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Reason and Persuasion

Three Dialogues By Plato: Euthyphro, Meno, Republic Book I

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Book designed by John Holbo.

The text is set in Hypatia Sans Pro.

Chapter 1

How To Read This Book, Part I: Masks

1



THE MAIN READINGS in this book are three philosophical dialogues. What's that? Maybe a cross between a play and a problem set? Doesn't help much. Let's try to do better.

The author of these texts is Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher (429-347 BCE). All of Western philosophy is footnotes to Plato. So they say.

And yet: these texts do not tell us what Plato thinks — not obviously. Rather, they narrate encounters between another philosopher, Socrates, and various further figures, who tend to lend their names to the dialogues.

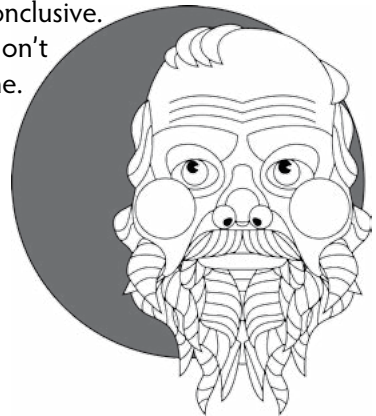
In **Euthyphro**, Socrates debates holiness with a priest named Euthyphro.

In **Meno**, he argues with Meno about the nature of virtue.

Republic is not about anyone named 'Republic'. It's about justice. Socrates debates three different characters with different views about that.

Not only is Plato himself nowhere to be seen. The conclusions of these debates he stage-manages tend to be inconclusive. The problem set has no answer key. We don't get answers from Plato, Socrates or anyone. So it would seem.

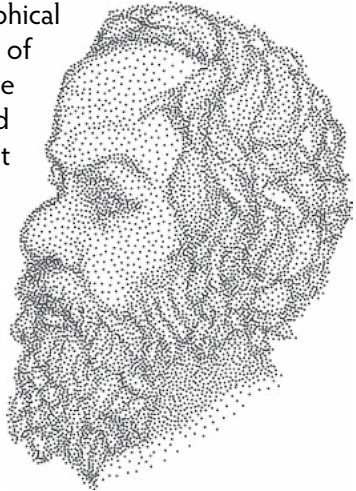
So what's he playing at, this Plato?



The main character in the dialogues is Socrates. He was a real, historical figure. We know roughly when he was born (470's BCE) and exactly when he died (399) because that was the year he was convicted, sentenced to death and executed. For what? For doing the sorts of things he is described as doing in these dialogues.

Socrates was Plato's teacher. Unlike Plato, whose complete works make a thick book, Socrates never wrote a word. He **talked**. To his fellow Athenians, to anyone he met. Unlike Plato, who founded a famous Academy, Socrates never taught, in any formal sense. Still, he had followers — admirers, imitators, spectators. Plato was one of these.

Plausibly, then, the purpose of these philosophical dialogues is to preserve, for posterity, a portrait of a man Plato admired. Since what was so distinctive about Socrates was, apparently, the way he asked questions and interacted with others, the portrait is a dramatic one, as opposed to being a book of wise sayings or a body of doctrine or theory. Not that these dialogues can be anything like transcriptions! Socrates' followers, including Plato, did not follow him around, taking verbatim notes. The dialogues cannot be attempts to reconstruct specific exchanges from memory, at least they can't **all** be. Plato could have been with Socrates around the time of his trial. So it is not impossible that he might have witnessed an encounter with a man named Euthyphro. But dramatic events in **Republic** are set much earlier, when Plato was just a child.



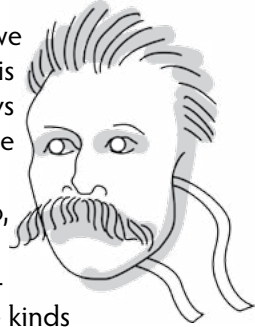
If **Republic** is fiction it seems reasonable to suspect **Euthyphro** is, too. Still, it could be that Plato is trying to write realistic fiction. Plato's Socrates is being made to ask the sorts of questions, say the sorts of things, that the real Socrates did. Plato fictionalizes unrecoverable detail in the service of overall historical, biographical, intellectual fidelity.



On this view Plato, the author, is a bit like one of those Russian dolls. We crack the Plato case to get to an authentic, Socratic core.



