcing Platonists. Aristotle would hardly have stayed for twenty years if it had been.

No doubt the Academy, and writing, occupied most of Plato's time for the rest of his life. But in 368 Dionysius I died and was succeeded by his son Dionysius II. Dion, who had remained faithful to Plato's influence and hostile to arbitrary rule, persuaded the new Tyrant to send for Plato to advise him. Reluctantly, Plato went; but soon after his arrival Dion's enemies persuaded Dionysius to banish Dion. Dionysius retained Plato by something very like force until 366, when war broke out between Syracuse and Carthage, and Plato was allowed to go home on condition that he returned after the war. This he had to do in 362. There was however renewed trouble between Dionysius and Dion (who was still in exile) which led to a breach between Dionysius and Plato, who was, however, kept at Syracuse until 360, when he was rescued by ambassadors from Tarentum sent by his friend Archytas. Dion later (357) led an expedition against Dionysius which led to civil turmoil in Syracuse. Dion was eventually assassinated some four years after he sailed.

The enterprise therefore was unsuccessful. Plato had proposed a plan of studies for Dionysius, but Dionysius had never allowed him to put it seriously into effect. Some have supposed that Plato went to Syracuse with a starry-eyed determination to turn Dionysius into a philosopher-king, and that the pessimism of his outlook derives from his failure to do so. But it is most unlikely that he was ever so simple-minded as to hope to turn Syracuse into an ideal community by converting its Tyrant, and the pessimism was undoubtedly there before he failed to do so. It is probable that he went to Syracuse in the sixties out of simple loyalty to his disciple Dion, and in the hope of mitigating the harshness of arbitrary rule. He can hardly be blamed for doing so; and there is no doubt that it was a brave act to return in 362.

Having returned home in 360 Plato kept in touch with the sad story of Syracusan affairs, but gave no doubt most of his attention to his work in the Academy. He died in 348 or 347 aged about eighty. His will suggests that he was not well off.

¹ This is not certain.

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

The following table gives the most important dates.

427	Birth of Plato
409	He becomes of military age
399	Death of Socrates; Plato is twenty-eight
?388	First visit to Syracuse; aged thirty-nine
?387	The Academy founded
367-6	Second visit to Syracuse; aged sixty
362-0	Third visit to Syracuse
347	Death of Plato.

Plato's writings

Our manuscripts contain thirty-five published works of Plato's, and thirteen letters. With one exception (the *Apology*, Plato's version of the speech Socrates made in his own defence), and two partial exceptions (the *Menexenus*, a remarkable oddity, and the *Timaeus*), the published works are all in dialogue form, and they are all referred to as 'the dialogues'. The manuscripts also contain a small number of dialogues and other pieces which were known in antiquity not to have been written by Plato. The writings represented as genuine in the manuscripts are arranged in nine groups of four (the letters counting as one). This arrangement probably dates from the first century A.D. and has no authority of any kind. It is certainly not, for example, an arrangement in order of composition. The dialogues are of very different lengths. Two (*Republic* and *Laws*) are as long as a modern book; others are short essays.

There has been much learned dispute about how many of the writings represented as genuine in antiquity are in fact by Plato. A great deal of research having been done, the general opinion is that they nearly all are. And this corresponds with the general probabilities of the case. The Academy had a library, and was in continuous organised existence down to the sixth century A.D. From the very first it is likely to have kept the founder's writings separate from all others. No doubt it is quite conceivable that other members of the Academy wrote dialogues after the Platonic model, and some of these may have been mistakenly imputed to Plato after his death; there may have been dialogues written by pupils with assistance from the master, unfinished drafts completed by pupils and so forth; and some of these may have got into our canon. Accidents of this kind are possible, but not many of them are likely to have happened.

Dating of the dialogues

It would be pleasant to know the relative dates of the dialogues, and there have been diligent attempts to determine them. Attempts based

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

on preconceived opinions about the development of Plato's thought, or on fancies about the subjects likely to interest an older or a younger man are now discredited. There are only three kinds of clues to the order of composition: (1) the mentioning of one dialogue by another; (2) the unintelligibility of something in one dialogue to anybody who has not read another; and (3) considerations of style. We can get a certain amount, but in my opinion not very much, out of the first two, and must rely mainly on style.

Considerations of style are of two kinds. Each kind begins from the fact that we have several conspiring reasons for assigning the long dialogue called the *Laws* to the last dozen years of Plato's life. Proceeding, then, on the assumption that the *Laws* is late, we find two distinct ways in which some dialogues resemble it in point of style and in which others do not, and broadly speaking those which resemble in the one way also resemble in the other. This enables us to distinguish a group of late dialogues. Turning our attention to the remainder we find that some of them seem to *approximate* to the style of the late dialogues more than others; from this fact we can distinguish a group of middle dialogues. We thus get the three groups, early, middle, and late; though on the whole we must confess that the distinctions between early and middle and middle and late are not very clear-cut.

The two kinds of differences are these. Firstly in the early dialogues Plato writes a brilliantly lucid, 'conversational' style, in which he does indeed aim at 'effects', but the effects are natural rather than literary, the humour comic rather than sophisticated, and so forth. In the later dialogues Plato is writing books rather than dialogues; the conflict of personalities is subordinated to the drama of ideas; the wonderful freshness of his early style is seldom quite accomplished even when it is aimed at, and what is more often aimed at, sometimes by well-known literary artifices,¹ is a rich-textured, slightly poetical style, full of antitheses and elaborate, sometimes almost breath-taking convolutions. Both in youth and in old age Plato is a brilliant prose-writer (in the *Laws* the writing is often faded and dead, but it is faded brilliance); but one thinks of some such adjective as 'sublime' to describe the brilliance of his old age, 'sparkling' for that of his youth. The other kind of difference is much more humdrum. At one period of his life a writer may use, say, 'furthermore' more often than 'moreover'; at another period the ratio may change. If one investigates the incidence of large numbers of words and phrases of this

¹ Among these dodges are: the avoidance of hiatus (i.e. that which occurs between the words 'the India Office'); the use of words from the tragic poets; the use of long, compound, often home-compounded words; attention to the rhythm of sentence endings; chiasmus (e.g. 'Cows live on grass; on rabbits live stoats').

