

DIALOGUE IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

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IN THE
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WORLD



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INTRODUCTION

Plato's *Republic* outlines the constitution and conventions for an ideal society. In Book 5 of the *Republic* we are presented with arguments in favor of including women among the guardians of the city. Students of Greek history are sometimes unsure what to make of this. Socrates argues eloquently for the essential equality of men and women, a notion that seems very modern yet which is being propounded here by one of antiquity's most prominent thinkers. Is the true purpose of this discussion to prompt the reader to reflect on the tyranny of convention? Or the true function of government? How should this work influence our understanding of gender in ancient Greece? To answer such questions we must first decide how singular the views expressed here really were. That is, does Plato represent an exception, merely one lone voice among a very small subsection of society (philosophers) who were interested in and capable of examining the role of women in society objectively, without making *a priori* assumptions as to their nature and abilities?

If we look for parallels, we do find that the topic of women's capacity to rule appears in Greek literature composed around or before the date of Plato's dialogue (composed ~380 BCE). Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* (*Ecclesiazusae*; dates to 391 BCE) included a comic reflection on women's capacity to rule (lines 590–710) as well as the common possession of wives (lines 611–634), also taken up by Plato in Book 5 in the *Republic*. And it is believed that both Plato and Aristophanes were engaging with ideas that had already been expressed in a late fifth- or early fourth-century source.¹

Finding predecessors and/or contemporaries who reflect the same themes shapes our understanding of Plato's work. We see that in

1 Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 177.

this dialogue Plato is taking part in an ongoing conversation about women. If we wanted now to uncover what he is contributing to that conversation we would need to analyze the dialogue with respect to its overall purpose and consider how the passages on women relate to the overall aim of the work. This is where the conventions of the genre of “dialogue” come into play.

In everyday language, the term “dialogue” refers to a conversation between two or more people. In literary terms, the definition of “dialogue” is much more difficult to pin down. Broadly speaking, a literary work will be labeled a dialogue if the work, or a significant portion of it, depicts a conversation taking place between two or more persons in which a specific topic or topics are examined or threshed out. This can take place in the form of a debate or in the form of a series of questions (presented by “interlocutors”—those who ask questions) and answers. The designation “dialogue” was loosely used in antiquity and if we were to try and list all of the dialogues that were produced in the Greco-Roman world, the list would no doubt vary from scholar to scholar. Regardless of this vagueness as to definition, scholars still agree that the genre of dialogue is an important one. By even the narrowest definition they add up to a substantial total and some dialogues are among the most central texts in the classical or early Judeo-Christian canon. Plato’s Socratic dialogues show us Greek philosophy at work; in Cicero’s dialogues we witness the development of a Roman stance on philosophy, law, religion, and statesmanship; in the dialogues of Justin Martyr, Octavius Felix, and Methodius Christians define their community over against those of Jews and pagans.

Texts, then as now, belong to different categories of writing, the two most significant being fiction and nonfiction. Within this broad categorization there are many different subcategories or genres (novels or short stories in fiction for example or textbooks and journal articles in nonfiction). Different types of texts come with their own set of rules as to how they should be read. Our expectations for a novel differ from the expectations we bring to a nonfiction book; we know that an autobiography gives us a firsthand view and

a biography a secondhand view; a textbook offers academic information and a coffee-table book light entertainment. But it is not only the case that different types of books give us different types of information. We read these texts differently, too. When we take up a textbook we (if we are good students) plan to pay attention to chapter headings and to the guiding questions in the margins. These are clues that indicate important points we should think about as we read. Such expectations guide our reading process. Genre in antiquity worked in similar ways: when an ancient Greek read epic poetry he understood that it would provide information about the world of gods and heroes, that it would come in verse form, that it would use metaphorical language. Plutarch, for instance, has an entire work on how to read poetry; Cicero, *Laws* 1.4–5 discusses the different ways of reading poetry and history. In short, the ancient reader would come to an epic poem as an experienced reader of myth and that would form his expectations as a reader.

This book will explain the origins of dialogue in ancient Greece and explain how dialogues of the Greco-Roman world are intended to be read. It will trace key developments in the genre and examine specific significant examples. The historical context of these dialogues will be considered and the issues that need to be taken into account as one uses these sources to help reconstruct or understand the past.

This book has two foci: the first: to address the following questions: What were readers expected to do with these dialogues? How were they to read them? What were the rules of reading them? The second follows from this: given the first points, what difference does it make to us today as students or historians of ancient history? If we want to use these ancient dialogues as evidence how may we responsibly do this given the former?

In what follows I will show you how to approach the reading of any dialogue generically using a basic checklist. Each chapter takes up in succession a major period for dialogue production. The chapter will provide a brief overview of what was produced in that age and

discuss any developments in genre conventions. Then a sample dialogue will be analyzed with respect to the checklist and with respect to interpretations of that dialogue in recent scholarship. Applying these two elements (checklist and recent interpretations), conclusions will be drawn so as to demonstrate how we might reconstruct social and political information from the dialogue.

The following list is not exhaustive and some of these points will be more important than others for any given dialogue.² It represents a baseline of things to consider before using a dialogue to study the past.

Checklist:

Audience: the intended reader

Frame: the dramatic setting and characters (speakers) of the dialogue

Relationship with previous examples of the genre

Relationship with contemporary or near-contemporary works of any genre on the same topic(s)

Author versus persona: the relationship between the author and the narrator of the dialogue

Reading the work within and across: reading the dialogue on its own terms and also reading it in light of other dialogues or other works by the same author

2 Checklists or points to consider are very popular in introductory and intermediary literature on dialogues, particularly Platonic dialogues. The checklist assembled here attempts to include the most significant, commonly mentioned points.

CHAPTER I

EARLY GREEK DIALOGUE

The origins of dialogue are associated with Plato (424/423–348/347 BCE). Plato wrote when the genre was still in flux. The term *dialogos* is used in Plato’s writings in two places, in *Laches* 200e and in *Republic* 1.354b but only to refer to a stretch of argument, not as a genre term.¹ It is possible that there were other types of dialogues before Plato and he was not the first one to write Socratic dialogues.² Plato is still a watershed figure for the genre, however, because he set the mold for the dialogues that came after. Consequently it is his dialogues that we will examine in this chapter. Below I will lay out the purpose, structure, and significant themes of the Platonic dialogues. I will show how the items in the checklist apply to the Platonic corpus as a whole before analyzing an individual dialogue, *Euthyphro*.

