Socrates and Plato

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Published online on: 18 Jun 2010

How to cite :- Richard Kraut. 18 Jun 2010, Socrates and Plato from: The Routledge Companion to Ethics Routledge
Accessed on: 13 Jan 2019
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The dialogues of Plato, composed nearly 2,400 years ago, fill more than 1,600 pages in the most recent English edition of his complete writings, and many of the works in his oeuvre are devoted to fundamental ethical and political matters – questions about how any human being should live, and how we, as members of political communities, should live together. No previous philosopher in the West had examined ethics and politics so deeply and comprehensively, and so he is rightly regarded as the founder of systematic moral and political philosophy. His writings reveal his engagement with the issues that faced Athens (of which he was a citizen) in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, but the questions he raises continue to resonate over the centuries, and Western philosophy has produced no author who has matched his ability to dramatize abstract ethical questions in works of enduring literary value.

He approached philosophical questions in the medium of a literary form – the dialogue – that is meant to signal to readers that face-to-face discussion should be the principal tool by which philosophy, including moral philosophy, is to be learned. Although Plato’s dialogues are devices by which he advocated his own point of view, they are also meant to convey his conviction that we cannot gain greater ethical understanding by uncritically reading books and accepting whatever they have to teach. We must take up the issues of moral philosophy by exposing our own ideas, in conversation, to the cross-examination of others. Plato intends his dialogues to be focal points of such conversations, not substitutes for them.

The principal interlocutor of many of the dialogues is Socrates, who did not himself write anything, but occupied himself with ethical questions solely by means of conversations in small groups. A vivid portrait of Socrates’ way of life is presented in Plato’s Apology of Socrates, which purports to be the speech Socrates gave in court when he was accused of having acted impiously by not believing in the gods of the city, but introducing new gods, and thereby corrupting the young. (In Greek, apologia means “defense” – Socrates was not apologizing for anything.) Socrates’ defense was unsuccessful: he was convicted
and sentenced to death. In many of Plato’s writings, the folly and injustice of this conviction are not far from the surface of the text. The death of Socrates, he suggests, tells us something not only about Athenian democracy but more generally about human nature: widespread resistance to unsettling ethical reflection is one of the defects to which human beings are prone.

Because Plato never speaks to his readers directly in his own voice, but instead portrays a leading speaker (in most cases, Socrates) and one or more other interlocutors, we might ask whether the point of view endorsed by a dialogue is original to Plato or whether he inherits it from Socrates. In fact, it is legitimate to ask an even more fundamental question: Why assume that Plato’s dialogues endorse any point of view at all? Why not instead take Plato to be doing nothing more than reporting some interesting conversations he has heard? The answer is that certain doctrines are consistently presented in a favorable light in many dialogues. Plato seems to be recommending them as doctrines that are worthy of consideration because of their great plausibility.

To renew our question: Are these doctrines Plato’s ideas or did he take them over from Socrates? There is no doubt that Plato makes Socrates the principal interlocutor in so many of his dialogues because he takes himself to be working out Socratic insights. Because his writings reveal him to be a literary artist and creative thinker in his own right, not a mere recording medium for the unaltered presentation of what he heard from Socrates, we can be sure that every sentence in his dialogues is shaped by his understanding of what it would be best for someone to say at this point in the conversation. Even the Apology must be regarded as Plato’s rendition of what Socrates should have said – based, in ways that we cannot recover, on what he did say, but nonetheless, not a mere repetition of words heard.

In what follows, I sometimes speak of what Socrates says, and sometimes of what Plato believes. Although one is making a significant inference when one attributes to Plato a belief on the basis of what Socrates says, that inference is, I believe, often justified. The remainder of this chapter will examine what I take to be Plato’s contribution to moral and political philosophy, as conveyed to us by the words he puts into the mouth of Socrates.

**Early, middle, and late dialogues**

We can make some educated guesses about the order in which Plato composed his dialogues, and it is best to pay attention to that order, because we should be open to the possibility that his ideas developed as he worked them out. One common device used by students of Plato is to divide his works into three groups: early, middle, and late dialogues. The Laws can be safely taken to have been written late in his career, and it shares many stylistic affinities to several other dialogues: Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, and Critias. So these six are generally regarded as belonging to his late period.
Furthermore, there is a group of short dialogues whose content is primarily ethical and whose principal goal seems to be the demonstration of the difficulty of an issue rather than its solution. In several of them, Socrates asks a question of the form, “What is –?” and then argues that all of his interlocutors’ proposed answers are inadequate. These works correspond closely to the portrait Socrates paints of himself in the Apology, for he emphasizes in his defense speech that he himself knows little or nothing, and has aroused hostility because his interlocutors often dislike having their claims to knowledge overturned. Among the shorter ethical dialogues that end in perplexity are Charmides, Euthyphro, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Protagoras. (These are listed alphabetically; we can only guess their chronological relationship within this group.) They are often called “Socratic” dialogues – a term that carries the suggestion that in them Plato is more indebted to Socrates than he is in other works. It is likely that many of them were in any case written at an early stage of Plato’s career, and that the Apology, Crito, and Gorgias were also composed during this early period.