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

kind (the trivial kind of word about which a writer does not deliberate) one may find marked tendencies which it is difficult to disregard if they coincide. This 'stylometric' work has been done on Plato and has produced results with whose broad outline most scholars are satisfied.

We get, then, three groups of dialogues. Since there are two big breaks in Plato's life after the death of Socrates (the founding of the Academy, and the Syracusan *imbroglio*) it is reasonable to guess that most of the early dialogues were written in the nineties, most of the late ones in the fifties, and the middle ones in the period in between. Further than this it does not seem possible to go. Some scholars have tried by stylometric tests to determine the order more minutely; but different scholars get different results; and it is questionable whether it is legitimate in principle to attach any significance to stylometry except when the differences discovered are large.

I said above that one could not determine the order of the dialogues on the basis of pre-conceived opinions about the development of Plato's thought; but it is undoubtedly satisfactory to discover that the order we get from considerations of style is an entirely satisfactory one. It bears no relation to the order believed in before the stylistic investigations were begun; but I doubt whether anybody would dispute that Plato's intellectual development as we now see it is much more intelligible than that which was pre-conceived for him.

I shall now give what seems to me to be the state of opinion at the moment concerning the contents of the three groups. In the following table I shall include only dialogues which seem to be pretty generally agreed to be by Plato; I shall subjoin notes on the others. I shall arrange the dialogues within the groups in alphabetical order; and shall ask the reader to remember that the difference between late and early is marked, and cannot be passed without grave cause; that between middle and early and middle and late shifting and provisional.

EARLY	MIDDLE	LATE
<i>Apology</i>	<i>Parmenides</i>	<i>Laws</i>
<i>Charmides</i>	<i>Phaedo</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Cratylus</i>	<i>Phaedrus</i>	<i>Sophist</i>
<i>Crito</i>	<i>Republic</i>	<i>Statesman</i>
<i>Euthydemus</i>	<i>Symposium</i>	(also called
<i>Euthyphro</i>	(also called	<i>Politicus</i>)
<i>Gorgias</i>	<i>Banquet</i>	<i>Timaeus</i> and
<i>Hippias Minor</i>	<i>Theaetetus</i>	<i>Critias</i>
<i>Laches</i>		(unfinished
<i>Lysis</i>		sequel to
<i>Menexenus</i>		<i>Timaeus</i>)
<i>Meno</i>		
<i>Protagoras</i>		

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

Alcibiades 1. Quite likely not by Plato. If by Plato, then fairly late, both on linguistic grounds and also because (a) it is something of a text-book of Platonic ethics, and (b) its Socrates and its Alcibiades might be any Platonist and any young man. There is no characterisation at all.

Alcibiades 2. Quite likely not by Plato. There are some suspicious words. If by Plato, then fairly late on the same grounds as the above. It is quite a good dialogue, better than *Alcibiades 1* because it makes most of the points the latter makes and makes them much more briefly and efficiently. Perhaps both of these were 'prize-essays' in the Academy; they read quite like it.

Clitophon. A short fragment. There is not enough of it to decide who wrote it or when.

Epinomis. In form, the epilogue to the *Laws*; therefore certainly late. According to Diogenes Laertius (iii, 1, 37) Plato did not live to write a fair copy of the *Laws*; this was done for him by Philippus of Opus, 'and his too, some say, is the *Epinomis*'. Whether this means that Philippus wrote, or merely fair-copied, the *Epinomis* is unclear. If Philippus wrote it (a) he wrote very like Plato and (b) he left a good many rather obscure and incoherent sentences standing, such as one might expect a living writer to improve on revision. If Plato wrote it, his death would explain this. I think Plato wrote it. At any rate it is presumably meant to be what he would have written, and as to that Philippus (who was an Academic and competent in the subject) would have known.

Hipparchus. Rather a dim dialogue, in Plato's early manner. If by Plato, then on an off-day.

Hippias Major. Still thought by some not to be Plato's, but for quite insufficient reasons. I have no doubt it is early Plato. It is an excellent short dialogue, bringing out more clearly than most of the early dialogues the logical nature of Socrates' procedures.

Ion. There is no reason to suppose it is not by Plato; presumably early. Socrates is a little more positive than he usually is in the early dialogues.

Lovers (also called *Rivals*). A good dialogue; I have little doubt it is by Plato, and probably fairly early. Its topics are close to those of the *Euthydemus* (see note on this below).

Minos. Linguistically late, and appears to admire Cretan institutions more than Plato does in the *Laws*. Generally held not to be Plato's. I would not like to say.

Theages. Purports to be an early dialogue; but the portrait of Socrates is very unconvincing. I should not like to ascribe it to Plato.

I would add, then, to the above tables:

EARLY
Hippias Major
Ion
Lovers

LATE
Epinomis

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

I append some notes on dialogues whose dating is disputed by some.

Cratylus. Stylometry will not get us very far with this, as the vein is more consistently light-hearted than usual. The preoccupation with language is characteristic of Plato's later life, and some would like to bring it down to the Middle or even Late group. I sympathise.