Plato was born in 424/423 BCE.³ Diogenes Laertius, a third-century CE Greek author, records his genealogical details:

Plato was the son of Ariston and Perictione or Petone, and a citizen of Athens; and his mother traced her family back to Solon; for Solon had a brother named Diopidas, who had a son named Critias, who was the

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- 1 Andrew Ford, “The Beginnings of Dialogue: Socratic Discourses and Fourth-Century Prose,” in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 35.
 - 2 Ibid., 29, 33. For pre-Socratic dialogues see Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters (Deipnosophists)* 11.505b–c; for other Socratic dialogues, see below.
 - 3 For a more detailed chronological overview and discussion of Plato’s family, see Debra Nails, “The Life of Plato of Athens,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 1–12.

father of Calloeschrus, who was the father of that Critias who was one of the thirty tyrants, and also of Glaucon, who was the father of Charmides and Perictione. And she became the mother of Plato by her husband Ariston ... They say too that on his father's side, he was descended from Codrus, the son of Melanthus. (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 3.1)⁴

Most of what we know about Plato's life comes from his own writings or from later sources such as that of Diogenes Laertius. His brothers fought in the Peloponnesian War (*Republic* 2.368a). Plato's kinsmen, Critias and Charmides, were part of the regime of the Thirty Tyrants in Athens; Plato himself was invited to join but declined (*Letter* 7.324d–325a). Plato was a student of Socrates and after his death (399 BCE), Plato moved to Megara (Diogenes Laertius 2.106). When he began to write, we do not know. His philosophical ideas must have been circulating by 391 BCE as he was parodied in Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* (see Introduction) which was produced in that year. 385 BCE marks the first of three trips to Sicily. Plato was invited to stay at the court of the Dionysius I, the tyrant of Syracuse. He was asked to serve as an advisor and an instructor in philosophy off and on for the Syracusan court, a task which he performed with little success and with increasing reluctance. His relationship with the ruling family at Syracuse would be a long-lasting one and a source of trouble and distress (*Letter* 7). Plato founded the Academy in the mid-380s. After escaping from Sicily one last time in 360 BCE, he renounced all further ties with that island and settled in Athens. He died there 348/347 BCE.

We are not certain of anything when it comes to Plato's reasons for writing and his reasons for choosing the dialogue form. There is some evidence to suggest that he chose this form in order to show what true philosophy entailed—a dialectical mode of examination

4 3.38 in Yonge. Translation taken from *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers by Diogenes Laërtius*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1853).

and reflection—and to cause the reader to engage in a similar dialectical mode of thinking and reasoning.⁵ To go back to the example from the Introduction, when an ancient Greek read epic poetry he understood that it would provide information about the world of gods and heroes, that it would come in verse form, and that it would use metaphorical language. He would come to it as an experienced reader of myth and that would form his expectations as a reader. In the case of the readers of Plato's dialogues, we are not sure what sort of expectations the readers would have had as we do not know how long the genre of dialogue had existed before Plato wrote, whether it had had time to develop conventions and how flexible these might be.⁶ There was never, even in antiquity, one agreed upon explanation for the origins of this genre.⁷ It has also been suggested that even philosophy itself was ill-defined at this time.⁸

Several of Socrates' associates wrote dialogues.⁹ The extant remains of these are in Xenophon, Plato, and in fragments of Aeschines.¹⁰

5 More on this below.

6 Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 37 stresses the uniqueness of his dialogues both in respect to predecessors and successors.

7 Simon Goldhill, "Introduction: Why Don't Christians Do Dialogue?" in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

8 Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, 10, 14-15, argues that it was Plato whose work solidified the meaning of "philosophy" as a distinct enterprise. Before Plato the word was less defined and meant something like "intellectual cultivation." In Plato's writings, the Greek verb "to philosophize" comes to refer to "a distinct mode of living and thinking."

9 Ford, "Beginnings of Dialogue," 29, 33.

10 Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, 4. Aeschines wrote several dialogues of which we have substantial fragments for two, *Aspasia* and *Alcibiades*. For a discussion of the fragments of Aeschines and bibliography, see Charles H. Kahn, "Aeschines or Socratic Eros," in *The Socratic Movement*, ed. Paul A. Vander Waerdt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 87-106. At least six apologies were written for Socrates (Ford, "Beginnings of Dialogue," 32). See below for Xenophon's *Memoirs of Socrates* (*Memorabilia*); Xenophon's *Hiero* was a dialogue between Simonides, the poet, and Hiero, the tyrant of Syracuse (478-467 BCE) on how to

Sokratikoi logoi is the phrase Aristotle uses to describe these writings and he highlights the difficulty in classifying these, stating that “no common term” could be applied to them (*Poetics* 1447b).¹¹

Ancient writers created theories about the nature of Plato’s dialogues. It was stated before that there is some evidence to suggest that he chose this form in order to show what true philosophy entailed—a dialectical mode of examination and reflection—and to cause the reader to engage in a similar dialectical mode of thinking and reasoning. This is consistent with the description of the evolution of philosophy in antiquity as recorded by Diogenes Laertius who tells us that philosophy started out as the study of nature (*physikos*) or natural philosophy, to which Socrates added the study of ethics and Plato, bringing the field to perfection, dialectics (Diogenes Laertius 3.56).

Our surest means of determining why Plato used the dialogue form is not ancient testimony but rather internal evidence from the dialogues themselves. The dialogues share features in common in terms of their structure and message. These give us the clues we use to uncover Plato’s purpose. The central figure of the dialogues is usually Socrates (or occasionally a wise “stranger,” who serves much the same role). Socrates engages the other characters depicted in the dialogues in a series of questions and answers. No matter the ostensible starting point, eventually it is revealed that what is actually at stake is the definition of true goodness and the purpose of human life. When Socrates or the main speaker is engaging with others, he typically states premises which are then examined for consistency

be a good tyrant. *Economics* has as its main focus household management. Socrates and Critoboulus, the son of Crito, open the dialogue but the work includes a dialogue within a dialogue as Socrates recounts an earlier conversation he had with Ischomachus. Topics include wealth, agriculture, wives, slaves, and leadership. In the *Symposium*, Socrates and companions discuss a number of topics including love (a central topic in Plato’s *Symposium*).

