

**PHILOSOPHY 234AA: PLATO**  
**LECTURE III: PLATONIC INTERPRETATION**

**I. DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF PLATO'S WORK:**

- A. **TRADITIONALISTS:** Generally read Plato dogmatically, seeing his work as containing fixed and explicit dogmas, usually found in the statements of Socrates. Alfred Edward Taylor (1926), Paul Shorey (1904, 1933), and I. M. Crombie (1962) were typical of this approach in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. More recently, “analytic philosophers” combine a Traditionalist method with interest in tracing formal arguments in the dialogues, especially in Socratic speeches (e.g. Fine, ed. 1999 and Vlastos, ed. 1971). Gregory Vlastos (1981) and his followers within the analytic school also investigate the relationship of the historic Socrates of the “early dialogues” to the Platonic Socrates of later dialogues.<sup>1</sup>
- B. **DRAMATIC INTERPRETERS:** Emphasize the importance of the literary form of the dialogues and the interplay of ideas with dialogue form (e.g. Arieti 1991 and Press 1993, 1997, and 2000, and Schliermacher). These scholars, who in the 1990s were somewhat of a radical fringe, but since have (inevitably) become more established as they have gained seniority, tend to be more open to interdisciplinarity than the Traditionalists. According to this view, Plato does not have any real doctrine that he puts forth in the dialogues; he doesn't believe in the Forms, for instance. We can only look at the characters, settings, and interactions between the characters, and continue the dialectical process for ourselves.
- C. **NEO-PLATONIC INTERPRETATION:** Plato was a mystic (this is not to say that he's an emotional, irrational thinker) who had a unificatory experience with the Form of the Good, and saw the way in which reality was laid out. This school of interpretation believes that the *Timaeus* accurately describes how the universe came into being, and the ideal state that Plato lays out is truly ideal. Iamblichus, Proclus, and Plotinus are three famous Neo-Platonists; John Dillon (1977, 1-10) and Philip Merlan (1960) are Neo-Platonic scholars who also tend to interpret Plato Neo-Platonically.
- D. **ESOTERICISTS:** Also known as the “Unwritten Doctrines” view, its proponents argue, on the basis of ancient commentators, that Plato had doctrines that cannot be found explicitly in the dialogues (discussed in Poster 1993). This group includes several who are sympathetic to Neo-Platonic readings of Plato, e.g. John Niemeyer Findlay (1974), the German Tübingen school (e.g. Kurt Gaiser 1980; Hans Joachim Kramer 1990; and Thomas A. Szlezak 1999), their Italian followers (e.g. Giovanni Reale, 1997), and Straussians (followers of Leo Strauss) who believe that Plato only revealed his true esoteric doctrines to a small philosophical elite and that Platonic exoteric moral principles and political theories serve primarily to form a society which allows that elite to prosper. Straussians cluster in Chicago, and tend to be interested primarily in politics, in contrast to the metaphysical focus of the Continental scholars (Leo Strauss 1975, 1978, 1983, 2000; and, to a degree, his students, Seth Bernadete 1984, 1989, 1991, 1993, 2000; and Stanley Rosen 1983, 1987, 1995).
- E. **ORALISTS** (e.g. Eric Havelock 1963, 1982, 1983; Walter Ong 1982; Kevin Robb 1993, 1994) are often hostile to Plato, seeing him as part of a global shift they believe had occurred between “oral” and “literate” modes of thought in classical Greece. Havelock especially, although assigning it a different cause, imputes to Plato much the same totalitarianism as did Karl Popper (1945).
- F. **POSTMODERNISTS:** As Catherine Zuekert points out in her cogent *Postmodern Platos* (1996), many of the postmodernist interpreters of Plato are primarily interested not in reconstructing Plato in ancient context but in using Plato as stimulus for their own philosophical projects.
- G. **DEVELOPMENTALIST READING:** The early dialogues exhibit the views of the historical Socrates, who has the view that there are no gods, there is no soul, no afterlife, and Socrates has no knowledge about ethical or metaphysical matters. Socratic dialogues are more cheery and upbeat, and they end in *aporia* or confusion – no answer to the questions posed. Platonic middle and late

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<sup>1</sup> I obtained some of this information about Platonic interpretation, from Views A through F from this website: [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4142/is\\_200507/ai\\_n14851246/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4142/is_200507/ai_n14851246/print)

dialogues have a different style – they’re either dogmatic (i.e., Plato claims that Forms exist, souls are immortal, gives myths of the afterlife, etc.) or more serious, brooding, and cynical [see *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Terry Penner’s article)]. Penner believes that while Plato was still under the intellectual grip of Socrates, he was thinking that no one errs willingly, but then he changed his mind about this in the *Republic*, Book IV, where he states that not all desire is for the good (e.g., one can desire drink itself, not good drink or bad drink). We’ll review the passages later in the semester. Dr. Vaughan (of MCC) says that it is inconceivable that Plato would not have changed his mind over the span of an adult lifetime of writing. Lastly, Aristotle claims in his *Metaphysics* that Socrates did not have the same view as Plato, since Plato separated the universal, and you can find evidence in the *Euthyphro*, e.g., that Socrates held that piety was something IN actions and people (you can also find “Plato” stating in the *Phaedo* that the Form Beauty is IN beautiful things, however!).