Euthydemus. On grounds of subject-matter I think this also may be much later than is commonly supposed.

Meno. Some would make this Middle period.

Timaeus. Mr. G. E. L. Owen has recently suggested (*Classical Quarterly* 1953) that this dialogue belongs to the Middle period. I am unconvinced by Mr. Owen's arguments, which imply a conception of Plato's development that I do not accept; but his conclusion is one which is extremely attractive once it is seriously entertained. Since the dialogue is anyhow a very singular one it is doubtful how far stylometric tests are relevant to it, and there is therefore no conclusive objection to the view that it was written not long after the *Republic*.

Phaedrus. I confess that I am unhappy at grouping the *Phaedrus* with the *Republic*. The *Phaedrus* shows a considerable interest in 'late' themes.

The Middle Group. It is I think arguable that the division into three groups (still taken for granted by many scholars) is misleading. The correct picture perhaps is: A considerable early output, culminating perhaps with the *Symposium* or *Phaedo*, or perhaps with the *Republic*. But one may reasonably suppose that the more substantial dialogues like the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* took longer to write and appeared at longer intervals than the earlier pieces. The rate of publication may be supposed therefore to have tailed off, and the *Republic* may well have appeared (whatever 'appeared' means, for we do not know what publication consisted in) some fair time after, say, the *Phaedo*; perhaps in the 370s. Then we might suppose a fairly fallow period into which we can fit the *Parmenides*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Theaetetus* (not necessarily in that order). The difference in tone between the *Theaetetus* and its official sequel the *Sophist* is marked, and there are some reasons for attributing the *Theaetetus* to a date shortly after Theaetetus' death which perhaps occurred in 369. We might suppose therefore that Syracusan preoccupations kept Plato fairly quiet for the rest of the 360s. (Or did he write the *Timaeus* in Syracuse? That would account perhaps for its odd character. For example, it fails to develop new ideas which are to be found in the *Parmenides* and *Phaedrus*, not to mention those in the *Theaetetus*. Political anxieties might account for this.) Then after his final return from Syracuse in 360 the considerable work of writing the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, and *Laws* might have been undertaken. This would give us an early period during which relatively slight dialogues were thrown off at a good rate, a final decade or so devoted to four very major works, and a considerable lapse of time in between into which we can fit anything

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

which is neither clearly early nor clearly late. This would hardly constitute a third 'period'.

Authorship of the Letters

Letters by great men, being saleable to libraries, were forged in antiquity, and Plato's letters would not have been in his possession at his death (though copies might well have been). Therefore, in the case of the letters, the principle that the Academy would have been careful to exclude unauthentic material has less weight than in the case of the dialogues. If a forged letter had turned up at Alexandria, they might have argued that there could still be authentic letters of Plato's knocking about, and admitted it into the canon.

The question is so complicated, and there is so little agreement about it, that we cannot go into it here. We must content ourselves with the following. (1) The *First Letter* is certainly not Plato's (nor a forgery; the writer does not pretend to be Plato, and it must have got there by mistake). (2) The *Second Letter* is generally thought not to be Plato's, but to be a forgery based on the *Seventh*. (3) The *Seventh Letter* is much the most important historically and philosophically, and is almost universally thought genuine today. If it is a forgery (and if it is not Plato's it cannot be anything else) the forger's literary and philosophical gifts were remarkable and his knowledge of Athenian and Syracusan history very great.¹ (4) In the case of all the others there are reputable scholars who think them genuine.

There is an excellent short discussion in *Plato and his Contemporaries* by G. C. Field, pp. 197-201.

THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

The difficulties of dialogue form

Anybody who sets out to report Plato's opinions can properly be asked to tell us on what principles he interprets the evidence at his disposal.

This evidence consists very largely of dialogues. It is true that we have the *Letters*, in particular the *Seventh*; but we cannot get very much guidance there. It is true also that in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle tells us a good deal (and a little elsewhere) about Plato's opinions. But most of what Aristotle tells us about Plato is told in the course of critical comments; quite often, also, the fact that Aristotle is addressing an audience who were familiar with the doctrines which he is

¹ It must be confessed that Professor Gilbert Ryle, whose opinions on Platonic questions are as bold as they are weighty, does not accept the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*.

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

decrying makes his allusions to these doctrines difficult for us to interpret. It is also the case that it is at least possible that what Aristotle is discussing is the doctrines which Plato propounded orally in the Academy, and we cannot assume without argument that what Plato taught in the Academy is continuous with what he taught or meant to teach in his dialogues. It might be, for example, that there was the same sort of revolution in Plato's opinions as there was in those of Kant, and the dialogues might belong to an early 'pre-Copernican' phase which was repudiated in the later oral teaching. If, then, we are to understand what Plato believed, during his earlier years at any rate, we shall have to decide what it was (if anything) that he meant his dialogues to persuade their readers of.

This is problematical. He who presents his points by means of imaginary conversations avoids, thereby, committing himself to the opinions of his characters. This applies to Plato with especial strength. His dialogues are not, on the whole, like those of, for example, Berkeley. I suppose that there is no reasonable doubt that Berkeley meant us to see that he was speaking through the mouth of Philonous, largely perhaps because it is Philonous who very clearly wins. Hylas' contribution to the conversation consists simply in being progressively beaten into retreat. Plato's dialogues are not often of this kind. For various reasons which we will shortly examine it is seldom easy to assume with confidence that Plato meant us to think that the line of argument which is followed by the chief speaker in a dialogue is correct. This is what makes it difficult to decide on what principles doctrines can be attributed to Plato as doctrines which he not only put into somebody's mouth but also himself maintained.