11 The translation is taken from *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art with a Critical Text and Translation of The Poetics*, trans. H. S. Butcher, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1920).

and truthfulness. This characteristic form of questioning is called the *elenchus*. Earlier philosophers had used a somewhat similar method.¹² By the time of Plato this word meant “examination of a person’s words for truth and falsity” (see Herodotus 2.115) or the negative result of such an examination (*Gorgias* 473b).¹³ In Plato it seems to be refutation or a test (see for example *Philebus* 52d). The term is also connected to the term “dialectic” in such a way as to suggest that it is an integral part of that process.¹⁴ *Theaetetus* 161e describes Socrates’ method of dialectics as the examination of the notions and opinions of others, and the attempt to refute them.¹⁵ The purpose of this refutation and dialectical question and answer is to get to a proper understanding of ultimate realities.

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- 12 Parmenides appears to have used this method. In Parmenides fr. 7 the idea is to consider alternatives and defend one’s own ideas. Gorgias also did this, going through options and critiquing them one by one on which see James H. Leshner, “Parmenidean *Elenchos*,” in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. G. A. Scott (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 34. For a discussion of other methods contained in Plato’s dialogues see Hugh H. Benson, “Plato’s Method of Dialectic,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 98 and Michelle Carpenter and Ronald M. Polansky, “Variety of Socratic Elenchi,” in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. G. A. Scott (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 89–100.
- 13 Charles M. Young, “The Socratic Elenchus,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 56. The history of the term before Socrates is discussed in Leshner, “Parmenidean *Elenchos*,” 19–35.
- 14 On dialectic see Blondell, *Play of Character*, 368 and Christopher Gill, “Afterword: Dialectic and the Dialogue Form in Late Plato,” in *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, eds. Christopher Gill, and Mary Margaret McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 285. *Exetaxis* is another Greek term that Plato’s Socrates will sometimes use to describe his method of examining people or ideas but it too, is linked to the term *elenchus* (see *Apology* 23c; 29e). On *exetaxis* see Harold Tarrant, “*Elenchos* and *Exetaxis*: Capturing the Purpose of Socratic Interrogation,” in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. G. A. Scott (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 61–77.
- 15 See also *Republic* 7.534b–c.

And when I speak of the other division of the intelligible, you will understand me to speak of that other sort of knowledge which reason herself attains by the power of dialectic, using the hypotheses not as first principles, but only as hypotheses—that is to say, as steps and points of departure into a world which is above hypotheses, in order that she may soar beyond them to the first principle of the whole; and clinging to this and then to that which depends on this, by successive steps she descends again without the aid of any sensible object, from ideas, through ideas, and in ideas she ends (*Republic* 6.511b–c).¹⁶

Only dialectic can bring us to reality (*Republic* 7.532e–533a). Dialectic belongs to the true philosopher (*Sophist* 253e).

Plato's dialogues, then, have an overarching consistency in form and content. Within this overarching consistency, there are significant variations. Blondell identifies two main presentations of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, the *aporetic*, or *elenctic*, and the constructive.¹⁷ The *elenctic* Socrates is primarily a questioner: he interrogates his interlocutors (the persons who pose questions) and forces them to reexamine their preconceived notions; he claims to have no knowledge himself (for example, *Apology* 22d). In the dialogues in which he figures, the dialogue ends in *aporia* or in lack of closure. Old ideas are shown to be untenable but no new conclusions are reached. The constructive Socrates is more willing to acknowledge a position as his own; he is less open-ended and is willing to put forth concrete

16 Unless otherwise specified, all translations of Plato are taken from *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd rev. ed., vol. 3 (Oxford University Press, 1892).

17 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 10–11. She names a third in the introduction but the bulk of her book deals with these two. The third is described in the following way: "One of these, whom I shall call 'Plato's Sokrates,' 'the Platonic Sokrates,' or just 'Sokrates,' is the maximal figure who emerges from the corpus as a whole, who maintains, at a bare minimum, the same identity and name, with all the ideas and traits that are ascribed to him" (10).

ideas; he is also more willing to discuss in full—and therefore to take seriously—ideas that he will ultimately discard.¹⁸

The addition of a constructive Socrates to the dialogues most likely indicates that Plato had concerns that the *elenchus* manner of dialectical engagement was not producing enough positive results. Socrates is most often presented as failing in the *aporetic* dialogues; he does not change people's minds.¹⁹ This Socrates will demonstrate only that his partners in the dialogue have no more knowledge of the truth than he has. We might characterize this type of encounter as Plato attempting to show what philosophy was by showing what it was *not*.²⁰ The problem then was to generate positive content for philosophy and to explain how truth *was* to be obtained.²¹ In the longer, constructive dialogues, such as *Republic* and *Laws*, positive concrete suggestions for living a life devoted to the good are provided. The Q and A format is still retained. What has changed in these dialogues is the participants. In order to receive Socrates' ideas one must have the right kind of character and intellectual capacity; only some people are fit by nature for right education (*Statesman* 309b).²² Plato implies that it was the failure of the individual characters of the interlocutors in the *aporetic* dialogues rather than the method of Socrates that was at fault.²³ In the constructive dialogues

18 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 11. An example of this is the *Theaetetus*' long section on knowledge as perception which is discarded; on a willingness to acknowledge a position as his own see Gill, "Afterword," 290–292.

19 Blondell draws these conclusions from her analysis of the dialogues on the basis of themes and structures, 13, 125–127.

20 Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, 11. The *elenchus* method does lead to the conclusion that some things are false. This is valuable in itself, see Rebecca Kamtekar, "Plato on Education and Art," in *Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 343.

21 Hugh H. Benson, "Problems with the Socratic Method," in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. G. A. Scott (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 113.

22 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 125–127; Gill, "Afterword," 285.

23 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 187–188.

Socrates carefully chooses his interlocutor; he pre-selects to get better results and as a consequence is able to make more progress.²⁴

Why does Plato choose to write about philosophy in this form? A strong possibility is that the dialogue form is used in order to draw the reader into the discussion as a participant. When the questions appear in the text, the reader is forced to consider them. When no definitive answer is provided in the text, the reader then has to supply one for him/herself. Another function of the forum is to avoid any hint of dogmatism. Being encouraged to draw one's own conclusions is the polar opposite of the dogmatic approach and we can see that later generations in antiquity thought that Plato's dialogues were non-dogmatic (Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism* 1.16). It is easy to see how this interpretation fits the *aporetic* dialogues. But this is true also of the constructive dialogues. Socrates' character is, of course, the most privileged. Even in dialogues in which other views are discussed at length, his views receive the most favorable treatment.²⁵ But through having his Socrates constantly stressing the need to reexamine and to question, Plato purposely draws attention to the lack of an authoritative voice.²⁶ We can contrast this approach with other philosophers of the day who did present their teachings as deity-inspired, in the manner of poet or a prophet.²⁷ Plato's Socrates inverts the traditional teaching hierarchy: in his view, he himself is a student rather than a teacher.²⁸ The dialogue form consequently provides a model for how to approach the philosophical life: it shows us how to engage in a life of examination and a never-ending search for truth and goodness.