Between these early compositions and the six late dialogues, many scholars place the Phaedo, Phaedrus, Republic, and Symposium (to list them alphabetically). Like the early dialogues, these four have a strong ethical content, but unlike those early dialogues, they combine ethics with a serious dose of metaphysics. This mixture of subjects, based on the assumption that ethical investigations must be anchored in a conception of the nature of reality, has its roots in some of the early dialogues (particularly the Euthyphro), but that assumption is not fully developed until Plato’s middle period. There is a distinctive other-worldliness that pervades Plato’s writing during his middle period, missing from the works that are considered early. He no doubt thought that the perplexity-filled conversations of the short ethical works point the way towards an other-worldly metaphysics. In the Meno, Socrates holds that we must take the soul to be separate from the body and to have enjoyed a prenatal vision of the truth, if we are to understand how it is possible to make progress in an inquiry regarding the nature of virtue. This feature of the Meno is generally taken to mark it out as a transitional work, one in which Plato begins to combine the study of ethics with the examination of metaphysical and epistemological issues.

**Ethical thought in the early dialogues**

Plato’s writings do not contain any single word or phrase that corresponds to our word “moral,” and although “ethical” has its origin in the Greek word, êthê (“character”), he does not use that word as a device for marking off a distinctive subject matter. (Here he differs from Aristotle, who does mark off ethics as an autonomous field of investigation within the broader framework of a study of politics.) When Socrates tells his listeners what it is that particularly interests
him, he speaks in terms of virtue or excellence (both words can be used to translate aretē), or specific virtues (justice, courage, wisdom), or what is good, or what is fine (kalon: it can also be translated as “beautiful” or “noble”).

One of the persistent themes of the early dialogues is that such virtues as justice, wisdom, and courage have a value that gives them absolute priority over all other goods. A good illustration of what this means is presented in the Crito. Socrates’ friend, Crito, reveals that he can arrange for Socrates’ escape from jail, and argues that Socrates owes it to his friends and family not to end his life, as he is legally required to, but ought instead to continue his activities in exile. Before Socrates examines the question whether life in exile would have any of the advantages Crito imagines, he insists on a principle – one he says has always been accepted in their previous conversations – that must never be violated, regardless of any benefits that violation might bring: one must never act unjustly. Accordingly, if it can be shown that were Socrates to evade his punishment that would be unjust, the matter will be decisively settled, even if escape would bring all the benefits that Crito has in mind. The rest of the dialogue proceeds to argue both that escape would be unjust, and that the benefits Crito has referred to are illusory.

Why must one never act unjustly? Socrates does not say. But at one point he claims that acting unjustly is bad for the unjust individual, and that idea is consonant with the point, made several times in other early dialogues, that it is contrary to one’s interest to have any of the vices, and in one’s interest to have the virtues. A virtue or excellence is, after all, a good quality, and it seems obvious to Socrates that it must therefore be good for the person who has it. Many students of Plato take Socrates to be saying (and Plato to be agreeing) that the ultimate justification for everything one does must be one’s own good, and that one should treat others well only if doing so can be shown to be in one’s own interest. (That thesis is sometimes labeled “egoism.”) But although we have grounds for taking him to be assuming that a necessary condition for a quality being a virtue is that it benefits the person who has that quality, it is less clear that this is also a sufficient condition. He might think instead that what makes a quality a virtue is that it benefits both its possessor and his community.