Philonous is the 'chief speaker' in Berkeley's *Three Dialogues* because he wins. In all of Plato's dialogues it is possible to nominate the 'chief speaker', but it is not precisely because he wins that we nominate him. The *Apology* is not a dialogue though it is of course spoken by Socrates (it purports to be his defence at his trial). The *Menexenus* is also not a dialogue. In form it is a funeral speech by Pericles' mistress which Socrates recites. The only reason for attributing it to Plato is that it is so very un-Platonic that those who included it in the canon must have had compelling reasons for doing so. The *Symposium* is also not precisely a dialogue, for it contains a number of long speeches; but the most important is that of Socrates. The *Timaeus* mainly consists of uninterrupted exposition, and the same is true of its fragmentary sequel the *Critias*. Apart from these exceptions, the rest of the so-called dialogues are all more or less genuine dialogues. In the *Parmenides*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias* the chief speaker is the person the dialogue is named after; in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* the chief speaker is an Eleatic Stranger, in the *Laws* an Athenian Stranger.

PLATO'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

In all the other dialogues it is Socrates. It seems then that every dialogue has a chief speaker, and it might be natural to suppose that he is Plato's mouthpiece. Why may we not do this?

One reason is that the chief speaker is so often a historical personage. The Athenian and Eleatic Strangers are of course anonymous, and Timaeus may well be fictitious. (We have no independent evidence that he existed, and this may well be taken as suggesting that he did not exist. If he did not, he might be meant to stand for an ideal, to be a representative specimen of the Western tradition, Pythagorean and other, of Greek thought.) But Parmenides and Socrates were historical characters. Therefore the doubt must inevitably arise: did Plato use them, and in particular Socrates, as ventriloquist's dummies, or did he rather put into their mouths opinions which he believed them to have held? So long as it is possible that Plato was trying to depict the doctrines of other thinkers we cannot assume that he is himself to be identified with the victor in the discussion.

Another reason why we cannot make this identification is that very often there is no victor in the simple sense in which Philonous is the victor in Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*. Except for the first part of the *Parmenides*, Socrates dominates and is in control of every conversation in which he takes any significant part. But he is seldom maintaining a view against an opponent who is putting forward a different view, as Philonous does against Hylas. In the first book of the *Republic* this does indeed happen; roughly speaking Socrates defends orthodox altruistic morality against the cynicism of Thrasymachus. Something rather similar happens in the *Gorgias*. In the *Phaedo* Socrates explains and defends his views on immortality. In the *Euthydemus* he expounds a moral view. In the *Republic* (apart from the first book) he puts forward his own opinions, his interlocutors confining themselves to asking questions and expressing agreement. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates puts forward opinions which seem to satisfy him, and which win Phaedrus' assent. In the first section of the *Theaetetus* his destructive criticism of a definition advanced by Theaetetus enables him to make an important positive point. In the *Philebus* (the only late dialogue in which Socrates appears) he begins by disputing with a hedonist opponent, but before long he is arguing constructively and his opponent has become an interested hearer. In the *Sophist* and *Statesman* the Eleatic Stranger is more or less a lecturer, and the same is true of the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*.

We see then that there are a good many dialogues (*Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Euthydemus*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*, with the first part of the *Theaetetus*) in which it is entirely or predominantly true that the chief speaker expounds at length a point of view on some topic. In these it would be easy to assume that the

point of view is Plato's own. There are however certain other dialogues in which this does not happen. Roughly these may be divided into two kinds. The one kind contains most of the early dialogues (for example the *Laches*), and it also contains the second part of the *Theaetetus* and perhaps the first part of the *Parmenides*. The characteristic feature of this kind of dialogue is that while the argument is fairly clear the conclusion is puzzling; for the chief speaker exerts his powers to produce a condition of *aporia* or of not knowing where to go next. The parties to the conversation go away sadly admitting that they do not know what piety or self-restraint or courage or knowledge is; for various promising attempts at answering questions of this kind have been shown to entail unacceptable conclusions. The second kind of dialogue in which nobody can be said to expound any positive doctrine is a small class consisting of the *Lysis* among the early dialogues and of the second part of the *Parmenides* from a later date. The characteristic of these works is that the reader lays them down mystified and exasperated. There has been a great deal of argument mostly of a brisk and not very thorough kind, and a string of paradoxes has constituted the conclusions of this argument. Doubtless numerous points have been established *obiter* (though the argument has seldom been exhaustive enough to satisfy one that the points are genuinely established), but the purpose of the whole performance is difficult to determine. One gets the impression that Plato is more interested in dazzling the reader with a display of, often sophistical, virtuosity than in convincing him of anything.

We have then three kinds of dialogues, which we might describe as the constructive, the destructive, and the enigmatic respectively. Furthermore, we find these three elements occurring occasionally in dialogues of a different general character—enigmatic passages in a generally constructive dialogue and so forth. We must notice also that there are two distinct kinds of destructive arguing. There is the kind which occurs in the 'destructive dialogues' where the conversation concludes with the demonstration that, if one asserts some proposition that seems attractive, then one will also have to assert some other proposition which is unacceptable. But there is also the kind of destructive arguing, to which for example Polus is subjected in the *Gorgias*, which is necessary in order that the chief speaker may clear out of the way something which is inconsistent with the doctrine that he goes on to put forward.

This second kind of destructive arguing creates no problem for the interpreter; obviously if I wish to say that political power is not worth seeking after I shall have to argue against those who say that it is. But the kind of destructive arguing which issues in a state of *aporia* does pose something of a problem; and so do the enigmatic passages.