24 Gill, "Afterword," 289.

25 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 40–43.

26 Gill, "Afterword," 283–311; Michael Frede, "Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form," in *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues*, eds. James C. Klagge, and Nicholas D. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 214, 215; Frede, "The Literary Form of the Sophist," in *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, eds. Christopher Gill, and Mary Margaret McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 136–137 and 139–142.

27 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 39.

28 *Ibid.*, 77–79.

Now that we have explored the general aim of Plato's dialogues, it is time to turn to the checklist and consider how this information informs the way we use these dialogues to do history.

Audience: Plato's works were published and circulated in his lifetime so at a minimum he must have wanted to reach the reading public. We can see from Old Comedy that philosophical ideas were to an extent "in the air" which may possibly suggest that the intended audience is then not necessarily only the literate but everyone.²⁹ Those who can actually become true philosophers, however, Plato certainly believed to be an elite group.

Frame: The frame is the setting in which the dialogue takes place. The frame for the dialogues includes the location, time, and the characters that are present as the dialogue proceeds. All of these details may impact the way the dialogue is to be read.

As an example, the *Symposium's* setting is Athens, the year before the Sicilian Expedition. The opening of this dialogue, 172a–174a, devotes considerable space to establishing when and where the original dialogue took place, and how the record of that dialogue has been passed down to the present day. The attention devoted to explaining the long chain through which this conversation has passed highlights how far removed is the original event from the present. The narrator is Apollodorus, a follower of Socrates. As the *Symposium* opens, he is speaking to his intimate friends and promising to recount to them, in response to their request, the dialogue that took place between Socrates and company some 16 years before. He explains that he had just recounted the episode recently (the day before yesterday) to one Glaucon who had also asked to hear it. In the original dialogue event there were several people present and events which took place before that occasion are also narrated. The chronological layers and chain of transmission are as follows:

Socrates' talks with Diotimia, a Mantinean prophetess
(201d–212a);

29 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 28.

Alcibiades has previous encounters with Socrates
(217a–221c)

The original dialogue event takes place (174a–223d)

Phoenix and Apollodorus hear about the dialogue
from Aristodemus who was present; Apollodorus also
hears about the dialogue from Socrates (173b)

The dialogue is recounted to Glaucon by someone
who heard it from Phoenix (172b)

Apollodorus recounts the dialogue to Glaucon
(173b–c)

Apollodorus recounts the dialogue to his intimate
friends (172a; 173c; 174a–223d)

The reader reads the dialogue as recounted by
Apollodorus
as crafted by Plato

Plato has multiple tiers to play with here. The framing invites the readers to view the arguments from within the frame and without.³⁰ He can manipulate the relationship of the original event with the narrator Apollodorus and his circle, and the relationship between each of these layers (original event and the event of the recounting) to the reader. One way that he does this is through characterization.³¹ Each of these layers (distant past, dialogue event, and present day) has its own set of characters, some of whom are historical (like Alcibiades) and some of whom are clearly wholly created (like Diomitia, the prophetic woman from Mantinea with whom Socrates conducts a dialogue-within-the-dialogue). Even the

30 Mary Margaret McCabe, “Form and the Platonic Dialogues,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 51.

31 This is Blondell’s approach.

narrator, Apollodorus, who appears but briefly, is given a characterization. He is described as one who is “crazy” (*to manikos*) for philosophy (173d).

What should we, as the readers, do with this information? The individual characters may work in several ways. One thing that seems to always be true is that the character of individuals in dialogues is directly related to their real lives.³² Aristotle describes this type of thinking in *Rhetoric* 1356a when he states “The proofs provided through the instrumentality of the speech are of three kinds, consisting either in the moral character of the speaker or in the production of a certain disposition in the audience or in the speech itself by means of real or apparent demonstration.”³³ Aristotle is writing about oratory here but the idea was commonplace in antiquity. The dialogues take place in the past; by the time the reader engages with the text, he knows whether what is said—the whole outlook or orientation of the character—has been vindicated or not.³⁴ In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades bursts suddenly into the midst of the dinner party, drunk and rowdy. He describes his relationship with Socrates and praises him profusely (212d–222b). But this speech is taking place only a year before he would be implicated in the scandal of the parody of the Mysteries and the defamation of the Herms, a turning point in his relationship with Athens to which city state he would prove to be no true friend. We must question then whether we are to take his portrayal of Socrates as accurate. This is particularly true since Alcibiades himself tells us that Socrates’ words have layers and that one must look beyond the surface (221e). Is Plato using this character to present a false view of Socrates that he wishes the reader to reject?

Allusions to the true life histories of a dialogue’s participants are not the only way that Plato characterizes them. Names of dialogue characters can be generic, or particular, or both, as in the case of Hippias

32 McCabe, “Form and the Platonic Dialogues,” 47.

33 Translation taken from *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. J. E. C. Welldon (New York: Macmillan, 1886).

34 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 32–34, 113.

who stands for a typical sophist but retains individual characteristics within the dialogue.³⁵ And Blondell warns that while Plato must logically use the fact that his readers would know some of the most public facets of his characters' lives (such as the infamous Alcibiades) that does not mean that Plato intended to *always* convey characters that meshed with *all* of the known historical facts.³⁶

Taking together everything that has been noted about Plato and his dialogues up to this point, we can see that these dialogues of Plato are literary creations. This was known also in antiquity.³⁷ We know that Plato has an agenda (to encourage a philosophical life). He tells us, through his use of frames and distancing techniques (there are at a minimum three levels: Socrates and his interlocutors; Plato's relationship with Socrates; and Plato's relationship with us) that he is not intending to record for us real historical events.³⁸ Even when, consequently, he includes historical figures in his dialogues, we cannot use the dialogues to learn about these historical persons—we must instead use the historical persons to interpret the dialogues.³⁹ For the historical Socrates, for example, sources include Plato's dialogues, Greek comedies, Xenophon's dialogues, and Aristotle. Plato's depiction of Socrates does not fully correspond with any of these sources and the personality and teaching style of his Socrates is inconsistent across the dialogues. Of course, we would not necessarily classify Plato's dialogues as a *worse* source for the historical Socrates than these others (Aristophanes is certainly not interested in drawing us an accurate portrait) but the point is that despite his

35 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 68–69.

