

## ON PLATO'S DIALOGUES

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TDC Ist Yr. (Major)

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Plato was the first person in the history of the world to produce a great all embracing work in Philosophy, which has its ramifications in all departments of thought and reality. He gathered the entire harvest of Greek Philosophy. All that was best in Pythagoras, the Eleatics, Heracleitus, and Socrates, reappears, transfigured in the system of Plato's Philosophy. But it is not to be imagined, on this account, that Plato was a mere eclectic, or a plagiarist, who took the best thoughts of others, and worked them into some sort of a patch-work philosophy. He was, on the contrary, in the highest degree, an original thinker.

Plato's writing take the form of dialogues. In the majority of these, the chief part is taken by Socrates, into whose mouth Plato puts the exposition of his own philosophy. The dialogues are genuinely dramatic, enlivened by incidents, humour and life-like characterization.

The most important element of Plato's style is his use of Myths. He does not explain his meaning in the form of direct scientific exposition. He frequently teaches by allegories, fables, and stories all of which may be included under the one general appellation of platonic myths. Moreover, the myths usually signify a defect in his thought itself. The fact is that the combination of poet and philosopher in one man is an exceedingly dangerous combination. It cannot, rationally explain a thing. Whenever we find myths in Plato's dialogues we may suspect that we have arrived at one of the weak points of the system. In fact, no writer has ever used such contemptuous language as Plato who says wise and beautiful things, without in the least understanding why they are wise and beautiful. No man has formed such a low estimate of the functions of the poet and mystic.

Although the dating of the dialogues is subject to scholarly controversy, the dialogues fall into three main groups, which correspond roughly to the three periods of Plato's life. Those of the earliest group were written around the time of the death of Socrates, and before the author's journey to Megara. These early dialogue seem to reflect Socrates' method and teaching and often seek to define some virtue without reaching a satisfactory definition : the APOLOGY, CRITO, LACHES, ION, HIPPIAS MINOR, CHARMIDES, PROTOGORAS, LYSIS, EUTHYPHRO, GORGIAS, EUTHYDEMUS AND HIPPIAS MAJOR.

The second group of dialogues is generally connected with the period of Plato's travels. These middle dialogues typically expound systematic theories based on the Theory of Forms: the MENO, PHAEDO, SYMPOSIUM, MENEXENUS, CRATYLUS, REPUBLIC AND PHAEDRUS.

The dialogues of the third group are the work of Plato's maturity. He has now completely mastered his thoughts and turns it with ease in all directions. Some later dialogue examined the problems of and interrelation between the Forms. It also analysed questions of knowledge science, happiness and political science : THE PARMENIDES, THEAETETUS, SOPHIST, STATESMEN, TIMAEUS, CRITIAS, PHILEBUS AND LAWS.

The plan for expounding Plato, which first suggests itself, is to go through the dialogues, one by one, and extract the doctrine of each, successively. But this suggestion has to be given up as soon as it is mentioned. For although the Philosophy of Plato is in itself a systematic and coherent body of thought, he did not express it in a systematic way. On the contrary, he scatters his ideas in all directions. He throws them out at random in any order. What logically comes first often appears last.

In Plato's dialogues, one notices that the figure of Socrates seems to change from a representation of the historical Socrates in the early dialogues. Socrates becomes a mouthpiece for Plato in the middle dialogues and sometimes a minor character in the later dialogues. However, the dialogue form is important to express the give and take of actual philosophical conversations alone, which for Plato represents the ideal pattern of instruction. □

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