If, for example, we suppose that in the *Lysis* Plato's main purpose is to pose theoretical puzzles so as to induce the reader to reflect on certain problems, then we are distinguishing between what Plato is doing and what the chief speaker is doing; and if we feel bound to make this distinction in an enigmatic dialogue or passage, then why should we not make it in a destructive dialogue or passage? Are we entitled to conclude that Plato thought that courage cannot be said to be the knowledge of what is and is not fearful from the fact that the *Laches* seem to issue in that conclusion? If he wants the reader to see through some of Socrates' arguments in the *Lysis*, may he not also want the reader to see through some of his arguments in the *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, or *Protagoras*? Moreover, once we get a firm hold on the idea that Plato may sometimes wish to suggest thoughts which are not identical with, and may even contradict, those which Socrates (or whoever it may be) expresses, we cannot help going on to wonder how far we are justified in regarding Plato as committing himself to the opinions of the chief speaker even in the constructive dialogues. Perhaps it was his regular practice to set down what seemed to him to be possible lines of argument, whether or not he was in agreement with them.

The doubts thus created are enhanced by certain passages in which Plato expresses a low view of the value of written philosophy. One such passage occurs in the *Seventh Letter* (341-4). Very much compressed what Plato says is this. About the things which he deems important he has never written and never will write a systematic treatise. To do so is to show that you do not understand that this kind of subject, unlike others, cannot be communicated. Words are too shifting to convey the speaker's meaning, examples that can be pointed to are never unambiguously examples of that which they are cited to illustrate. Definitions and empirical examples can convey a measure of understanding; but the man who wants real understanding cannot get it by their aid. For any verbal statement can always have holes picked in it and be made to look ridiculous, any instance can always be looked at from the wrong point of view. Really to understand something you need not only mental ability but also an affinity to the subject (if the subject is justice, for example, you need to be a just man), and you must live with the subject for a long time, engaging in friendly disputation upon it and allowing ideas, words, definitions, and instances to rub against each other, until in the end the topic which you are trying to understand, like a flame leaping from a fire, suddenly illuminates your mind, and the illumination thereafter abides.¹ Since this is what it is like to come to understand something important, it is absurd to write down important doctrine

¹ This passage is more carefully discussed in Volume 2.

systematically; for what is written cannot be modified to meet the needs of a particular reader.

In other words, in philosophical matters any statement that I may make will be misleading to you unless it excites in your mind the thought which it represents in mine; and there can be no guarantee that it will do this, for there can be no guarantee that you will take the words in the sense in which I intend them, nor, if I use examples, that you will see them as I see them. Therefore the only thing that the teacher can do is to bring his pupil to see things as he sees them, which involves a prolonged process of discussion, and in particular of testing and questioning the account of the matter which the pupil is able, at any stage of the process, to give. This is something which no written exposition can ever achieve.

In the *Phaedrus* (275-6) Socrates is made to say something rather similar. He tells us that a written statement is like a picture; it seems to mean something, but if you ask it what it means it will not tell you. Once published you cannot restrict its circulation, and when it is read you will not be there to back it up. True writing is done in the soul of the pupil. Literal writing is comparable to a hobby such as forcing hot-house plants; it is a recreation which some prefer to going to parties. Apart from such entertainment-value writing is useful only to assist the memory.

A rather different point, but one which conspires to suggest that Plato did not believe in teaching philosophy by publishing systematic accounts of his doctrine, is to be found in the *Sophist* (228-30). Here the Eleatic Stranger (echoing Socrates in the *Apology* and elsewhere) maintains that the greatest spiritual evil is ignorance, and the most pernicious form of ignorance the belief that you know something which you do not know. This form of ignorance is a kind of constipation; it is no use feeding the patient on wholesome doctrine, for without a preliminary purge he can make no use of it. You must first make him ready to learn by showing him the inconsistency of his opinions.

Put together, such passages might suggest that Plato would take a low view of the value of philosophical writing. Abstruse and technical points might be worth writing down, since these are easily forgotten. Popular errors might be worth refuting, for this would be for many people the first step in a very necessary purge. Apart from that one might expect to find in Plato's writings a good deal of pure entertainment, and a good deal of enigmatic material designed to convince the reader of the paucity of his understanding. The general purpose would be destructive where it was not either mnemonic or purely recreational.

I do not believe that the expectation that this is what Plato's

writings will be like will survive the experience of reading them. All of these factors are present certainly, and perhaps in greater bulk than some commentators assume. But there is little reasonable doubt that there is also a good deal of positive teaching. What we ought perhaps to say is not that Plato thought it positively wrong to attempt to communicate philosophical doctrine in writing, but rather that he thought it unlikely to be very successful. He ought perhaps to have been more sensitive to the danger of creating 'the most pernicious form of ignorance' in the minds of uncritical disciples; but he seems to have taken the risk. It may be that much of his writing was intended to be used in the class-room as a basis for discussions over which he would himself preside, and that this was intended to be the antidote to the poison.

