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LECTURES ON
GREECE, ROME
AND THE CLASSICAL
TRADITION

Why Plato Wrote

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Abbreviations	xi
Prologue: Why Think about Plato?	1
Part I: Why Plato Wrote	9
Chapter 1: Who Was Plato?	11
Chapter 2: The Importance of Symbols in Human Life	24
Chapter 3: The Philosopher as Model-Maker	38
Chapter 4: The Philosopher as Shadow-Maker	55
Chapter 5: What Plato Wrote	70
Chapter 6: How Plato Lived	79
Part II: What Plato Did	87
Chapter 7: The Case for Influence	89
Chapter 8: Culture War Emergent	108
Chapter 9: Culture War Concluded	122
Epilogue: And to My Colleagues	143
Appendix 1: The Relationship between Paradigms and Forms	148
Appendix 2: A Second Tri-partite Division of the Soul?	154
Appendix 3: <i>Miso</i> - Compounds in Greek Literature	158
Notes	161
References	206
Further Reading	215
Index	219



Prologue

Why Think about Plato?

Why write about Plato nearly 2400 years after his death? Don't we understand him by now?

We do and we don't. But more important than whether humanity's collective knowledge about Plato, built up over centuries, includes mastery of his systematic philosophy is whether our generation understands Plato at all.

The grand total of human knowledge might be conceived in either of two ways. One might think of it as the sum of all the intellectual material in all the books in all the libraries of the world; this mountain of text would include everything that has already been said about Plato, or any other subject, from the beginning of time. On this conception, each scholarly project on Plato rolls one more small stone up onto the accumulated pile of human contributions to interpreting his works; one would imagine that each contribution would yield smaller and smaller returns and that humanity would eventually exhaust the subject.

But one might rather conceive of human knowledge as the sum of what all human beings currently alive know and understand. Everyone starts life with little knowledge or understanding; everyone dies with a lifetime's treasury. On this conception, the sum of human knowledge is what each generation wins for itself between birth and death. To some extent, any given generation can speed up its self-education by teaching itself what earlier generations have already discovered; to some extent, any given generation must discover things for itself. On this second conception of the sum of human knowledge, a scholarly project on Plato lights up yet again, for this generation, as earlier scholars have for their own generations, a range of questions and ideas significant to human life. Sometimes one manages to light up questions that have been dark for a long time.

I prefer this second conception of human knowledge. After all, if all the books in the world contained the secret of life, but no one had read them, how much actual knowledge about the secret of life would be alive in the world? Humanistic scholarship activates knowledge and understanding here and now – both by reclaiming things that have been known by earlier generations and by asking and introducing, where necessary, fresh questions and new ideas. Nor does reclaiming past intellectual gains require agreement with them. They are a valuable property, an inheritance, because they help us grasp the conceptual alternatives that frame human life; but we will agree with some and disagree with other ideas from earlier generations. The project of coming to understanding *now* is a matter of deciding for ourselves where to agree or not.

This book both reclaims what has been known and understood about Plato by earlier generations and introduces new ideas.

So how can it happen that a person might have a new idea about a subject as long-lived as Plato’s philosophy? Reactivating older bodies of knowledge for present use often seems also to spur discovery. Why is that?

Human knowledge is inevitably partial, by which I mean both incomplete and situated: the combined total of human knowledge emanates from hundreds of billions of individuals each situated in a specific place and time and with individualized curiosities, preoccupations, and desires. As we ourselves learn what our predecessors have known, we discover not only their successes – ideas worthy of being relit – but also their limits – conceptual points where corrections, revisions, subtractions, or additions are necessary. Our own views will have similar blemishes; we should never pretend otherwise.

In my own case, some accidental discoveries, made meaningful by technological contingencies, led me to question how earlier scholars had interpreted Plato’s view of the relation between philosophy and politics.

What were the accidental discoveries? And what do I mean by “technological contingencies”?

About fifteen years ago, when I was working on my dissertation on the politics of punishing in democratic Athens of the fourth century BCE, I noticed that some of Plato’s philosophical vocabulary appeared in speeches given by Athenian politicians. Some of Aristotle’s vocabulary showed up too. But this wasn’t supposed to happen. Hadn’t the execution of Socrates by the Athenians caused Plato such disillusionment with his home city that he had turned his back on politics? And since Aristotle wasn’t even a citizen, his political engagement had been entirely with the Macedonians, principally as tutor to Alexander the Great, no? Students are told year after year that in Athens after the death of Socrates philosophy and politics lived separate lives.¹ They learn that during the fourth century BCE an ideal of contemplation took hold; philosophy became identified with time spent away from practical realities in

peaceful retreats where ceaseless conversation could be oriented toward securing knowledge, not society's daily needs. What, then, were these fragments of philosophical vocabulary doing in political speeches?

