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In addition to this series of lectures on the dialogues of Plato, Professor Sugrue has also taped the following series for The Teaching Company:

The Bible and Western Culture
PLATO, SOCRATES AND THE DIALOGUES

Scope: This set of sixteen lectures examines the Greek philosopher Plato, whose writings are at the core of the Western intellectual tradition. The famous quote: “All philosophy is but a footnote to Plato” exemplifies the fact that he is the necessary starting point for any study of Western philosophy. In many of his dialogues, he speaks through the person of his revered teacher, Socrates, using the dialogic form that is still today termed the “Socratic method.” The lectures will analyze this form and then discuss certain key dialogues and other writings that address issues concerning governance, knowledge, reality, virtue and others that have engaged philosophers both before, but especially since, Plato. This exploration of the thought of Plato necessarily makes us consider the Greek world of thought and literature, to which Plato was the heir. In fact, in a play on the quote above, it has been suggested (half-seriously) that Plato is merely a footnote to Parmenides of Elea. Thus, we will also consider other philosophers and their schools, as well as the world of 5th century BC. Greece as we explore Plato’s fascinating world of Greece and of the mind.

Objectives:

Upon completion of these lectures, you should be able to:

1. State the key facts concerning the lives of Socrates and Plato, and the 5th century B.C. Greek world in which they lived.

2. State and discuss the basic teachings of the major presocratic philosophers and the Sophists.

3. Explain the structure and purpose of the Socratic dialogue as employed by Plato in his writings.


5. Define and explain key philosophical terms used by Plato.

6. Evaluate the importance of Plato from the perspective of his contribution to the Western intellectual tradition.
Lecture One
The Domain of the Dialogues

Scope: This introductory lecture sets the stage by introducing us to the great Greek philosopher Socrates, who figures prominently in the writings of Plato. The lectures present two views of Socrates and place him in his time in Athens in the 5th century BC. Since we are studying the dialogues of Plato, they will be briefly introduced by name and general topic, and we will discuss the dialogic form in terms of structure and its educational intent. This will prepare the way for detailed discussions of particular dialogues in subsequent lessons.

I. Socrates & Plato.
   A. Socrates (c. 470 - 399 BC) is the key figure in Plato’s writing, particularly in the early dialogues. He is a seminal figure in Western thought, because it is he who can be credited with a great shift in philosophical inquiry from the contemplation of the heavens cosmology) to the critical investigation of self. There are two main sources for historical information about Socrates:
      1. Xenophon (c. 428 - c. 354 BC) was a famous Greek general and historian. The Socrates of his Memorabilia was wise and virtuous, but not necessarily inspiring (an Athenian “Ben Franklin”).
      2. Plato (c. 429 - 347 BC) is the other source. To him, his revered teacher was, as it were, “Saint Socrates,” a daemonic hero of wisdom. Where the real Socrates leaves off and the created spokesman Socrates takes over is an issue that historians of philosophy are not sure of. We do know for a fact that Socrates was tried and executed in 399 B.C. for “corrupting the youth of Athens.”
   B. To understand Plato, we must first understand the development of philosophy before his time.
      1. Before Socrates and Plato, Greek philosophy was primarily speculative about the nature of the universe and the world and mathematics. The philosophers before him are generally grouped together and termed the “presocratics.” Their main concern was in the area of nature or “physics.” Among the famous presocratics are Pythagoras (born c.570 B.C.), Parmenides of Elea (c. 515 BC) and Heraclitus of Ephesus died after c. 480), but there were many others even before their time.
      2. Closer to the time of Plato and Socrates a new school of thought developed, that of the Sophists. Perhaps the best-known Sophist is Protagoras (c. 490 - c. 420 BC). They were a more skeptical group who did not focus on the natural (physical) world or speculative cosmologies.
      3. Both Socrates and Plato were inimical to the Sophists, viewing them as morally empty teachers who instructed young men to argue only for victory and sought money, rather than wisdom and truth, as the end for their techne (art of teaching rhetoric).
      4. The Peloponnesian War (431 - 417 BC) was the lengthy war between Athens and Sparta which ruined Athens, ending its “Golden Age.” The war was chronicled by the historian Thucydides. Issues raised by the changes in Athenian society brought about by the war and its aftermath figure in the dialogues.
      5. Plato is angry at Athens for killing Socrates, and for losing the Peloponnesian War. He took this to mean that the Athenians lacked true wisdom as to how best to conduct themselves and their city-state.

II. It is useful to understand the order and general content of the dialogues as a way to keep them in context and to understand their relationship one to the other.
   A. There are thirty five dialogues, plus letters, surviving. They may be divided into three general groupings, based on chronology and topic. Scholars consider some dialogues to be dubious or spurious. The major dialogues, by group, include:
      1. Early (aporetic and ethical): Apology, Crito, Laches, Ion, Euthyphro, Hippias Minor, Protagoras, Gorgias, Euthydemus, Hippias Major, Lysis, Mexeneus. These dialogues end in an impasse (aporia) which invites further contemplation.
      2. Middle (dramatic): Meno, Phaedo, Symposium, Republic, Parmenides, Theaetetus. These deal with moral order, being (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) and are generally, but not always, more dogmatic than aporetic.
3. Late (less dramatic and poetical, more analytical and concerned with saving the moral and political order, less emphasis on Socrates): *Timaeus, Critias, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Laws*.

B. It is important to understand the general characteristics of the dialogues.
   1. The dialogues are not a soliloquy, but rather a discussion.
   2. They are not between equals (there is a teacher-student relationship).
   3. Plato himself never speaks.

III. There are other important characteristics of the dialogic form.
   A. Each dialogue is a work of art, but all, taken together, constitute one huge artwork.
   B. Next to the Bible, they are perhaps the most studied and scrutinized work of in Western literature. Scholars have adopted a standard way of referring to specific chapters, paragraphs and lines. This system is termed “Stephanus numbers” after the 1478 Greek/Latin version.
   C. At the center of the form is irony.
      1. Plato (through Socrates) disclaims the propositions that he intends to affirm.
      2. By making a bad argument or feigning a defective memory, Plato demands a dialectical (give and take) form of discourse, not a rhetorical (one-way) form.
      3. The progression of the argument is thus: intentional deception as to the aim; temptation to enter into the discussion; provocation of the listeners; and finally, an invitation to seek the truth in the argument.
      4. The method of the discourse is termed elenchus, which connotes cross-examination.
   D. There is a certain ambiguity in the dialogic form.
      1. Like the utterances of the Oracle at Delphi, the argument requires interpretation. The idea is that Socrates is possessed of (or perhaps is) a daimon (or ‘daemon’ in English), an inspiring spirit that will make things clear.
      2. The dialogues contain abundant symbolism (e.g., the sun, themes of remembering and forgetting, etc.) and use of isomorphic, or one-to-one, correlations to demonstrate key points.
      3. Despite their seeming ambiguity and symbolism, the dialogues make minimal use of technical terms.
      4. The dialogues introduce new problems into Western thought, such as that of the mind versus body, and emotion.

IV. Conclusion: The dialogues are very clearly intended to be a teaching tool.
   A. The dialogues were intended to instruct and edify. Individually, they make specific points about various fundamental issues of importance in living the right kind of examined life.
   B. Beyond their immediate subjects, the dialogues provide a meta-education, even an auto-education.
      1. Socrates teaches us how to teach ourselves by using a skeptical, critical, questioning approach that weighs all sides of an argument.
      2. Reading Plato teaches you to read, as you learn to pay attention to the individual threads of the argument and the overall direction and outcome.
      3. Socrates teaches you how to talk (logically, clearly) and, more importantly, how to listen (with patience and an open-mind).
      4. Taken as a whole, Plato’s dialogues teach you how to think. That is perhaps their greatest significance and why they have always stood at the center of the Western intellectual tradition.
Readings

Essential:

Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Chapters I - X (for background on Greece civilization and the pre-Socratics), Chapter XI - XXIII (for details on the teachings of Socrates and Plato).

Supplementary:


Certainly, for general background, you should review Thucydides *Peloponnesian Wars* and the works of the Greek dramatists (especially Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*, which pokes fun at, and even criticizes, Socrates).

Questions to consider:

1. Assess the familiar statement “All philosophy is a footnote to Plato.” To what extent do you think this is true?

2. In terms of pedagogy, do you think that the elenctic (Socratic) method is preferable to the rhetorical (or lecture) method? Support your answer.
Lecture Two
What Socratic Dialogue Is Not

Scope: From Lesson One, we have learned a few characteristics of the Platonic dialogues. In this lesson, we will learn what a dialogue is not, and study an early dialogue, *Euthydemus*, to provide an example of Plato’s style in constructing a dialogue. His stress is on dialectical give-and-take, and we will see that when this breaks down, Plato is trying to tell us something important. The break-down occurs most typically because his interlocutors do not understand how to engage in true philosophical discourse. Socrates often fights fire with fire by appearing to argue as his interlocutors do. But as we learned above, this is a ruse. Dialectical break-down tells us we are still in the state of ignorance, and it is from this point that Socrates begins to draw us, via a renewed dialectic, up towards the deeper understanding that is the point of the dialogue.

I. We need to consider what happens when the Socratic dialogue is undermined.
   A. There is a loss of communication, which is often masked by an ironic conclusion (or non-conclusion), for example, that we have not answered the question or perhaps the answer is unknowable. We need to be careful not to take this at face value, and investigate possible reasons for this result.
      1. Perhaps the fault lies with the interlocutor and how he handles the discussion. Look at the dramatic situation of the dialogue.
      2. Another contributing factor may be the approach taken to the issue from the beginning.
      3. Don’t take the endings literally, especially in the aporetic dialogues (e.g., *Meno*, the conclusion of which is that virtue comes from the gods).
   B. There are several preconditions of a dialectical discussion (or a good philosophy class, for that matter).
      1. A dialectical discussion presupposes a willingness to ask and answer questions one at a time.
      2. The intent is to communicate and investigate all sides of an issue, breaking big questions into many smaller ones.
      3. The goal is to determine the truth, not to win the argument.
      4. This requires intellectual exertion and a willingness to change your mind in light of evidence and logical argument. This applies to the teacher and the student (cf. the characters Theaetetus and Meno in the dialogues of the same names).
   C. Rhetoric is the art of influencing your listeners through the spoken word. The goal here is victory in debate, rather than true knowledge.
      1. Rhetorical argument is eristic, that is, it seeks to provoke controversy and often uses sophistic arguments to make the point.
      2. The Sophist school trained young Athenians in rhetoric, which one reason that Socrates and Plato were antagonistic to it.

II. We will use the dialogue *Euthydemus* to demonstrate Plato’s dialogic approach.
   A. This early work is an example of a Socratic dialogue that breaks down.
      1. This short, comic dialogue can be compared in some ways with the the plays of Aristophanes.
      2. Two of the main figures are the brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, respectively half-wit and nitwit Sophists, who have come to Athens to teach for money. They formerly taught military skills. Plato is making a point here about the Sophists and their eristic methods of exploiting linguistic and philosophical ambiguity. We will also see that the use of brothers embodies the idea of self-contradiction.
      3. The interlocutor is Clinias. The brother Sophists engage him in an eristic contest. The Sophists confuse Clinias with their refutation of all his answers to trick questions, whether true or false. Dionysodorus is interpreting the argument to Socrates. The crowd loves all the contradictions. They represent the ignorance Plato saw in the “democratic mob” of Athens.
   B. At this point, there is a typical Socratic device, the protreptic interlude, that is, the introduction of a didactic “teaching point.” Socrates exhorts Clinias to learn virtue, if it can be taught. Perhaps the Sophists can teach it.
      1. Dionysodorus asserts that the question “Do you want Clinias to become wise?” actually means “Do you want him to become what he is not?” He follows this approach to a (fallacious) conclusion,
namely, that if Socrates or the crowd wants Clinias to become wise, they really want him to be dead (to be that which is not).

2. Ctesiippus (who has a homosexual crush on Clinias) becomes enraged. He starts making eristic arguments of his own, catching Dionysodorus and Euthydemus in contradictions (again, Plato is making a point about the Sophists). The crowd loves it. This makes another point about the inability of the crowd to distinguish between eristic victory and the search for truth. They are the real corrupters of young men, not Socrates.

3. The dialogue has an ironic ending: the eristic method seems to triumph. Communication has broken down. Even when Socrates becomes the interlocutor, he (deliberately) doesn’t follow the arguments to their end in his dialectical style, but falls in with the eristic style of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus.

4. Socrates humorously and ironically tells the Sophists to keep their “wisdom” to themselves and a small elite.

III. The dialogue *Meno*, dealing with the teachability of virtue, continues the attack against the Sophists.

A. The basic theme of this widely-read middle dialogue is whether virtue can be taught. Meno was a student of one of the greatest Sophists, Gorgias, who is not interested in teaching about virtue (*arete*), but training people to speak cleverly to put speech in the service of power.

1. First, Meno asks Socrates if virtue can be taught. Socrates then asks Meno to define what is meant by virtue. Is it knowledge? (Socrates doesn’t really give us the answer he could, but this is where he is headed, but Meno isn’t going to cooperate).

2. The character Meno attempts an enumeration of virtuous things or characteristics (in line with Gorgias’ methods), but Socrates insists on knowing the essence of virtue. We must remember that to Socrates and Plato, mathematics (and particularly geometry) was the underlying model of knowledge (this requires an “every and only” definition or answer to the question). A given example of triangle is not the essential or “real” triangle.

3. Socrates uses the elenctic method discussed in Lecture 1 to dismiss individual examples of virtue in attempting to get to the heart of what makes virtue what it is.

B. At this point, a second attempt is made at getting at virtue.

1. Meno tries again by stating that virtue is the acquisition of “good things.”

2. Socrates defeats this by saying that everybody wants good things. Meno uses gold and silver as an example of “good things.” Socrates is driving at a higher goal and tries to show that gold and silver (and by extension, worldly goods or triumphs) are not the answer to the question of virtue.

3. Meno blames Socrates for not giving him the answer. Because of his poor (or perhaps misguided) training by Gorgias, he is lazy and doesn’t want to make the effort required by a true Socratic dialogue.

C. In typical Platonic style, there is a third attempt at answering the same question; each attempt brings us by degrees to the final insight.

1. Meno says that Socrates makes him numb, that he, Meno, knew more when he started the discussion than he knows now. He doesn’t want to make the investment, and therefore throws the Socratic dialogue off the track.

2. Meno next tries sophistry by using the argument that a person cannot inquire into either what he already knows or what he does not know. Thus, he doesn’t really have to inquire into virtue or knowledge. Obviously, the Sophists have served him poorly.

3. Socrates’ answer is a long, dogmatic passage that indicates that the dialectic has broken down. He states that the soul is immortal, that it is reincarnated (*cf. Pythagoras and the Orphic tradition, perhaps an echo of the Indian Vedic knowledge*), and all knowledge is therefore a recollection of things already in the soul from a previous life.

4. He illustrates his point by calling up a slave boy (“he knows Greek, he speaks our language”), whom he undertakes to instruct in geometry, even though the boy doesn’t know anything about it. Yet he is open to instruction. Even though his first answer is wrong, Socrates gets him to eventually understand. Socrates uses this as an example that he is “remembering” what he already knows.
5. This is a good example of the propaedeutic method, that is, leading one forward as one does a child step by step to understanding. This is in contrast to the eristic (argumentative and confrontational) approach of the Sophists.

D. The dialogue comes to an ending without resolution.

1. Meno doesn’t really want to go on. He is happy in his ignorance.

2. According to Socrates, virtue is teachable, but only if it is knowledge. But is virtue knowledge? Perhaps not, for if it were, there would be teachers and students of it, but there are not.

3. At this juncture, the character Anytus is introduced. He is one of those who would eventually accuses Socrates of corrupting the youth of Athens. He hates Sophists and thinks Socrates is one.

4. Socrates engages Anytus in a dialectical discussion, but Anytus is impervious to this, and to real intellectual improvement. Socrates asks how can the Athenians have lost the Peloponnesian War and how can they be so unvirtuous if the politicians like Anytus have done such a good job of educating them?

5. Anytus tells Socrates not to run down his betters and cites famous Athenians such as Themistocles (an earlier Athenian statesman and naval commander who defeated the Persians at Salamis in 480 B.C.) and Pericles (the ruler of Athens in its “Golden Age” from 445-430 B.C.) and other famous Greeks.

6. One theme which emerges here is the disjunction or conflict between knowledge and power, which is a persistent theme in Plato’s philosophy.

7. Virtue, since it isn’t knowledge (here we see some of Socrates’ irony) comes from the gods, and therefore Meno must be virtuous (more irony). He urges Meno to go talk to Anytus and let him know that Socrates’ goals are really the same as those of Anytus and the other politicians of Athens, even if he criticizes them (here Socrates is being more serious, since he realizes Anytus and his cronies are out to get him).

Readings

Essential: The dialogues Euthydemus and Meno; there are several excellent versions available. Read over the introductions and try to find one that provides a literal translation.

Supplementary:


Questions to consider:

1. What are the main similarities between the dialogues Euthydemus and Meno? What are the differences?

2. Even though these dialogues are termed “aporetic,” do they indeed end without a resolution? What answers to what philosophical issues can you take away from these dialogues, standing on their own?
Lecture Three
The Examined Life

Scope: The first two lectures introduced us to the Socratic dialogue and contrasted it to the eristic methods of the Sophists. In examining the Euthydemus and Meno, two aporetic dialogues, we saw where the dialogic method was untracked by the interlocutor’s unwillingness to play by the rules. This did, however, enable Plato, speaking through Socrates, to make some telling points about knowledge, virtue, power, the Sophists and political matters as they stood in Athens near the end of the 5th century B.C. This lecture will explore two very important and well-wrought dialogues, namely Timaeus and Theaetetus, dealing with, respectively, the issues of nature/body/soul and knowledge. In Timaeus, Plato offers a different answer to the origin, make up and purpose (or telos) of the universe than that given by the Ionian philosophers and the Sophists. In Theaetetus, Plato develops the concept of true knowledge, again taking on earlier philosophers such as Parmenides of Elea and Heraclitus of Ephesus. This dialogue ends with Socrates going to answer the indictment brought against him by the authorities of Athens. These two works are central to an understanding of Platonic thought.

I. The Platonic dialogues provide a mimesis (imitation) of the “examined life.”
   A. Timaeus: This late dialogue gives us Plato’s view on cosmology (the nature and structure of the universe).
      1. This dialogue draws on the Pythagorean tradition of the mathematical.
      2. It is largely mythic, aimed at the mind as opposed to the knowability of the external world.
      3. Plato is more interested in pure ideas versus physis.
   B. In the Theaetetus, we will look at the contemplative life, the nature of knowledge and the knower.
      1. One major theme of this dialogue is how to face death; therefore, it is in, as it were, a “minor key.”
      2. At the end of the Theaetetus, Socrates goes off to answer the charges against him. Thus, this dialogue
         can even be seen to prefigure Socrates’ own death.
      3. Midway through the dialogue, there is a digression, but this is really an encomium to the “examined
         life.” This is really the center of the dialogue.

II. The late dialogue, Timaeus, is another central work in Plato’s oeuvre.
   A. This late dialogue is Plato’s contribution to the theory of nature. This is a turning point in our
      understanding of the physical universe that goes beyond the purely physical and naturalistic systems of the
      Ionian natural philosophers, such as Thales of Miletus, who lived about one hundred years before Plato.
      1. Setting: this dialogue supposedly occurs the day after the large dialogue, the Republic. Therefore, we
         can presuppose the theory of knowledge in the Republic, where mathematical knowledge is far more
         certain than knowledge about the physical universe (which might be called “opinion.”)
      2. If Plato’s understanding or appreciation of the physical world seems simplistic to us, we must
         remember Plato’s place in the development of science. He wasn’t too impressed by the Ionians.
      3. Plato’s theory is more of a hymn to nature than a textbook. His account is a teleology (an explanation
         of the telos or purpose of the natural universe) and a theodicy (a justification as to why “God” would
         order the universe the way it is ordered).
      4. The demiurgic creator God of the Timeaus changes chaos into the the cosmos. Since God is good,
         his purpose is to make matter as good as possible, though never perfect or eternal (cf. with Voltaire’s
         Candide or the writings of Leibnitz).
   B. The Timaeus pits Plato against Ionian deterministic natural science.
      1. Plato saw an Ionian and Sophistic disjunction between nomos (laws) and physis (physical reality). His
         natural theory exists to justify his moral and political theories, to reconcile political and moral law with
         and natural law (we saw this theme emerging in Lecture Two).
      2. Physics is therefore useful only to the extent that it can be used to
         legitimize the soul and the state.
      3. Plato had hoped to write another dialogue, the Critias, to discuss the early history of a more perfect
         Athens, to more fully develop his physics or cosmology, but it was never written.
   C. Timaeus starts with the idea of “elements,” earth/air/water/fire, showing his familiarity with the Ionian
      natural philosophers like Democritus.
1. He offers a geometric model for physical reality. There is some sort of material substrate common to all the elements.

