

Chapter 7

Plato: Introduction

7.1 Readings and Homework

7.1.1 Required Readings

- Plato, *Seventh Letter*, available on the M.I.T archives.

7.1.2 Further Readings

- Christopher Rowe, “Plato”, Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy, p.98-125
- Richard Kraut, “Plato”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/>
- Other Stanford articles on Plato (use the search engine)

7.1.3 Homework

Give a short answer (three or four sentences) to the following questions on the basis of the readings:

1. What sort of carrier had Plato planned on doing at first? Why did he changed his mind? Did he retire entirely from politics?
2. Explain how Plato’s plans to make Syracuse a better place failed

3. What does Plato think about writing philosophy? Why?
4. What does Plato's ideas about writing philosophy imply about the dialogues?

7.2 Education and life: from politics to philosophy

- Dates: 428 – 348 BCE (80 years!)
- Origins: High aristocracy and aristocratic education: Art and Sport. Plato was naturally to become a leader in Athenian politics
- Meeting with Socrates: probably the most important event in his life: "the most just man of his time".
- Postpone political action in Athens when the Athenians, from whom he had great expectations, put Socrates to death.
- Finally turns to philosophy:

Finally, it became clear to me, with regard to all existing communities, that they were one and all misgoverned. For their laws have got into a state that is almost incurable, except by some extraordinary reform with good luck to support it. And I was forced to say, when praising true philosophy that it is by this that men are enabled to see what justice in public and private life really is. **Therefore, I said, there will be no cessation of evils for the sons of men, till either those who are pursuing a right and true philosophy receive sovereign power in the States, or those in power in the States by some dispensation of providence become true philosophers.** [my emphasis]

- This passage contains different claims and assumptions:
 1. only philosophy enable men to see what justice in public and private affairs is;

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2. Implicit assumption: it is necessary and sufficient to see what justice is, in order to conduct public affairs in the right way;
 3. Consequence of the assumption: to have philosophers in power is necessary and sufficient for a good government of public affairs
 4. This only can bring happiness and freedom
- Consequence:
 - Plato turns to philosophy with a political aim in mind: philosophy is the way to political life in agreement with true justice
 - A important issue for Plato's philosophy is then the following: how to educate the citizens and to organize the state such that the best people, that is, the people who act according to justice because they know what justice is, be put into power.
 - See also: *Republic*, V, 473c-e and VI, 499b
- Note that in the latter, it is said that the philosophers will be forced to take on power and rule the city, meaning that they probably will not be willing to do it. Note that this implies that true philosophers won't be driven crazy about power like most politicians do.

7.3 The Syracuse adventure, or Plato's political failure

7.3.1 Syracuse 1st – First meeting with Dion

- Plato is very critical toward the people: debauchery.
- believes there is no hopes for a government that maintains justice and equality for people with such a way of life: such cities must go through revolutions, changing constitutions and unstable governments.
- Meets Dion who is fond of philosophy.
 - very good student: accepts the rule of true philosophical life: “set his affection on virtue in preference to pleasure and self-indulgence”
 - becomes “unpopular” in the court (as a good philosopher)

- Plato also: Plato is sold as a slave. Sent on a boat which ends up in a harbor, at war with Athens: he should be put to death without trial. Anniceris saves him. (See Diogenes Laertius)

7.3.2 Dion's hopes and asking for help – Plato deliberations

- Dionysios I dies, Dion hopes to educate his son
 - as a good philosopher, Dion then feels like spreading his wisdom
 - again as a good philosopher, he believes that converting the young Dionysios II to philosophy would bring “unspeakable happiness both for himself and for the rest of the Syracuseans.”
- Dion asks for Plato's help to carry on his plans
 - This is, according to him, a first rate opportunity to carry on the dream that “the same persons might actually become both philosophers and the rulers of great States”, that is to say: the dream of the philosopher-king
- Plato's deliberations:
 - hesitates first to follow a young man, because of the unstable desires of young people.
 - Plato decides to come because:
 1. action is not only a full part of philosophizing: it is its accomplishment:

[...]if ever anyone was to try to carry out in practice my ideas about laws and constitutions, now was the time for making the attempt; for if only I could fully convince one man, I should have secured thereby the accomplishment of all good things.
 2. Otherwise the philosopher is but “a man of words, one would never of his own will lay his hand to any act”;
 3. Dion makes this clear to Plato: not to come would be treacherous to true philosophy.

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- Thus:

I took my departure, therefore, acting, so far as a man can act, in obedience to reason and justice[...].

7.3.3 Syracuse 2nd: Dion exiled and Plato kept as prisoner

- Plato's first visit to Dionysios (second visit to Syracuse)
 - there are intrigues in the court against Dion
 - Dion exiled, accused of conspiracy
 - Dionysios keeps Plato more or less like a prisoner: pretends to like him a lot, in fact makes his departure impossible.
 - Bad philosopher: concerned about fame and rumors.
 - He finally lets Plato go under the promise that he will come back (Dion in the balance).