I was not the first scholar to notice that, for instance, a speech by the politician Lysurgus, which charges a citizen named Leocrates with treason, was remarkably full of Platonic vocabulary.² But was I the first to notice that a key term in Aristotle's ethical theory, *prohairesis*, which means "deliberated commitment," turned up frequently in late fourth-century Athenian political speeches? Maybe.³ Whatever the case, once I had noticed the migration of these concepts from philosophy to politics, I was able to do something earlier scholars couldn't: I ran the terms through a computer database of Greek texts to see whether patterns emerged in their usage.⁴ Were these two examples one-offs? Or could one spot some more systematic movement of philosophical concepts into politics?

As we shall see in chapter 6, patterns did emerge. First, the relevant terms (*prohairesis* and also the word *kolasis*, which refers to a reformatory approach to punishment) seem genuinely to have originated with Plato and/or Aristotle; they were largely unused by earlier writers. Second, the political use of these and related terms had a distinct chronological pattern; the terminological migration seems to have begun in the 350s BCE. Third, some politicians took up the philosophical vocabulary more eagerly than others; and at least one politician actively resisted at least the Platonic vocabulary. What was one to make of these facts, newly visible thanks to technological contingency? It has taken more than a decade to answer that question.

I was not alone in my confusion over how to understand the relationship between philosophical ideas and political events. If anything, social scientists freely admit uncertainty with regard to this question.⁵ In 1936 the economist John Maynard Keynes wrote: "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood."⁶ Three decades later, another economist, Albert O. Hirschman wrote the following about the decline in the seventeenth century of a heroic ethos and rise of a valorization of commercial activity: "This astounding transformation of the moral and ideological scene erupts quite suddenly, and the historical and psychological reasons for it are still not wholly understood."⁷

What are the processes by which intellectuals' ideas come to shape a community's values? When non-philosophers adopt concepts from philosophers, getting them partly wrong and partly right, using and abusing them to particular, strategic ends, how should we think about the degree of "influence" on social events wielded by those philosophers and their concepts? In what sense might the ideas of economists and political philosophers be "powerful," as Keynes put it? Why isn't the role of ideas in politics well understood, as both Keynes and Hirschman indicate? Although these

questions are old, and even trite, we still don't have good answers. As I pondered the movement of terms like *kolasis* (reformatory punishment) and *prohairesis* (deliberated commitment) from philosophical to political argument, versions of these questions, linking Plato and Aristotle to Athenian politics, preoccupied me.

About half way through the period of my consternation and confusion, it suddenly occurred to me to ask the question: Why did Plato write anyway? His teacher, Socrates, had not done so. Socrates had insisted on philosophy as an oral practice directed toward the examination of self and other. If anything, he appears to have disdained writing. Why, then, should his ardent disciple have pursued an altogether different way of life? I soon realized that asking and answering the question, "Why did Plato write?" might provide us with philosophical and historical treasure.

Plato wrote, but he never wrote to speak in his own voice. He wrote dialogues representing conversations among various casts of characters. Very often, but not always, Socrates played the lead role. Socrates' opinions (at least as represented by Plato) are therefore those one most immediately takes from any given Platonic dialogue as the main ideas. This has led to the perennial question of how one can distinguish the ideas and opinions of teacher and pupil. What did Plato think, actually, if we hear, in his dialogues, only ever from Socrates? It occurred to me that, since Plato had chosen to write, when Socrates had not, if we could figure out *why* Plato wrote, we would know something fundamental about the philosophical differences between him and Socrates.⁸

Happily, this question, "Why did Plato write?" turned out also to be the key to the appearance of Platonic formulations in the mouths of Athenian politicians. Plato wrote, among other purposes, to effect political change. Yes, Plato was the world's first systematic political philosopher, using text to record technical philosophical advances, but he was also, it appears, the western world's first think-tank activist and its first message man.⁹ He wrote – not solely but consistently – to change Athenian culture and thereby transform Athenian politics.¹⁰ As Diogenes Laertius, one of the most important biographers of Plato, put it, "in his own city Plato did not meddle with political affairs, although he was a politician or political leader [*politikos* in the Greek], to judge from his writings" (*entha politeias men ouch hêpsato, kaitoi politikos ôn ex hôn gegraphen*).¹¹

But the question of "Why Plato wrote" and the answer that he wrote as a politician raise the further question of who would have read Plato's dialogues. Historians concur that in the fourth century most male Athenian citizens would have had the basic literacy necessary for the city's political business, which involved written laws, decrees, and lists of names identifying who was obligated to serve in particular capacities.¹² But such citizenly literacy would have developed into higher forms only for a smaller circle of

elites who received formal education.¹³ But we know that, as far as this social group was concerned, Plato's books did travel. We hear that one woman, Axiothea of Philesia, was drawn from her Peloponnesian city to Athens to study with Plato on account of having read the *Republic*.¹⁴ Some range of elite Athenians (and foreigners) would have had access to Plato's written texts. Perhaps even some non-elite citizens would have too: Socrates, in Plato's *Apology*, remarks that Anaxagoras' books were easily available to anyone in the market-place for a drachma (*Apol.* 6). But then again, a drachma would have been the better part of a day's wage for a laborer.¹⁵

While it is unlikely that Athens achieved general literacy for citizens during Plato's lifetime, one of his characters advocated such a goal in the *Laus* (810a).¹⁶ In the ideal city described in that dialogue, all citizens would be able to read books like Plato's. This means Plato could imagine a general reader for his dialogues, and my argument in this book is that he developed a mode of philosophical writing that anticipated such readers even in advance of their general emergence.

