

Plato
Introduction to Plato

Plato wrote in a very different time and for a very different audience, who shared some very different presuppositions (e.g. about the structure of the natural world, about societal roles) than the philosophers and everyone else of modern Britain.

Obviously we will have to make sure that we understand Socrates or Plato properly, what they say and what they do not say, before we can discuss them fairly and usefully (we want to avoid attacking 'straw men'). But the *main* business of this course is the critical analysis of Socrates's and Plato's philosophical ideas. In this sense it will be as if they have just entered the room and proposed an idea to us in person, and we proceed to engage with it at face value: "all right, yes, it's an interesting idea, let's look at the implications of it, how would you define this key term," etc..

So these two observations pull in different directions. As a philosophy tutor, I will be urging you – in your discussions – in the second direction, trying to take apart the arguments and find the weaknesses. However, I will demand that you always bear the first constraint in mind in your discussions and essay (if you choose to write one). Some aspects of Socrates and Plato are *universal*, some of them are *local*, some of them are local manifestations of universal ideas, and it is not always obvious which is which. Two local aspects are the unquestioned attitudes to women and to slavery, for example, and these are very difficult for us to understand from our standpoint.

So here are some distinctive features of Ancient Greece that inevitably colour Greek philosophy:

The *polis*: standardly translated as "city-state", was communal; Athens was one of a handful, together with Sparta and Thebes. During periods of democracy or autocracy, most free (not slaves), adult, native-born men (i.e. citizens) were expected to take part as amateurs in civil life – in administration, the law courts, the legislature, and the army. Citizens numbered about 30-40,000 at the time of Socrates's death, and so it was relatively manageable. In addition, there were about 100-120,000 slaves, half of whom were in domestic employ, the other half in farming, mining, metallurgy etc., and it was this that underpinned the Greek economy and allowed citizens so much time. The citizen identified much more with his *polis* than British citizens with Britain (and its various parliaments) today. Individualistic self-sufficiency is very much a modern ideal.

Next, two ethical ideas dominated Greek thought: *eudaimonia* and *arête*. *Eudaimonia* as conceived by

Aristotle was subtly different but both terms roughly translate as thriving or flourishing.¹

The focus on *arête* (roughly translated as 'excellence') should be contrasted with modern moral concepts such as duty and utility. Typically, the modern moral philosopher will find him/herself in a difficult situation and ask themselves "what should I do here and now?" A number of physically viable options will present themselves, and the responsible agent will try to discover which of them is the best or right option to perform, (and for justifiable reasons). So I might say that I have a duty to defend my country and, therefore, I should enlist during times of national crisis; or I might say that I should promote the best consequences to the greatest number of people, by becoming a hospital administrator rather than an historian. In this light, virtue ethics (as the revived modern version of some elements of Socratic philosophy is called) is seen as pretty useless: "I should do the courageous thing." Yes, but what *is* the courageous thing. Answer: "it is that which a courageous person would do." Still not much help. How does one *become* courageous? And so on.

Socrates & Plato: Socrates himself published nothing, while Plato published about three dozen texts, most of which were in the form of dramatic dialogues between characters; almost always a character called 'Socrates' and the person after whom the text in question was named (often a real historical figure). How close is the character Socrates (and his philosophical opinions) to the historical figure? Hard to say, also because there is no single character: there is a difference between 'Socrates' in the *Laches* and 'Socrates' in the *Meno* (and in the later dialogues). The best way to understand this difference is in terms of the former corresponding to the historical figure, and the latter being Plato's own ideas (being) inserted into the character's mouth. Therefore the trend is for Plato to use more and more of his own ideas as he writes more. One simplistic way to describe the difference is to say that Socrates is mostly critical and negative in his philosophical approach – there are supposedly no conclusions to the early works – while Plato advances and defends bold philosophical theories.

Plato's work, is commonly divided up into three periods:

- The early period (the 'Socratic dialogues'): e.g. the *Apology*, the *Gorgias*, the *Laches*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Lysis*. The latter three

¹ Some commentators translate *eudaimonia* as happiness. This can be misleading because it does not refer to happiness as a psychological state. It is more like a form of contentment with the world.

are distinctive in surrounding an attempt to define a particular virtue or concept: courage, piety and friendship respectively.

- The middle period: e.g. the *Republic*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo*. The first of these is probably the most famous of Plato's works.
- The late period: e.g. the *Thaetetus*, the *Timaeus*, the *Parmenides*, the *Laws*.

Plato's philosophical interests were vast, covering every area of the discipline as we know it today. The above texts in the three periods, contain subtle and elaborate arguments in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, aesthetics and the philosophy of mind. He introduced and structured some of the first problems of philosophy, such that the structure remains with us today. Indeed, 2300 years of philosophy after the year 347 BC were described by the philosopher A.N. Whitehead as no more than footnotes to the great man's work.