36 *Ibid.*, 35–36.

37 Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* 11.505d–506a; see also 11.505b; on Timon of Phlius and his criticism of Socrates writing fake conversation (fr. 19; 62) see A. A. Long, “Plato and Hellenistic Philosophy,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 428.

38 Rosemary Desjardins, “Why Dialogues? Plato's Serious Play,” in *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 112, 123–125.

39 As exemplified in Blondell.

many works that include Socrates as a main character, Plato is still not a strong source for the historical Socrates' beliefs and actions.⁴⁰ We must exercise a similar caution when using Plato as a source for the other characters (such as Alcibiades).

Author versus persona: We must not assume that the dominant speaker in the dialogue always represents Plato's own voice.⁴¹ The main speaker is usually Socrates. But sometimes it is someone else (as for example in *Laws*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*). If the dialogue is giving more airtime to one set of views over another, then we might assume that Plato agrees with that view (else why prioritize it?) but we do have to pause to consider. The construction of the *aporetic* dialogues at least suggests that they are not intended to present the last word on any subject.

Reading within and across: Each dialogue must be approached in two ways: it must be read as a complete work in itself (taken on its own terms as it were) but must also be read in light of other works (particularly other dialogues) by that same author.⁴² For Plato, we can identify overarching constants across all of the dialogues. Plato's dialogues assume that we can know the good through philosophy and dialectic (the examination of previously held and often faulty beliefs).⁴³ Some dialogues clearly indicate that they are in fact to be

40 William J. Prior, "The Socratic Problem," in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 25–35. Plato is specifically mentioned as not being present on the day of Socrates's death (*Phaedo* 59b).

41 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 17–21.

42 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 10. Individual context is determinative for Carpenter and Polansky, "Variety of Socratic Elenchi," 89–100; Christopher Gill, "Dialectic and the Dialogue Form," in *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient*, eds. Julia Annas, and Christopher J. Rowe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 152–161 suggests that our primary task should be to read each dialogue on its own terms (rather than in light of other dialogues); Christopher J. Rowe, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–51 suggests that Plato tries to progressively educate the reader across the dialogues.

43 Rowe, *Plato*, 25–28 and 273–276.

read in light of others as they explicitly refer to each other (see for example the opening lines of the *Statesman*).⁴⁴

There are also repeating themes in the dialogues. Here is a quick list of some of the more prominent: citizenship, consistency between word and deed, poetry and the visual arts, political life, philosophy, the limitations of language, education, knowledge, false experts, sophists, rhetors, imitation, law, religion, laughter, drama (comedy and tragedy), the nature of reality, sense perception, and the nature of the soul. Many of these feed into each other as for example in the case of knowledge, experts, and education. Plato frequently addresses how we obtain true knowledge and of what it consists.⁴⁵ This is in turn related to the educational system: how we can learn and how we pass things on to others (*Laws* 6.765d–e).⁴⁶ Plato's Socrates bemoans the lack of experts everywhere and individual dialogues attack different types of traditional experts: poets, natural philosophers, sophists, and rhetors.⁴⁷ A running theme throughout Plato's dialogues is that these traditional authorities cannot teach virtue and need to be replaced with dialectic.⁴⁸

It will be helpful to look briefly at some of these themes since they will help us understand Plato better and because many of them recur in the dialogues of later generations. As we proceed through this select survey, we will note in passing the writings of contemporaries or near-contemporaries who wrote on similar topics (in accordance with our checklist: Relationship with contemporary or near-contemporary works of any genre on the same topic(s)). We will give

44 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 314.

45 See below for references.

46 On education and teaching in Plato and his time, see Kamtekar, "Plato," 336–359.

47 These will be discussed below. In addition to these, Socrates critiques the "cristic" or disputatious style (*Euthydemus* 277d–278d).

48 Alternatively, we might understand Socrates as one who does not want to abandon the past but to re-interpret received tradition. Plato himself may be taking this approach toward the teaching of Socrates; see Desjardins, "Why Dialogues?," 122–124.

particular attention to the theme of religious belief and practice as this topic is of central concern to two of the sample dialogues which we will analyze in this study.

Sophists are the subject of several Platonic dialogues. By the 450s BCE, sophists were educators for hire who prepared men for political careers.⁴⁹ Sophists were foreigners and as such were mistrusted (Plato, *Protagoras* 313b; 316c–d; compare Isocrates, *Exchange of Properties* (*Antidosis*) 155–156).⁵⁰ They took money for their services which fed into the negative stereotype present in the dialogues (*Protagoras* 310d; 311b–314b; *Sophist* 223a–b; 225e–226a; 231d; and *Theaetetus* 161d–e; *Meno* 91b–d).⁵¹ Sophists in Plato's view charm their listeners with eloquence so that they are not inclined to critically examine but instead become merely passive recipients (*Protagoras* 315a–b).⁵² Just as important is the fact that sophists do not know that of which they speak.⁵³ They only imitate reality (*Sophist* 234a–235b; 268b–d) and, being deceptive imitators, they are only capable of corrupting (*Meno* 91b–d).⁵⁴

Rhetors, or public speakers, are characterized very similarly. In *Gorgias* Socrates all but concludes that rhetors and sophists are in

49 T. H. Irwin, "Plato: The Intellectual Background," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 63–68.

50 Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, 22–25.

51 Some scholars do not think that Socrates has a wholly negative view of sophists. It is true that Socrates does not seem to be categorically denouncing the teaching of Protagoras. In *Meno*, he defends him as being a good sophist in 91d–e. But good sophists are the exception rather than the rule in the dialogues. And in *Protagoras*, the sophist is still challenged on the grounds that his views, while not necessarily incorrect, are still unexamined.

52 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 97.

53 In *Protagoras* sophists are those who sell doctrines for the soul. This is a dangerous practice as they do not know what they are selling (313d–314b; see also *Meno* 91b–d; 95c–96b; *Sophist* 233b–c).

54 *Republic*, Book 3; *Euthydemus* and *Greater Hippias* also critique sophists. Imitation will be discussed further below.

fact one (465c). Both practices consist of a form of flattery whose only aim is to gratify the audience (463a–b). Rhetoric can only offer pleasure to the audience; it is incapable of contributing to personal betterment (like poetry, 502b–503b). In *Euthydemus*, skill in speechmaking is likened to the sorcerer's art in its ability to charm (289d–290a). Rhetors, like sophists, do not know that of which they speak (*Gorgias* 465a).⁵⁵

Natural philosophers who explained the workings of the world through natural laws and principles were also a target for Plato (see for example *Laws* 10.886d–890d). Plato views them as instigators of atheism (*Laws* 10.886d–e and 10.890a).⁵⁶ Like other self-proclaimed authorities, they do not have true knowledge of their subject matter (of being and nonbeing; *Sophist* 242c–252d).