2. These smallest things (“atoms”) are geometric, with the triangle being the basic building block.

D. He then goes through all the subjects of physics to offer a teleological explanation (answer the “why” of nature).

1. These stories offer justification of a benevolent god’s reason for creating things just as they are. For example, humans have longer intestines than hummingbirds so that humans will have more time between meals and thus have more time for contemplation than birds, who must constantly eat.

2. Another example, which seems as quaint to us as the story of the intestines, is that God put the sun and stars in place to teach humans mathematics.

3. Modern physics explains the “how” of things, not “why.” To Plato, these two questions were not separate.

E. It is important to realize that Plato’s cosmos was earth-centered (geo-centric or Ptolemaic). His explanations of its workings are to demonstrate that a sense of mathematical order underlies all physical reality.

F. At the end of Timaeus, Plato gives an edifying story about the eternal life of the soul and reincarnation. It is similar to the myth of Er; some souls decline into animals after rebirth, some go back to the stars. Again, we can infer that this Orphic and Pythagorean idea derives from the Vedic traditions of the Indian river valley civilizations.

1. In this summing up, Plato offers a departure in Greek literature and thought. The Doric tradition of a hero is in the line of an Achilles or Hector or Odysseus, who died when they died (they didn’t get a second chance at life).

2. Plato offers Socrates as a different kind of hero, not one of death and violence, but of one who insists on moral order and moral judgment.

3. Rebirth is important because it gives a reason for a moral life. Thus, a physical theory becomes the justification for a moral and political ethos.

III. The Theaetetetus is central to our understanding of what we have come to know as “the examined life,” a central concept in Western thought.

A. This late middle dialogue explores knowledge.

1. Theaetetus is narrated second-hand and deals with a young man who is near death from wounds and disease.

2. Theaetetus is well-educated and therefore is a good interlocutor. He is said to be homely, like Socrates, but with a great soul.

B. Perhaps the whole point of the dialogue is the question “what is knowledge?”

1. The dialogue begins with Socrates asking Theaetetus to tell him what knowledge is. Theaetetus says he doesn’t know (cf. Meno), but offers that it is sense perception.

   This is the position of the Sophists. This relativist theory depends on the ontological doctrine of flux or change expounded by Heraclitus of Ephesus.

2. Plato attacks this theory because if human knowledge is isomorphic of the ever-changing physical world of the senses, then there is no true knowledge. This leads to solipsism (only I am real and what I see is the only truth). If so, knowledge and speech mean nothing.

C. The dialogue continues by contrasting the active life versus the contemplative life.

1. Plato digresses into a long passage lauding the contemplative life. This makes better sense at the end of the dialogue, but he perhaps juxtaposed it; if we accept this, we can view the so-called digression to be the core of the dialogue.

2. Basically, what Plato (through Socrates) is saying is that the “active life” of concern with worldly affairs is the real digression away from the higher calling of a contemplative (or “examined” life) of the mind, in attempting to answer “why” to the questions of life.

D. But before summing up, Plato allows the discussants the opportunity to consider other answers.
1. Following the digression, the dialogue continues with Theaetetus attempting to give other answers. The first is that knowledge is pre-judgment. That is, knowledge consists of true propositions that we can be sure of. Socrates dismisses this, since it overlaps with opinion.

2. The third answer is “true account with a logos.” Here the word logos means an account or explanation. However, Socrates defeats this argument by showing that it is regressive and presupposes what it is trying to prove.

E. The ending of the dialogue imparts several lessons.

1. Theaetetus is morally improved by this dialogue. He is moved from the study of mathematics to the study of dialectic, therefore moving closer to knowledge (as perhaps we, the readers, are also moved).

2. Therefore, again we see Socrates as a new sort of hero for Greek culture, a hero of the spirit.

3. Socrates ends the dialogue by going off to answer the charges against him. There is a death (of Theaetetus) at the beginning, and another (of Socrates) at the end. Perhaps the conclusion is that death is not to be feared by the person who has lived the “examined life.”

Readings

Essential:

The dialogues Timaeus and Theaetetus.

Russell, Bertrand. A History of Western Philosophy. Chapters XVII (for Timaeus and Plato’s cosmogony) and XVIII (for Theaetetus and Plato’s concept of knowledge and perception).

Supplementary:


Questions to consider:

1. Do you agree with Dr. Sugrue that the so-called digression in Theaetetus is really the core argument and the unresolved discussion of knowledge is really just the frame into which this passage is inserted? Defend your position.

2. Compare Plato’s explanation of the physical world with Aristotle’s. What were their respective motivations for developing their respective explanations? What was one historical effect of their insistence on an orderly, geocentric universe?
Lecture Four
Tragedy in the Philosphic Age of the Greeks

Scope: Lecture Four concerns itself with the trial and death of Socrates. This is the subject of some of Plato’s most sublime and moving dialogues which, although set in a particular time and place, speak of universal issues and provide an excellent introduction not only to Socrates the man and philosopher, but also to the ideas of Plato. This historical event was a turning point in Western intellectual development; Plato’s accounts mark a high point in Greek literature as well. We will explore Apology, Crito, and Phaedo. These works, although written at different times in the dialogic sequence, are unified in their presentation of the imperturbable calmness with which Socrates faced his accusers, showed the errors of their charges and thinking, and then submitted to their flawed judgment by taking the cup of hemlock.

I. The first dialogue of the triptych to be considered is the Apology.
   A. Socrates is accused of being a Sophist and a corrupter of youth.
      1. Because Athens was built on a certain accepted view of religious mythology, the actual charge against Socrates was that of impiety, a political crime.
      2. But Athens is the real impious corrupter of youth. The irony is that Socrates is the “purest” of the Athenians.
      3. He in effect puts Athens on trial while pleading for fairness.
   B. Socrates is a sort of laughing-stock among the people of Athens, who turn vicious because they are ignorant of real philosophical training.
      1. Socrates was lampooned by the comedian Aristophanes and this kind of prejudice clearly affected the trial.
      2. The Athenian “law of oblivion” should have protected Socrates, but he was connected with Alcibiades and others whose leadership led to defeat in the Peloponnesian War. The charges are really trumped up, which shows the hypocrisy of the accusers.
      3. Socrates says in his defense that he is has never been in court before, is not a Sophist and charges no money for his teaching.
   C. Socrates then moves to a cross-examination of Meletus.
      1. Socrates proves that the charges are diffuse and Meletus doesn’t really know what he is talking about. He demonstrates that he is perhaps heterodox, but not impious.
      2. Then Socrates moves from dialectic to rhetoric. He mentions his friend Chaerephon, who was told by the Oracle at Delphi thatthere was no one wiser than Socrates.
      3. This wisdom is based on the fact that he (Socrates) knows what he does not know. He is following his daimon to philosophize and help people to improve themselves.
      4. He also refuses to make the jury and the people pity him on personal grounds. He proclaims his innocence. In fact, he asks for the highest honors Athens can bestow, those given to Olympic winners.
   D. Socrates is convicted and gives an important speech where he brings down a blood curse on his convicters.
      1. This is reminiscent of the Oresteia, although Socrates is without flaw, unlike the dramatic heroes.
      2. He then praises those who voted to acquit him.
      3. He speaks of his lack of fear of death, which is the result of his philosophy. This is really a type of catharsis, a new and improved Greek tragedy, with a new kind of hero, a hero of knowledge.

II. The next dialogue in the logical sequence is the Crito.
   A. This dialogue forms a symbolic interlude between the trial and death of Socrates.
      1. Crito, the interlocutor, is a nice person, mundane, prosaic and well-intentioned.
      2. He comes in to visit Socrates the day before his execution and waits for him to wake up from a nap.
      3. Crito is amazed at how calm Socrates is, knowing he is to die.
   B. Socrates relates a dream; a woman in white robes appears and says that he (Socrates) will be taken on third day to “pleasant Phthia.”
1. This is a direct reference to Book Nine of the *Iliad* and the scene where Achilles refuses the blandishments and bribes of Agamemnon, and vows to return home to “pleasant Phthia” in three days, if the gods grant favorable weather.

2. Again, Plato is establishing Socrates as a new kind of hero, distinct from the doomed epic heroes such as Achilles.

3. Crito offers to bribe the jailer so that Plato can escape to Thessaly.

4. Socrates declines and states that he is on a journey, and, ironically, is going to continue the journey by staying where he is. For seventy years he has been an alien in his birthplace, like Achilles he longs to go home (*nostos*), only his home is with the gods.

C. Socrates then engages Crito in a dialectic about morality and the law.

1. Socrates says that as a citizen of the *polis*, he has made an implicit agreement to obey the laws of the *polis*.

2. This is essentially a conservative political message, somewhat balancing the more radical drift of the *Apology*, wherein Socrates says that he won’t obey the law by ceasing to philosophize.

3. Plato feared Socrates’ defiance and contempt could be interpreted as being antinomian or anarchic. By staying in Athens and accepting the decision of the court, Socrates is saying that he is part of the community and not a law unto himself.

4. This legalistic interpretation would seem to be more appealing to a philosopher like Kant than to one like Thoreau.

III. Finally, we come to the *Phaedo*. The setting is the death of Socrates following his conviction for corrupting the youth of Athens.

A. This middle-period dialogue is a central work in Plato’s output. It discusses the soul and death.

1. Phaedo, a Pythagorean, narrates the death of Socrates. This is important because the Pythagoreans were deeply concerned with mathematics, the divine and metaphysics. They believed in reincarnation.

2. The dialogue starts with Socrates, unshackled, talking about pleasure and pain and how they are bound up with the body. There is symbolism in the unshackling of the chains and the soon-to-come unshackling of the soul and body in death.

3. This is the only dialogue in which Socrates laughs, and he laughs at death, saying it is not to be feared. His supporters, even though they believe in immortality, are crying.

4. Pleasure and pain, comedy and tragedy are mixed in this work.

B. Socrates begins to articulate his belief in immortality.

1. He starts out with the idea of “opposites.” Life alternates with death, like heat does with cold.

2. His interlocutors Simmias and Cebes ask him to further explain immortality and Socrates goes through a dialectic discussion of his theories (such as “attunement,” the elemental nature of the soul).

3. They are still skeptical, and Socrates says that they will have to find their own answers, because his time is up.

4. For himself, because he has lived an orderly life, he expects to see the good, immortal gods, and the souls of good and virtuous people as well.

5. We can compare Plato’s eschatology (ideas about the end of life) with that of Kant and his “Postulates of Pure Practical Reason.” The immortality of the soul is an foundation of an political/moral ethical system that governs life and action.

C. The “journey” motif is reintroduced at this point.

1. The road to heaven is straight; that to Hades is convoluted.

2. Socrates’ odyssey has taken place in one city (compare Joyce’s *Ulysses*).

3. Socrates walks (journeys) until his legs get heavy from the hemlock. This highlights his spiritual journey.

D. Cebes asks how they are to bury him, and Socrates tries to explain that they can’t bury Socrates (his immortal part). They can do what they want with his corpse, and laughs about it.

1. We can compare Socrates’ gesture towards humanity (humorous) with that of Christ (sorrowful).
2. Knowledge of the “human comedy” leads to an understanding of the “divine comedy.” This is the Platonic message here.

3. Plato thus establishes Socrates as a cosmic comic hero (very different from the vulgar, inferior protagonists of Aristophanes). Again, we see him as a demonic hero, one foot on earth, one in the cosmos.

4. In Phaedo, Plato is gesturing at eternity, at how to face death. This means that one must live the examined life, keep the soul in order and approach the model of Socrates.

5. Socrates offers a human and humane message of hope; the journey of life matters much more than the destination.

Readings

Essential:
The dialogues Apology, Crito, Phaedo.
Russell, Bertrand. A History of Western Philosophy. Chapter XVI.

Supplementary:
The dialogue Euthyphro (this takes place at the trial of Socrates and gives us a notion of Plato’s view on religion and piety). It can be considered a companion piece with the three dialogues covered in this lecture because it deals with the trial and death of Socrates.

Questions to consider:

1. Consider the assertion that Plato has created in Socrates the supplanter of the epic, tragic and comedic heroes of Greek literature. Do you agree or disagree with this? Draw comparisons or contrasts with Achilles, Odysseus, Oedipus, Orestes.

2. Explain what is meant by the Platonic ideal of the “examined life.” How has subsequent philosophy, especially that of the last few hundred years, either maintained this focus or deviated from it?
Lecture Five

*Republic I—Justice, Power, and Knowledge*

**Scope:** This is the first of three lectures on the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, as set forth in Plato’s *Republic*. This lecture examines Book I of *The Republic*, which establishes the main themes and problems to be addressed in the dialogue. Socrates asks his interlocutors to explain the meaning of justice. He refutes the arguments of Cephalus that justice consists in telling the truth and returning borrowed property, of Polemarchus that justice consists in giving to every man his due, and of Thrasy machus that might makes right. His refutation of Thrasy machus is less than fully convincing, however, which leads Glaucon to restate the argument, as we shall see in the following lecture.

I. The main themes of *The Republic* are set forth in the introductory frame scene.

A. Socrates and Glaucon go down to Piraeus to view a religious procession and are stopped by Polemarchus’ slave.

B. Socrates is “overpowered” by force. A dialectic of force and persuasion emerges in which the philosopher succumbs to the unknowing *demos*. Glaucon decides that Socrates will submit.

II. Socrates and Glaucon go to the house of Polemarchus and Cephalus.

A. Aged Cephalus is erotic, avaricious, superstitious, philistine, and pious. As an old man, he is more interested in speeches than he had been during his passionate youth. He has just finished sacrificing. He needs wealth to buy off the gods to forgive youthful sins.

B. Polemarchus refutes his argument that justice equals truth-telling and the return of property.

C. Polemarchus inherits the argument when Cephalus returns to the sacrifices. The dialogue moves symbolically from old piety to living philosophy.
   1. Polemarchus tries to justify old piety to living philosophy.
   2. He invokes the authority of Simonides (no further mention of divine retribution is made until the myth of Er in Book X).
   3. Polemarchus asserts that justice is “giving to every man his due,” i.e., that justice consists in doing good to one’s friends and evil to one’s enemies. Socrates responds that justice is incompatible with doing harm to another.

III. Thrasy machus, the beast of discourse, breaks in.

A. He demands that Socrates define justice, but not abstractly as “the advantageous” or “the needful.”

B. Socrates uses multilevel irony; he cannot answer since Thrasy machus has prohibited abstraction.

C. Thrasy machus demands money; Glaucon and others guarantee it. (Thrasy machus acts as if reluctant to speak, but he really wants to speak in order to enhance his reputation.)

D. Narration makes it impossible to enact a Platonic dialogue. Unlike other drama, Platonic drama is a spectacle which appeals to the ear and eye, and perhaps to the brain.

E. Thrasy machus’ argument is as follows.
   1. Justice equals the advantage of the stronger. Thrasy machus is the spokesman for the status quo (all existing regimes formulate the laws according to their own advantage; therefore justice is obeying the law).
   2. Justice equals legality (understood as legal positivism and *Realpolitik*). The tyrant is in the best situation, as he can make laws that gratify his own desires.

V. Socrates engages Thrasy machus in dialogue.

A. What if the rulers do not know what is good for them and thus make mistakes? Then justice becomes the disadvantage of the stronger.
B. Thrasymachus agrees that really existing rulers make mistakes, but he asserts that the true ruler *qua* ruler is infallible. Thrasymachus thus moves from positive to normative—the rulers *should* rule with perfect knowledge of their interests.

C. Socrates responds that all arts serve the object of the art, not the interest of the artist. Medicine is to bodies as horsemanship is to horses (342E).

D. Thrasymachus goes *ad hominem*: “Do you have a wet nurse? She should wipe your nose.” He holds that injustice is more profitable than justice on the largest scale (i.e., tyranny).

E. Socrates argues that the artist or technician wants to get the better only of those who do not properly practice the art, while the ignorant man wants to get the better of all others, even if the object suffers harm. The shepherd, for instance, gets paid because he is interested in the good of the flock, not in his own good.  
   1. Thrasymachus blushes, then turns petulant, then argues that even unjust men need some justice, in order to be able to act together. Complete injustice would leave them utterly impotent.  
   2. Socrates holds that justice is the virtue of the soul, which allows it to perform its *telos*.

F. Thrasymachus has grown gentle; Socrates has silenced but not convincingly refuted him. Socrates wants to draw Adeimantus and Glaucon into the discussion.

Readings:

**Essential:**

Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy*. Chapters XIV and XV.

**Supplementary:**


**Questions to Consider:**

1. What basic themes of *The Republic* are presented in the opening scene of the dialogue, and how are they presented?  
2. What is Thrasymachus’ definition of justice? How does Socrates refute him, and how convincing is his refutation?
Lecture Six
Republic II-V—Soul and City

Scope: Our study of Plato’s Republic continues. Responding to Glaucon’s challenge that he defend justice on its own merits rather than any practical consideration, Socrates suggests that the group examine justice in the city as an analogue of justice within the individual human soul. He then describes the educational regimen of the ruling class in his ideal city, and he explains that justice in the individual, as in the city, consists in the proper and harmonious ordering of the parts that constitute the whole. Finally, we examine the three “waves” of revolutionary change that characterize Socrates’ ideal city: political equality of women, abolition of private property and the family, and rule by philosophers.

I. Socrates has silenced but not refuted Thrasymachus. Socrates’ arguments offered in Book I are weak, as he realizes. Socrates offers weak arguments in order to provoke Glaucon and Adeimantus to enter the discussion.

II. Book II of The Republic examines Socrates’ analogy between the just man and the just city.
   A. Glaucon asserts a social contract theory—justice is the advantage of the weaker.
      1. He recounts the myth of Gyges to demonstrate that all men will practice injustice if given the chance
      2. He demands that Socrates demonstrate that justice is good as an end, not as a means; i.e., he demands that Socrates remove all accidental considerations and show that justice is essentially good.
   B. Adeimantus anticipates Machiavelli in asserting that it is preferable to have a reputation for justice while practicing injustice. He notes that men can be fooled, and the gods either do not exist or can be bribed.
   C. Glaucon and Adeimantus want to seem just, but they are tempted to be unjust; they assert the disclaimer: “I have heard this, but don’t believe it.”
   D. Socrates asserts a parallel between man and city; he suggests that the group seek justice by examining the city.
      1. Socrates and Adeimantus construct a “city of utmost necessity” in which there is a basic division of labor—one job for each man.
      2. The arcadian simplicity of this image leads Glaucon to denigrate it as a “city of pigs.”
      3. Glaucon prefers a more luxurious city. A philosopher-king and a guardian class are needed to order desires in this “feverish city.” The guardians must behave like “philosophical dogs,” knowing and loving their own and showing antagonism toward strangers and toward change.
      4. The education of the guardian class will consist of music (to soften their hearts and promote harmony in their souls) and gymnastics.

III. Book III of The Republic constitutes an attack on Homer.
   A. The poets are inspired but ignorant; the apparent beauty of their poems hides moral corruption.
   B. Homeric heroes cannot be the ideal of men who would be wise, courageous, moderate, and just.
   C. Homer and his ideal, Achilles, must be demoted and censored (in favor of a new poet, Plato, and a new ideal, Socrates—the philosopher-king). This is the point of the myth of metals—the different parts of the soul correspond to gold, silver, and bronze.
   D. The education of the guardians harmonizes mind with body, gold with silver, Doric with Ionic.
   E. Comedy and tragedy also produce bad (i.e., corrupting) imitations; thus they—like epic—must be censored in favor of the morally good.
   F. Truly educational poetry is Platonic dialogue.

