

Guide to Lecture 22: Introduction to Plato

A) Review of Presocratics

a) Ontology

- i) (Anaximander, Pythagoras) The Indefinite and Definite, One and Many/Dyad; their necessary interrelation.
- ii) (Pythagoreans) Hierarchy of causes, perhaps a function of later interpolation.
- iii) (Pythagoreans) Curriculum driven by metaphysics.
- iv) (Parmenides, Heraclitus, perhaps some atomists) Centrality of unity, unity containing difference

b) Cosmology

- i) (Heraclitus, Anaxagoras) World as rational/logical, akin to a “word” or reason; but causes also necessary; knowledge from gods appears as a “sign.”
- ii) (Heraclitus, Pythagoras) World as a harmony or exhibiting harmony.
- iii) (Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Anaximander) Things are understood in terms of structure and momentary phases in a process of change.

c) Ethics

- i) Pythagorean ethics highly dependent upon the personality of Pythagoras; Anaximander sees physical events in moral terms, which could lead to something like Gnosticism.

d) Theology, aesthetics. Not much.

B) Introduction to Plato

a) Life of Socrates (469–399 BC)

- i) Lived during Athens’s Golden Age: Parthenon, Peloponnesian War, Plague, the Thirty Tyrants, Democrats.

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- ii) Questioned well-known people about basic values, showed they were ignorant.
 - iii) Accused by democratic assembly of corrupting the youth (through his questioning) and atheism (not believing in the city gods). Socrates antagonizes the assembly and jury, telling them they can't really hurt him, he's not afraid of death, and that they are harming the city.
 - iv) Sentenced to death by drinking hemlock; his death scene recorded in Plato's *Phaedo*.
- b) **Life of Plato (428/27—347 BC)**
- i) Born in an illustrious and politically involved family: connections to previous royalty, some relatives were in or worked for the Thirty Tyrants. He saw the worst of political systems at the time, including the democrats' condemnation of Socrates.
 - ii) After death of Socrates, traveled for about 15 years studying under different mathematicians and philosophers. Important period with the school at Megara (which has connections to later Stoicism); also under Cratylus, a follower of Heraclitus. Possible trip to Egypt.
 - iii) Three trips to Sicily (Syracuse), hoping to turn young Dionysius II into a "philosopher-king" (unsuccessful).
 - iv) Opened the Academy at Athens (ca. 386 BC): attracted philosophers, mathematicians and others; Plato's dialogues used as texts and bases for discussion and lecture; possible side lectures for special students on special topics teaching "secret" doctrines. Disappointing public lecture on "the Good."
 - v) After Plato's death, nephew Speusippus took over this "Old Academy," which continued until 266 BC.

- vi) Archesilaus and his successors took the Academy in a Socratic, skeptical direction (“Middle” and “New” Academies”) from 266 BC—90 BC.
- vii) Antiochus of Ascalon revived more traditional, but eclectic Platonism in what became “Middle Platonism” after the Academy itself was destroyed in a war. Neglected by academics but important for Christian and esoteric thought.
- viii) Plotinus (200s AD) and his successors begin new phase of Platonism, “Neoplatonism.”

c) **Plato as a writer/thinker**

- i) Platonic collection put together by Thrasyllus, the personal astrologer to Emperor Tiberius and a Platonic philosopher. Some works in this collection spurious, but no genuine Platonic works are missing (see accompanying guide).
- ii) Starting in 19th Century, attempts to determine the chronology of Plato’s writings in order to reckon which dialogues are more “mature.” Belief that later works reflect more mature and authentic philosophy. Little basis for this belief because of how Plato writes:
 - (1) Does not have strict technical vocabulary in any of his works, so must rely on dubious factors like how Plato ends his sentences.
 - (2) His philosophy not a seamless system. Dialogues often leave gray areas or focus only on certain aspects of an issue. Dialogues have many layers that speech statistics is irrelevant for.
 - (3) Plato often introduces images and myths to inspire or illustrate something—these can’t well be judged as more or less mature.
 - (4) Plato is like a screenwriter of a historical drama: there is a lot more going on behind the dialogue.

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(5) Plato often selective about what he explores, and puts words into others' mouths that may not be historically accurate; but he himself exhibits a well-worked out philosophy as a whole.

iii) Use of myths.

(1) Myth of metals (Republic)

(2) Myth of Cave, Divided Line (Republic)

(3) Atlantis (Timaeus)

(4) Myth of Er (Republic)

(5) Phaedrus reincarnation myth (Phaedrus)

(6) Ladder of Love (Symposium)

d) **Major themes and beliefs.**

i) Ethics. No one does evil willingly; moral virtue is knowledge; only one virtue, and can be taught.

ii) Metaphysics. Theory of Forms: immaterial, everlasting, objective entities which provide structure and being for the world.

iii) Knowledge. We can only have true knowledge of the Forms; we know them by recollecting them from a time before our soul was incarnated.

iv) Psychology. Soul is immaterial; human soul has at least two parts, a lower more sensual and emotional part, and a higher rational part. Connection to the Chariot Card in the Tarot.