Another theme that runs through the early dialogues is an analogy Socrates draws between possessing such virtues as justice, courage, and wisdom, on the one hand, and ordinary practical skills like medicine, carpentry, and shoe-making, on the other. An expert crafts worker, he assumes, has some articulate knowledge that he can call upon to explain why he performs his job in one manner rather than another. A skilled doctor, for example, has some understanding of health and disease – he does not merely have a record of success in healing people (that might be due to a string of good luck) but draws upon an investigation he has conducted of the human body and its vulnerability to disease. In several early dialogues, and particularly in the Gorgias, Socrates proposes that we should think of a virtuous person as someone who has the analogue of a doctor’s knowledge of medicine. Accordingly, a just person is someone who has
made a study of justice, and has thereby learned something about the human soul that is comparable to what a doctor learns about the body. (When the early dialogues allude to the human soul, they are simply making the innocuous assumption that we can attribute psychological — the Greek word for soul is psyche — properties to human beings: thought, emotion, deliberation, sensation, and the like. The soul is simply whatever is responsible for these mental states. Socrates does not, in these works, venture any thoughts about how the soul is related to the body, thus leaving it open that the soul might be a special kind of body, as some of his contemporaries believed. That is an issue that Plato takes up for the first time in the Phaedo.)

As I noted above, several of the early dialogues pursue questions about how the virtue terms are to be defined. They ask: What is piety? (Euthyphro), courage? (Laches), moderation? (Charmides), beauty? (Hippias Major), friendship? (Lysis). That definitional quest is not abandoned in Plato’s later works. He seeks definitions of justice (Republic), knowledge (Theaetetus), statecraft (Statesman), and sophistry (Sophist). It is important to see that these questions are not requests for mere synonyms or any of the easy linguistic equivalents that might be entered into a dictionary. When Socrates asks what to hosion (piety) is, for example, he is not looking for a phrase that conveys what any competent speaker of Greek already knows. He is seeking something far more difficult to acquire: he wants to know why pious acts or pious people are grouped together as belonging to the same kind. What is this property, piety, that they all share, and by virtue of which they are pious? To answer that question, one must have a deep understanding of the rationale that justifies our practice of sorting people and acts into the pious and the impious. To have that insight into piety would be an accomplishment as great or greater than the achievement of a doctor who has a comparable understanding of physical health. It would be to have a full theory of piety, not mere facility in using the word.

Socrates is presupposing that there can be such a thing as moral expertise — that is, a mastery of such concepts as justice, goodness, and virtue that would enable one to apply them in a wide range of particular cases, and to know how to justify (to others, not only to oneself) one’s beliefs about them. Such a person would be a recognized guide to and teacher of virtue, provided that competent and willing students of the subject are available. Socrates does not claim such expertise for himself; on the contrary, he insists that he falls far short of the mark. His special kind of human wisdom, as he says in the Apology, lies in his realization that this is an ideal all human beings must strive to achieve, and in his awareness of his great distance from that ideal. He is critical of his fellow Athenians because they rest content with unexamined assumptions about the virtues and their application to people and actions. They think that because they have learned how to convey their beliefs and desires by using such terms as “good” and “virtue,” they know all that they need to know about what goodness and virtue are.
The human error that Socrates despises is comparable to the mistake someone would make if he thought that he knows what heat is, or what a rainbow is, simply because he can more or less correctly apply the words “heat” and “rainbow.” There is a scientific theory of heat and other meteorological phenomena, and one cannot acquire it unless one makes a special study of these subjects. Socrates is, in this sense, searching for a science of ethics. His dictum, proclaimed in the Apology, that the unexamined life is not worth living, means that human beings must strive for a deeper understanding of the concepts by which they govern themselves. The Apology beautifully conveys Socrates’ sense of exasperation with the folly of his fellow citizens: after all, is it not obvious that nothing could be more worthwhile than improving one’s understanding of the ultimate ends of human life?

The early dialogues take it for granted that genuine fields of expertise – medicine, navigation at sea, farming – owe their success to their discovery of effective means to some single goal. Their deep understanding of that goal, which organizes everything done by the expert, explains their ability to find the best means to it. Socrates assumes that since each of the crafts is organized around a single well-understood end, a virtuous person will similarly aim at and achieve one ultimate goal. What might that goal be? It would be unilluminating to reply: “knowledge.” For that tells us nothing, unless we can say: knowledge of what? If we reply that the virtuous person has knowledge of virtue, we have spoken the truth, but this too is an unilluminating truth, because it does not give us a sufficiently concrete target by which we can guide our actions. (These issues are most fully rehearsed in the Charmides, Meno, and Republic Book 1.) It is understandable that the early dialogues typically end in failure. Socrates is asking his interlocutors to draw upon their inner mental resources to find a formula for living well that is both philosophically defensible and concrete enough to serve as a practical guide. No easy task.