IV. As befits one who is oligarchically inclined, Adeimantus objects that rulers will be unhappy if deprived of property.
   A. Socrates retorts that a good ruler seeks the good of the whole city. Sharp distinctions between wealth and poverty harm the polis by creating faction.
   B. Unity of soul implies unity in the city.
1. Different virtues correspond to different parts of the soul, just as they do to different sorts of cities. Justice consists in the harmony that prevails among reason, spirit, and passion in the well-ordered soul.

2. Justice consists in each element pursuing its own telos and not trespassing into the sphere of the other elements.

3. Plato uses these logical ideas to distinguish silver from bronze. Only through justice can a city harmonize classes and can a man harmonize his own soul—justice is to the soul as health is to the body. The good ruler resembles a doctor, just as the tyrant resembles a quack doctor.

V. Adiemantus breaks in, demanding that Socrates explain his proposals for eugenic breeding and abolition of the family. Then all chime in, and the framing scene of Book I is reprised. Socrates is arrested again by a suddenly bold Adeimantus. Socrates fears being drowned by three “waves” of his argument.

A. The first wave is feminism; women should have the right to rule.
   1. Female guardians receive the same gymnastic and musical education as men.
   2. Socrates compares the difference between the sexes to accidental differences among men (e.g., long versus short hair). He distinguishes accidental and essential differences (which are analogous to the difference between body and soul).

B. The second wave is communal possession of property and abolition of the family.
   1. Sex is a necessity. The rulers will arrange eugenic marriages, by contriving phony lots. Beyond reproduction, the guardians have complete erotic freedom.
   2. Children are reared apart from parents, so the parent-child bond is generalized among all the guardians.
   3. Guardians are all one family. Eros is used in the service of war.

C. The third wave is rule by philosophers, but is such a regime possible? The impracticality of the good city shows that there is something wrong with the world, not with the theory.

Readings:

Essential:
Russell, Bertrand. A History of Western Philosophy. Chapters XIV and XV.

Supplementary:

Questions to Consider:
1. Describe the purposes of each of the stages in the education of guardians in Plato’s ideal city. What role does education serve in this city’s preservation?
2. According to Plato, how is justice different from wisdom, courage, and moderation?
Lecture Seven

Republic VI-X—The Architecture of Reality

Scope: We end our examination of Plato’s Republic by considering three of Plato’s most famous metaphors: the ship of state, the divided line, and the cave. The first of these depicts the negative consequences of misrule, while the latter two illustrate Plato’s ontological and epistemological teaching that with the right education, one possessing the proper constitution can advance from mere opinion of sensible particulars to true knowledge of the eternal, unchanging Forms—i.e., of ultimate reality. Next we consider Plato’s theory of the degeneration of good regimes into their vicious counterparts, and we close with the “Myth of Er,” intended to encourage just behavior among the unwise demos.

I. Book VI extends the discussion of the third “wave”—rule by philosopher-kings.
   A. This discussion foreshadows the epistemological and ontological doctrines to be considered next (light vs. darkness, sight vs. blindness).
   B. The philosopher is called the lover of Forms, but Adiemantus is unconvinced.
   C. Socrates offers the parable of the state. Only the ignorant and vicious pursue political power. The philosopher’s eros is for knowledge, not power.
   D. The philosopher desires the good, not merely the pleasurable.
      1. It is said that philosophers are corrupt and corrupting, but the opposite is true.
      2. The best natures, when corrupted, become tyrannical. Thrasymachus is thus an inverted philosopher-king who has suffered from a bad education.
      3. The best natures need the best education. They must go beyond mere opinion to knowledge, particularly knowledge of the Form of the Good, which is analogous to the sun.
      4. Plato uses the simile of the divided line to clarify this analogy. The dividing line is a schematic diagram of the progression from apprehension of images and sensible objects, of which one can only have opinion, to the knowledge of intelligible objects and ultimately of the Forms.

II. Book VII includes the Myth of the Cave.
   A. Most human beings are “imprisoned” in the realm of sensible particulars, which Plato analogizes to shadows projected upon the wall of a cave. The representations produced by deceptive poets and sophists are regarded as real by most men, when in fact they are illusion.
   B. The philosopher uses dialectic to free himself from the sensible realm and to progress upward out of the cave and into the realm of the sun (i.e., ultimate reality, the Form of the Good).
   C. The upward way is painful and difficult; the eyes take time to adjust.
   D. Glaucon asks if the philosopher-king will be compelled to go back down into the realm of opinion, for the sake of the general good.
      1. The education of the philosopher-king, like other guardians, begins with gymnastic and the muses.
      2. The guardians study Pythagorean arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics between ages 20 and 30, followed by five years of dialectic. After fifteen years of practical politics, one can become a philosopher-king.
   E. Dialectic is an asymptotic journey, the end of which is knowledge of the Form of the Good, which cannot be articulated.
   F. The City of Speech can be constructed only if true philosophers come to power and exile all citizens more than 10 years old.
      1. Its establishment requires coercive power (the good city is a yardstick, not a practical possibility).
      2. It has profoundly conservative and anti-utopian implications.
      3. The City of Speech illustrates the limits of politics. Our progression toward it, like or movement toward the Form of the Good, is asymptotic.

III. Book VIII examines the degeneration of regimes from rule by philosophers ultimately to tyranny.
A. Having reached the symbolic and conceptual high point with the Form of the Good, we descend through the degenerate regimes. The organic progression downward through the four degenerate regimes parallels that through the degenerate forms of the soul.

B. History (i.e., change) has been abolished in the good city, but it returns as a dialectic of depravity (an inversion of Hegel). This process resembles the Nietzschean genealogy of morals.

C. Good regimes follow a natural course of degeneration.

1. The good city, led by the philosopher, degenerates into the timocratic city as a consequence of bad breeding and disagreement among the guardians. In the timocratic city, the desire for honor supplants desire for knowledge.

2. Disorder in the warlike timocratic soul causes wealth to supplant honor. Thus the timocrat becomes an oligarch, concerned with wealth and necessary desires.

3. The few among the bronze (i.e., the oligarchs) are overthrown by the many, who are unable to discipline their desires, giving rise to democracy.

4. Class conflict between oligarchs and democrats forces the democratic regime to elevate a tyrant to protect the regime. The tyrant eventually undermines the democracy and establishes a tyranny.

D. Symbolically, Socrates represents the philosopher-king, Glaucon the timocrat, Adiemanous the oligarch, Polemarchmus the democrat, and Thrasymachus the tyrant. This decline can be reversed through the journey of dialectic, as all characters rise one level.

1. Thrasymachus the tyrant becomes a democrat; he votes for the re-arrest of Socrates.

2. Polemarchmus as spokesman for demos becomes an oligarch; he asks about property.

3. Adiemanous the oligarch suddenly becomes spirited and brave; he arrests Socrates.

4. Erotic Glaucon, “brave in all things,” admits the attractions of tyranny are ridiculous. The unjust man wrongs himself involuntarily, and he learns through education to practice justice for its own sake. Up we go.

IV. Book IX compares the condition of the tyrant and the philosopher.

A. The tyrannical man, a completely heteronomous bundle of insatiable desires, is the most miserable of men.

B. The philosopher, who has the greatest knowledge, knows pleasures best. Pleasures of the soul are greatly superior to pleasures of body; virtue equals knowledge, and virtue is its own reward.

V. Book X discusses the usefulness of poetry and myth in reinforcing the imperative to behave justly.

A. Socrates criticizes epic, tragedy, and comedy as imitations of imitations of Forms.

B. Good poetry must edify with true opinion, if it cannot instruct with true knowledge.

1. The poetry of the good city will not allow epic/comic/tragic heroes to make bad (ignorant) men worse.

2. A new poetry and new hero are needed. Instead of tragic crime, comic foolishness, and epic slaughter, there must be a new poetry of education, with a virtuous (knowledgeable) hero who is a benefactor and educator.

3. The poetry of the good city is Platonic dialogue. Socrates is the new Achilles of reason without hubris. He embarks on a spiritual odyssey of dialectic. He is an Oedipus without a tragic flaw in a city in which everyone else is blind; a comic hero where the joke is on everyone else.

C. Since it is clear that justice is an end in itself, let us restore reputation and divine retribution in the Myth of Er. Not all can be wise; Cephalus and the demos are deterred from vice only by good myths.

Readings:

Essential:
Russell, Bertrand. A History of Western Philosophy. Chapters XIV and XV.
Questions to Consider:

1. How does Plato’s simile of the divided line illustrate the relationship between his ontology and epistemology?
2. What causes the degeneration of regimes from aristocracy to tyranny? What sort of desire or *eros* is characteristic of each of the degenerate regimes?
Lecture Eight

Laws—The Legacy of Cephalus

Scope: Having completed our investigation of the Republic, we can appreciate that it is the source of the Western utopian tradition, clearly the inspiration for the Christian philosophers Augustine and Thomas More. This lecture explores a late dialogue, Laws, which is in many ways a critique of the Republic. That Plato should critique his own work should not be considered strange, as the lecture explains. The interlocutor in this dialogue is not Socrates, but rather the “Athenian Stranger.” Although the Republic is a high-point in Western intellectual development and understandably any “sequel” could not match its inspiration, still Laws does offer some additional insights that are worth considering.

I. The Republic is about the rule of wisdom and the wise; it says little about the laws or legal aspects.
   A. While Plato was working on this last and longest dialogue, which most likely occupied over ten years, he was more pessimistic about political rule than in his earlier periods. He had tried to educate Dionysus of Sicily in how to govern, but failed. He didn’t reject his philosophical idealism, but believed he had to bring this down to a more practical or understandable level.
      1. He sets out to criticize Socrates. This is what it means to be Socratic, because investigation or criticism is at the heart of Socrates’ teachings (cf. Cebes in Phaedo, Aristotle in Politics).
      2. Plato’s goal is to create the “second best city,” one ruled not by the philosopher-king of the Republic, but by rule of law.

II. Books I - III form a preamble to the rest of the work.
   A. “The Athenian Stranger” dominates the dialogue. Perhaps this character represents Plato himself, or may represent a “mask” for Plato, to offer at least true opinion, in the absence of certain knowledge, about the subjects under discussion.
   B. Book I of Laws opens with three elderly men walking toward the cave of Dicte, the mythical birthplace of Zeus on Crete.
      1. Divinity and theology are themes of Laws. Plato was pious and for him, religion undergirded the political system.
      2. This daytime trek reinforces the “solar” symbolism of Plato’s dialogues (the sun equals knowledge) and also reinforces the “journey” motif of the soul which goes all the way back to Odysseus. In this case, the journey or nostos (homecoming) is toward wisdom and the gods.
      3. The other men are Megillus (a Spartan) and Clinias (a Cretan).
   C. They decide to talk about law in a good, but not ideal, city, because the rule of law is second-best to the rule of wisdom. They begin a dialectical “journey” a Pythagorean pilgrimage to practical political wisdom.
      1. The Athenian Stranger asks the others where their laws originated. They answer that they came from the gods (in the case of Sparta, Apollo; in the case of Crete, Zeus). Both were timocrat regimes (i.e., motivated by glory and fame), devoted to war and victory over external enemies. Plato admired the constitutions of these two polities.
      2. This favorable view harkens back to the reinforcement given to political power by religion in the older “river valley” civilizations. Platonism might be thought of as bolstering these conceptions which were evident in Egypt and Mesopotamia.
      3. In this sense, Platonism may be thought of as a backward-looking, conservative philosophy. Plato thought that speculation into the natural sciences (cf. the Ionian and Eleatic schools) brought about an immoral, impious attitude that created centrifugal forces that blasted Greek society apart, and he is trying to put it back to rights.
      4. He is searching for the overlap between mythos and logos.
   D. In Book 2, Megillus (from Sparta) praises the moderation of Spartans, because their law forbids intoxication.
      1. Plato in essence replies “in vino veritas,” that temperance is good and necessary, but makes the point that Sparta was governed to defeat external threats, when in fact the danger may be within.
2. Victory over factionalism is important for legislators, and education is good for the soul, and a
   laudable goal for the polis.
3. We have the image of the sober, older man testing and guiding the younger man, using Apollonian
   order to control the Dionysian impulses of the young. Music and dancing played a part in this
   conception of controlling and channeling pleasures, and showing that the happy man is the wise man
   is the virtuous man.

E. Book III goes back to the beginning of the first city,” to a period after a cataclysm that had reduced man to
   a state of nature (cf. to the city of swine in Republic).
   1. In Republic, Plato want to find a synthesis of Athens and Sparta, merging the more severe Ionian
      outlook with the somewhat provincial Doric viewpoint that typified Athens.
   2. In Laws, he deviates from this goal. He wants to unify Athens (freedom through democracy) with
      Persia (order through autocracy), thus getting the best of both worlds, as it were.

III. Books 4-10 describe the microcosmic city.
   A. In Book 4, Plato starts out by enumerating its practical resources (cf. Montesquieu).
      1. He is interesting in its self-sufficiency. He rails against the influx of foreigners and, in essence,
         innovation.
      2. He wants a state divinity, a state religion. This is a big difference between Laws and Republic.
   B. He advances that the law is a kind of poetry, and its purpose is instructive. Each law needs an exhortatory
      preamble to tell people why the law is good and necessary. Education thus is the bedrock.
   C. Plato describes a city of four classes, based on income, which has a strict upper and lower limit. There is
      not equality, but there is a regulation which avoids factionalism based on economic disparity.
      1. Surplus wealth goes to the gods, thus linking public and private good.
      2. There is little commerce; rather the emphasis is on self-sufficiency.
   D. The city will have a strictly limited size of 5,040 households. This is Pythagorean numerology, keyed to
      the number twelve. There will be two children per household. Excess population will be used to found a
      new city, rather than expanding the present city.
      1. Each of the twelve tribes in the city takes a monthly turn in the exercise of the government.
      2. Thus the city becomes a living solar calendar, cycling around and around in a very predictable way.
      3. This is a demonstration of Plato’s desire to “abolish history.” History is cyclic, not linear. Again, we
         have Apollonian (sun-god) order over Dionysian disorder.
   E. In Book 6, Plato discusses the magistrates, or guardians of the law.
      1. There is a representative assembly from all four classes.
      2. There is a committee of women to supervise married couples, family life (including reproduction)
         and early education.
   F. Book 7 covers education.
      1. The most important official minister of education.
      2. There is compulsory education for boys and girls after the age of six. All education is closely
         supervised, which extended even to prenatal care. Children will be taught gymnastic, dance
         weapons, music, literature (but in a “censored” version to ensure the inculcation of proper virtue).
      3. Higher education would exclude the teachings of the Sophists, but would include math and astronomy.
   G. Book 8 surveys religion. Poetry and music and athletic games were religiously oriented. Thus the city
      becomes theocratic, merging education, religion and governance.
   H. In Book 9, Plato expounds on the theme of justice.
      1. The microcosmic city of twelve tribes governing each of the twelve months in cycle creates order.
         There is not to be improper behavior (e.g., example, no adultery, no homosexuality, etc.).
      2. He distinguishes between harm (torts) and crime (transgression of the law).
      3. In the event of a transgression, Plato propounds the idea that punishment is educative (i.e., its purpose
         is to bring the transgressor to knowledge, virtue and recognition of the supremacy of the law).
      4. For the truly corrupt, severe punishment, even death, is necessary as an example to others.
5. These ideas are breakthroughs in jurisprudence which still influence legal systems to the present day.

I. Theology is the subject of Book 10.
   1. This is perhaps the most interesting and important book of Laws.
   2. Theology, as a systematic activity, related to other kinds of knowledge, really begins with Plato. It didn’t really exist in Western thought before him.
   3. He is really concerned with “atheism” which Plato sees as originating in Ionian physics, which demythologized life and created a moral vacuum which spawned Sophistic nihilism.
   4. Plato makes an argument from design for the way the world works. The order implies the logos of the universe, and thus a moral order.
   5. Thus, heresy is a contradiction of this understanding of moral order. There are two other heresies: the Epicurean idea that the gods are indifferent to man, and the idea propounded by Cephalus and Adiæmantus in Republic that the gods require sacrifices to “buy them off.”

IV. Books 11 and 12 serve a catch-all function (note that the books number twelve in keeping with the numerology of Plato’s city).
   A. Book 11 is clearly a miscellany and isn’t really a dialogue in the Socratic or dialectic sense
   B. In Book 12, Plato introduces the Nocturnal Council, which has a function similar to the Guardians in Republic.
      1. These are wise officials (see Book 6) who receive a special education in dialectic, astronomy, math, theology, and metaphysics.
      2. They are not meant to be philosopher-kings.
      3. Virtue and order are the goals, but Laws steps back from the optimism of Republic, taking a much more pragmatic view of things.
      4. In this “second-best city,” there is an effort to replicate the order of the universe, and the citizens need to do the best they can do.

Readings:

Essential:
The dialogue Laws

Supplementary:

Questions to consider:

1. Do you agree with Plato’s verdict that political and moral decay were caused by naturalistic Ionian speculation? Why or why not? Is there an analogue in the science versus religion battles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?
2. In what ways is Plato’s city (or republic, for that matter) similar to modern totalitarian regimes? Cite examples.
Glossary

This glossary contains philosophical words and other terms used in the course of these lectures on Plato’s dialogues

**ad hominem:** a form of argument where one party attacks his opponent personally, rather than attacking his position.

**antinomian:** the concept or belief that oneself is a sufficient basis for making moral decisions, therefore exempting one from adherence to societal or religious moral codes. Although it is generally used in reference to various unorthodox Christian sects which sprang up in the early Reformation, it has the larger connotation given in the definition. In the *Crito*, Plato makes the point that Socrates takes the hemlock in deference to the prevailing laws of the *polis*, and is therefore not antinomian.

**aporetic:** Platonic dialogues that end without a definite conclusion. “Aporia” means “a state of doubt.”

**arete** (Greek): virtue or excellence. Plato linked virtue with a purpose or *telos*, which in his case was to live well.

**asceticism:** the practice of self-denial or “mortification of the flesh” for the sake of virtue or God. The practice is widely associated with certain strands of Christian theology which preached the sinful or fallen nature of the body, but has been practiced within a variety of religious and philosophical traditions.

**copula:** a word that links a subject and predicate (e.g., ‘is,’ ‘are,’ ‘is not,’ ‘are not’). Depending on the nature of the terms being linked, the copula can be understood to have different meanings. The ‘is’ in an identity (“Bill Clinton is the president”) is different from the ‘is’ of predication (“the grass is green”).

**cosmological arguments:** arguments for God’s existence that appeal to the causation of the universe. Aristotle and Aquinas, among others, have put forward such arguments.

**cosmology:** the study of the universe as a whole, as a coherent system.

**demiurge:** From the Greek word for “craftsman,” in Plato’s dialogue *Timaeus* the creative force that makes the natural or physical world.

**demos** (Greek): people. Root of the word “democracy.”

**deus ex machina:** a literary device whereby a seeming inevitable outcome in the plot is thwarted by the sudden appearance of a higher intervening source (in early literature, a god figure).

**dialectic:** rigorous conversation, as in Plato’s dialogues. In the writings of Hegel and Marx, the term takes on a more technical sense involving the progress from thesis through antithesis to synthesis.

**dithyramb:** an ecstatic speech (originally, an emotional choral hymn to Dionysus).

**efficient cause:** the event immediately preceding some event, in terms of which it can be physically explained. Often opposed to *formal cause* (see *telos*).

**elenchus:** in logic, an argument that disproves a proposition by proving the direct contrary to its conclusion. The word has the connotation of “cross-examination” and is a characteristic of the Socratic dialogue form. The adjectival form is “elenctic.”

**encomium** (from the Greek *enkomion*): formal expression of high praise, eulogy, panegyric.
**Epistemology:** the theory of knowledge. Traditional problems of epistemology include whether we know anything and, if so, how. The position that we cannot have knowledge in some particular area is **skepticism** with regard to that area.

**Eristic:** related to sophistical argument and specious reasoning (can be a noun or an adjective). Eristic is the opposite of dialectic (*q.v.*).

**Eros:** a word with many connotations, but generally meaning desire, longing, lust (usually sexual). Plato abstracts *eros* by moving it from the particular (a desire for a particular person or thing, like money or power) to a desire for an underlying attribute (beauty, friendship, etc.) and finally to a desire for the form itself. The examined life is motivated by *eros* to seek for truth, virtue, etc. as forms and as the highest goal or telos of life.