What's the alternative? Maybe we need to keep cracking. "All that is profound wears a mask." So says Friedrich Nietzsche (who had the moustache to prove it.)



Maybe what looks like Socrates is really Plato, wearing a Socrates mask. Plato puts ideas into the mouth of his martyred teacher. Perhaps the historical Socrates didn't say at least some of these kinds of things at all.

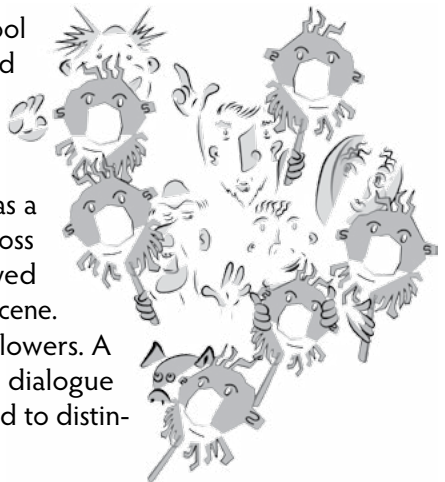
Why would Plato misrepresent his dead teacher's philosophy? For any number of reasons. Let's start with simple ones.

Socrates was executed. Plato might not want to risk that himself. Speaking through a mask affords deniability. Or perhaps using Socrates as a mouth-piece is an attempt to borrow authority, or is a sincere gesture of filial piety. Obviously it can be hard for students to know at what point, exactly, they come into their own.

Where does teacher stop and student begin?

Here is an interesting fact. Plato was not the only one writing 'dialogues with Socrates'. Several followers of Socrates did so in the generation following his death. Aristotle (Plato's most famous pupil) apparently thought Alexamenos of Teos was the first; sadly, that's all we know about Alexamenos. Mostly these early works are lost, except for scraps and half-forgotten author names: Aeschines, Antisthenes, Phaedo, Eucleides. But some of these writers were, apparently, prolific.

Plato had the foresight to start a school in which his writings were preserved and passed down. He towers over these others — no doubt in part due to the fact that he was a tremendous writer and thinker. But even if his reputation as a uniquely great thinker is deserved, the loss of these other writings gives us a skewed perspective on the Athenian intellectual scene. Plato was one of Socrates' younger followers. A little late to this literary party, Socratic dialogue writing, **Plato's** Socrates presumably had to distinguish himself somehow.

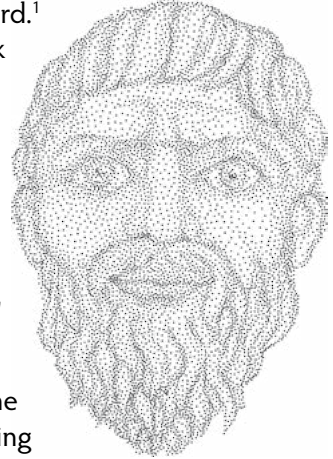


We do see distinctions. We have intact dialogues by only one other author, Xenophon. His Socrates is, in many ways, a different character. Xenophon's Socrates is practical, down-to-earth, less ironic and paradoxical, more conventional in his opinions and attitudes.

Suppose — just suppose! — all those other socratic dialogues hadn't been lost. Suppose scholars today simply refused to consult them, insisting Plato's powerful intelligence gives us reason to place our trust in him alone. Obviously this would be an unscholarly attitude. We aren't being irresponsible like that, since we don't have the option. But the fact that our approach would be grossly irresponsible, under ideal conditions, reminds us how far from ideal our condition is. Just because we are doing our very best doesn't mean we have a reasonable expectation our best will be very good. Hypothesizing Plato's Socrates as the real Socrates is a historical stretch.

We **want** to know who Socrates really was. But it's hard.¹

And another thing. As readers we tend to think of Plato as contemporary with these characters who inhabit his works. We are drawn into this milieu and may think of it as Plato's intellectual scene. He is bemused by Euthyphro, messes with Meno's head, thrashes Thrasymachus. But Thrasymachus was dead before Plato put pen to papyrus to write his first dialogue, never mind his mature masterpiece, **Republic**. Plato is re-fighting the last generation's intellectual fights, while he himself is surely fighting his own battles **by** re-litigating these past ones. The picture has holes in it, but the mind insists on seeing definite faces. Try to keep that in mind.