One could prolong this discussion greatly. I shall cut it down by giving a list of the elements which I take to be commonly present in the dialogues. The first of these is entertainment. This takes two forms, firstly simple comedy, whether broad or sophisticated, and secondly intellectual teasing. Examples of the first are common and for our present purpose not interesting. An example of the second is to be found in the *Lysis* (211-13). Here there are a series of arguments which create perplexity and which depend on the ambiguities of the word *philos* and the verb *philein*. A and B cannot be *friends* (*philoí*) unless A *loves* (*philei*) B and B loves A; but it may be that A is *fond of* (*philei*) B, and that B is therefore *dear* (*philos*) to A, without any response from B. That *philos* means 'friend', 'dear to' and (in combination) 'fond of' is, in a sense, the point which Plato is making in this passage; he is not simply entangled in the ambiguities of the word. Yet he is not straightforwardly making this point; ostensibly he is showing that it is very difficult to say what a *philos* is. He is posing a conundrum which he could solve if he had a mind to, but which he feels that the reader may prefer to solve for himself. It is true that these notions played some part in cosmological speculation (*philia* was a force in the world-picture of Empedocles) and that therefore the solution of the conundrum might have been of relevance to some serious matter; but if Plato was primarily interested in serious applications of his puzzle he would surely have given some indication of what these might be. It seems that we must say that this passage poses a conundrum for its own sake. Less wholehearted examples of the same thing are not uncommonly to be found in less enigmatic writings than the *Lysis*. For example, in the First Book of the *Republic* when Socrates has sufficiently disposed of Polemarchus' attempt to extract a definition of justice from the poet Simonides, he goes on beyond the needs of the argument to foist upon Polemarchus the alleged consequence that a just man will be a skilful thief. The

serious point has already been made; the further consequence is something for the reader to exercise his wits upon.

Another element which one sometimes encounters in Plato's writings is deliberate paradox of the Shavian kind. The notorious attack upon *oratio recta* in Socrates' discussion of poetry in the *Republic* is perhaps an example of this. Another is to be found in a passage in the *Gorgias* (480) where, from the serious point that just punishment is beneficial, Socrates extracts the consequence that the only use of rhetoric is to use it to get oneself or one's friends convicted when guilty or to get one's enemies acquitted. This is certainly a deliberate paradox advanced only for its shock value, for Socrates did not believe in doing evil to one's enemies. It is possible that Plato does this more often than some have thought.

The most conscientiously destructive of philosophical writers might perhaps permit himself to make minor logical points of a constructive kind in passing; and this too is not uncommon in Plato's earlier writings. An example may be drawn from the *Lysis* (217-18) where Socrates distinguishes two ways in which A may be present to B, or in other words two ways in which a subject may have a predicate. Jones' hair may be white through old age, or because he is a miller and it is covered with flour; a sick man may be a healthy man who has a disease or he may be permanently unhealthy. Again in the *Charmides* (169) Socrates distinguishes those relations which are irreflexive (a relation R is irreflexive if it is logically impossible for *a* to have R to *a*) from those, if any, which are not; and this point, being inessential to its context, is introduced for its own sake. Again in the *Hippias Major* (301) Socrates points out a general distinction between what we might call collective and several properties; that is between those properties (such as *being a pair*) such that if A and B collectively have the property, then neither A has it nor B has it, and those properties (e.g. *being brave*) such that if A and B have the property, then A has it and B has it. It is incidentally interesting that Plato makes such points as these *in passing*. For while the philosophically alert reader may have been expected to notice the importance of these distinctions, most people would surely have passed them over. Thus the tool which Plato has forged is made available for those who can use it; it is not left lying about to be picked up by those who cannot, as it would have been if it had made its appearance in a logical treatise. This is at least consistent with Plato's professed distrust of general doctrine which can be used as a substitute for thought.

The next two elements which seem to me to be present in Plato's writings are connected with the production of *aporia*. Two kinds of *aporia* may be distinguished. There is first the kind which is produced,

perhaps, by the first part of the *Parmenides*, and by the second part of the *Theaetetus*. This is genuine *aporia*. By this I do not mean that Plato is necessarily himself uncertain what is the correct account of the matter. In some cases he may be, in other cases he may not. I mean rather that the arguments which have produced the *impasse* seem to the reader to be cogent, and one is not tempted to feel that Plato is inviting one to solve it in any particular way. The other or non-genuine kind of *aporia* (and the distinction between them will be a matter of discernment and a matter also of degree) is precisely the kind in which one does feel that Plato is inviting one to adopt a particular solution. An example of this is provided by the ending of the *Laches* where the formula that courage is the knowledge of what is and what is not terrible is thrown out on the ground that, if that were so, a man could not be brave without being also just, self-restrained and pious. Here it is (for various reasons) very difficult not to feel that we are being invited to take the plunge and accept the consequence that a man cannot have one moral virtue without having all the others. Here in fact one is very tempted to feel that Plato is covering his positive doctrine with a very thin veil. A further example of the same thing is to be found in Socrates' argument with Polemarchus in the First Book of the *Republic*, where Polemarchus is unable to say what good just men do because he allows Socrates to foist upon him the assumption that any good which they may do must be done by virtue of some technical skill. No doubt we are to take it that Socrates presupposes that just men are so by virtue of some kind of knowledge or understanding; but not by virtue of some technical skill. The necessary distinction between what we might call technical and moral understanding is made in the *Laches* (195), and we cannot help feeling that we are meant to apply it here and to see that Polemarchus could have fought on.

It would be to go too far if we said that in passages like these Plato knows for certain what the right answer is and means us to find it out by our own devices, or that he is refuting by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* one of the propositions or assumptions which generate the *impasse*. But it would be equally wrong in the other direction to suppose that, if the chief speaker in such a passage pronounces, say, a definition of courage unacceptable, Plato must mean us to think that this is so. His view might be that the doctrine in question is acceptable but that it carries with it a good deal more than those who casually assert it are likely to realise. Or it might be that he was himself uncertain.