**Eschatology:** the notion of or orientation toward the end of life or time.

**Ethics:** the study of moral human character and action. Questions in ethics include: what is the nature of the good? what makes an action right or wrong? how ought one to live? what is the nature of virtue?

**Eudaimonism:** the ethical view that the purpose and good of human life is happiness.

**Form:** in Plato’s philosophy, the idea, essence, or perhaps definition of a thing (as of man or justice); also conceived to be the most real ontological level.

**Hubris** (Greek): pride, usually coming before a fall.

**Idealism:** the ontological position that only minds and their ideas exist or are truly real. Plato, Berkeley, Leibniz, and Kant are in some sense idealists.

**Interlocutor:** a party to a discussion or dialogue. In Plato, one of the key people with whom Socrates engages in dialectical argument, such as Theaetetus, Meno, Crito or other eponymous characters of the Dialogues.

**Ionian School:** Presocratic philosophers centered in Ionia, whose speculations into the natural world were the foundation of physical science; they were attacked by Socrates and Plato for undermining religion and morality. Three of the best known philosophers were Thales (*fl.* 585 B.C.), Anaximander (*c.* 610 B.C. - *c.* 547/6 B.C.) and Anaximenes (*fl.* *c.* 546 B.C.). They are sometimes referred to as the Milesian philosophers, from the city of Miletus (in Asia Minor).

**Irony:** the situation when an appearance, statement or outcome is the opposite of what is expected, known or thought to be the case. In the Platonic Dialogues, irony refers specifically to Socrates’ technique of pretending not to know something as he is discussing it, thereby enabling him to engage in dialectical argument and make his point from a seemingly opposite position.

**Isomorphic:** having a one-to-one relationship or the same form.

**Logic:** the study of the forms and principles of correct reasoning.

**Logos** (Greek): speech, word, reasoning (or reason), intelligence, account, principle. The word is used in a revealing variety of ways by the Presocratics, Plato, and Christian thinkers.

**Metaphysics:** literally, “beyond physics.” Metaphysics is the study of the ultimate constituents of reality, both in its parts and as a whole. The discipline is traditionally divided into two parts, *ontology* and *cosmology*.

**Mimesis:** imitation. Plato discusses mimesis in Book X of Republic in the sense of artistic creation. The artist’s work is an imitation of reality, in fact is an imitation of something which itself is an imitation of the true Form. Therefore, Plato is somewhat skeptical, if not perhaps hostile, towards artists for taking people away from the truth.
(i.e., away from reality). We also used “mimesis” to describe the Dialogues themselves as an imitation of Socrates’ idea of the “examined life.”

**monism:** the ontological position that there is only one thing. Parmenides (a Pre-Socratic philosopher) and Spinoza were monists of different kinds.

**mythos** (Greek): myth, story.

**nomos** (Greek): political law.

**nostos:** homecoming. This is a theme of the Iliad (Achilles wishing to return to “pleasant Phthia”) and is the leitmotif of the Odyssey. There is a clear parallel between these epic poems and their heroes, and the journey of Socrates (the new Platonic “hero”) toward truth and the gods as portrayed in the Crito.

**ontology:** the study of what sorts of things there are. The three fundamental, general positions in ontology are idealism, materialism, and dualism.

**Orphic:** having to do with the ancient Greek cult which originated in the myth of Orpheus. It involved mysticism and reincarnation, and influenced both Pythagoras and Plato.

**paean:** a song of thanksgiving, happiness, triumph, etc.

**physis** (Greek): natural law or, simply, nature: what spontaneously produces itself or acts from within itself.

**philosophy:** Derived from the Greek words meaning love of wisdom, philosophy is characterized by inquiry at the most general and profound level. On the other hand, its great questions are often insoluble or at least perennially controversial. Originally, philosophy included what we now term science: often termed “natural philosophy.”

**pleonexia:** excess, going beyond satiety, gluttony; when referring to speech or writing, redundancy.

**polis** (Greek): city. root of the word “politics.”

**Presocratics:** general term applied to Greek philosophers living between c. 600 B.C. and 400 B.C. and particularly those who are considered natural or physical philosophers; thus, the Sophists (q.v.) are not considered Presocratics. The Presocratics are generally divided into the following schools: Ionian (or Milesian) (q.v.), Eleatic (Parmenides, b. c. 515 B.C., is the chief Eleatic philosopher), Pythagoreans, and the Atomists (e.g., Democritus, c. 460 B.C. - c. 370 B.C., and Leucippus, fl. 450-420 B.C.). Heraclitus of Ephesus (d. after 480 B.C.) and Empedocles of Acragas (c. 493 B.C. - c. 433 B.C.) are Presocratics who are not ascribed to any of the other schools, although we might term Heraclitus to be the head of the Ephesian school.

**propaedeutic:** of, or having the nature of, elementary instruction, in a subject.

**ontology:** that division of philosophy which has as its study the question of existence or being.

**realism:** With regard to the problem of universals (the question of the status of general concepts such as “humanity,” “redness,” or “goodness”), realism is the position that universals are existing entities. The Platonic theory of Forms is an example of a realist view.

**protreptic:** something that is intended to be instructive, usually didactic. The “protreptic interlude” is a device used by Plato in his Dialogues to introduce a teaching point.

**reductio ad absurdum:** in logic, reasoning that proves a proposition by demonstrating that the opposite is false or contradictory; or disproving a proposition by demonstrating the absurdity or impossibility of its outcome.
**rhetoric:** the use of language to influence others. Plato (through Socrates) attacked the Sophists for their teaching of rhetoric for money, holding that the goal was to win the favor of the crowds rather than seek truth through a dialectical give-and-take.

**solipsism:** the belief that the only reality is what one experiences; this leads to the position that only oneself truly exists, and that anything external is therefore not real or non-existent. This is perhaps the ultimate skepticism.

**Sophists:** A group of philosophers roughly contemporaneous with Socrates and Plato. The Sophists were portrayed (perhaps not entirely fairly) by Socrates as more interested in teaching rhetorical tricks for money to aspiring politicians than in pursuing knowledge. In fact, they, like Socrates, were somewhat skeptical of the speculative teachings of philosophers of Presocratics, such as the Eleatic school, and were interested in morality and knowledge (epistemology) as well as other issues debated by the Presocratics. Prominent Sophists were Protagoras (c. 490 - C. 420 B.C.), who was a friend of Pericles and first used the phrase “man is the measure of all things; and Gorgias (c. 483 - 376 B.C.); Thrasymachus; and, lastly, Hippias of Elis. Both Protagoras and Gorgias were eponyms for Platonic dialogues.

**taxonomy:** a system (generally hierarchical) for arranging things such as laws, principles, life forms, concepts, etc.

**techne** (Greek): art, skill, craft; most generally, rule-governed activity. Root of the word “technology.” The concept is central to both Plato and Aristotle.

**telos** (Greek): purpose, aim, function, end. A *teleological* explanation (one made in terms of purposes) is often contrasted with a *mechanistic* or *naturalistic* explanation (one made in terms of physical states and events).

**theodicy:** a response to the problem of evil: an explanation of why there’s evil in a universe created and (perhaps) sustained by a perfectly good and all-powerful being. Augustine and Leibniz put forward famous theodicies; Hume famously argued that all theodicies are miserable failures.

**timocracy:** In Plato, a form of government in which ambition for power and glory motivates the rulers (adjective: timocratic; noun: timocrat).

**utopia:** literally: “nowhere.” A utopian system is a vision of an ideal political state or state of humanity. Such systems were put forward by Plato and More, among others.

**veil of maya:** a Hindu concept and term that refers to the illusory nature of the world as perceived and experienced. True reality (*atman* or *brahman*), which is a unitary thing, resides behind the plurality and variation registered by the senses (in this regard, *atman* or *brahman* are similar to the static unity of being described by Parmenides).
The Presocratic Philosophers

The Presocratics were Greek philosophers of nature who lived in the two centuries before Socrates (c. 600 B.C. - c. 400 B.C.). They developed a wide range of approaches to the discussion of nature, but they are united by their non-mythic explanations. The very little we know about these thinkers is derived from commentaries on their works by subsequent philosophers such as Aristotle.

The Milesian (or Ionian) School:
Thales (fl. 585 B.C.), Anaximander (c. 610 - c. 547/6 B.C.), and Anaximenes (fl. c. 546 B.C.) constitute the Milesian (or Ionian) school of philosophy. Thales' statement that "all is water" is considered to be the first solely material description of the universe, and thus Aristotle acknowledges him as father of the physical sciences. Anaximander, who was Thales' student, postulated that pairs of conflicting opposites were contained within the *apeiron* (the boundless). Anaximenes, who was probably the student of Anaximander, maintained that the cosmos consisted of air, which when rarefied becomes fire, and when condensed becomes water and earth.

The Ephesian School:
A second school of Presocratic philosophy was founded by Heraclitus of Ephesus (d. after 480 B.C.). He conceived the cosmos as a ceaseless conflict of opposites. Fire, he claimed, was the best representation of this universal flux. He is attributed with the famous statements that "you cannot step into the same river twice" and "the sun is new everyday." His student was Cratylus (5th century B.C.), thought to have been Plato’s teacher before Socrates.

The Eleatic School:
Heraclitus' view of cosmic flux was challenged by the Eleatics. Parmenides of Elea (b. c. 515 B.C.), the leading exponent of this third Presocratic school of philosophy, held that the universe was one and unchanging, and that observed motion is only apparent. Parmenides was an early master of logic, making skilled arguments using the *reductio ad absurdum*, the law of identity, and the law of contradiction.

The Atomist School:
A fourth school, the Atomists, agreed with its predecessors on a materialist (rather than religious) explanation for the universe but held a different view of the *urstuff* of the universe, and differed particularly with the Eleatics on the question of being and motion. Democritus of Abdera (c. 460 - c. 370 B.C.) and Leucippus of Miletus (fl. 450 - 420 B.C., but not of the Milesian school of Thales) agreed that the universe was composed of tiny unsplittable particles. The Greek for "splittable" is *tomoi*, while the prefix *a* means "not." Hence, they called these tiny bits *atomoi* (from which we derive the modern word "atom"). Their world was totally mechanistic.

The Pythagorean School:
Pythagoras of Samos (b. c. 570 B.C.) was the founder of a fifth Presocratic school of philosophy. Known to all students of mathematics as the author of the Pythagorean Theorem, he held that nature was written in the language of mathematics. Pythagoras believed that mathematics could describe such diverse things as the relations between notes in a musical octave, the number of the heavenly bodies, and justice. He believed in a cycle of reincarnation. He broke from the Milesian worldview of a prime matter (*urstuff*) and focused on the forms of things which were attributable to geometric shapes or structure.
The Sophists were a group of philosophers roughly contemporaneous with Socrates and Plato. They are not considered within the term Presocratic because their emphasis was different, as noted below. The Sophists were portrayed (perhaps not entirely fairly) by Plato (through Socrates) as being more interested in teaching rhetorical tricks for money to aspiring politicians than in pursuing knowledge for its own sake (see the definitions for “eristic” and “rhetoric” in the Glossary). In fact, they, like Socrates, were somewhat skeptical of the speculative cosmological teachings of the Presocratics, such as the Eleatic school, and were interested in morality and knowledge (epistemology) as well as other issues debated by the Presocratics. Prominent Sophists were Protagoras (c. 490 - C. 420 B.C.), who was a friend of Pericles and first used the phrase “man is the measure of all things; and Gorgias of Leontini (c. 483 - 376 B.C.), who wrote on “scientific” issues and also on free will; Thrasymachus; and, lastly, Hippias of Elis. Both Protagoras and Gorgias were eponyms for Platonic dialogues attacking the Sophists.
Other Figures

Aeschylus (525 - 456 B.C.): Greek tragedian who wrote, among others, the plays of the Oresteian trilogy *(Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, Eumenides)*, dealing with the concepts of justice, revenge, suffering and forgiveness.

Aristophanes (c. 448 - 388 B.C.): Greek comic playwright who used his plays to satirize politics and individuals (including the playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides, as well as the Sophists and Socrates). Among his most famous plays are *The Clouds, The Wasps, Lysistrata, The Frogs* and *The Birds*.

Euripides (485? or 480? - 406 B.C.): Greek tragedian who wrote, among others, the plays *Medea, Electra, The Trojan Women, Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Orestes*, plays that addressed contemporary issues by harkening back to older myths.

Sophocles (c. 496 - 406 B.C.): Greek tragedian who wrote *Oedipus the King, Electra, Oedipus at Colonnus, Ajax* and *Antigone* (of his surviving plays).

Themistocles (c. 525 - 462 B.C.): Athenian statesman and naval commander, who built up the Athenian navy and led the Greek forces to victory against the Persian fleet of Xerxes at the naval battle of Salamis.

Thucydides (c. 460 - c. 400 B.C.): author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, covering the years 431-411 B.C. This is considered the first real history as it is understood today, with its emphasis on fact and careful description.

Xenophon (c. 430 - c. 355 B.C.): Greek general, writer and historian, who provides us with a different look at Socrates than that given by Plato.
Timeline

This timeline shows major historical and cultural events, as well as the dates of the philosophers discussed in these lectures. It is important to get the context of 5th century B.C. Greece (or more specifically Athens) as a time of considerable warfare, first against the Persians and then against the Spartans. In the midst of all this conflict, the flourishing of the arts termed the ‘Golden Age’ of Greece occurred under Pericles, endowing the world with imperishable works of literature, philosophy, art and architecture, to say nothing of concepts which are at the heart of Western civilization. But prior to this time, the Greeks were speculating about the nature of things, and after this time, the conquests of Alexander the Great spread the Greek legacy far beyond its original boundaries. The turmoil of the their times served as the impulse for the playwrights and the philosophers. Socrates and Plato developed their philosophy to propose new answers where both the older mythos and precedent naturalistic speculations or the interpretations of the Sophists no longer seemed to serve to explain or preserve their Athenian world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 750 - 700 B.C.</td>
<td>Homeric poetry (Iliad and Odyssey) recorded in writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 610 - 547 B.C.</td>
<td>Anaximander (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 625 - 545 B.C.</td>
<td>Thales of Miletus (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 610 - 540 B.C.</td>
<td>Anaximander of Miletus (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 570 B.C.</td>
<td>Pythagoras of Samos born (Pythagorean School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 546 B.C.</td>
<td>Anaximenes flourished (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 515 B.C.</td>
<td>Parmenides of Elea born (Eleatic School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>508 B.C.</td>
<td>Reform of Athenian democracy by Cleisthenes</td>
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<tr>
<td>499 - 479 B.C.</td>
<td>War with Persian</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 495 B.C.</td>
<td>Birth of Pericles, leader of Athens in “Golden Age”</td>
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<tr>
<td>490 B.C.</td>
<td>Battle of Marathon (defeat of Darius the Persian)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 490 - c. 420 B.C.</td>
<td>Protagoras (Sophist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 483 - c. 376 B.C.</td>
<td>Gorgias (Sophist)</td>
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<tr>
<td>480 B.C.</td>
<td>Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis</td>
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<tr>
<td>after c. 480 B.C.</td>
<td>death Heraclitus of Ephesus (Ephesian School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 470 - 399 B.C.</td>
<td>LIFE OF SOCRATES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 460 - c. 370 B.C.</td>
<td>Democritus of Abdera (Atomist School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>458 B.C.</td>
<td>Oresteia by Aeschylus produced in Athens</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 450 - 420 B.C.</td>
<td>Leucippus of Miletus (Atomist School)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 447 - c. 411 B.C.</td>
<td>Staging of dramas and comedies by Sophocles (Oedipus, etc.), Euripides (Medea), Aristophanes</td>
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(Lysistrata, The Clouds)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 429 - 347 B.C.</td>
<td><strong>LIFE OF PLATO</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>449 - 429 B.C.</td>
<td>“Golden Age” of Athens under Pericles (d. 429 B.C.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>431 - 404 B.C.</td>
<td>Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta</td>
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<tr>
<td>411 B.C.</td>
<td>Temporary suspension of Athenian democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>404 - 403 B.C.</td>
<td>Rule of Athens by the Thirty Tyrants</td>
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<tr>
<td>403 B.C.</td>
<td>Restoration of Athenian democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>399 B.C.</td>
<td>Death of Socrates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>384 - 322 B.C.</td>
<td>Aristotle of Macedonia (student of Plato)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography

Any good edition of Plato’s works (Viking, Penguin, etc.)
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Michael Sugrue received his BA in history at the University of Chicago, where he won first prize in the Phi Beta Kappa essay competition. He earned his MA, MPhil and PhD in History from Columbia University. He has been awarded the Chamberlain Fellowship, the President's Fellowship, the John Jay Fellowship, and the Meyer Padva Prize.

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The Bible and Western Culture
Lecture Nine

Protagoras—The Dialectic of the Many and the One

Scope: The Protagoras, named after the famous Sophist philosopher, is an early dialogue which, along with the Gorgias, marks a transition to the great dialogues of Plato’s middle period. As we know from the earlier lectures in this series, Socrates and Plato did not like the Sophists, believing them to be mis-educating the young men of Athens by their emphasis on flashy rhetorical tricks at the expense of true learning. They also took exception to the Sophists’ penchant for charging for their teaching. Reflecting the basic opposition of their views, the Protagoras is a dialogue of opposites, with Socrates skillfully showing the defects of the Sophistic way by contrasting its features and ends with those of the Socratic method. However, typical of the early dialogues (and many of the later ones), Protagoras ends in an aporia, an impasse, where there is no clear-cut answer to the underlying question. We come to know only what we don’t know.

Outline

I. The Protagoras is an early dialogue which forms a transition to the great middle dialogues of Plato.
   A. In terms of form, it is a comedy which leads to an aporia, or impasse.
      1. Although it doesn’t take us all the way to the unity of virtue or a full knowledge of virtue, it undermines the Sophistic attempts to create a pluralized definition of virtue.
      2. It provides engaging vignettes of the Sophists, seen at a gathering of Protagoras and some of his followers.
   B. In terms of subject matter, Protagoras is notable for its skillful juggling of many themes: pleasure and virtue; the methods of rhetoric versus dialectic; logos and mythos (reason and poetry); and finally, unity and plurality.
      1. Socrates and Plato are interested in unity and coherence.
      2. The Sophists thrive in ambiguity and relativism. This is the opposite of Socratic precision and analysis, perhaps symbolized by the difference between poetry and mathematics.
      3. Protagoras coined the phrase “man is the measure of all things.” This states his belief in relativity and plurality. However, this position leads to solipsism and makes any reasonable discourse impossible, since each person interprets words and reality from his or her own point of view.
      4. Socrates believes that it is precisely this plurality (or relativism) that is misleading and dangerous and he attacks it through his method of dialectic.

II. The setting of the dialogue is very similar to that of the Symposium. It is held in the same house and the same people are there. You should also compare it with the Gorgias. It is an enlarged dialectical argument in three parts: first Sophistic section, dialectic; second Sophistic section, dialectic; third Sophistic section, dialectic. Between the second and third sections, there is an aporia.
   A. Socrates begins by narrating (to an anonymous friend) the story of being awakened before dawn by Hippocrates, who wants to go hear the famous Sophist, Protagoras, newly arrived in Athens.
      1. Socrates suggests that it is too early and that they should walk about discoursing until sunrise. Here we again see the symbolism of the sun representing knowledge.
      2. The walking also symbolizes the journey of the dialectic, the way home to truth (Plato makes Socrates the “new Odysseus.”)
      3. This walk also tells us that both Socrates and Plato believe that the dialectic (as opposed to rhetoric) is the best way to teach.
      4. Finally, Socrates gives freely of his time and wisdom, and doesn’t charge for it like the Sophists.
   B. Upon arriving at the house of Callias, a wealthy Athenian, the pair is met by the eunuch doorkeeper.
      1. He is tired of all the Sophists and their comings and goings. He thinks Socrates is a Sophist and doesn’t want to let him in.
2. Socrates clearly states that he is not a Sophist and is admitted. This is Plato’s clever use of humor and irony. The eunuch represents the demos of Athens who also couldn’t recognize the difference between Socrates and the Sophists. They are, in effect, mental eunuchs.