7.3.4 Plato's advice and theses

- About Political counseling
 - Analogy: political counselor and physician: both have to display pieces of advice IF and ONLY IF the target is willing to follow;
 - Dionysios is not of such a well willing student
- About friendship and loyalty:
 - one cannot count on friends "from the mysteries" (lovers)
 - one can count on a friend when friendship is grounded in common liberal educational training

- The big theses:

Plato seems to uncover here some of his strongest doctrines:

1. To enslave a city is better neither for the enslavers, nor for the enslaved – Note that the enslavers!

2. To escape death is not something good when in balance with an honorable deed: the soulless is deprived of good or bad, the soul is where good and bad belong, whatever its attachment to a body.
3. Immortality of soul
4. Penalties after death for misbehaving souls (see the end of the *Republic*)
5. The ethical paradox:

Therefore also we should consider it a lesser evil to suffer great wrongs and outrages than to do them.

6. Life and the ethical principle:

[...] there can be no happiness neither for the community or for the individual man, unless he passes his life under the rule of the righteousness with the guidance of wisdom, either possessing these virtues in himself, or living under the rule of godly men and having received a right training, and education in morals.

7. A philosopher in power is necessary and sufficient for the happiness (he says “salvation”) of the citizens.
8. *Ignorance* is “the seed from which all evils for all mankind take root and grow [...]” – thus only ignorance is responsible of all what happened (is it? what about political ambition, emotional reactions, etc.? According to Plato, all these arise from mere ignorance of what is best for us.)
9. In a case of a civil war, cessation of violence, security and happiness can only be achieved if the rulers are not partial, that is:
 - “give equal and common rights to the whole State”;
 - are themselves “servants to the laws” .

Even after, Plato stresses that the core of security and happiness in a State is that the rulers “show more obedience to the laws than the conquered”

7.3.5 Syracuse 3rd: Plato outside the walls, Dion murdered

- Invitation dismissed – Plato is not stupid...

- Dionysios “crave” for philosophy for the wrong reasons: honor and glory
- Third invitation:
 - Dionysios puts Dion’s affairs in the balance;
 - Plato takes it as an opportunity to “test” one and for all Dionysios’ desire for philosophy – description of the philosophical life: see next section.
- When Plato comes back, Denys is well occupied to deal with Dion’s concurrence. After a while, instead of letting Dion alone as promised, he takes his good and have Plato living outside the walls, among the mercenaries. That is to say, Plato can be killed at any moment. Dion wants to “take his vengeance”. Plato refuses to take part to such plans.
- As we know, Dion is finally murdered.

7.4 Philosophical life in the *Seventh letter*

- The main point is that the philosophical life is hard to lead.
- It involves:
 - of course, long and hard studies;
 - but also order and regulation in daily life , including sobriety and diet constraints;
- The test consists in seeing the reaction of the one who is challenged to live a philosophical life:
 - either one thinks that it is “a marvelous road lying before him, that he must forthwith press on with all his strength, and that life is not worth living if he does anything else;
 - or one thinks it is too difficult and impossible for them (or pretend to know enough).

Plato founded the Academy when he came back to Athens. It is in his schools that he achieved to convert the happy few to philosophical life.

7.5 The Academy, or Plato's educational success

7.5.1 Why the Academy, and what for?

- The Academy was not the first school of philosophy, but the **first university** we really know of. Its aims, means and organization were to be copied many times later on.
- To found a philosophical school is consistent with Plato's view on philosophy. A school, where the best skilled live together and practice daily some philosophical dialogue, is necessary to be a full lover of wisdom. **Only this way can the love of wisdom be fecund, that is give birth to more philosophers.**
- The education provided there was then in agreement with Plato's idea about what is philosophy:
 - founded upon a **rational method**
 - oriented toward **ethical concerns**
 - inseparable from the full **conversion of the inner person**
- To found a philosophical school is consistent with Plato's first hopes for political actions. **The final aim, however long the detour might be, was to educate people that could educate others and at length form the ideal city.** Plato never gave up on the idea to reform the human cities and governments.
- Thus, the Academy was a center of research for theoretical subjects (astronomy and mathematics in particular), but the interest for practical matters, ethics and politics, in philosophy remained vivid until now. Many of the students there actually served in different governments all around the sea.
- Note that two women were accepted in the Academy

7.5.2 Training in the Academy

- The importance of **mathematics**

- disinterested training
- aimed at purify the mind from sensible representations

- **Dialectics**

- debating technique subject to precise rules (a thesis, a defender, an interrogator)
- aimed at perfect mastery of speech and reasoning
- but deemed dangerous for the young minds (can get used to eristics, or rhetorical battle without any concern for the truth or the good): only late in life (thirty years old)
- is a way to **transcend one's own individual point of view toward the *logos***, or discourse that requires both rationality and universality.
- Note that, for Plato, **thought is itself a form of dialogue**.

