

A Note on Reading Plato's Dialogues

Plato's dialogues tend to frustrate first-time readers. There are several reasons for this. The discussion between Socrates and his interlocutors often move in different directions that are not easy to follow; the arguments are not always clear; and the distinctions between things can appear arbitrary or misleading. Some readers may also be put off by Socrates' treatment of the so-called experts he is questioning, finding it overly harsh, demeaning, ironic, and arrogant.

Now there's good reason to be provoked by Plato's writings. First of all, in spite of his obvious concerns about the dangers of poetry, the best of Plato's dialogues are dramatic philosophical and "literary texts". A good deal of attention is given to their form and style, but even so they are not conceived and fashioned by Plato as "fine and beautiful" works of art. This sets up a tension between philosophy and poetry in Plato's work. How did it come about?

Plato, so the story goes, destroyed his youthful poetic writings (mostly tragedies) after meeting Socrates and dedicating his life to the practice of philosophy. It's not likely that Plato lacked the **ability** to become a great poet, but rather that he lacked the **desire**. He no longer found the practice of poetry worthwhile.¹ Nonetheless, he was able and willing to create dramatic philosophical dialogues as a way of **practicing** philosophy and **provoking** others to do the same. Plato draws us into the philosophical discourse by bringing our beliefs out into the open and challenging us to examine them, justifying those that can withstand philosophical scrutiny, and abandoning those that cannot. The ideal reader of Plato is anything but a neutral bystander.

When reading Plato's dialogues, keep in mind that his home city-state of Athens was going through a dramatic transition during his lifetime (429-327 BC). After several wars and a period of economic prosperity, increasing immigration, and rebirth of culture (c. 480-404 BC), the core values of Greek society were being held up to closer scrutiny, questioned, and publicly debated.

Fifth-century Greek culture had re-emerged from rather dark and impoverished conditions. After the fall of the ancient city of Mycenae, the Greeks were largely illiterate. From roughly 1100-750 BC there were few written records remaining and stories were passed from generation to generation through an oral tradition, with Homer serving as the primary source of Greek history and values. Even in the "Golden Age" of Athens after literacy re-emerged, education was often informal and much of it conducted orally. To flourish in such a culture, one needed to be an articulate and compelling public speaker. The intense power struggles between the conservatives, who advocated a traditional **oligarchy** or rule by the few (in this case wealthy) Athenian aristocrats, and the proponents of **democracy** in many ways shaped the public discourse and re-examination of local values and beliefs.

A rudimentary science was also becoming more sophisticated, and in doing so challenged traditional religious beliefs. Athens also attracted traveling professional educators — the **Sophists** — who offered to teach young men how to achieve success and political influence through the use of **persuasive rhetoric**. Their emphasis on materialism and disregard for the established order also posed a threat to the conservatives who now felt besieged on at least two fronts.

It's in the face of radical uncertainty and competing self-interest that we find Socrates seeking an alternative approach to philosophy by combining free inquiry with elements of "the old religion" (myth). Both these elements are filtered through and further developed in Plato's dramatic dialogues.

Timothy Quigley, revised 7 July 13

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Plato and the Poets", in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.