

Plato's Dialogues

Introduction

- Plato's works are primarily **dialogues**—dramatic, literary, and philosophical texts that feature **Socrates as the main character**.
- There are roughly **35 dialogues**. Though some letters exist, their authenticity is questionable.
- These dialogues are not transcripts but **crafted conversations**—rich in drama and layered with meaning.

“Socrates never wrote. Plato never wrote in his own name. But he’s everywhere—and nowhere—in these dialogues.”

The Three Phases of Plato's Dialogues

1. Early Dialogues (Post-399 BC)

- Written shortly after Socrates' execution.
- Focus on **virtues** like courage, piety, friendship, and beauty.
- Often end in **aporia** (ἀπορία) — a **state of puzzlement or failure**.
- Socrates acts as a **gadfly**, stinging experts into confusion.
- Aim: to expose **assumptions** and provoke deeper thought.

“Socrates, you’re like a stingray. You’ve numbed me—I thought I knew what courage was.”

Key Dialogues:

- *Apology* – Socrates' trial defense.
- *Crito* – Friends urge Socrates to escape.
- *Euthyphro* – What is piety?
- *Laches* – What is courage?
- *Charmides* – What is moderation?
- *Hippias Major* – What is beauty?

- *Lysis* – What is friendship?

2. Middle Dialogues (380s–370s BC)

- Plato reaches the height of his philosophical genius.
- Longer speeches; Socrates begins to **articulate doctrines**.
- The **Theory of Forms** begins to emerge.
- More systematic explorations of **truth, beauty, love, justice, and the soul**.

Key Dialogues:

- *Phaedo* – On the soul and its immortality.
- *Symposium* – On love and transcendence.
- *Phaedrus* – On beauty and divine madness.
- *Republic* – On justice, education, the soul, and the state.

3. Late Dialogues (360s–350s BC)

- Socrates plays a diminished role; sometimes absent.
- Philosophical arguments become more technical.
- Greater **self-critique**—Plato tests and sometimes **refutes his own ideas**.

Key Dialogues:

- *Parmenides* – A critique of the Theory of Forms.
- *Timaeus* – Plato’s cosmology and creation myth (influenced medieval and Islamic thought).
- *Laws* – Plato’s last and longest work; less idealistic than *Republic*.

The Aporetic Pattern (Aporia)

1. Socrates approaches an **expert**.
2. The expert confidently defines a virtue.
3. Socrates gently asks questions, **undoing** the definition.
4. The Dialogue ends in **confusion**, not clarity.

*The failure is the point: it's a moment of **illumination through ignorance**.*

Philosophical Essence vs Postmodern Flux

- Socrates assumes there's a **truth** to be found. He asks *ti esti* — “What is it?”
- This implies belief in **essence**, stable realities, and the possibility of knowledge.
- **Postmodernism** and **existentialism** (e.g., Sartre) challenge this:
- Sartre: *Existence precedes essence*.
- We **invent** meaning, not discover it.
- But Plato's view: there **is** a truth—possibly beyond time and space.

Even the gods must answer to the good, the beautiful, and the true.

Dialogue Highlights

Euthyphro

- What is piety?
- Euthyphro says: “Piety is what the gods love.”
- Socrates' challenge: *Do the gods love it because it's pious, or is it pious because they love it?*
- Conclusion: The gods cannot define truth—they must recognize it.

Protagoras & Gorgias

- Both feature leading Sophists.
- Protagoras is critiqued but treated civilly.
- Gorgias' student (Polus) shows how bad rhetoric can warp truth.
- Socrates exposes the **moral failure** of sophistic education.
- *Callicles* emerges: a chilling defender of power over truth.

Might makes right. Justice is the advantage of the stronger.

***Republic* (Preview)**

- Begins with **Thrasymachus**, echoing Callicles: power defines justice.
 - Plato spends the next nine books refuting this idea.
-

Historical Parallel: The Melian Dialogue

- *Thucydides*, Book 5 of *Peloponnesian War*:
 - Athenian delegates justify slaughtering the Melians: “Justice is what the strong say it is.”
 - This logic horrified Plato. His dialogues are a response—a rejection of **raw power divorced from the good**.
-

The Role of Power

- Plato is not anti-power—he wants **just power**.
 - He advocates for power **anchored** in the good, the beautiful, and the true.
 - Rejects both:
 - Sophistic **rhetoric-as-power**.
 - Modern anti-power nihilism (e.g., Foucault’s “all truth is power”).
-

Other Major Dialogues (Briefly Mentioned)

- *Symposium* – Love as ascent toward the divine.
- *Phaedo* – The soul is eternal; death is liberation.
- *Timaeus* – A divine craftsman (demiurge) orders the cosmos.
- Influential in Christian, Islamic, and medieval thought.

Plato on Dialogue Today

“In a society obsessed with mythos and not logos, we’re just prisoners watching shadows on the cave wall.”

- Dialogue breaks down when:
- There is **no belief in Truth**.
- Truth is seen as a **mask for power**.
- Truth is reduced to **evolutionary survival**.

Final Thoughts

- Philosophy begins with **wonder**, but it continues through **honest ignorance**.
- The Dialogues aren’t just arguments—they’re **exemplars** of how to think and live.
- Socrates remains a **moral role model**, confronting death with composure and thoughtfulness.

“Who do we look up to when no one knows anything? Socrates.”

Next Up: *Lecture 3 – Plato’s Theories: Being and Knowing*