- **Philosophical life:**

- Free discussion and controversies even about the most important subject were part of the Academy's life
- But all members agreed on committing to live in a philosophical way, that is:
 - to devote themselves to disinterested intellectual life, in deliberate opposition to the sophistic mercantilism;
 - to seek to transcend themselves toward the *logos*
 - to aim at becoming master of oneself
 - to detach one's soul from one's body

This is why "the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death" (Phaedo, 64a)

7.6 Plato's work

7.6.1 Plato and writing philosophy

- Seventh Letter: the five levels
 - name

- definition
- image
- knowledge
- the thing itself

The first three are defective and potentially deceitful. The fifth is the most true, most real of everything: the form. The fourth is a direct grasp of the form by a purified soul. This is what we should look for, in practicing all the forms of imperfect knowledge in dialectics.

- Thus, philosophy is not to be written
 - language is imperfect and changing
 - a book cannot answer any questions
 - and tends to present himself as displaying a ready-made knowledge
- Only dialogue provokes thinking – thinking is an inner dialogue
 - an oral discourse implies the concrete presence of an living interlocutor,
 - to whom one can ask questions, and from whom one can get answers
 - in order to give birth to one's knowledge

7.6.2 The dialogues: what to make of them?

If Plato says that he never wrote anything serious in philosophy, what did he wrote the dialogues for? Why are we reading and studying them?

- Could be a work of propaganda, a way to exhort a extended amount of people, from diverse origins, to do philosophy.
- Comport numerous inconsistencies between one another, do not form a unified system of philosophy.
- Certainly give a limited and impoverished image of Plato's philosophy.
- **Plato's aim is presumably to form, rather than to inform, the readers' mind, that is to make them experience the ethics of the true philosophical dialogue.**

- The presuppositions of such ethics of the true philosophical dialogue are however informative concerning Plato's philosophy. Indeed, philosophical dialogue have the following theses as conditions of possibility:
 - the existence of the Forms, or Ideas
 - the existence of the soul, separate from the body in human beings
- It is rather impossible to sustain these are not Plato's own doctrines. All the dialogues hinge on the distinction between the many, sensible and changing objects and the one, abstract and eternal form.
- Now, it is also clearly the case that:
 - Plato constantly encourages the discussion, even about his favorite doctrines: see the *Parmenides*
 - Plato sustains, during his entire life (and probably not only at the beginning), that puzzlement is an important part of philosophy.

7.6.3 Plato's Dialogues

Presentation

Plato wrote nothing but the dialogues. He never makes himself speak: only fictional character in fictional situations.

- Long history of the sources
- 26 dialogs are admitted as Plato's by most scholars
- There is an agreement on **three periods** between academics, but the distribution of the dialogues in the three period varies. That said, one such distribution is the following:
 - Early Period – aporetic dialogs, Socrates is the main character
 - Middle Period – Socrates is still important, but turns to discuss more complex theories, including some epistemology, metaphysics and cosmology, which is not consistent with what we know (from other sources) about the historical Socrates. Plato also takes his distance with some of the most important theses that Socrates hold: immanence of the forms (forms as non-separate) and intellectualism (human = rational

and only rational). Plato is thus probably speaking for himself through Socrates.

- Late Period – Socrates' figure gradually lose its importance and finally disappears in *The Laws*, which is believed to be the last work by Plato. Plato now exposes heavy duty theories, put into questions his own conclusion from previous dialogs

- For a long time, academics had agreed that this classification of dialogs corresponded to the actual evolution of Plato's thought. This is not so clear anymore. Some consider that, right from the beginning, Plato has his own philosophical ideas. He was never a simple reporter of Socrates' memory. Moreover, he probably never gave up the aporetic dialog, for questioning, doubt, and puzzlement are always an important part of philosophy.

7.6.4 Plato's philosophy as a synthesis of different influences

- **Plato and Socrates**

In agreement with Socrates, Plato's philosophy is primarily interested in **ethics**. Also, Plato holds the Socratic thesis that **knowledge, virtue and happiness are all one and single state of the soul**, and further that practicing philosophy is necessary to reach such a state.

That said, Plato quite early abandons the Socratic elenchus, and have the character Socrates expose his doctrines. He indeed develops **elaborated doctrines** in ethics, epistemology and metaphysics, which do not seem to come from Socrates's direct inheritance.

- **Plato's intellectual biography**

Plato's philosophy is a synthesis of the Socratic and different Presocratic influences (we rely a lot on Aristotle for this intellectual biography of Plato):

- From Socrates' influence, he focused philosophy on ethics, and praised the idea of philosophical dialog,

- From a **Heraclitean influence**, he (probably) got the idea that sensible things in our world always flow, that is, is always changing, do not have a specific, immutable form which alone would allow true knowledge,
- From a Parmenidean influence, he (probably) got the idea of the immutable forms, separate from the sensible things,
- From a Pythagorean influence, he (probably) got the idea that numbers and ratios are the key to reality, and consequently put emphasis on mathematics.