The elements so far listed are congenial to a view of written philosophy which allows to it a low educational value except in so far as it stimulates the reader to think for himself. But as we have already

seen Plato's writings contain in quite large measure two further elements of a comparatively straightforward kind, namely the simple assault on erroneous doctrine and the simple exposition of the truth. Thus it would really be unplausible to deny that the *Republic* contains a sustained attack on the view that selfishness leads to happiness or that it advocates the view that social concord requires strict discipline. There are so far as I can see no rules by which we can determine which of these elements is present on a given occasion—whether Plato is being serious or frivolous, and if serious whether he is being straightforward or backhanded. The only principle that one can follow if one tries, against his expressed warnings, to extract Plato's beliefs from his writings, is the principle that the interpretation of particular passages which attributes to Plato the most plausible intellectual development is to be preferred. For the most part it seems that this principle can be followed and leads to a fair measure of agreement among different interpreters. There are however various passages about which disagreement seems to be ineradicable. Thus for example many scholars would regard the first part of the *Parmenides* as a recantation by Plato of his earlier opinions. Others however (whom I follow) believe that Plato has given us in this passage sufficient warnings against taking this interpretation of the passage (although it is perhaps the most straightforward); and such readers regard the passage rather as an attack on certain misrepresentations of Plato's earlier opinions. Since this passage is crucial to any account of Plato's intellectual development, it is a pity, but I think that it is inescapable, that this disagreement should exist.

The problem of fallacies

There are two special problems concerned with the extraction of Plato's beliefs from his writings. One concerns fallacies. Every philosopher sometimes argues fallaciously, but in Plato's writings there are passages which depend on apparently gross reasoning. Socrates' performance in the First Book of the *Republic* is a large-scale example. Some scholars argue that where the fallacies are extremely gross Plato cannot have been deceived by them, and must have planted them there for us to exercise our wits upon. Wherever, therefore, we encounter a gross fallacy on the lips of a chief speaker in a dialogue we must dissociate the author from the chief speaker.

It is only common sense, when we encounter a piece of apparently fallacious reasoning, to try to find presuppositions which will explain why the author thought the reasoning valid, to prefer, *ceteris paribus*, interpretations which render it valid to those which render it fallacious, and so forth. But the idea that Plato could never be guilty of a gross fallacy or a piece of shoddy reasoning, or uncandid persuasion,

belongs to the picture of Plato as a kind of superhuman seer, which has had too much currency.

Apart from this, there are various special considerations which tell against the view that gross fallacies are always planted. One of these is that they usually occur in the mouth of Socrates, and most often perhaps in polemical argument. But it is consistent with Socrates' account of his mission in the *Apology* that he should sometimes argue recklessly. For he conceived it to be his mission to convince those, who thought that they understood something, that they did not in fact do so. But to show Polemarchus that he did not really understand the formula about justice which he had got from Simonides, any stick would do. If a man understands a subject he will cope with fallacious arguments; if fallacious argument deceives him he does not understand the subject. Perhaps it was not Plato's purpose to show us that Polemarchus' opinions were false, but rather to depict Polemarchus failing to cope with Socrates and thereby revealing his poor grasp of the meaning of his formula. Perhaps in other words it was Socrates' practice to use against an adversary any argument which would deflate the adversary's pretence of understanding, and perhaps Plato both depicted and also continued the practice. This would of course allow us to say that Plato is not necessarily a victim of his own bad reasoning, but it would not allow us to say that wherever a fallacy is put into Socrates' mouth, Plato has always planted it there to make us think of some important truth to which the fallacy in some way draws attention. He may simply be depicting Socrates bamboozling his opponent, or himself be bamboozling the reader. This is a special application of the general point that Plato sometimes teases us.

Again the view that we are always meant to try to divine some hidden purpose behind the planting of a fallacy presupposes that Plato's readers would detect the fallacy. 'He cannot intend this argument to be taken at face value; what then does he intend?' is a question I can only ask if I notice that the argument is gross. But can we safely assume that Plato's contemporaries knew what a fallacy was? The *Euthydemus* depicts the Sophists¹ Euthydemus and Dionysodorus puzzling an audience of young men with fallacies as gross as: If you have a dog which has puppies, the dog is yours and a father; therefore it is your father. Socrates is not taken in by such arguments, and we are not meant to think that the audience judged them valid. But what does seem to have been the case is that people were simply puzzled by tricks of this kind. There are a number of places in Plato's writings from which we get the idea that many among his contemporaries greatly distrusted argument because, lacking the distinction

¹ I write the word 'Sophist' with a capital letter meaning it to be taken in the official sense of one who teaches adults for a fee, without any abusive connotations.

between valid and invalid reasoning, they thought that a clever performer could demonstrate anything. They would of course know that there was something wrong with an argument that showed that my dog was my father, but what they might not know was that this argument transgressed rules such that, if one abides by these rules, one can never get from true premises to a false conclusion. Lacking the notion of rules obedience to which renders argumentative journeys safe, they might come to distrust all argument, and they would also be without the concept of a fallacy. To readers who lacked this concept, the practice of planting fallacies in order to make them divine a hidden purpose would be ineffective. They might detect that there was something wrong with the argument, they might conceivably be led to regret their own poor understanding of the subject; but they could not ask themselves: 'What is the message of this fallacy?' if they did not implicitly know it to be one.