In the Protagoras, he tries out the idea that pleasure might serve as such a guide. The thematic question of this dialogue (and the Meno as well) is whether virtue can be taught – a question that is really a way of asking whether there is such a thing as moral expertise. The issue of the teachability of virtue is then connected to the further question whether virtue is a unitary phenomenon; presumably these questions are linked because Plato assumes that any genuine field of expertise is a single subject with a single domain of study. In the closing pages of the dialogue, Socrates induces Protagoras to accept the common idea that we should make all our decisions by calculating how much pleasure each of the alternatives would bring, and choosing the course of action that would, on balance and over the long run, bring us the greatest amount of pleasure. That is the kind of criterion of decision-making that Socrates seeks in other early dialogues, and in fact one important tradition in moral philosophy (with advocates in both the ancient and modern periods) agrees that pleasure is the ultimate goal of all action. But does the Socrates of the Protagoras mean that pleasure is the good?

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Or is he merely saying that we need some goal that plays the role that pleasure occupies in many people’s deliberations? Scholars are divided on this issue. In any case the Socrates of other dialogues is unequivocally opposed to the thesis that pleasure should be our ultimate goal. That idea is decisively rejected in the Gorgias, the Republic, and the Philebus.

One of the greatest contributions to ethical reflection made in the early dialogues can be found in a marvelously succinct passage in the Euthyphro. The topic is the virtue whose public enforcement led to Socrates’ death — piety. One of the definitions proposed by Socrates’ conversational partner (Euthyphro) is that piety is whatever all of the gods love. Through a series of questions and distinctions, Socrates leads Euthyphro to see the difference between two ways of interpreting that proposed definition: the gods might love anything and anyone whatsoever, and that loving attitude would confer on those objects the status of being pious; or the gods might love certain acts and people because they have a property that makes love the appropriate reaction to them. Euthyphro plausibly opts for the second alternative: the love that the gods have for pious people and their actions is their appropriate response to some attribute that merits love. The upshot is that piety must be defined in terms other than the love of the gods. The definition must pick out what makes piety lovable and therefore deserving of love.

That suggests that the attitudes of gods can at best play a secondary role in our ethical reflections and deliberations. The Socrates of the Republic consistently endorses the idea that the gods demand and desire only what is good for human beings, and so if we want to live in a way that honors and pleases them, we need to figure out, on our own, what is good for us. Plato has no doubt that religious ceremonies play an important role in human life and that the political community rightly promotes and regulates these festivals. (He most fully expresses these ideas in the Republic and the Laws.) But he is not tempted by the idea that religious experience or priestly authority might be sources of ethical knowledge. He had an opportunity to explore these ideas, because Socrates is portrayed in the Apology, the Euthyphro, and several other works as someone who answered to a divine inner voice. But the early dialogues treat that religious phenomenon as a Socratic idiosyncrasy and nothing more. The epistemological assumption made throughout the early dialogues is that ethical knowledge is to be acquired in the same way that all craft-knowledge is acquired: by sustained and careful reasoning that draws upon and organizes our experience.

**Ethical thought in the middle and late dialogues**

In the Phaedo, Socrates offers several arguments for the immortality of the soul, and portrays the body as a prison in which the soul has temporarily taken up residence. The soul is not itself made out of any material, and is therefore not
vulnerable to decay or decomposition. Its incorporeal nature marks its kinship to another kind of entity that now comes to play a central role in Plato’s thinking: what he calls forms or ideas. His positing of forms arises from a distinction drawn in the *Euthyphro* between the many things that are pious and piety itself. Piety is a property; pious people and actions have that property, but are not identical to it. Forms are simply properties. The Socrates of the *Phaedo* conceives of them as eternal, changeless, incorporeal objects that can be grasped by the soul but not the body. In fact, the soul would be better able to arrive at a full understanding of these properties if it were not hindered by the body. That is why death is not an evil; it is instead an opportunity for the soul to escape its confinement and thereby improve its understanding of the forms.

A later tradition of Platonists, sometimes called “Neoplatonists,” who took their lead from the writings of the third-century AD philosopher, Plotinus, looks to this other-worldly component of the middle and late dialogues as the foundation of ethics. But the Platonic dialogues, including those written in his middle and late periods, are as attentive to our social responsibilities and current emotional needs as they are to the soul’s eventual release from the body. Death holds the promise of a better world, but while we are embodied we have to learn how to make the best possible use of our sexual desires, our social emotions, and our deliberative skills. In our worldly existence, we can achieve some degree of understanding of the forms, and in fact doing so will give us a chance to make our embodied condition and our political community vastly more livable. Someone who can grasp what the forms of justice, beauty, and goodness are will be far better able to see what must be done to enhance the justice, beauty, and goodness of the everyday world. That is the thought that underlies much of the moral philosophy of the middle and late dialogues. It is most fully developed in the *Republic*, a dialogue that depicts an ideal society ruled by philosophers in the light of their understanding of the most important form of all – the form of the good.