H. **UNITARIAN/UNIFICATIONIST/COMPATIBILIST READING:** Plato has one view throughout the dialogues, though he might be more explicit about his views as the dialogues move from early to middle to late. He is committed to the Forms throughout, the immortal soul (though sometimes the character might not be absolutely sure about that point), no one errs willingly, etc. There is nothing in principle incompatible between anything that is written in the earlier dialogues and the middle ones, between the early and the late, or between the middle and the late. That is, we do not find Plato explicitly denying something that he claimed earlier in his writings, if we accept the Brandwood classification of early, middle, and late dialogues. Some Unitarians deny the classifications of early, middle and late dialogues as meaningless or irrelevant (Julia Annas).

## II. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR AND AGAINST THESE VIEWS:

- A. **In favor of view A: TRADITIONALISTS:** Aristotle studied with Plato for twenty years and spent much of his *Metaphysics* arguing against Plato’s view of the Forms. In his writings, Aristotle argued that the Form of the Good was not relevant to ethics in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemean Ethics*, and *Magna Moralia*, and that Plato’s view of the ideal state was wrong. Aristotle took Plato seriously and took Plato as holding views, so it would seem that if we take Aristotle as not being insane and as in fact brilliant as many including Plato have said (even if we might want to leave the possibility that Aristotle was biased in some claims about Plato), then Plato definitely at least held that Forms exist, and had a view about the ideal state and the soul’s being immortal, and we can now analyze the dialogues for his arguments in favor of the Forms’ existence, along with other doctrines.
- B. **Against view B: DRAMATIC INTERPRETERS:** The same argument in favor of the Traditionalists is an objection against this view. However, in favor of this view, it is indeed very interesting to look at each character, what they thought in real life (if possible) and compare that with what we see the character do/say in the dialogue, and if we analyze the dramatic context. As long as one is not *solely* a dramatic interpreter of the dialogues, this view can be a supplement to the Traditionalist view.
- C. **In favor of view C: NEO-PLATONIC INTERPRETATION:** There is arguably compelling evidence that Plato held that one can have some kind of an experience of a transcendental Good, that is the source of everything, that even grounds math and logic itself, and that if one experiences this, one knows what can be known, what exists, and how to live. He also repeatedly and equally refers to it as a vision and/or knowledge, and even a kind of divine madness. Some interpreters are uncomfortable with this view, because it might make it sound like Plato is more of a religious zealot than a rational philosopher with arguments for his positions.
- D. **Against view D: ESOTERICISTS:** Since Plato himself does state that the truth cannot be put into words, but also that dialectic is the highest form of study, there is no reason to think that the dialogues do not contain about as much of his thought as he IS able to discuss. Against the view that Plato primarily created his dialogues to have the elite prosper, he explicitly raises the point about which class will be the happiest in the ideal state, and Glaucon objects that the guardians (highest class) will not get to contemplate continuously, which is all they really want to do, since they’ll have to take time out to rule, which is what they do not really want to do. The lowest class would be very

happy that they get to have spouses, their own kids, property, and money, and would very likely think that the guardians are silly and crazy to forgo these things in favor of philosophy. [I've also read that neo-conservatives (such as Wolfowitz who served in the Bush Administration) actually are Straussian interpreters of Plato and have glommed on to the idea of the noble lie, but they believe that the government/elite rulers can lie about anything, and not just about the different classes and why they're in that class, as Plato's noble lie does (we'll read it later).] **In favor of view D:** You can hold the view that Plato had some oral teachings he passed on to the worthy and still hold other interpretations above to be true. This is not a view that is incompatible in principle with any of the other views, depending how it is construed.

- E. **Against view E: ORALISTS:** These interpreters fail to understand that Plato holds that dialectic (conversing in order to understand the truth of a matter) is the highest study in which one can engage. He also holds that dialectic is superior to writing in the *Phaedrus*, so I believe that they miss the point of Plato's dialogues. Moreover, must they reject every philosopher's view who wrote something down, given their view? And lastly, in favor, they're welcome to bring back any oral teachings or method that they wish!
- F. **Against view F: POSTMODERNISTS:** Any philosopher can use Plato for his/her own purposes, but there remains the question about whether Plato was seriously putting forth a doctrine and making significant philosophical points in his dialogues (as the Traditionalists would argue), or whether he was merely having fun with drama and characters.
- G. **DEVELOPMENTALISTS v. UNITARIAN View:** It will come down not to differences in mood or style, but to actual claims from different periods of Plato's writings that are held to differ, according to Developmentalists. We need to examine the text and see if there is not a way to hold that Plato did not change his mind in any significant way throughout the dialogues. Given any claims I have seen so far, I am a Unitarian. E.g., Dr. Vaughan's claim that it's likely that Plato changed his mind is *prima facie* very plausible; however, (1) given Plato's view that the truth is one immutable thing that one can know, it will be *unlikely* in Plato's case that he would switch his view on anything significant (assuming he had the experience and then started writing). And (2) however *likely* it is that Plato did change his mind, we need specific textual examples to determine how and whether Plato changed his view. Later in the semester, we will focus on examining the most famous claim that Plato allegedly changed his mind on – no one errs willingly – in the Ethics section, and see where you fall on that question.