Locke rightly observed that God has not been so sparing to men to make them barely two-legged creatures and left it to Aristotle to make them rational. Men argued validly before Aristotle told them how to do so. Nevertheless, it was left to Aristotle to formulate the notion of types of argument and of rules obedience to which secures argumentative validity. It is possible therefore to go further than we have gone so far and to ask whether Plato himself, let alone his readers, had formulated the conception of a fallacy. To have the conception of a fallacy it is necessary to see that arguments on very different topics can be gathered into types, that arguments which belong to the same type do so because they all conform to or all transgress the same rule, and that the function of rules of this kind is to guarantee that he who conforms to them will never extract a false conclusion from true premises. It seems to me clear that Plato, at least from quite an early stage, was in possession of the raw material for manufacturing the concepts of a valid argument and of a fallacy. There are relatively early examples of the idea that one bad argument is analogous or similar to another (e.g. *Republic* 454); and Plato was certainly aware of the possibility of extracting false conclusions from true premises. But to possess the raw materials is not to possess the finished product; and I think it is quite conceivable that Plato did not possess, until quite a late stage in his career, the notion of a formal fallacy. Even in his later writings when Plato does lay down a number of rules for correct reasoning they tend not to be rules of formal logic. Thus in the *Philebus* we are warned not to assume that the members of a class are necessarily homogeneous in any respect except that for which the class-concept stands. This is an important warning, neglect of which will lead to much bad argument; but it is not stated as a rule of formal logic. It is possible therefore that the notion of a formal

fallacy was never clearly isolated by Plato. This would not mean that he would be unable to argue validly. One does not need to be a logician to argue logically. But if neither Plato nor his contemporaries were familiar with the notion of something's *following*, for example, or *not following*¹ from its premises, there is a temptation to which this would expose him. For an argument which led invalidly from what seemed to him to be true premises to what seemed to him to be a true conclusion might surely fail to shock his logical conscience as it would shock ours. What after all is wrong with an argumentative process which reminds a man of a truth which he assents to and which uses his assent to this truth to convince him of a further truth of which he was not aware? What is wrong with it, if the argument is invalid, is that we might by similar reasoning have argued from a truth to a falsehood. But to say this we need to have the notion of similar reasoning, and not only to have this notion but to employ it self-critically. This is something that a pre-Aristotelian writer might not have been in the habit of doing. This would apply with particular strength to a certain type of fallacy. This is the fallacy which a writer commits when he does not apprehend very clearly a piece of valid reasoning which he has at the back of his mind. What he may then do is to write down something formally fallacious which seems to him to give expression to something valid of which he is dimly aware. If I feel that there is a valid connection between certain premises and a certain conclusion, and if I have written down something which seems to derive that conclusion from these premises, I need a fairly sophisticated grasp of the notion of logical invalidity if I am to detect the fallacy in a process which extracts a truth from certain other truths which genuinely do, as I am convinced, entail it. Since many of Plato's worst fallacies seem to be of this kind it seems to me quite possible that they got there through inadvertence.

We cannot assume then that when Socrates argues fallaciously it is Plato's purpose that we should ascertain his meaning by asking to what end Socrates has been made to do so. All the same we shall naturally try, whenever we find a passage the reasoning of which is apparently sophistical, to find an interpretation of it which renders it valid, or at least to reconstruct the valid train of thought the presence of which in Plato's mind allowed the fallacy to pass undetected. In my judgment one or other of these enterprises will commonly be successful.

¹ It may be said that Plato's common word *sumbainonta* means 'logical consequences', and it certainly means something of the kind. But it has often been pointed out (e.g. by Mr. Robinson in *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*) that Plato says some things about *sumbainonta* that can hardly be said about logical consequences.

The problem of Socrates

In one sense it does not matter whether an Athenian called Sophroniscus ever had a son called Socrates, any more than it matters whether Denmark ever had a prince called Hamlet. Plato's character is as vivid as Shakespeare's, and what we know of the original from independent sources is not vastly greater in the one case than in the other.

The view has been maintained (by Professors Taylor and Burnet) that in the dialogues in which Socrates is the chief speaker the doctrines which he propounds are, more or less, the doctrines of the historical Socrates; and that it is only in the dialogues in which Socrates falls into the background that we have Plato's own thoughts. This view receives some support from a sentence in the dubiously authentic *Second Letter* (314 c): 'There is no treatise of Plato's and never will be; what are so called are those of Socrates adorned and rejuvenated.' It can also be defended along the following lines:—The *Phaedo* describes what Socrates said in prison on the last day of his life. Plato would not have falsified this. But there is no topic which is discussed in any of the dialogues in which Socrates is the chief speaker which is not at least alluded to in the *Phaedo*. Therefore the strongest argument of the school which separates the Platonic Socrates from the historical—namely that the historical Socrates was only interested in ethics, whereas the Platonic Socrates was interested in a great deal more—is refuted. For the Socrates of the *Phaedo* is interested in all this more, and *ex hypothesi* the Socrates of the *Phaedo* is the historical Socrates.

Much hangs on the question of the range of subjects in which the historical Socrates was interested. Unfortunately this cannot be ascertained. There is conflicting testimony. Aristophanes in a comedy, *The Clouds* (acted when Plato was four and Socrates about forty-five), depicts Socrates as interested in scientific speculation and strange religious ceremonies. Plato in the *Phaedo* makes Socrates say that he had been deeply interested in science in his youth. On the other hand in the *Apology* Plato makes Socrates deny specifically Aristophanes' charge that he was a scientist; he challenges any member of the jury to say that he has ever heard him discuss such matters. Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* says that Socrates was interested in ethics and not at all in science; and Xenophon's accounts of him convey the same impression.

It seems that all this can probably be reconciled. We can assume that Socrates read with enthusiasm the works of the cosmologists and others but that he felt (as the Platonic Socrates implies in the *Phaedo*) that they were vitiated by methodological errors; and we can assume that his own interest was primarily in ethics. We do not have to assume that he was a simple-minded moralist. But fortunately it does