4

On the Russian doll model we assume Plato gives us more or less the real Socrates. On the mask view we are basically talking to Plato himself.

For a variety of reasons — some common sense, some having to do with features of texts and independently known facts — neither of these extremes is quite believable.

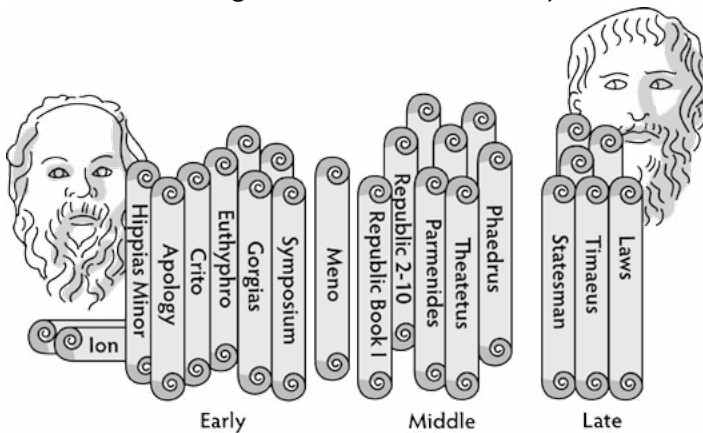


1 For a longer discussion of some points made in this section, see Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 1.

The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

What do scholars think? They disagree and debate. (What did you expect?) An intermediate, fairly standard position is that it is possible to establish a rough chronology, an approximate order in which the dialogues must have been composed.

A path of intellectual development for Plato corresponds to this chronology—several, in fact. There is more consensus about chronology than interpretation. Many an interesting argument begins in the space between. But, broadly, no one will look at you as if you are crazy if you say this: there are early, middle and late dialogues. We think we can mostly tell which are which.



In early dialogues we may find something closer to an accurate portrait of the historical Socrates. Middle Plato is coming into his own as a thinker, so in middle dialogues we may meet a hybrid Socrates. Late Plato may have left his teacher behind. It fits with this view that, in one late dialogue, **Laws**, Socrates does not appear at all. In a few others Socrates is a minor character.

In saying this view is 'standard' I don't insist it is correct. Some scholars seriously doubt it. But everyone familiar with these debates will be familiar with this view. It provides the basis for many discussions.

There isn't any competing overall view of the whole body of Plato's writings that is comparably influential. The standard view is plausible and seems to explain a lot. It provides a coherent picture. But think about how, if you interpret a given dialogue on the assumption that it is early, you have to be extra careful not to double-count your interpretation as independent **evidence** that the dialogue really is early, or that the early-middle-late scheme is right. Coherence is not truth. Think of the standard view as a nice, negotiable starting-point.

Assuming these 'early', 'middle', and 'late' labels make at least some sense: our first dialogue, **Euthyphro**, is early. **Meno** is early-middle. The third, **Republic**, is middle. But Book 1 may have been written earlier. Call it, like **Meno**, early-middle.²

Have I answered my question: how to read this book?

Maybe I've just said who you'll meet, which isn't the same. I didn't even give you a straight answer about that! Fortunately, I'll get another crack at the case in Chapter 4. In the meantime, the next two chapters will pursue the crucial **who are we dealing with?** questions in greater depth.

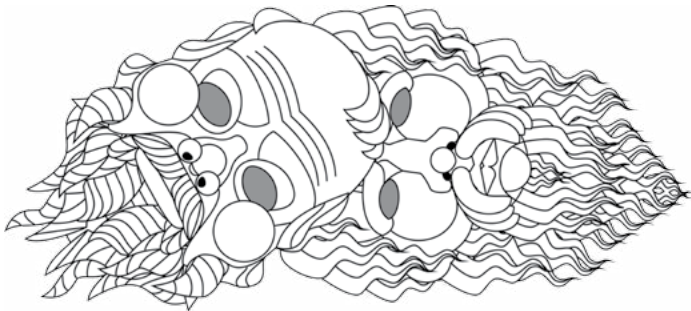
Who was Socrates?

Who was Plato?

What did they say?

What did they mean by saying it?

What did they think?



- 2 The standard view is most associated with the writings of an influential philosopher and classical scholar, Gregory Vlastos. For an authoritative expression of doubt about the standard view, see the Introduction to John M. Cooper (ed.) **Plato: Complete Works** (Hackett, 1997).