C. The admission scene at Callias’ house is described like Odysseus’ descent into Hades. (Odyssey, Book 11). This Hades is full of Sophists (cf. also to Dante’s Inferno, peopled with real figures). The three main Sophists are Protagoras, Hippias and Prodicus, the latter two in particular Plato treats with high comedy and parody.

III. Plato goes up to Protagoras, says his young friend wants to study with him and directly asks Protagoras “What do you do? What value would it be for my friend to study with you?”

A. Protagoras delivers an encomium to himself, comparing himself to the poets Homer, Hesiod and Simonides.
   1. He analogizes Sophistry and poetry, but whereas the poets hid behind poetry, he (Protagoras) regards himself as courageous enough to call himself “sophist and educator”.
   2. Despite telling Socrates that he likes the way Socrates asks questions, he gives an ambiguous answer. Socrates refines the question: what do you teach? To whom? What is the benefit?
   3. Protagoras answers that he teaches politics and good citizenship, that is, political virtue.
   4. Socrates says he suspect political virtue is impossible to teach, because there is no techne involved. There are no specialists to call on, like shipbuilding or masonry.

B. This leads to the second Sophistic section. Protagoras asks if Socrates would like to hear a story or engage in a dialectic. While Socrates would prefer the dialectic, the crowd wants a story and Protagoras, who agrees that this would be “more pleasant” than the hard work of a dialectical argument, answers with a double origin myth.
   1. The myth of Prometheus is cited (the origin of the “natural” man) and then the account of Zeus and Hermes bringing justice to mankind is adduced.
   2. These two myths cover both nomos (conventional law) and physis (nature). Sophists don’t believe that conventional laws should be taken particularly seriously.
   3. Protagoras (a foreigner) goes on to say that this is why Athens is ruled the way it is (democratically). It is a relativistic affair, justified by the particular myth just cited.

C. Socrates starts the second dialectical section. He tries to bring Protagoras back by asking if virtue is a unity or a diversity. Naturally, Protagoras answers ambiguously.
   1. Socrates makes an argument for the function of virtue.
   2. Protagoras bristles and backs off. This leads to the first aporia.
   3. The aporia enables Plato to make the point, through the interchange of the characters, that the dialectic has its own rules and can’t be bent to the whim of the Sophists.

D. The third Sophistic section begins with Protagoras agreeing to ask questions in the dialectic method.
   1. He begins by asking Plato about the poet Simonides, meant to trap Socrates.
   2. Socrates turns the tables by giving three different interpretations, all saturated in irony and humor.

E. This leads to the third dialectic section. Hippias wants to speak, but Alcibiades cuts him off. Socrates wants more thinking and less talking.
   1. He brings the discussion back from poetry to the problem of the unity of virtue,
   2. Protagoras shifts his ground and says that the virtues do resemble each other fairly closely, except perhaps courage.
   3. Socrates then asks how pleasure relates to good. Protagoras affirms that, for him, pleasure does not equal good, but he points out that “the many” hold the opposite view (i.e., that pleasure is the good).
   4. Socrates shows that hedonism (pursuit of pleasure) is inconsistent with akrasia (weakness of the will, or the tendency to do the opposite of what one knows is the right thing to do). Protagoras agrees with Socrates that pleasure is not the good.
   5. The other Sophists chime in and claim to understand and agree with Plato, but only so that they can teach others for money (in other words, they don’t really care about the truth of the issue, they only want a position that they can teach). This professional jealousy and bickering shows that the Sophists
are interested in only themselves and their position. This inconsistency and plurality of view underscores the point that Plato (through Socrates) is trying to say about the unity of virtue.

6. Finally, Socrates ask Protagoras to defend his latest argument that “evil, ignorant men can be brave.” This gives Socrates the chance to go for the pin: if akrasia equals ignorance, and self-control equals knowledge, then the knowing man is the courageous man and the unknowing man is the coward. This demonstrates that courage cannot be separated from the unity of virtue.

IV. The conclusion of this witty and ironic dialogue finds Socrates and Protagoras in an inversion of their starting positions.

A. Socrates now argues that knowledge is virtue, so it must be teachable. Protagoras who had originally tried to prove virtue teachable (but for the wrong reasons), ends up trying to prove that virtue does not equal knowledge, and therefore is not teachable.

B. The question of the essential nature of virtue is unresolved (the aporia). Protagoras is complimentary to Socrates (he states that Socrates will become very eminent in philosophy!), but is tired of the dialectical beating he has taken.

C. In this dialogue, Socrates, through the dialectic and use of irony, ridicules the Sophists as mercenary, incoherent, immoral, vain heirs of the poets. *Techne* can be taught through rhetoric, but *arete* can only be taught by dialectic pursuit of virtue. This is another way of saying that the pursuit of truth through dialectic is the way out of Hades, towards the sunlight.

Readings

**Essential:** the dialogue *Protagoras*

**Supplementary:**

Questions to consider:

1. Do you agree that this dialogue ends in an aporia, that is, that the issue of the unity of virtue is left unresolved? Defend your position.

2. Distinguish between *nomos* and *physis.* Why is this distinction important with respect to this dialogue?
Lecture Ten
Gorgias—The Temptation to Speak

Scope: In this dialogue, named after one of the two most famous Sophists (Protagoras was the other), Plato, through the Socratic dialectic, basically co-opts the rhetorical teachings of the Sophists to the purposes of establishing moral order in the good city. Thus, this dialogue is about those perennial Platonic topics: public morality, education and goal of philosophy, namely, virtue. It is both enjoyable and interesting to see how Socrates turns the tables on Gorgias and his eristic teaching, which was a constant target of Plato’s writings.

Outline

I. The Gorgias is one of the greatest and most underestimated dialogues. It deals with similar themes as its near contemporary, the Protagoras.

A. Here, Socrates is taking a stand against the Sophists. Gorgias has been present in many dialogues (cf. Meno). Socrates views him as a deformer of the young men who study rhetoric with him.
   1. Gorgias is the “anti-Socrates.” However, we might think of him as being a noble anti-hero who goes the whole way into Sophistic chaos (as opposed to Platonic unity).
   2. Gorgias wrote two works: The first, The Encomium on Helen. The first tries to refurbish the “reputation” of Helen of Troy. However, he does it as a game, not as a search for the truth.
   3. On Not Being is a parody of Parmenides. It is nihilistic. He argues three propositions: first, that nothing exists; second, that if anything does exist, it is not knowable. Third, that if anything exists and is knowable, then it can’t be communicated. This does away with the idea of logos, of words, of permanence. In essence, the whole world is an illusion.

B. Because of the extremity of his position, Socrates admires Gorgias and takes him as a challenge for the Socratic method. If he can improve Gorgias, then he can certainly correct and improve the young men who follow the Sophists.

II. The dialogue starts with Socrates having his student, Chaerophon, ask Gorgias “who he is.” This is an important question, since it goes to the core of personal identity, which is constructed in language.

A. Gorgias answers that he is a teacher. But what does he teach?
   1. He shares with Socrates a certain melancholy. He has searched for moral order and has not found it (cf. On Not Being). He is not teaching us about ourselves.
   2. This is opposed to Protagoras’ somewhat casual and unworried attitude about his teaching.
   3. This is why Socrates admires Gorgias; he views him as essentially noble and goes easy on him in the dialogue.

B. Polus, a student of Gorgias steps out to take the offensive and delivers an encomium on Gorgias.
   1. This can be likened to a preliminary bout before the heavyweightscome out to trade blows.
   2. Polus’ speech clearly points up the empty essence of Sophistic teaching. Neither Gorgias nor his students know themselves or the logos.

D. At this point, Socrates and then Gorgias step in. Gorgias acknowledges that he teaches persuasion and uses a medical example of doctor and patient.
   1. The theme of doctor shows up again and again in the dialogues.
   2. For Socrates and Plato, the art of doctoring is more than techne. Rather, medical healing (like true philosophy) is teleological. It involves a knowledge of the good and true state of wellness.

E. Socrates moves further and probes Gorgias on whether he teaches his students about good things.
   1. Socrates ironically applauds Gorgias for teaching justice and virtue.
   2. However, he says he is not responsible for what his students do after he trains them, using a boxing and military analogy.
   3. Socrates takes Gorgias down on this point by talking about the teleology of the teaching. This leads to catching Gorgias in a contradiction. In the ensuing aporia, Polus jumps back in to “save” his teacher.
This reminds us that the structure of the *Gorgias* is similar to Book 1 of the *Republic*, with its three interlocutors.

1. Socrates tries to get Polus to engage in dialectic. He draws him out as to what he (Polus) likes. Polus is an advocate of Homeric *pleonexia* (basically, the desire to get as much as possible), and is interested in the outside world, fame, etc.
2. This is in clear contrast to the Delphic dictum “know thyself” and the Socratic/Platonic idea of “due measure,” and the emphasis on the inner world of reflective thought.
3. Polus is not good at orderly dialectic, but Polus doesn’t catch on because of his rhetorical training. Socrates takes over the discussion.
4. We note again that when dialectic breaks down, the long speeches begin (even by Socrates).

*Gorgias* is beginning to be shamed by his student, who is showing badly. This residual piety means he can be reclaimed.

1. At this point, Callicles breaks in. He is the third interlocutor. An ambitious politician, he is a cut above Polus, which means that his Sophistic education has had an even worse effect on him than it did on Polus.
2. He questions Socrates’ sincerity about his arguments pertaining to knowledge of the good.
3. Callicles is lost already. He is a man of action and by moving into the realm of philosophy, he is on very weak ground.
4. Nonetheless, Callicles launches into a beautiful speech, a paean about power (cf. Thrasymachus, Edmund in *Lear*, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Sade, Nietzsche, Machiavelli, all of whom expressed similar views). To him, the happy man is the one who outdoes the limits (*pleonexia*). This shows the complete immorality of the Sophistic way.
5. Socrates goes right after him to teach him about virtue. He uses an example that Callicles rejects. Then Socrates tries the dialectic approach, and catches Callicles in a contradiction.
6. This leads to an impasse. Gorgias (who has been improved by this exchange), encourages Callicles to go along with Socrates. He persuades Callicles (who represents the demos) to take the medicine from the “soul doctor.”
7. This enables Socrates to demonstrate the superiority of the contemplative life and the necessity for virtue in the political realm. He scores big points against Athenian politicians by comparing the body politic to the individual soul, where self-discipline rules.

Once again, Socrates establishes the necessity for the *logos*, while at the same time not totally banishing the *mythos*. The *Gorgias* is a parable of education that works on several levels.

1. By educating Gorgias’ students, he instructs Gorgias and uses him as an example where the Sophists, through “true opinion,” can contribute to the *polis*.
2. Poetry versus logic and Socrates versus Athens are other themes in this beautiful, fugal dialogue.

**Readings**

**Essential:**

The dialogue *Gorgias*

**Supplementary:**


**Questions to Consider:**

1. Compare and contrast the *Protagoras* with the *Gorgias* with respect to themes and organization.
2. What implications for contemporary “values” or “citizenship” education can you find in the *Gorgias*?
Lecture Eleven  
**Parmenides—“Most True”**

Scope: The well-known phrase of Lord Whitehead that all philosophy is a but footnotes to Plato has drawn the observation from philosopher Simon Blackburn that all Plato might be considered a series of comments on Parmenides. Although there were several sources for Plato’s philosophy, Parmenides (born c. 515 B.C.) contributed the idea that what is real is eternal and unitary (i.e., it doesn’t change). Yet in this dialogue, the theory of forms is put through the wringer. Socrates might be said to meet his dialectical match. Plato presents this eponymous dialogue as a tale told at several removes from an ostensible meeting of the young Socrates with the older Eleatic philosopher Parmenides. This dialogue is different in many respects from other dialogues, and is perhaps not as easy to grasp as some of the other more familiar works in this series. Yet it is crucial for two reasons: it helps us to review the two main presocratic schools and it shows that all beliefs, even those of “Saint Socrates” must be continuously examined.

I. The *Parmenides* is unique among the Platonic dialogues in several respects:

A. It is different in its structure and content, and is somewhat more difficult to follow. for the last three-quarters of the dialogue there is almost no dialogue!

B. Socrates meets his dialectical equal in Parmenides; it is the latter who comes off looking like the master, and Socrates the learner.

C. Instead of attacking the stance of others (e.g., the Sophists as in *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*), this late middle dialogue (written after the *Republic, Symposium*, etc.) offers a serious criticism of Plato’s own theory of forms. Thus, he shows himself to be a true Socratic, by critically self-analyzing his own ideas.

II. The presocratic background: In the two centuries before 450 B.C., when this dialogue is set, two “schools” of thought emerged in Greece.

A. The first was the so-called Ionian school, characterized by its naturalistic explanation of the world. Major Ionians were Thales of Miletus, Anaximander, Democritus and Heraclitus of Ephesus.

1. To them, the world was a mechanical process; atoms moved in the void without any purpose.
2. Thus, the world is plural, there is only flux and no real being.
3. The emphasis is on the senses and their perceptions; Plato has a hard time with this idea which leads to the type of relativism we see in later Sophists like Protagoras.

B. The second school was the Eleatic school, which can be described as logical or anti-naturalistic.

1. Parmenides of Elea is the founder of the Eleatic school.
2. Although not an Eleatic, *per se*, the philosopher Pythagoras can be placed in the mathematical-logical branch of presocratic philosophy.
3. The ontology of this branch is that there is only one being in the world; thus there is not the flux or chaos inherent in the Ionian school.
4. The world of sense perception (and therefore, plurality) is rejected. This may well be derived from Eastern (Indian) sources (*cf.* the ‘veil of *maya*, or illusion, from Hindu philosophy). We can see that this concept introduces a degree of mysticism into Greek philosophy.

C. The atomization (or centrifugal forces) of the Ionian school destroys speech because of its relativism.

1. Ironically, the unity of the Parmenidean world also destroys speech. “Being is” can reduced to “being” and thus to nothing that can be articulated. This is a logical “black hole.”
2. This can be related to the universal syllable “om” of Buddhist mantras.

D. Plato’s task is to find an “isthmus of speech” between two oceans of silence that avoids the destruction of speech noted above.

1. This helps to explain the “divided line” example in the *Republic*, which compares the illusion of sense perception (Heraclitus) and the “real” world of forms (Parmenides).
2. Thus, Plato recognizes the world of space and time while establishing that it doesn’t allow us to draw certain (i.e., logical) conclusions; the upper half of the line shows Plato’s belief that the eternal and unitary (perhaps mathematical) world is the realm of true knowledge, but that is not all there is.
3. Plato is ultimately concerned with moral order. This is the goal of his epistemology and ontology. Thus, he must resolve the differences between the Ionians and Eleatics.

III. The first part of dialogue is narrated third-hand by Cephalus, who heard it from Antiphon, who heard it from Pythodorus, who was present at the meeting of the young Socrates with Parmenides more than 50 years ago. Since then, Antiphon has given up philosophy in favor of horses. This suggests we not take the narration too seriously.

A. Zeno of Elea (student and defender of Parmenides) has just finished reading his treatise against the pluralists. Zeno is credited (by Aristotle) with developing the dialectic method.
   1. Zeno developed a series of logical paradoxes of which perhaps the best known is that of Achilles and the tortoise.
   2. These paradoxes were designed to show that the world of sense perceptions of space, time, change and motion lead to unintelligible contradiction.
   3. Thus, Zeno is really attacking the Ionian naturalists and especially Heraclitus; He does this by a redictio ad absurdum argument which avoids having to defend directly the Parmenidean point of view.
   4. Socrates is not impressed by Zeno’s arguments; he believes that the world of the senses is plural, but unified by participation in “forms” which are unified, unchanging, and outside space and time.
   5. Parmenides steps up to continue the argument, viewing Zeno as too young to debate with an somewhat older man like Socrates.

IV. The second part then proceeds with Parmenides launching several attacks on the theory of forms.

A. He asks whether objects “participate” in forms in whole or part.
   1. This forces Socrates into a trap and Parmenides tries to show that following the theory of forms to a logical conclusion leads to the very confusion and plurality it supposedly eliminates.
   2. Although there are logical problems with this line of argument, Socrates is made to think about the consistency of his notion of forms.

B. These creates a crisis for Socrates (and Plato), because if Parmenides, in his trenchant attack, can upset the theory of forms, then all the arguments for moral goodness and political order that are based on this theory are demolished (thus, the Republic would have been written in vain).

C. Socrates tries to take the initiative back.
   1. He starts by saying that these forms just exist in one’s head, as a way of organizing things. Parmenides doesn’t allow Plato to “psychologize” his way out of an ontological argument
   2. Then Socrates argues for “patterns” in the world. There is a symmetrical relationship between the form and the object. They share in the form of likeness, which leads to a “third man” or infinite regress argument.
   3. Parmenides doesn’t accept this and Socrates appears to give up. The Eleatics have generated serious logical objections to the linchpin of Platonism.

D. To avoid the total destruction of his underlying theory, Socrates gets Parmenides to give a logically exhaustive speech on being.
   1. This comprises the last three-quarters of the dialogue and represents a high point of Plato’s literary humor.
   2. Parmenides advances eight arguments, which Plato handles in such a way as to show how Parmenides’ ideas destroy speech (a redictio ad absurdum argument such as used in Zeno’s paradoxes against the Ionians). Thus, Plato, by demonstrating the illogic or inconsistency of Parmenides’ arguments, is attempting to dismiss the credibility of the Parmenidean attacks against the theory of forms.
   3. These antinomies (paradoxes) are very confusing. They remind us of Kant’s antinomies of pure reason, or perhaps a combination of Spinoza and Louis Carroll.
   4. We end up with an “algebra of ontology” wherein all predicates exist, and the negation of all predicates exists.

IV. He creates a types of philosophical “moebius strip.”
A. He mediates the two “oceans of silence” by saying we must take from both and avoid being submerged by either. He does this by high parody.

B. His last line, which follows a very confusing and contradictory statement by Parmenides, is the comment: “most true.”
   1. This witty and ironic comment lets us know that we must remain on grounds which allow us to discourse together.
   2. As we know from other dialogues, when dialectic breaks down, the argument is in trouble. Most of *Parmenides* is not in the dialectic form.
   3. Plato leaves the issue a bit unresolved. He dismisses the extremity of the Eleatic position, and, while still concerned with the theory of forms, basically says its the best we have, at this point.

**Readings**

**Essential:**

The dialogue *Parmenides*

**Supplementary:**

Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Chapter XV.

**Questions to consider:**

1. Do you think that Plato really needs to be so concerned with the extremities of the Parmenidean position of monism (oneness of being), since his theory of forms seems to draw heavily on the idea of an eternal, stable basis to the world and the things in it?

2. Can you draw any comparisons or conclusions about the current deconstructionist approach to language and meaning (a “multiplicity of horizons”), the Ionian concept of plurality and Plato’s concern that this latter destroys language (i.e., discourse or dialectic)? In other words, has the argument over being, becoming, and reality come full circle in the late 1990’s?
Lecture Twelve

Sophist and Statesman—The Formal Disintegration of Justice

Scope: The dialogues Sophist and Statesman are late dialogues (in company with others we cover in this series, including Parmenides, Laws and Phaedrus). They are twin dialogues that occur the morning after the Theaetetus. Socrates is not much in evidence, the discussions being conducted by “the Eleatic Stranger.” This enables Plato to articulate some philosophy that is not strictly Socratic, and establish himself as an heir to the Parmenidean logical drive for unity. There is an unwritten third dialogue entitled The Philosopher.

I. The Sophist begins, not with a dialectic argument, but rather with an elaborate taxonomy by which we can identify or define what a Sophist is by the “method of division.”

A. This is somewhat like a preface to Aristotle, with his all-encompassing divisions and cataloging.

B. This retreat from dialectic may also represent a “retooling” by Plato of his methods of investigating true knowledge.
   1. This may be because Plato knows that the theory of the forms is in trouble (cf. Parmenides) and since the dialectic was the method used to come to the knowledge of the forms, Plato may want to take another tack.
   2. He may also be showing a willingness to accept a “second best” explanation. If he can’t satisfactorily defend the notion of unity, then at least he can organize plurality through the method of taxonomy.
   3. Again, this is more in line with Aristotle’s philosophy.

II. There is little of poetry or drama in the Sophist, written when Plato was an old man (about 70 years old), and in decline.

A. He is really more interested in explaining the logical structure of negation (and therefore affirmation) in order to pull us out of many of the traps that the Sophists have laid for us in earlier dialogues.