Unlike many of the early dialogues, which fail to find satisfactory definitions of the virtues, the *Republic*, beginning with Book 2 (it is divided into ten books), claims success. (Book 1, by contrast, refutes several proposed definitions but does not offer a positive account of what justice is.) One of the key steps that leads to a successful outcome is the thesis that the human soul is not inherently unitary but is composed of three parts – reason, spirit, and appetite – that will be at war with one another unless each is trained to play its proper role in relation to the others. Reason is the part that is capable of looking after the good of the whole soul, and so it should govern the rest. Spirit, which houses our propensity to seek social distinction (victory, honor, angry domination), must be trained to become an ally of reason. The third part of the soul, by virtue of which we seek food, drink, sex, and the means for their satiation (including and especially wealth), must be tamed in a way that makes us healthy, vigorous, and restrained. In the *Phaedrus*, the tripartite nature of the human personality is depicted by
means of the image of a charioteer trying to control two horses, one manageable (spirit) and the other unruly (appetite). As this image suggests, reason, though not inherently inert, can get nowhere on its own; to move ahead, it needs to enlist the massive energies of our emotional and appetitive nature. And yet it must have its own notion of where to go – it cannot simply take its directional cues from the two horses. Implicit in this analogy is the thesis that our lives cannot be lived well unless our highest aspirations are recommended to us not by their emotional appeal or the pleasures of their fulfillment but because reason shows them to be good.

Where does justice fit into this picture? Socrates prepares the way for answering this question by portraying an ideal society in which each citizen contributes as best he can to the common good, receiving in turn the care that other citizens can best give him. A perfectly just city would be one bound together by these ties of reciprocity, and each citizen’s recognition of his indebtedness to others would foster a sense of unity sufficient to overcome all of the divisive tendencies of human nature. What it is for a city to be a good city, in fact, is precisely this unification of its parts. The best division of labor, Socrates says, would put philosophically trained lovers of the common good in charge of decision-making. A second group of citizens would be specially trained to defend the city against enemies; and a third would be devoted to the production of material resources. That threefold division of the ideal social world corresponds to the tripartite structure of the human soul. As a city is just when its three parts are unified, each doing its own, so too is the human soul: justice precisely is each doing its own.

But is justice good? – good, that is, for the person who develops this virtue? Is it good for someone even apart from the rewards it often confers in this life (a good reputation and the advantages that brings) and a future life (favorable treatment by the gods)? One of the most remarkable features of the Republic is its insistence that this question deserves an answer. It is not enough that a social arrangement be shown to be just; that would not by itself give us enough reason to adopt it. It must be shown to be good – and good not only because there are advantages in being treated justly, but also because it is by itself good to have justice in one’s soul.

To answer this question fully, Socrates needs to say not only what justice is, but also what goodness is. And Plato seems to acknowledge this burden, for when Socrates describes the educational program that will best inculcate justice and the other virtues, knowledge of the form of the good is portrayed as the highest form of knowledge. The Republic refrains from proposing a definition of goodness, and instead relies on an analogy between the importance of the sun to visible objects and the importance of the good in the realm of the forms. But the dialogue suggests that what makes any complex object good is the order or harmony achieved by its parts. That proposal reappears in the Philebus, one of the late dialogues. In the Laws, which depicts a second-best city (one ruled by law
rather than philosophers), we are again told that what makes for a good community is social harmony. Plato’s idea, then, is that if we were to carry out a full inquiry into what goodness is, we would confirm the hypothesis that justice, being a harmony of parts of the soul, is inherently good for the soul, because goodness is itself a proper balance or proportion among parts.

Plato’s identification of goodness with order, harmony, measure, and kindred notions has not been universally accepted – far from it. Aristotle, for example, insisted that Plato sought the good at too high a level of abstraction, and recommended instead that we focus our attention on the human good. But two other Platonic claims have been accepted by a long tradition of moral thinking, which continues to this day: First, in everything we do, we should strive to achieve something that is good; it is not enough that what we do is something we want to do – it must pass a critical test, by being worthy of our desire because it is good. Second, for this reason, we had better make sure we know what goodness – the property that good things have in common – is.

See also Ethical intuitionism (Chapter 39); Virtue ethics (Chapter 40).

Further reading