Poets perhaps come in for the most stringent and sustained criticism of all the established authorities. According to *Republic* 10.607b, the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is an old one. This may or may not be true (Plato may be exaggerating), but in Plato's dialogues there is no question that the two forms of learning, poetry and philosophy, are enemies.⁵⁷ Plato wanted to banish or regulate poetry because poets claim to be giving truth when they are really not.⁵⁸ The poets (Homer and Hesiod are mentioned often) have incorrect ideas about the gods (*Euthyphro* 5e–6c, *Republic* 2.364c–e, and *Laws* 10.886c).⁵⁹ They cannot be trusted to compose proper

55 In *Ion* rhapsodes are even further removed from reality and the ability to convey goodness than poets as they recite the words of poets—they do not know the things the poets describe (537a–542b).

56 Irwin, "Plato: The Intellectual Background," 79: some of them believed in a divine creator but some did not; see 51–58 for survey of passages of natural philosophy in Irwin.

57 Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, 60 argues that this was a piece of rhetoric.

58 Christopher Janaway, "Plato and the Arts," in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 392.

59 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 381 n. 277; Xenophanes the sixth-century founder of the Eleatic School reproached poets for attributing shameful things to the gods (Diogenes Laertius 9.18); Heraclitus the philosopher (c. 535–c. 475 BCE) considered them to be unreliable (Diogenes

prayers and are not able to discern the good; in an ideal state, they would be regulated by the authorities (*Laws* 7.801a–d and *Republic* 3.401b).⁶⁰

Poets, as we might expect, are therefore depicted as another group who do not have true knowledge of what they depict (*Apology* 22c). Poets give merely a reflection of their own souls rather than a faithful reproduction of the truth or the real.⁶¹ Since poets are incapable of reflecting the truth, poetry cannot educate or help people. Poets (like rhetors) try to please the audience rather than to better them. To do this, they appeal to the bad part of the human soul, the emotional part. Poets try to cultivate and stimulate the emotional and their attention is on the worst parts of the human character.⁶² What they have to offer is imitation and bad imitation at that (*Republic* 3.392a–398b; 10.598a–608b). It was believed that poetry or the emotional performance of a story would enchant the listener or reader and endow him with mimetic impulses.⁶³

Imitation (*mimesis*) is a key concept in Plato.⁶⁴ The foundational idea behind much of Plato's critique of poets, sophists, and rhetors

Laertius 9.1); discussed in Elizabeth Asmis, "Plato on Poetic Creativity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 340.

60 There are some indications that perhaps he was not wholly adverse to every kind of poetry; in *Republic* 10.607a hymns and praises to gods are acceptable forms of poetry; see also Asmis, "Plato on Poetic Creativity," 344–346.

61 *Ibid.*, 352–353.

62 Asmis, "Plato on Poetic Creativity," 354–356.

63 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 96–97. In *Hippias Minor*, which may or may not have been written by Plato, Socrates lays out the problems he had with poetry and sophists, two interconnected ways of educating (128). Hippias is representing the use of Homer as an educational tool and the interpretation of Homer and the kind of thinking that supports and welcomes this type of education in other works (136). Plato's Socrates is not consistently against Homeric heroes; he depicts Achilles and Odysseus as positive models on occasion (158). Even in *Hippias Minor* he upholds some aspects of these characters (160).

64 For more on the concept of imitation in Plato see Amasis and Blondell.

is that imitation could influence character development.⁶⁵ The role of imitation in education and the shaping of one's character is evident in the works of Plato's contemporary Isocrates (436–338 BCE) who tells us that praiseworthy speeches or discourses should use only the most fit and useful examples which will influence the speaker not only in his discourse but in his very life (Isocrates, *Exchange of Properties* 277). Compare this with the description of the guardians in *Republic*:

[O]ur guardians, setting aside every other business, are to dedicate themselves wholly to the maintenance of freedom in the State ... they ought not to practice or imitate anything else; if they imitate at all, they should imitate from youth upward only those characters which are suitable to their profession—the courageous, temperate, holy, free, and the like; but they should not depict or be skilful [*sic*] at imitating any kind of illiberality or baseness, lest from imitation they should come to be what they imitate. Did you never observe how imitations, beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice, and mind? (*Republic* 3.395b–d)

Ancient Greeks thought that not only real persons could shape character but also that representations of good and bad examples in any media could do so. In the stories of the poets (epic, tragedy, and comedy) there was a relationship between the character conveying the ideas and the impact of those ideas (see for example *Republic* 3.392a–398b; 6.500c; 10.598a–608b; and *Laws* 7.816e).⁶⁶ The consumer (audience/reader) was thought to assume the character's point of view, feelings, etc. and so to imitate them.⁶⁷ An emotional identification with the speaker was dangerous (see especially Book

65 Janaway, "Plato and the Arts," 390–391.

66 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 80.

67 *Ibid.*, 81.

10 of the *Republic*; Aristotle *Poetics* 1462a and *Politics* 1336b).⁶⁸ In the classical idea of mimetic pedagogy, the characters of stage or literature were supposed to reinforce what is already in one (whether good or bad). The problem with viewing bad characters, consequently, was that they would reinforce one's latent badness. Ancient audiences were supposed to reject negative characters in plays, for example, precisely because they were not supposed to feel affinity with them.⁶⁹ In Book 3 of *Republic*, the underlying idea is that in imitating the good one becomes the self one is meant to be by developing the latent goodness within; this is the only proper type of imitation.⁷⁰ In post-Platonic dialogues, as we will see, there is a move away from this very narrow classification of profitable models.

Poetry is related to the theme of sense perception as is the discussion of other types of art. Although ideally all the arts would provide examples of goodness, visual art like poetry is but an image of true reality (and therefore deceptive; *Republic* 3.401c; 10.596e).⁷¹ Sense perception and its relationship with reality is a recurring topic in the dialogues (*Phaedo* 65a–66a; 74d–76a; 83a–c; cp. 99e; *Republic* 6.511b–c; 7.523a–c; *Sophist* 235d–236c; 260c; 266e; and *Theaetetus* 151e–164b).⁷²

As in his examination of the arts and the senses, so in his examination of language, Plato questions how and if language is capable of conveying reality. Whereas poets and sophists use language to persuade, “Plato sought to change language into an instrument of investigation and moral reform.”⁷³ In *Phaedrus* 275c–276a, Socrates disparages the written word which, when questioned, always says

68 Ibid., 90; Janaway, “Plato and the Arts,” 392–396.

69 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 88–93.