B. Plato says that the Sophist is a “vendor of contentious contradictions” and while appearing to know everything, knows nothing except how to confuse and confound other people.
   1. Sophists work on us by using the ambiguous words “being” and “not.”
   2. Refer to the Euthydemus, where the Sophist apparently demonstrates that a dog (who has fathered puppies and is therefore a father) is a person’s father. To get out of this kind of trap, we need a logical structure of negation, which will let us know what is false and true.

C. While these arguments about “what is” and “what is not” may seem simple or even silly to us, much like the word games of a six year old, actually they are not. The formulation of a logical theory of negation is intellectually challenging. Plato undertakes this difficult task to keep his whole system of knowledge and political order from unraveling.

III. The logical construction of being involves “identity” and “attribution” or “predication.”

A. To express both identity and attribution, we use the word “is” (e.g., “this is a book;” “this book is green”).
   1. The word “is” is a copula, or a coupling device by which we can join a subject and a predicate (things that are complete in themselves) in a coherent way in a sentence.
   2. Other copulae include: “are,” “is not,” “are not.”
   3. The use of a copula enables us to reconcile the differences between identity (“this is a book”) and attribution (“this book is green”).

B. By clarifying the overlapping meanings of “is” we can eliminate many sophistic contradictions. Attributes are limited within their domain. Plato thus forces the Sophists to agree to the proper definition of being and thus does away with their dark deception.

C. We must also establish the structure of negation.
   1. The word “not” collapses the distinction between identity and attribution. In the statement “the dog is a father” and “the dog is not my father” we have said that the dog has a property (attribution) with respect to one thing, but not with respect to another thing.
2. We can find another example in literature, in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. The horses called Houynyms always tell the truth, while the Yahoo’s always talk about what is not, which is incomprehensible to the Houynyms.

3. If we establish real negation, then a statement like “two plus two is not five.” It is something, but it is not five.

4. We must remember that formal logic had not been established yet; that came later with Aristotle.

D. By establishing the logic of being and negation, we can establish the truth and falsity of statements, and take away the Sophist’s main weapon, as we noted above.

IV. There are still a few other problems to solve. We must do some things that appear to be contradictory, but are not. We must begin by tinkering with the “divided line” of Plato’s ontology.

A. In *Parmenides*, we found that Plato’s theory of forms was shaking; now we are going to discover that other parts of his ontology and epistemology are shaking as well.

B. Plato invents the “great kinds” or “categories” which seem to be a sub-set of the theory of forms. The divided line now has five divisions.

C. We should be aware that this type of tinkering might represent the beginning of a paradigm shift (cf. to Kuhn’s discussion of the shift from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican model of the solar system). Whenever a theory begins to acquire a lot of explanatory footnotes, it is a sign that it is in trouble and the only way out may be a shift to a newer model.

D. The five “categories” are: being, sameness, difference, change and unchangingness.
1. An entity can possess one of the properties and at the same time possess or participate in another seemingly contradictory category (*e.g.*, the book is itself, but it is not the podium).
2. This prevents the Sophists from finding an apparent contradiction.
3. This doesn’t so much prove Plato’s case as to undercut the Sophists, meaning that until a better explanation comes along, alternative theories like Parmenidean monism or Sophist rhetoric cannot supplant the theory of the form, no matter how “leaky” that theory might seem.

V. The *Sophist* and *Statesmen* are both dominated by the figure of the “Eleatic Stranger,” who can be taken as a tip of the hat toward Parmenidean monism.

A. Theaetetus remains in the dialogue *Statesman*, but the “young Socrates” becomes the main interlocutor of the Eleatic Stranger. But the old Socrates is also in the dialogue. There has to be a reason for this.
1. The reason is to clear up ambiguities in natural language that keeps us from really engaging in a dialectic. Socrates uses the examples of himself and Theaetetus/young Socrates and the Greeks and barbarians; the latter does not comprise a natural form, yet they have names by which we describe them. Naming doesn’t necessarily imply affinity.
2. If there is a problem with the theory of the forms, and if there is a problem with natural language that precludes true dialectical investigation of the truth, then there is not going to be any purpose in a philosopher-king. This represents a crisis to Plato who above all is interested in moral and political order.
3. We need to find a way to buttress the dialectic, and Plato does this through elaborate taxonomies.
4. Plato is saying that if we can’t have a philosopher-king, we can have the second best, the statesman and the rule of law.

B. Plato then introduces the myth of Cronos and Zeus. Plato advances the Ptolemaic idea of the universe with its *axis mundi*.
1. The demiurge made everything work correctly (although backwards from common experience) in the age of Cronos. But in the age of Zeus, what we experience is really the universe operating in a degenerate manner.
2. Plato says that the philosopher-king is really a hold-over from the earlier, better age of Cronos. This is reminiscent of Hesiod’s “Golden Age.”

C. This brings out Plato’s agenda. He has finished off the Sophists and now he wants to set the basis for the rule of law (the “second best system”).
1. In defining the statesmen, the Eleatic stranger talks to the young Socrates, and uses the method of examples.
2. This is something that Plato hates (cf. Meno), since it goes against the forms (there is plurality instead of unity). However, since Plato is on thin ice with the realm of the forms and dialectic, he must (begrudgingly) resort to the method of examples.

3. He then introduces a new metaphor of weaving, in this case of opposites. Plato gets away from clear hierarchies of the divided line and mixes things together. This leads directly into the last dialogue, the Laws. (which we have already studied).

4. Although Plato’s agenda has been the same for all of his life, he has the intellectual courage to change the way he views the answers. He becomes more pragmatic and flexible, but still within the bounds of intellectual respectability.

5. Therefore, we can say that Plato’s changes in his political theory arise from changes in his ontology and epistemology.

D. We should take a “helicopter view” of the late dialogues to see the relation of Parmenides to Sophist and Statesman, and that is that it shows an underlying architecture to Plato’s late thought on political order.

1. Plato creates a mimesis of real political knowledge (such as found in the philosopher-king) in the statesman, who represents true opinion (not true understanding).
2. Plato arrests the slide away from the theory of the form of the good, but doesn’t give up his dream of the ideal city and philosopher-king.
3. The rule of the lawful statesman is probably the best we can do for now and certainly preferable to the Sophist world-order.
4. Plato is like Kant, focused on moral order, and like all idealists, is willing to let loose of ontology and epistemology to retain the underlying moral and political order.
5. The third dialogue, Philosopher, is never written because Plato just can’t get at the problem any further with the idea of the forms. Instead, he offers Laws.

Readings

Essential:
The late dialogues Sophist and Statesman.

Supplementary

Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, Chapter XX (This is on Kant, not Plato; see question 2 below)

Questions to consider:

1. Review all the dialogues where Plato inveighs against the Sophists and the Ionians to a lesser degree. Why does it seem that his main pre-occupation is bashing other philosophers? After all, couldn’t one dialogue make the point that the Sophists held to a deceptive and deceitful method. What other reasons can you advance for this steady drum-roll of anti-Sophist, anti-Ionian criticism.

2. Professor Sugrue mentions that Plato is like Kant, concerned with moral and political order. Read Chapter XX of the Russell book (which doesn’t mention Plato once), and then draw comparisons between Plato and Kant (e.g., is there an ideal ‘republic’ for Kant? What does he say about forms and a priori knowledge?). Is Professor Sugrue right in his assertion?
Lecture Thirteen
Phaedrus—Hymn to Love

Scope: *Phaedrus* is a well-known and well-loved Platonic dialogue which is an extended hymn to love, and one of the supreme examples of Greek (and Western) lyric poetry. Besides love, Plato uses this dialogue to expand on his concepts of identity, desire and the nature of the ultimate Beauty. As we might expect, Socrates is engaged in trying to rescue his young interlocutor from the clutches of the Sophists. He does this by taking a walk outside of the city walls with his friend Phaedrus, who recites a seductive love poem written to him by the Sophist-trained poet, Lysias. In true dialogic and dialectic steps, Socrates composes a better, then a best, poem, establishing firmly in the Western psyche the idea that the goal of love is to be found in centering oneself on, and dedicating oneself to, the improvement of the soul of the beloved. True love is not interested in the satisfaction of personal pleasure, but is rather based on the idea of striving for something outside of and above oneself. There is a telos to love. Plato masterfully blends allusions to earlier Greek literature and religion into this new masterpiece.

I. The *Phaedrus* is the great lyrical masterpiece of Platonic poetry.

A. The main themes of love and rhetoric are bridged by a complex of related themes: identity, the soul, desire, and the longing for the ultimate Beauty.

B. However, it is not usually ranked in the top tier of dialogues because it doesn’t cover the wider variety of themes of other dialogues, it may be the most beautiful. This is a middle dialogue, belonging in the company of *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Theaetetus*.

II. The dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus takes place outside the walls of Athens in a pastoral setting.

A. Phaedrus, a gifted young man, doesn’t understand love, but, like all humans, needs to understand love. He therefore becomes a foil to Socrates to help explain ideas of construction of personality and identity.

B. Phaedrus is an attractive young man; we need to understand the homosexual atmosphere of upper-class Athenian society of this time.

1. He has attracted the attention of an orator, Lysias, who writes a speech of seduction to Phaedrus.
2. Phaedrus is impressed by this speech, so he decides to practice it. So he goes outside of the city. This is symbolic of moving from nomos (conventional law) to physis (nature). Thus we are going to examine love as it naturally is. In this way, Socrates can undo the Sophistic distinction between nomos and physis and achieve a unity (an overarching principle of the soul).
3. The fact that they are starting out in the cool shade of morning has symbolic importance which will become more evident as the pair “journeys” through their dialogue and time passes through the day.
4. The river setting has religious and symbolic importance. It is the Illisus, where the North Wind, Boreas, carried off the nymph Orythia to be his wife. This introduces themes of both marriage and rape, with the latter saying mirroring the idea that rhetoric is somehow forcible and violent.

C. Phaedrus begins the speech, which starts with the notion that the lover is a mad man, that is, insane with desire. This insanity is detrimental to the lover and the beloved.

1. This speech of Lysias is cynical at this point, describing a physical, selfish love. This relates to the stage of humanity in the “bronze” phases of the *Republic*.
2. The speech itself is badly written, a parody actually, which shows the infirmity and corruption of the thought behind it. Plato has a reason for writing it in this way. Socrates fears that this speech will corrupt haedrus, who is quite taken by it, and therefore makes derogatory and ironic comments about this speech of Lysias.
3. Platonic love is something much different from what this speech says love. Plato says real love is concerned with the benefit of the beloved and the construction of one’s own identity in the process of constructing the identity of the other (the beloved).
4. This is not to say that Platonic love is somehow cool and detached. It is in fact highly emotional and sexually charged, but it is focused not on personal bodily gratification but on the benefit of the other.

D. Socrates refutes the speech with a speech of his own.

1. He puts a cloak over his head and delivers an improved version of the Lysias speech. It is better, but still not as good as his final speech at the end of the dialogue.
2. Socrates starts out by defining love, and he organizes the speech much better than Lysias did, which is consistent with Plato’s desire for order and beauty.
3. At this point, what Socrates says about love is in the realm of right opinion as opposed to true knowledge.

4. He appears, in part to agree with Lysias’ idea of love (an irrational desire for the object of the desire). But he then breaks off when he realizes that he has praised what to him is a non-lover.

5. At this point, Plato works in mention of the ancient Greek lyric poets Ibycus and Stesichorus. Any time Plato uses poets or poetry in his dialogue, it marks something important. In this case, Plato is trying to create a new lyric.

6. Socrates is becoming dithyrambic, and wants to leave. Phaedrus asks him to stay; it is “scorching noon” (more symbolism of the intellectual journey, in this case getting closer to knowledge, but also the heat of passion, which will soon begin to go down).

7. Socrates’ *daimon* orders him to stay and make up for his impiety in talking about love in the way he has; the gods have overheard him and are unhappy.

8. Stesichorus was blinded for his impiety in writing an unflattering poem about Helen of Troy. The real target of Plato is Homer (who was said to have been blind), whom Plato believes has miseducated everyone, including the lyric poets. Stesichorus atoned by writing an encomium to Helen and his sight is restored.

9. Here we see the symbolism of the cloak over Socrates’ head. He has been, in effect, blind and therefore his speech about love has not been one of true knowledge. But by removing his cloak (having his vision restored, like Stesichorus) he is now ready to give us this true knowledge.

E. Socrates decides to start again: “The essence of good speech is telling the truth.” That is why his first speech failed, because it accepted some of Lysias’ values and assumptions, and therefore was not true.

1. Socrates admits that love is madness or a type of insanity. But not all insanity is evil.

2. There are four kinds of “insanity” that are good, endowed by the gods: prophecy, purgation or atonement for sins, lyric poetry, and love.

3. Socrates third speech is actually all of these things, the “great instantiation” of love in a kind of divine or superhuman sense.

4. We can view Lysias’ speech as a “bronze” speech; Socrates’ first speech as a “silver” speech; and his third and final encomium is a “gold” speech, perhaps the finest lyric to love in Western literature.

F. Socrates gives us an image of the soul in love. He uses the metaphor of a winged chariot, driven by charioteer and pulled by two horses. This chariot takes us up out of the realm of space and time to the home of the gods and the realm of the forms.

1. Most humans have a white horse (docile and good) and a black one (hard to handle, bad). The problem is to get the black horse of the soul under control.

2. Only in this way can we “stand on the back of the universe” to see reality and live with the gods for the 10,000 year cycle of the cosmos.

3. If we do not control the “black” horse, we suffer the human condition of living in the world of substance, longing for the beautiful realm of the forms.

4. Love reminds us of the beauty of what our souls once knew in an earlier existence (cf. to Plato’s ideas of reincarnation).

5. Real love is thus an attempt to improve the other by improving their soul. This is what Socrates is trying to do for Phaedrus.

6. Plato believed in a cycle of life, judgment and rebirth in one thousand year cycles (within the larger 10,000 year cosmic cycle). If, after 10,000 years, you are virtuous, you “get your wings” and live with the gods. However, if you are like Socrates, practicing this kind of (“Platonic”) love, you need only go around three times.

G. Socrates lets us know that sex is to the body what good, improving speech is to the soul. This is unselfish, divine love. This is the true speech about love, which (as we recall) Socrates is delivering with the cloak off his head, symbolizing light in truth.

1. At this point, after a religious speech about love, Socrates begins to talk about rhetoric, and a definition of the “good” speech. In this case, he accuses the Sophists as the seducers of the *demos* (the people of Athens). Their motives are suspect because they want to gratify themselves, not improve the *demos*.

2. Socrates wants to persuade people and society for their own benefit. Knowledge is the essence of a good speech.

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3. A speech must move towards dialectic. Some rhetoric is acceptable, but Socrates’ rhetoric is different (more orderly) than that of the Sophists.

4. Socrates then gives a whole catalogue of opposites, which express what the soul is, and what our identity is. We are seen and known in our speech.

5. Again, we see that Socrates is divinely inspired (dithyrambic), undergoing a purgation, using lyric poetry, and expressing his love for Phaedrus.

H. At the end of this “hymn to love” (cf. Eric Satie’s composition “Socrates”), the sun is setting (the heat of passion is gone and reason prevails). Socrates now moves to philosophy to finish the “journey” of the dialogue as they return to the city.

1. Socrates suggests a prayer, demonstrating the importance of piety as a bridge to the gods.

2. The concluding idea is that the love reaches into the soul and makes it divine. This happens only in the presence of another soul, which we can love. Love is the gift of the gods.

Readings:

Essential:
The dialogue Phaedrus

Questions to consider:

1. Draw comparisons between Plato’s conception of the soul and love, as expressed by Socrates in his “gold” speech in Phaedrus, and later Christian expressions of love, particularly as embodied in the concept of Christ and the Church. Investigate the influence of Plato on early Church fathers, especially Augustine.

2. Clarify what is meant by “Platonic love.” Is it as disinterested and non-sexual as modern usage implies?
Lecture Fourteen  
**Symposium—The Pride of Love**  

**Scope:** The *Symposium* rightfully holds the position of the greatest dialogue after the *Republic*, due both to its wonderful poetry and to its treatment of multiple themes, the key of which is love. Among the *dramatis personae*, we will encounter many familiar names from other dialogues, as well as some famous figures from Greek society of the time. Again, the target of the dialogue, set at an all-night drinking bout, is what Plato takes to be the errors in the teaching of the Sophists, which has corrupted the youth of Athens. Thus, we can expect Gorgias and the other Sophist teachers to come in for a dialectical beating here, and we are not disappointed. Likewise, the poet Aristophanes and the political leader Alcibiades (both enemies of Socrates) are held up to ridicule by Plato as a kind of pay-back for their role in Socrates’ death. The crux of the dialogue is love, or more particularly, what is the best kind of love. The characters other than Socrates are used to show gradations of misguided, self-seeking and ultimately futile love. Plato skillfully does this not only with his poetry, but the physical actions and even disguises in which he places the characters. In the end, the disinterested, higher, “sober” love of Socrates shines forth as the other players essentially sink into an abyss of drunkeness and ignorance. A careful consideration of this magnificent dialogue will reveal other themes that Plato often played on dealing with the entire spectrum of human (Greek) society of his troubled times.

I. After the *Republic*, the *Symposium* is considered to be the greatest of the Platonic dialogues. The main theme is love, but other important themes are introduced, especially towards the end.

A. There are levels of symbolism which must be analyzed in the context of the other Platonic dialogues.

B. Many of the interlocutors and characters of the *Protagoras* (see Lecture 10) are present in *Symposium*. Also making an appearance is Aristophanes, the great comic playwright, and also Alcibiades.

C. The setting is a banquet in honor of Agathon, a young poet (taught by Gorgias, the Sophist) whose tragedies have just won first prize in an Athens religious festival.

1. Socrates gets into his good clothes to go to the party. But he stops along the way because he has fallen into a contemplative reverie.

2. The early discussion of the seating arrangement is important because of the idea of the proximity of bodies (cf. to the Platonic idea of the proximity of souls). It must also be understood in light of the homosexuality of that stratum of Greek society in that late 5th century B.C. time period.

3. We must also keep in mind the “corruption” theme, since these young men are either poets or have been educated by Gorgias, or both. They decide to give speeches in honor of the god of love, Eros. This is Plato’s device to reveal their souls from what they love.

4. Socrates comes in late and sits next to Agathon (which means “good” in Greek). This is in itself symbolic.

5. They decide not to let this degenerate into a wild drinking party, since they are still hung over from the last night’s carousing. This shows their immoderation and “bronze” love that features self-indulgence. There is a “soul-sickness” afflicting these people.

II. One after the other, the men give their speeches to Eros, straddling piety and bodily interests and desires.

A. Phaedrus, beloved of Eriximachus, student of Hippias, makes a very uninspiring speech, in which the gods or souls are never mentioned. It seems he didn’t learn anything from Socrates. His speech praising selfish, calculating love is well received. It is clear he has a “small” soul and has no concept of real love.

B. Pausanias, lover of Agathon, praises selfish, pederast love. He advocates changing the *nomos* (law) of Athens in favor of the homosexual lover.

1. He is speaking like a sophist, trying to gratify himself and change the external world rather than to concentrate on his soul.

2. The guests at the banquet applaud the speech which is slightly better than that of Phaedrus.

C. The next speaker is Aristophanes, the comic playwright.
1. We must recall that Aristophanes has targeted Socrates in his plays, making fun of him and even making him look like a Sophist or worse (cf. to the Apology, where Socrates says his real accusers are the poets and playwrights who have made him appear to be a Sophist).

2. Thus, Plato is getting his “revenge” by showing Aristophanes in a bad light.

3. Aristophanes is unable to speak due to his over-indulgence. There is a short comic interlude when Aristophanes begins to hiccup and asks Eriximachus to cure him and/or speak next. This hiccupping and the cure of sneezing are symbolic of “spasms” of desire that characterize Aristophanes.

4. Eriximachus, a doctor, begins to speak of the unity of opposites as the goal of the soul. However, he is really interested in what gratifies him (in this case, homosexual love which is really the unity of the same).

5. Eriximachus’ speech is, like the first two, rather mundane, selfish and aimed at the body, compared to the ones that will follow.