Socratic method. In the early dialogues, Socrates uses the *elenchus*, his characteristic and frustrating courtroom interrogation style, to explore the concept at issue. Typically, Socrates will ask for a definition from a self-professed expert, e.g. "What is courage?," and will be offered an over-confident definition such as 'steadfastness in battle'. To which Socrates will offer a counter-example, such as "what about tactical retreats - can those not be courageous?" Whereupon the interlocutor will try to come up with another definition. (Or Socrates may get his interlocutor to agree to a number of uncontroversial further propositions, which are then shown to collectively refute the proposed definition.) Throughout, Socrates claims to know nothing himself; such claims are examples of the famous *Socratic irony*: irony, because he certainly seems to know enough to recognise the shortcomings of the suggested definitions.

We can see the extent to which Socrates relies on shared meanings and uses of language. Rather than trying to legislate what, for example, courage *ought* to be, he teases out the implications – some of them mutually contradictory – of the way we (Socrates and his hapless interlocutors) *already* understand it. As such he was the first 'analytic' philosopher - where the word 'analyse' is about taking things apart to see how they function.

The Sophists. Finally, the sophists were a class of rhetoricians and philosophers who were widely hired as teachers in ancient Greece. Socrates mentioned them mainly in sarcasm when he stated that he wished he could afford to absorb their wisdom. Socrates disliked the sophists because they pretended to have knowledge of various

concepts and ideas (such as virtue) and they gave grand, pretentious explanations rather than the clear and concise definitions preferred by Socrates (and charged a hefty fee). In short, they practiced rhetoric rather than true philosophy. The modern equivalent might be political spin doctors.

Part ii

The importance of conversation lies in that it is only through speaking and writing to one another that understanding the reasons which others give for their actions can become apparent.

Philosophy is about self-knowledge; a way in which we gain such knowledge is through understanding why we count certain reasons for acting over certain others (or why certain things act as reasons and others do not). And, of course, the kinds of things we count as reasons in our thoughts and actions, contribute to understanding ourselves, and how others understand us. How far one is able to inhabit a detached perspective when trying to gain self-knowledge in this way is debatable; some might argue (quite reasonably) that if you can only use your own mind to assess your own reasons, then you're not going to get very far. For how can the mind that determines which are the most relevant reasons to act in particular situations, also assess those reasons dispassionately (from outside of itself) – sincerely considering that they might not be the best reasons after all? Other people are needed here.

It would seem then, as though the need for others in a person's quest for self-knowledge is vital. Most frequently, there is the need for conversation in which it is possible to subject one's own reasons to the criticisms of others. Although being subjected to criticism (or subjecting others to criticism) runs the risk of escalating into a heated dispute, it is, nonetheless, vital that civil and honest conversations occur. Achieving this deepened understanding will involve a certain amount of humility and a willingness to recognise and acknowledge where one needs to concede points in a dispute. Much of Socrates' philosophy (at least as recounted by Plato) is, nevertheless, somewhat abstract and it is at least questionable to what degree abstract conversations can contribute to self-knowledge. Something similar might be said for the frequent banality of formal question and answer sessions in philosophy conferences!

For the remainder of this lecture, I want to now focus on the concept of authentic conversation because it is fundamental to the humanising potential of Socrates and Plato.

There are – as I am sure you are all aware – right and wrong ways of coming to believe something. Being indoctrinated is obviously a wrong way;

another obvious way is coming to believe something just because one wants to. In the case of authentic conversation with others, one has always to trust that one's interlocutor respects the fact that there are right ways and wrong ways in which one can come to believe things. One important part of that, is that conversation is not manipulative; this is largely why Plato detested sophistry (and why we, as an electorate, tend to be cynical of political spin). Sometimes we are unable to spot that our beliefs have been manipulated by spin when, for example, we are persuaded by the spin appealing to our vulnerabilities (indeed, it is precisely because people are quite readily taken in that the art of spin is seen as worthwhile at all). Any attempt to persuade in ways – such as this – which are not legitimate, does not respect the person with whom one is conversing, or exemplify the humanising potential of conversation. This amounts to saying that there is a fundamental difference between trying to persuade someone to believe something by exploiting any means available, and trying to persuade someone by appealing to legitimate means – i.e. appealing to someone in ways that acknowledge them as a full participant in the dialogue, as opposed to merely being an object to be persuaded. Another way of thinking about this might be to say that, in rhetorical attempts to persuade, one fails to recognise, in one's interlocutor, a human perspective on the world; rather, one just sees a means to one's own ends in human form.

It was for all of these reasons that Socrates was suspicious of the Sophists. His suspicion ran far deeper than the conventionally acknowledged distrust of rhetoric as a form of legitimate persuasion; it was informed as much by the heavily related thought that rhetoric designed to persuade at all costs denigrated (through disregarding) the humanity of one's audience.