70 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 238.

71 Asmis, “Plato on Poetic Creativity,” 349; on the visual arts see Janaway.

72 Covered in Deborah K. W. Modrak, “Plato: A Theory of Perception or a Nod to Sensation?,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 366–367.

73 Asmis, “Plato on Poetic Creativity,” 341.

the same thing (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d).⁷⁴ The written word is but the image of the spoken word (276a). But spoken language too can also be but a deceptive image as we have already seen.

And may there not be supposed to be an imitative art of reasoning? Is it not possible to enchant the hearts of young men by words poured through their ears, when they are still at a distance from the truth of facts, by exhibiting to them fictitious arguments, and making them think that they are true, and that the speaker is the wisest of men in all things? (*Sophist* 234c).⁷⁵

Another theme that recurs in Platonic and later dialogues is that of the conflict between a life of active political engagement and the life of the detached philosopher.⁷⁶ The *Republic* for instance gives us the constitution for an ideal society, the *Laws* a more pragmatic, scaled-back version.⁷⁷ Nightingale in her book points out that we can understand Plato's position best by placing him in contradistinction to his contemporary, Isocrates. Isocrates had his own ideas about what a philosopher should be. He did not think that philosophers were, or should be, outsiders. In his view, they should work within the Athenian social and political fabric (see *Exchange of Properties* 60–61 and 205–206). Plato thought that philosophers should take up issues that impinge upon or shape the social and political life of society: because philosophy in his view dealt with ultimate realities, the insights of philosophy would theoretically impact everything all the time. But unlike Isocrates, he thought that the philosophers were inevitably always outsiders. We can see this best in the allegory

74 Plato says he has not written any philosophy (*Letter* 7.341c–e); writing is not where one puts one's serious thoughts (344c–d); (books cannot do Q and A (*Protagoras* 329a). See Desjardins, "Why Dialogues?", 111 for discussion of this topic.

75 Jowett translation, vol. 4.

76 Blondell, *Play of Character*, 298–303.

77 Trevor J. Saunders, "Plato's Later Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 483.

of the cave: the philosopher, as one of the few who truly knows the Good, stands apart from his fellow man. Having visited the divine, he must return to earth and help to lead the blind to the light. But he will be mocked and perhaps even killed (*Republic* 7.517a).⁷⁸

The last theme from the Platonic dialogues that we will examine is religion. The goal of philosophical inquiry is to know the Ultimate Realities and the best way to live. The connection to religion is therefore obvious and philosophers regularly discussed the nature of the gods and humanity's tie to them. We have seen already that the dialogues express criticism of false depictions of the gods as found among the natural philosophers and the poets. Plato thought that producing virtue and wisdom by improving our souls is to give the best type of service to the gods (*Apology* 29d–30b).⁷⁹ But Plato did not think that everyone was capable of the highest form of service. A true philosopher's existence is not possible for the multitude (*Republic* 6.494a).⁸⁰ In an ideal state, the bulk of humanity would render service to the gods via a well-regulated polis cult (on state regulation see *Laws* 6.759a–760a; 7.799a–b; 7.803e–804b; Book 10). There were some things that he wanted to change about traditional religion: in his ideal state there would be restrictions on private cult and on the terms of priesthoods (*Laws* 4.717b; 6.759d; 10.909d–910d); he disapproved of joking in religious ceremonies, of the emotional impact of hymns, and of course of poetic depictions of the gods.⁸¹ But his views on state cult were conventional

78 See discussion in Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, 26–59.

79 Mark L. McPherran, "Platonic Religion," in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 246; Jon D. Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29 argues that "service to the gods" is the closest we get to a definition of religion in Greek thought and we see this in Plato.

80 *Laws* presents a two-tiered theology, one for the philosophically ready/competent and one for everyone else (through polis cult) on which see Michael L. Morgan, "Plato and Greek Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 241–244.

81 For myths and joking see Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion*, 60–66; for hymns *Laws* 7.800d–e.

in many respects: the gods exist and they are good (*Laws*, Book 10); the *Timaeus* describes a divine craftsman (see also *Statesman* 271d–275c, God as a shepherd); he endorsed all the usual types of veneration (prayer, sacrifices, and hymns) to the Olympians, the state gods, underworld gods, *daimones*, heroes, and ancestral deities (*Laws* 4.716d; 4.717a–b; 7.801d; 7.803e–804b; 7.799a). In his ideal society, the city authorities would determine religious practices but he also envisioned consulting the Oracle of Apollo. This too, was conventional, cultic regulation being a regular function of the Delphic Oracle (see *Republic* 4.427b–c; *Laws* 6.759c–d).

What, then, he said, is still remaining to us of the work of legislation? Nothing to us, I replied; but to Apollo, the God of Delphi, there remains the ordering of the greatest and noblest and chiefest things of all. Which are they? he said. The institution of temples and sacrifices, and the entire service of gods, demigods, and heroes; also the ordering of the repositories of the dead, and the rites which have to be observed by him who would propitiate the inhabitants of the world below. These are matters of which we are ignorant ourselves, and as founders of a city we should be unwise in trusting them to any interpreter but our ancestral deity. He is the god who sits in the centre, on the navel of the earth, and he is the interpreter of religion to all mankind. (*Republic* 4.427b–c)

Many philosophers wrote about divination.⁸² We can see in the writings of the Roman Cicero (who would himself write a dialogue on this subject) that their views were well known.