D. Aristophanes now gets his turn to speak. He begins by talking about mythos (poetry or religious myth) which in his opinion supersedes the physical, mechanical view of the first three speeches.

1. He tells the myth that humans used to have a connection of bodies: two faces, one head, four arms and four legs. These humans tried to scale the heights of Olympus, and Zeus split them in two.

2. Thus, humans are seeking completeness, their “other half.”

3. This really means that Aristophanes is half a man, who desires strongly and wants to gratify them in a maximal way.

4. Humans are basically impious monsters who are now split in two. Aristophanes exemplifies this with his pursuit of Dionysus and Aphrodite.

5. This is actually a very unbalanced, “un-Greek” conception of the soul and self.

E. Agathon is next to speak, and his speech is better than all the preceding. But he is a student of Gorgias, so we can expect corruption. He is very narcissistic and his speech to Eros is really a speech or encomium to himself.

1. He uses the Gorgian formula, which requires no thoughtwhatsoever. The adjectives and phrases could apply to anyone or anything.

2. He likens himself to the great Homer. He has won the prizes, and is totally in love with himself, not seeing that this is false love.

3. He really has no identity, because he doesn’t need other people (other than to fawn over him).

4. At the end of the glittering speech, Socrates gets in an ironic line about Agathon’s praise of himself, disguised as praise to the god, Eros.

F. Socrates is next, and starts out by saying (with ironic understatement) that he doubts if he can measure up to the speeches of Aristophanes and the others.

1. He says that he learned about love from an woman prophetess named Diatina (in Greek, “the honor of God”). He states that love is a daimon, connecting the human and divine.

2. The speech is actually a poetic mimesis of a Socratic dialogue within the larger dialogue. It is not like the rhetorical speeches of the others.

3. He defines, or rather describes, love as a longing (therefore, it cannot be a god, since gods do not lack for any completeness).

4. Love is mostly a desire for the perfection of the soul (bodies might enter into it, but that is not the focus). Diatima leads him up the “ladder of beauty,” which leads to the image of the final beauty in the beloved.

5. Thus love moves from the love of many to the love of one, to the love of the soul, and then to the love of knowledge and wisdom, thence to laws and institutions, and finally to the forms. The goal is something above us, something Else (with a capital “E”).

6. In the soul of our beloved, we see the image of the perfect beauty and love, which is outside of time and space.

G. Everyone except Aristophanes stands and applauds. Aristophanes (who is now completely drunk) wants to rebut Socrates. But before he can do it, Alcibiades enters (recall that he was responsible lose the Peloponnesian War because of the ill-fated Sicilian expedition; he is bad, daemonic, traitorous, corrupt).
1. He represents the exact opposite of Socrates: disordered and evil, but outwardly eloquent and charming.
2. Socrates is really Diatima’s “daimon of love.”
3. Alcibiades enters drunk and dressed as the god Dionysus and places a laurel wreath on Agathon (Dionysus is the god of wine and also of tragedy and comedy).
4. He recognizes Socrates and wants to place a wreath on Socrates (“there is no head like this in all of Greece”), even though Socrates makes him very uncomfortable.
5. He invites everyone to drink deeply. He goes on about Socrates, and the crowd asks him for an encomium on Socrates. Alcibiades, in delivering this speech, first discusses his attempt to seduce him for homosexual love (thinking he would get Socrates’ wisdom).
6. Socrates begins to emerge as the daimon of love, who does not care about the body or other human urges. He (Socrates) seeks the higher, purer love.
7. This encomium really becomes a speech of accusation. Alcibiades accuses Socrates of hubris, of being non-human, of being too good. Since Alcibiades is in the form of a god, he can get away with this accusation of the partially divine daimon.
8. At the end of the speech, the revelers (the demos) fill the room and the drinking picks up. Socrates’ gets both the tragic poet (Agathon) and the comic poet (Aristophanes) together with him. They eventually pass out; only Socrates remains sober.
9. Socrates is arguing that the same poet can write both comedy and tragedy. Plato is saying that Socrates is the new tragic hero, yet he lacks a tragic flaw.

H. Thus we can see that this great poem about love is also about politics, art, rhetoric and the soul.

Readings:

Essential:
The dialogue Symposium

Supplementary:
Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, Chapter XI (this discusses the historical Socrates and his circle and makes references to several passages in Symposium)

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare and contrast the treatment of the theme of love in Symposium (a middle dialogue) and Phaedrus (a late dialogue). Do you detect a maturity of Plato’s concept in the latter?

2. Compare Diatima’s “ladder of beauty” with the “divided line” of Republic.
Lecture Fifteen
The Platonic Achievement

Scope: This penultimate lecture reviews Plato’s dialogues from several perspectives: as the origin of subsequent Western philosophical speculation; as the bridge between older Middle Eastern and oriental philosophies, as well as between the mythic origins of Greece and the realities of the 5th century B.C.; and as the creation of a new Greek (and Western) literature, with epic, lyric and drama subsumed into a new type of writing (dialectic dialogues) with a new type of hero (Socrates). There is always a purpose in Plato, and we will review the primary Platonic concern with moral and political order, which was so threatened in Plato’s own time, not only by the ravages of the Athenian wars with Persia and Sparta, but also (in Plato’s estimation) by the seemingly purposeless and dangerous philosophies of the Ionian school and the Sophists. In reviewing these broad themes, we will begin to see the legacy that Plato left to future thinkers and writers and, indeed, to all of us. So this lecture serves as a summing up and review of the dialogues we have covered in the previous fourteen lectures.

I. It is hard to do justice to the tremendous achievement of Plato. His writings are indeed the origin of Western speculation, with its complete system of thought (cf. Augustine and the German idealists, to name but two examples). But rather than to review subsequent Western philosophy, it is perhaps more instructive to view Plato from other perspectives.

A. While Plato can be seen as a beginning, he can also be viewed as the end of an archaic intellectual, religious and political tradition.
   1. We must consider the much older river valley civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indian subcontinent. These were bound up under the same theological account of the world (cf. the divinity of Pharaoh, the Gilgamesh epic and Indic writings).
   2. These civilizations were all static, and this stability is something sought out longingly by Plato, who lived in a fluid, innovative, even turbulent time. Plato wants to reinforce older myths with logos.
   3. Egypt is his ideal of permanence in the political sense (cf. Laws: the city that never changes).
   4. Likewise, Plato’s ontology seeks the permanence of the eternal forms, rather than the impermanence and imperfection of the everyday world of materiality.
   5. We can see Vedic wisdom in the cycles of time and the cosmos and in reincarnation contemplated by Plato. Plato can also be seen as the culmination of the world view of dynastic Egypt or the Gilgamesh epic, with the Greek overlay of the logos.

B. In synthesizing these traditions, Plato also introduces a new “Mediterranean” concept, that of reason and rationality, that is, an extended knowledge that goes beyond myth and poetry and mere rhetoric. This unleashes the power of human rationality. This is true of his political theory, ontology and epistemology.

II. Plato is trying to reconstruct or perfect Greek religion, which he sees threatened by mechanistic, ateleological Ionian physics. The older myths were no longer enough to bind Greek civilization together (a problem that did not occur in the older river valley civilizations).

A. Greece flowered in the fifth century B.C., but it was a destructive creativity. Plato wanted to channel this energy through reason (logos).
   1. Thus, Plato envisioned himself up as the “new Homer,” whose eternal forms replaced the Homeric gods.
   2. The mere fact that he had such lofty aspirations (to be a great artist, to be a great philosopher) is in itself a noteworthy fact.
   3. He also wants to be the new reconstituting force in Greek religion, who, through helping people organize their souls, will help re-organize the political order.

B. It is this level of aspiration and accomplishment that marks Plato as one of the greatest thinkers of any civilization at any time in human history, and makes his dialogues a treasure of the Western intellectual tradition, well worth our time to read and understand.

III. The late dialogues most clearly show the maturity of Plato’s thought and purpose.
A. The Laws is his last dialogue and presents a city that could be ancient Ninevah: a giant solar calendar. In fact, the society he presents is a microcosm. This can be understood as the “last gasp” of the ancient, sun-centered river valley civilizations.

B. Plato depersonalizes the sun-god myths and replaces them with the universal idea of permanence and the concept of autonomous rationality.

C. Plato is thus playing the biggest of all possible intellectual “games” here: he is trying to synthesis and transmute the ancient myths.
   1. Compare the centrality of sun metaphors in Republic and other dialogues.
   2. The other metaphors used throughout the dialogues are also ocular (implying light, implying wisdom): you “see” the forms, you see the Good. Compare the scene in Phaedrus where Socrates covers his head with the cloak and therefore cannot see (implying blindness, implying ignorance). When he removes it to “see,” we know that this implies truth and wisdom.

D. Plato is trying to be the savior of Greece, specifically Athens, which he sees sliding into oblivion as the result of the Peloponnesian War.
   1. He chooses to do this by rehabilitating these ancient myths in a unique way, to make them relevant to his day.
   2. It is important to remember that Plato is as far removed in time (2,500 years) from the civilizations that produced these myths as we are removed from his 5th century B.C. civilization.
   3. He did not leap, fully armed, from the head of Zeus, like Athena, but rather represents a culmination of preceding civilization.
   4. In this way, he stepped out of time and space and thus can still speak directly to us, with the living voice of inquiry.

E. There has been a debate among scholars about the changes in Plato’s thought over time, about the answers Plato gave to these questions and even about the changes in the questions themselves.
   1. Even though Plato questions things from different perspectives over the course of his long productive life, he is ultimately concerned with the same basic issues.
   2. To be intellectually honest, he must change his mind about things as he investigates the issues.

F. There are two clusters of issues in Plato
   1. The first “cluster” deals with the idea of creating harmony within the human soul, which strives for virtue (using a musical metaphor of the tuned lyre). Related to this is the unification of politics and ethics (growing out of the first issue, thus linking the virtuous soul to the virtuous city)
   2. The second “cluster” deals with the idea of art/aesthetics and education.
   3. The dialogues themselves represent a high point of Greek art and indeed the art of any civilization at any time. Beyond this, they also say much about the purpose of art. To Plato, poetry (and by extension, all artistic creation) is didactic.
   4. Thus, the city of Republic or the Laws, not only are the dialogues themselves poems of a high order, but the concept they discuss (the “ideal city”) is also a poem, a beautiful creation, a mimesis.
   5. To Plato, the domain of art even includes nature, at least our theory of nature. This is why he goes after the Ionian physicists and tries to supplant their writings with a teleology lacking in their worldview. This is the purpose behind Timeaus.
   6. Thus, we can say that Plato’s corpus is a gesture to cover all of human endeavor. Even if we don’t accept all of his points, that doesn’t take away from the grandeur of his effort and accomplishment.

G. To expand on the concept of aesthetics, we can consider Tolstoy’s dictum (in What is Art?) that all art is ultimately moral and true beauty is done with the goal of educating the reader or viewer in moral truth. This is a Platonic viewpoint.
   1. This explains his advocacy of censorship in the city of the Republic. He calls for hymns to the god or praise to good men.
   2. Plato’s dialogues would have been admitted into his city, as being morally educative, and designed to unify soul and city, as opposed to just giving us pleasure.
   3. On the other hand, lyric poetry (cf. Sappho, Anacreon, and others), which might lead to evil behavior, would be superseded by the idea of love in Phaedrus. He becomes the new Stesichorus.
4. We can consider the dialogues as a new epic. Plato lets us know that he wants to be a new Homer. They contain a journey motif; although Socrates (the new Odysseus) never leaves the city or its environs, he is on a spiritual journey. In Crito, he passes up the chance to leave Athens, but to continue his “journey” by remaining for his trial and execution. He doesn’t have to leave Athens to meet monsters: he meets Gorgias, Protagoras, Hippias, who are “monsters” in their spiritual deformity.

5. Socrates is also the new Achilles, without the “wrath” of the warrior. He knows what to be brave about (moral virtue).

6. Plato also takes on the tragedians and comedians of the Athenian stage (cf. Symposium and the portrayal of Aristophanes and the use of Alcibiades as a deus ex machina, parodying Euripides’ plays).

7. Plato’s new hero, Socrates, is like the tragic heroes of Aeschylus (who maintained a moral order in his plays), although without the tragic flaw.

8. The dialogues, although serious, are filled with humor, irony, inside jokes. Compare Parmenides, a lampoon of ontology. In Euthydemus, the two nitwit brothers make up foolish arguments and try to explain them to Socrates.

9. Irony is the major mean for Plato to interject comedy into his dialogues, a comedy organized from a moral perspective, aimed at those things which are bad for people (ignorance, stupidity, vice).

H. The great accomplishment of Plato is to comprise comedy, tragedy, lyric into the same body of work, with a new universal hero, Socrates.

1. He is a hero of knowledge, of the soul, of morality; he is an enigmatic and protean hero who supersedes the previous “ideals” of the various literary art forms.

2. Thus, when we think of the Greeks and heroes, we think of Plato and Socrates, perhaps more so than the older Homeric or tragic heroes.

3. Plato joins mythos and logos, thus uniting the soul, uniting the city and showing the divinity of the universe.

Readings:

Essential:

Review the dialogues cited in this lecture, looking for examples of Plato’s synthesis of ancient myth and his supplanting of earlier Greek poets and philosophers in the totality of the dialogues.

Supplementary:

Review any of the supplementary readings cited in the bibliography to provide further prospective on the points made by Professor Sugrue in this lecture.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare Plato’s aesthetic theory with that of Kant (an idealist) and Nietzsche (a non-idealist). To do this, try to pose at least four questions about art (one question should be whether beauty is connected with moral virtue or something universal or “essential.”). Professor Sugrue has given hints as to some of the other questions. Then read a good encyclopedia entry on Kant and Nietzsche (unless you would prefer to tackle the actual writings (e.g., Kant’s Critique of Judgment).

2. As a sequel to the above, investigate the aesthetic theories of Count Leo Tolstoy as embodied in his essays such as What is Art? and in his greatest writings such as War and Peace and Anna Karenina. Do you agree with the idea that art must be didactic to be true art? What are some ramifications (pro and con) of this theory of aesthetics?
Lecture Sixteen
The Living Voice

Scope: In this final lecture of the series, we will consider some additional insights into the Platonic dialogues and their hero, Socrates. We will look further at the use of ironic humor, at the educational nature of the dialogues, and what we can (and perhaps cannot) learn from the dialogues. Since the dialogues and their dialectical format were specifically intended to be edifying, this lecture will primarily address epistemological issues, that is, what we can know and how we can know it. From this, we can expand our discussion to what it is we should know and how we can come to know it. In a sense, this brings us full circle back to the beginning of our lectures, where we saw that Plato’s mission was to create a rational system of thought and inquiry to fend off what he saw as the moral vacuum of the earlier Ionian speculation and Greek literature from Homer to his time. He set out to teach us how to learn and in this final lecture, we can review whether, in our case, he has been successful.

I. In summing up the Platonic dialogues, the most difficult issue is Socrates himself. What must we think of this daemonic hero of love and knowledge, both the historic Socrates and the Socrates presented in the dialogues?

A. Socrates was interested in the problem of identity, and we are interested in his identity.

1. In the beginning of both the Gorgias and Protagoras, he (or his student) asks these Sophists: who are you? What is your function in society?

2. We could ask the same about Socrates. In Apology, he talks of himself as being a “gadfly,” but this is hardly sufficient.

3. We can view Socrates as the ideal lover, the eudaemonia (“happiness”) of Athens, an epic figure, the tragic hero without the flaw and the great comic hero.

4. We must realize, however, that the comedy of Plato and Socrates is not a human comedy, but rather a type of “divine” comedy.

5. Socrates only laughs once in all the dialogue, although he is joking all the time. He is living in his own comedy; the joke is on the other person, or on us, the readers. But the jokes are not malicious, but educational.

B. The philosopher Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on Socratic irony, and stated that the all melancholic men have the best sense of humor. This seems true of Socrates (as of Kierkegaard).

1. There is a dark side or melancholy in Socrates (cf. his opponent Gorgias, who also shared this tendency).

2. Socrates cannot find satisfaction in this world of space and time; his drive is towards something higher and superior (cf. Phaedo, and Socrates’ description of heaven).

3. Socrates is always comparing the true eternal world with the human world and the latter is found wanting. He thus wants to move us away from what we know to something higher. Thus, this makes it hard for his interlocutors to understand him, especially his jokes.

4. Thus, Socrates uses irony to mask his superiority, to protect others from him and his wisdom. He is godlike, enigmatic and out of place in the transitory world.

5. It is possible that if Socrates had not been ironic, it is likely that he would have been executed sooner than he was. By hiding himself in irony, he gives us only glimpses of himself. But if we can get below the surface irony, we learn much about ourselves, but we can never remove all the ironic masks of Socrates.

C. The purpose or telos of Socrates’ irony is educational. If we can become familiar with the dialogues, we will gain in self-knowledge.

1. This is protreptic; Socrates offers us the chance to become new heroes, to make our own intellectual journey.

2. Socrates is more than a person who poses the eternal question or gives the eternal answer. Rather, he is one who shows us how to ask questions in searching for the truth. In modern terms, “it’s not the destination, it’s the journey.”

3. In the early dialogue Cratylus (which we did not cover in this series of lectures), the interlocutor asks “what is the meaning of Dionysus (drunken excess) and Aphrodite (human sexual drive)? In other words, what is the meaning and place of our emotions?
4. Socrates says there is a serious answer (which he cannot give) and a facetious one: the gods love a joke. Thus, our disorder in the face of these strong emotions is a joke played on mankind by the gods. This is not a “non-answer,” but rather a reminder that not every answer is necessarily deadly serious and that we must continue to inquire.

II. We may not be able to get to the bottom of all the ironic jokes, but we can approach them asymptotically. To do this, we must ask tough questions of the dialogues. They then can directly answer us, a mimesis of the “living voice.”

A. The biggest “joke” in the dialogues is that they don’t teach you anything. We never quite get to the Form of the Good.
   1. There is no Socratic dogma, no Socratic solution. If we study the interpretations over time of Socrates, we find contradictory conclusions. Is this a “practical joke” played on us? Perhaps so, but we do gain something from trying to understand what Socrates is really telling us.
   2. There is no Socratic book. Like Buddha, Confucius and other great spiritual teachers of mankind, Socrates never wrote anything down. In *Phaedrus*, he says: “I don’t trust the written word.” This is in line with the give-and-take of the dialectic form.

B. In *Philebus*, Socrates says comedy involves people who do not know themselves and therefore make ridiculous (human) mistakes.
   1. Socrates thus uses the dialogic method to push us toward other people, so that we can improve ourselves and others (and avoid being ridiculous).
   2. Of course, we must realize that this is not really Socrates, but a mimesis of Socrates, written by Plato (another “joke” on us). Plato memorializes his teacher by writing down the dialogues, but stresses that the Socratic life is bound up with the “living word,” which is to say that we are driven toward other people in our quest for knowledge.
   3. This is underscored in *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, paeans to love, which pull us out egoism to the larger world of love and friendship.

C. Another “joke” is the fact that the professor is himself a mimesis (this puts him far down the “Divided Line”). He cannot give you the answers. You have to read the book yourself.
   1. Once you have paid your dues reading Plato, you still have only a poetic mimesis.
   2. The professor can exhort you to climb the ladder toward the forms, and also give you some things to think about.
   3. The imitation of Socrates is not exactly like the imitation of Christ or the Buddha.
   4. Socrates says that you cannot learn philosophy without friends (the “living voice”) and without participating in the *logos*. If you don’t like the conclusions, such as they are, of Plato and Socrates, it is not impious to discard them and move on in your quest.

D. The self is constructed in language. The awareness of this fact helps us to develop knowledge in ourselves and others. Socrates thus offers us the chance to drive toward perfection by providing a teleology.
   1. We must start by organizing ourselves from within (the soul).
   2. Only then can we organize the chaos without (the external world, the *polis*).

E. In the *Laws*, Plato shows the mixture of simultaneous comedy and seriousness.
   1. The Athenian Stranger tells us that life shouldn’t be taken too seriously, and that man has been made to be a toy of the god.
   2. Our goal is to try to become as perfect as possible and be serious about those things which require seriousness (but not to be filled with self-importance).
Readings:

Essential:

Review the dialogues cited in this lecture, looking for examples of Plato’s synthesis of ancient myth and his supplanting of earlier Greek poets and philosophers in the totality of the dialogues.