But some exquisite arguments of philosophers have been collected to prove why divination may well be a true science. Now of these philosophers, to go back to the most ancient ones, Xenophanes the Colophonian appears to have been the only one who admitted the

82 Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion*, 110–129.

existence of Gods, and yet utterly denied the efficacy of divination. But every other philosopher except Epicurus, who talks so childishly about the nature of the Gods, has sanctioned a belief in divination; though they have not all spoken in the same manner ... (Cicero, *On Divination* 1.5).⁸³

Plato in *Phaedrus* prefers the ecstatic kind of divination (that is, deity-inspired) as opposed to a divination that was practiced through learned techniques.⁸⁴ In *Symposium* 202e–203a, *daimones* or spiritual beings bridge the gap between mortal and immortal worlds. Socrates' own *daimon* is mentioned at *Apology* 31d and 40a; *Euthydemus* 272e; *Phaedrus* 242b–c; *Theaetetus* 151a; and *Republic* 6.496c. To have a *daimon* was also not uncommon. There was a name for such people—or for their *daimones*—“belly talkers.” The name arose from the idea that the *daimon* was speaking from within the person.⁸⁵ Johnston points out that Greeks and Romans wrote about divination more than on any other type of religious practice.⁸⁶ This makes sense because messages from the beyond were open to interpretation and could be easily manipulated. Plato grouped soothsayers with those who dealt in the despicable chicanery of spells and charms:

And mendicant priests and soothsayers [*manteis*] go to rich men's doors and persuade them that they have a power committed to them by the gods of making an atonement for a man's own or his ancestor's sins by sacrifices or charms, with rejoicings and feasts; and they promise to harm an enemy, whether just or unjust, at

83 In Yonge's numbering, *On Divination* 3. All translations of this text are taken from *The Treatises of M. T. Cicero: On the Nature of the Gods; On Divination; On Fate; On the Republic; On the Laws; and On Standing for the Consulship*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878).

84 Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 8.

85 See for example in Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1019–20; Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 140.

86 Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 4.

a small cost; with magic arts and incantations binding heaven, as they say, to execute their will. (*Republic* 2.364b–c)⁸⁷

In *Meno* 99c, diviners and soothsayers speak under the power of divine inspiration but they do not themselves know what they are saying; that is, diviners can say true things but not of their own accord. Plato believed that some divination could be real but false diviners were included in his critique of false experts.⁸⁸

We have been looking here at themes that persist across the dialogues. But as was noted above, there are reasons to read each dialogue on its own without relevance to how the same theme appears in other works. The fact that there are issues with consistency across the dialogues would seem to support this. David Sedley compares

87 I have altered the translation of the first line very slightly; see also *Laws* 10.909b which is very similar.

88 Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion*, 126 on Plato and types of diviners; on diviners and types of diviners in general, see Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 109–143 and Michael Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22–71. Flower does not think that Plato's views on divination were normative. The following are singled out: the categorization of divination into artificial and natural types (85–87, 241); the conflation of seers (*manteis*) with begging priests (*agurtai*) and wizards (*magoi*), (see especially 28–29, 65, 69–70); the depiction of the *daimones* in *Symposium* 202e–3a as intermediaries in the process of divination (89); according to Flower, Plato is the only classical author to state that all humans have a prophetic part of the soul (which is located in the liver) (7–8); in Plato's view, only the divinely inspired female prophetesses (the Pythia, the Sibyl, the priestesses at Dodona) were truly valid (84–86). Of these, the idea that Plato was the first to divide divination into natural and artificial types is plausible though not certain. It does mesh with Plato's prevalent theme of false experts. Flower writes, "Plato is determined to represent the practitioners of noncstatic divination as the practitioners of mere *technē*, and a faulty one at that, and this is part of his attempt to devalue the importance of technical divination in Greek society" (85). But it must be noted that although Plato may have been attempting to impose a rigid, two-tiered, categorization onto a sphere of activity which was much more fluid in reality, he still includes artificial or technical divination in his ideal society, as Flower notes himself (*Laws* 8.828b and 9.871d; Flower, 139 n. 9).

Plato's differing explanations of knowledge across the dialogues.⁸⁹ *Republic* and *Timaeus* discuss knowledge with reference to the Theory of Forms but *Theaetetus* does not reference the Forms; in *Republic* and *Timaeus*, knowledge (*epistēme*) and opinion (*doxa*) are different but in *Theaetetus* knowledge is a type of opinion; in *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, knowledge is recollection but this is not mentioned in the *Theaetetus* and in this work the mind in infancy is empty. Diogenes Laertius complains about the obscurity of Plato's dialogues and suggests method for dealing with this complexity:

And the explanation of his arguments is threefold. For first of all, it is necessary to explain what each thing that is said is; secondly, on what account it is said, whether because of its bearing on the principal point, or figuratively, and whether it is said for the purpose of establishing an opinion of his own, or of refuting the arguments brought forward by the other party to the conversation; and thirdly, whether it has been said truly (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.65)⁹⁰

In short, we must be open to the possibility that there is not one set message about any given theme. It is better to see the dialogues as intentionally providing layers of meaning or having competing messages which must be allowed to co-exist.⁹¹ Such intentional complexity was not unusual in the antiquity and is reflected in Greek, Roman, and early Christian writings.⁹²

89 On knowledge across the dialogues (he is comparing *Theaetetus* to other dialogues) see David Sedley, "Three Platonist Interpretations of the *Theaetetus*," in *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, eds. Christopher Gill, and Mary Margaret McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 84–85.

90 3.38 in Yonge.

91 Kenneth M. Sayre, *Plato's Literary Garden: How to Read a Platonic Dialogue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 201; Rowe, "Plato," vii; Desjardins, "Why Dialogues?," 113.

92 Pythagoras for example had two levels of instruction—see Diogenes

Now we turn to the analysis of a specific dialogue, *Euthyphro*, so that we might see the checklist in action, drawing out any fruitful implications in regard to audience, frame, relationship with previous examples of the genre, author versus persona, reading within and across, and in light of contemporary or near-contemporary authors.

Euthyphro

The dialogue opens in the portico of the king archon's court (2a). The king archon was in charge of trials for impiety in ancient Athens and Socrates reveals to Euthyphro that he has been indicted.⁹³ The frame here suggests an apologetic intent: if Socrates' trial is referenced, his unjust execution is also brought to mind. And indeed we will see this theme carried throughout the dialogue. The characterization that Socrates makes of Meletus, his indictor, is telling:

What is the charge? Well, a very serious charge, which shows a good deal of character in the young man, and for which he is certainly not to be despised. He says he knows how the youth are corrupted and who are their corruptors. I fancy that he must be a wise man, and seeing that I am the reverse of a wise man, he has found me out, and is going to accuse me of corrupting his young friends. And of this our mother the state is to be the judge (2c).⁹⁴

There is heavy sarcasm here: "he *says* he knows ..." he *must* be a wise man." Even if we had no other dialogues to which to compare this one we would be suspicious of these words of Socrates. But read in light of other dialogues, in which the theme of *thinking that one knows*

Laertius 8.15; Cicero tells us that Heraclitus deliberately adopted obscurity (*On Ends* 2.15); Christians would develop allegorical scriptural interpretation and the Gnostic communities in particular were heavily invested in the idea that a text could be constructed so as to have different meanings for different readers).

93 Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* 57.2.

94 Jowett translation, vol. 2.

end of sample