Supplementary:

Review any of the supplementary readings cited in the bibliography to provide further prospective on the points made by Professor Sugrue in this lecture.

Questions to Consider:

1. Like Socrates, both Christ and Buddha offered a new way of looking at things that moved out of, and beyond, earlier systems of belief (Judaism and Hinduism, respectively). Both were interested in inner morality and both had a purpose or telos beyond the ephemeral life of earth. In this light, consider Professor Sugrue’s statement that imitating Socrates (that is, living the “examined life”) is different than imitating Christ or the Buddha. Do you agree or disagree? Support your answer.

2. Discuss the significance of the fact that the three great “teaching figures” mentioned in the lecture did not leave any written documents, but were instead interpreted in the writings of others. Does this present any problems as to the certainty of knowledge as to their teachings? As to their identity? Are there other great teachers who also failed to leave their own thoughts in writing? Are there others who did produce a written legacy to guide followers?
This glossary contains philosophical words and other terms used in the course of these lectures on Plato’s dialogues

*ad hominem*: a form of argument where one party attacks his opponent personally, rather than attacking his position.

*antinomian*: the concept or belief that oneself is a sufficient basis for making moral decisions, therefore exempting one from adherence to societal or religious moral codes. Although it is generally used in reference to various unorthodox Christian sects which sprang up in the early Reformation, it has the larger connotation given in the definition. In the *Crito*, Plato makes the point that Socrates takes the hemlock in deference to the prevailing laws of the *polis*, and is therefore not antinomial.

*aporetic*: Platonic dialogues that end without a definite conclusion. “Aporia” means “a state of doubt.”

*arete* (Greek): virtue or excellence. Plato linked virtue with a purpose or *telos*, which in his case was to live well.

*asceticism*: the practice of self-denial or “mortification of the flesh” for the sake of virtue or God. The practice is widely associated with certain strands of Christian theology which preached the sinful or fallen nature of the body, but has been practiced within a variety of religious and philosophical traditions.

*copula*: a word that links a subject and predicate (e.g., ‘is,’ ‘are,’ ‘is not,’ ‘are not’). Depending on the nature of the terms being linked, the copula can be understood to have different meanings. The ‘is’ in an identity (“Bill Clinton is the president”) is different from the ‘is’ of predication (“the grass is green”).

*cosmological arguments*: arguments for God’s existence that appeal to the causation of the universe. Aristotle and Aquinas, among others, have put forward such arguments.

*cosmology*: the study of the universe as a whole, as a coherent system.

*demiurge*: From the Greek word for “craftsman,” in Plato’s dialogue *Timaeus* the creative force that makes the natural or physical world.

*demos* (Greek): people. Root of the word “democracy.”

*deus ex machina*: a literary device whereby a seeming inevitable outcome in the plot is thwarted by the sudden appearance of a higher intervening source (in early literature, a god figure).

*dialectic*: rigorous conversation, as in Plato’s dialogues. In the writings of Hegel and Marx, the term takes on a more technical sense involving the progress from thesis through antithesis to synthesis.

*dithyramb*: an ecstatic speech (originally, an emotional choral hymn to Dionysus).

*efficient cause*: the event immediately preceding some event, in terms of which it can be physically explained. Often opposed to *formal cause* (see *telos*).

*elenchus*: in logic, an argument that disproves a proposition by proving the direct contrary to its conclusion. The word has the connotation of “cross-examination” and is a characteristic of the Socratic dialogue form. The adjectival form is “elenctic.”

*encomium* (from the Greek *enkomion*): formal expression of high praise, eulogy, panegyric.
epistemology: the theory of knowledge. Traditional problems of epistemology include whether we know anything and, if so, how. The position that we cannot have knowledge in some particular area is skepticism with regard to that area.

eristic: related to sophistical argument and specious reasoning (can be a noun or an adjective). Eristic is the opposite of dialectic (q.v.).

eros: a word with many connotations, but generally meaning desire, longing, lust (usually sexual). Plato abstracts eros by moving it from the particular (a desire for a particular person or thing, like money or power) to a desire for an underlying attribute (beauty, friendship, etc.) and finally to a desire for the form itself. The examined life is motivated by eros to seek for truth, virtue, etc. as forms and as the highest goal or telos of life.

eschatology: the notion of or orientation toward the end of life or time.

ethics: the study of moral human character and action. Questions in ethics include: what is the nature of the good? what makes an action right or wrong? how ought one to live? what is the nature of virtue?

eudaimonism: the ethical view that the purpose and good of human life is happiness.

Form: in Plato’s philosophy, the idea, essence, or perhaps definition of a thing (as of man or justice); also conceived to be the most real ontological level.

hubris (Greek): pride, usually coming before a fall.

idealism: the ontological position that only minds and their ideas exist or are truly real. Plato, Berkeley, Leibniz, and Kant are in some sense idealists.

interlocutor: a party to a discussion or dialogue. In Plato, one of the key people with whom Socrates engages in dialectical argument, such as Theaetetus, Meno, Crito or other eponymous characters of the Dialogues.

Ionian School: Presocratic philosophers centered in Ionia, whose speculations into the natural world were the foundation of physical science; they were attacked by Socrates and Plato for undermining religion and morality. Three of the best known philosophers were Thales (fl. 585 B.C.), Anaximander (c. 610 B.C. - c. 547/6 B.C.) and Anaximines (fl. c. 546 B.C.). They are sometimes referred to as the Milesian philosophers, from the city of Miletus (in Asia Minor).

irony: the situation when an appearance, statement or outcome is the opposite of what is expected, known or thought to be the case. In the Platonic Dialogues, irony refers specifically to Socrates’ technique of pretending not to know something as he is discussing it, thereby enabling him to engage in dialectical argument and make his point from a seemingly opposite position.

isomorphic: having a one-to-one relationship or the same form.

logic: the study of the forms and principles of correct reasoning.

logos (Greek): speech, word, reasoning (or reason), intelligence, account, principle. The word is used in a revealing variety of ways by the Presocratics, Plato, and Christian thinkers.

metaphysics: literally, “beyond physics.” Metaphysics is the study of the ultimate constituents of reality, both in its parts and as a whole. The discipline is traditionally divided into two parts, ontology and cosmology.

mimesis: imitation. Plato discusses mimesis in Book X of Republic in the sense of artistic creation. The artist’s work is an imitation of reality, in fact is an imitation of something which itself is an imitation of the true Form. Therefore, Plato is somewhat skeptical, if not perhaps hostile, towards artists for taking people away from the truth.
We also used “mimesis” to describe the Dialogues themselves as an imitation of Socrates’ idea of the “examined life.”

**monism:** the ontological position that there is only one thing. Parmenides (a Pre-Socratic philosopher) and Spinoza were monists of different kinds.

**mythos** (Greek): myth, story.

**nomos** (Greek): political law.

**nostos:** homecoming. This is a theme of the Iliad (Achilles wishing to return to “pleasant Phthia”) and is the leitmotif of the Odyssey. There is a clear parallel between these epic poems and their heroes, and the journey of Socrates (the new Platonic “hero”) toward truth and the gods as portrayed in the Crito.

**ontology:** the study of what sorts of things there are. The three fundamental, general positions in ontology are **idealism,** **materialism,** and **dualism.**

**Orphic:** having to do with the ancient Greek cult which originated in the myth of Orpheus. It involved mysticism and reincarnation, and influenced both Pythagoras and Plato.

**paean:** a song of thanksgiving, happiness, triumph, etc.

**physis** (Greek): natural law or, simply, nature: what spontaneously produces itself or acts from within itself.

**philosophy:** Derived from the Greek words meaning love of wisdom, philosophy is characterized by inquiry at the most general and profound level. On the other hand, its great questions are often insoluble or at least perennially controversial. Originally, philosophy included what we now term science: often termed “natural philosophy.”

**pleonexia:** excess, going beyond satiety, gluttony; when referring to speech or writing, redundancy.

**polis** (Greek): city. root of the word “politics.”

**Presocratics:** general term applied to Greek philosophers living between c. 600 B.C. and 400 B.C. and particularly those who are considered natural or physical philosophers; thus, the Sophists (q.v.) are not considered Presocratics. The Presocratics are generally divided into the following schools: Ionian (or Milesian) (q.v.), Eleatic (Parmenides, b. c. 515 B.C., is the chief Eleatic philosopher), Pythagoreans, and the Atomists (e.g., Democritus, c. 460 B.C. - c. 370 B.C., and Leucippus, fl. 450-420 B.C.). Heraclitus of Ephesus (d. after 480 B.C.) and Empedocles of Acracas (c. 493 B.C. - c. 433 B.C.) are Presocratics who are not ascribed to any of the other schools, although we might term Heraclitus to be the head of the Ephesian school.

**propaedeutic:** of, or having the nature of, elementary instruction, in a subject.

**ontology:** that division of philosophy which has as its study the question of existence or being.

**realism:** With regard to the problem of universals (the question of the status of general concepts such as “humanity,” “redness,” or “goodness”), realism is the position that universals are existing entities. The Platonic theory of Forms is an example of a realist view.

**protreptic:** something that is intended to be instructive, usually didactic. The “protreptic interlude” is a device used by Plato in his Dialogues to introduce a teaching point.

**reductio ad absurdum:** in logic, reasoning that proves a proposition by demonstrating that the opposite is false or contradictory; or disproving a proposition by demonstrating the absurdity or impossibility of its outcome.
rhetoric: the use of language to influence others. Plato (through Socrates) attacked the Sophists for their teaching of rhetoric for money, holding that the goal was to win the favor of the crowds rather than seek truth through a dialectical give-and-take.

solipsism: the belief that the only reality is what one experiences; this leads to the position that only oneself truly exists, and that anything external is therefore not real or non-existent. This is perhaps the ultimate skepticism.

Sophists: A group of philosophers roughly contemporaneous with Socrates and Plato. The Sophists were portrayed (perhaps not entirely fairly) by Socrates as more interested in teaching rhetorical tricks for money to aspiring politicians than in pursuing knowledge. In fact, they, like Socrates, were somewhat skeptical of the speculative teachings of philosophers of Presocratics, such as the Eleatic school, and were interested in morality and knowledge (epistemology) as well as other issues debated by the Presocratics. Prominent Sophists were Protagoras (c. 490 - C. 420 B.C.), who was a friend of Pericles and first used the phrase “man is the measure of all things; and Gorgias (c. 483 - 376 B.C.); Thrasy machus; and, lastly, Hippias of Elis. Both Protagoras and Gorgias were eponyms for Platonic dialogues.

taxonomy: a system (generally hierarchical) for arranging things such as laws, principles, life forms, concepts, etc.

techne (Greek): art, skill, craft; most generally, rule-governed activity. Root of the word “technology.” The concept is central to both Plato and Aristotle.

telos (Greek): purpose, aim, function, end. A teleological explanation (one made in terms of purposes) is often contrasted with a mechanistic or naturalistic explanation (one made in terms of physical states and events).

theodicy: a response to the problem of evil: an explanation of why there’s evil in a universe created and (perhaps) sustained by a perfectly good and all-powerful being. Augustine and Leibniz put forward famous theodicies; Hume famously argued that all theodicies are miserable failures.

timocracy: In Plato, a form of government in which ambition for power and glory motivates the rulers (adjective: timocratic; noun: timocrat).

utopia: literally: “nowhere.” A utopian system is a vision of an ideal political state or state of humanity. Such systems were put forward by Plato and More, among others.

veil of maya: a Hindu concept and term that refers to the illusory nature of the world as perceived and experienced. True reality (atman or brahman), which is a unitary thing, resides behind the plurality and variation registered by the senses (in this regard, atman or brahman are similar to the static unity of being described by Parmenides).
Biographical Information

This section contains background biographical information on figures mentioned in these lectures. Further facts can be found in the various references cited after each lecture.

The Presocratic Philosophers

The Presocratics were Greek philosophers of nature who lived in the two centuries before Socrates (c. 600 B.C. - c. 400 B.C.). They developed a wide range of approaches to the discussion of nature, but they are united by their non-mythic explanations. The very little we know about these thinkers is derived from commentaries on their works by subsequent philosophers such as Aristotle.

The Milesian (or Ionian) School:

Thales (fl. 585 B.C.), Anaximander (c. 610 - c. 547/6 B.C.), and Anaximenes (fl. c. 546 B.C.) constitute the Milesian (or Ionian) school of philosophy. Thales' statement that "all is water" is considered to be the first solely material description of the universe, and thus Aristotle acknowledges him as father of the physical sciences. Anaximander, who was Thales' student, postulated that pairs of conflicting opposites were contained within the *apeiron* (the boundless). Anaximenes, who was probably the student of Anaximander, maintained that the cosmos consisted of air, which when rarefied becomes fire, and when condensed becomes water and earth.

The Ephesian School:

A second school of Presocratic philosophy was founded by Heraclitus of Ephesus (d. after 480 B.C.). He conceived the cosmos as a ceaseless conflict of opposites. Fire, he claimed, was the best representation of this universal flux. He is attributed with the famous statements that “you cannot step into the same river twice” and “the sun is new everyday.” His student was Cratylus (5th century B.C.), thought to have been Plato’s teacher before Socrates.

The Eleatic School:

Heraclitus' view of cosmic flux was challenged by the Eleatics. Parmenides of Elea (b. c. 515 B.C.), the leading exponent of this third Presocratic school of philosophy, held that the universe was one and unchanging, and that observed motion is only apparent. Parmenides was an early master of logic, making skilled arguments using the *reductio ad absurdum*, the law of identity, and the law of contradiction.

The Atomist School:

A fourth school, the Atomists, agreed with its predecessors on a materialist (rather than religious) explanation for the universe but held a different view of the *urstuff* of the universe, and differed particularly with the Eleatics on the question of being and motion. Democritus of Abdera (c. 460 - c. 370 B.C.) and Leucippus of Miletus (fl. 450 - 420 B.C., but not of the Milesian school of Thales) agreed that the universe was composed of tiny unsplittable particles. The Greek for "splittable" is *tomoi*, while the prefix *a* means "not." Hence, they called these tiny bits *atomoi* (from which we derive the modern word "atom"). Their world was totally mechanistic.

The Pythagorean School:

Pythagoras of Samos (b. c. 570 B.C.) was the founder of a fifth Presocratic school of philosophy. Known to all students of mathematics as the author of the Pythagorean Theorem, he held that nature was written in the language of mathematics. Pythagoras believed that mathematics could describe such diverse things as the relations between notes in a musical octave, the number of the heavenly bodies, and justice. He believed in a cycle of reincarnation. He broke from the Milesian worldview of a prime matter (*urstuff*) and focused on the forms of things which were attributable to geometric shapes or structure.
The Sophist Philosophers

The Sophists were a group of philosophers roughly contemporaneous with Socrates and Plato. They are not considered within the term Presocratic because their emphasis was different, as noted below. The Sophists were portrayed (perhaps not entirely fairly) by Plato (through Socrates) as being more interested in teaching rhetorical tricks for money to aspiring politicians than in pursuing knowledge for its own sake (see the definitions for “eristic” and “rhetoric” in the Glossary). In fact, they, like Socrates, were somewhat skeptical of the speculative cosmological teachings of the Presocratics, such as the Eleatic school, and were interested in morality and knowledge (epistemology) as well as other issues debated by the Presocratics. Prominent Sophists were Protagoras (c. 490 - C. 420 B.C.), who was a friend of Pericles and first used the phrase “man is the measure of all things; and Gorgias of Leontini (c. 483 - 376 B.C.), who wrote on “scientific” issues and also on free will; Thrasymachus; and, lastly, Hippias of Elis. Both Protagoras and Gorgias were eponyms for Platonic dialogues attacking the Sophists.
**Other Figures**

Aeschylus (525 - 456 B.C.): Greek tragedian who wrote, among others, the plays of the Oresteian trilogy (*Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, Eumenides*), dealing with the concepts of justice, revenge, suffering and forgiveness.

Aristophanes (c. 448 - 388 B.C.): Greek comic playwright who used his plays to satirize politics and individuals (including the playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides, as well as the Sophists and Socrates). Among his most famous plays are *The Clouds, The Wasps, Lysistrata, The Frogs* and *The Birds*.

Euripides (485? or 480? - 406 B.C.): Greek tragedian who wrote, among others, the plays *Medea, Electra, The Trojan Women, Iphigenia in Aulis, and Orestes*, plays that addressed contemporary issues by harkening back to older myths.

Sophocles (c. 496 - 406 B.C.): Greek tragedian who wrote *Oedipus the King, Electra, Oedipus at Colonnus, Ajax* and *Antigone* (of his surviving plays).

Themistocles (c. 525 - 462 B.C.): Athenian statesman and naval commander, who built up the Athenian navy and led the Greek forces to victory against the Persian fleet of Xerxes at the naval battle of Salamis.

Thucydides (c. 460 - c. 400 B.C.): author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, covering the years 431-411 B.C. This is considered the first real history as it is understood today, with its emphasis on fact and careful description.

Xenophon (c. 430 - c. 355 B.C.): Greek general, writer and historian, who provides us with a different look at Socrates than that given by Plato.
# Timeline

This timeline shows major historical and cultural events, as well as the dates of the philosophers discussed in these lectures. It is important to get the context of 5th century B.C. Greece (or more specifically Athens) as a time of considerable warfare, first against the Persians and then against the Spartans. In the midst of all this conflict, the flourishing of the arts termed the “Golden Age” of Greece occurred under Pericles, endowing the world with imperishable works of literature, philosophy, art and architecture, to say nothing of concepts which are at the heart of Western civilization. But prior to this time, the Greeks were speculating about the nature of things, and after this time, the conquests of Alexander the Great spread the Greek legacy far beyond its original boundaries. The turmoil of their times served as the impulse for the playwrights and the philosophers. Socrates and Plato developed their philosophy to propose new answers where both the older *mythos* and precedent naturalistic speculations or the interpretations of the Sophists no longer seemed to serve to explain or preserve their Athenian world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 750 - 700 B.C.</td>
<td>Homeric poetry (<em>Iliad</em> and <em>Odyssey</em>) recorded in ancient writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 610 - 547 B.C.</td>
<td>Anaximander (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 625 - 545 B.C.</td>
<td>Thales of Miletus (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 610 - 540 B.C.</td>
<td>Anaximander of Miletus (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 570 B.C.</td>
<td>Pythagoras of Samos born (Pythagorean School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 546 B.C.</td>
<td>Anaximenes flourished (Milesian or Ionian School)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 515 B.C.</td>
<td>Parmenides of Elea born (Eleatic School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>508 B.C.</td>
<td>Reform of Athenian democracy by Cleisthenes</td>
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<tr>
<td>499 - 479 B.C.</td>
<td>War with Persian</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 495 B.C.</td>
<td>Birth of Pericles, leader of Athens in “Golden Age”</td>
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<tr>
<td>490 B.C.</td>
<td>Battle of Marathon (defeat of Darius the Persian)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 490 - c. 420 B.C.</td>
<td>Protagoras (Sophist)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 483 - c. 376 B.C.</td>
<td>Gorgias (Sophist)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>480 B.C.</td>
<td>Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis</td>
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<tr>
<td>after c. 480 B.C.</td>
<td>Death Heraclitus of Ephesus (Ephesian School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 470 - 399 B.C.</td>
<td><strong>LIFE OF SOCRATES</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 460 - c. 370 B.C.</td>
<td>Democritus of Abdera (Atomist School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>458 B.C.</td>
<td><em>Oresteia</em> by Aeschylus produced in Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 450 - 420 B.C.</td>
<td>Leucippus of Miletus (Atomist School)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
c. 447 - c. 411 B.C.  Staging of dramas and comedies by Sophocles
(Oedipus, etc.), Euripides (Medea), Aristophanes
(Lysistrata, The Clouds)

c. 429 - 347 B.C.  LIFE OF PLATO

449 - 429 B.C.  “Golden Age” of Athens under Pericles (d. 429 B.C.)

431 - 404 B.C.  Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta

411 B.C.  Temporary suspension of Athenian democracy

404 - 403 B.C.  Rule of Athens by the Thirty Tyrants

403 B.C.  Restoration of Athenian democracy

399 B.C.  Death of Socrates

384 - 322 B.C.  Aristotle of Macedonia (student of Plato)
Bibliography

Any good edition of Plato’s works (Viking, Penguin, etc.)