Reading was not, however, the only way to learn about philosophy in Athens. Plato gave at least one public lecture, and Aristotle gave several. The subject of Plato's lecture was "the good," while Aristotle's public lectures were about rhetoric. We can't help but notice that the subject of Plato's lecture was also the subject of the middle books of the *Republic*. All we know about his lecture, though, is that attendees complained that it had too much to do with mathematics. Curiously, this complaint is also familiar to anyone who has tried to teach the middle books of the *Republic*.¹⁷ It's plausible that some of what Plato said in that lecture would have overlapped with what he wrote. Whatever the case, since Plato did give this public lecture, and Aristotle too gave public lectures, we know that the circle of Athenians exposed to Plato's ideas, and philosophy generally, extended beyond the students enrolled in his school, the Academy.

In fact, that circle also stretched to include the tens of thousands of citizens who attended the comic theater. Just as toward the end of the fifth century Aristophanes had mocked Socrates with a real understanding of Socrates' ideas, so too later comic poets seemed to get Plato.¹⁸ Thus, Theopompus mocks: "*For one thing is no longer only one, but two things now are scarcely one,*" as Plato says.¹⁹ Theopompus is clearly jabbing at the importance to Plato of the idea of number, as well as at Plato's commitment to the unity of the good. Word had spread broadly enough about Plato's ideas, then, including even the metaphysical ones, for them to be the basis for jokes meant to be accessible to the ordinary, even minimally literate, Athenian citizen. And those who didn't get the joke at least learned that Plato was up to some funny business with numbers. Plato's written dialogues would, though, have anchored these alternative forms of dissemination through the lectures and plays.

Importantly, to identify Plato as a message man is not to diminish his status as a philosopher. First, these were and are not mutually exclusive roles, and Plato pursued both.²⁰ Second, Plato's pursuit of language that might shift cultural norms was itself philosophically grounded, as we shall see. The effort to answer the question, "Why did Plato write?" leads us deep into his philosophy of language, which in turn provides at least provisional answers to the sorts of questions raised by Keynes, Hirschman, and others in the social sciences about how ideas intersect with social life. Most importantly, Plato's philosophy of language indicates that the route to explaining the relation between ideas and events requires bringing together the resources of multiple disciplines: linguistics, psychology, and sociology, at least.

In his dialogues, Plato offers an argument about the linguistic, psychological, and social processes by which ideas gain a hold on the human imagination. Like the linguist and cultural theorist George Lakoff, he makes a case for the powerful effects of metaphor and allegory on the dissemination of concepts, information, and evaluative schema. Like the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, he analyzes how the proximity of mothers to children, the charisma of paternal authority, and the fear of death generate psychological phenomena in individuals that anchor their moral values. Like the French historian and theorist of power, Michel Foucault, he argues that social norms are disseminated not only through texts and other media of verbal communication but also through material realities themselves; like Foucault, he understood that human beings build their worlds – including their social practices and material objects – around their core values, with the result that those social practices and material objects themselves convey dominant social norms.²¹

On Plato's account, the social power of ideas arises from how well their verbal expression exploits the resources of metaphor, how closely they respond to psychic structures arising from maternal proximity, paternal authority, and the fear of death, and how available they are for transformation into rules of action that generate concrete practices and material effects. Speakers and writers who mobilize any of these sources of power inherent in language seek to acquire a surplus of linguistic power (or social influence) beyond the average quantities available to each of us every day in ordinary talk.²²

In writing his dialogues, Plato, I will argue, sought to generate exactly such surplus linguistic power as a means to acquire social power within his own city, ancient Athens of the fourth century BCE. As a part of explaining how philosophers' ideas can have power, he makes the strongest possible case that I know of for language as a potential cause of social and political change. His argument is not, however, that somehow philosophers' ideas – their reigning concepts – are transmitted whole (unchanged and unadapted) to

their publics, with political consequences flowing immediately out from those ideas. He recognizes the anarchic structure of the lives of human beings in language. As words and concepts move from person to person, there are myriad forms of slippage, misapprehension, metonymic extension, and Freudian replacement, not to mention the constantly trailing shadow of the antitheses of the concepts under discussion. Plato's argument is therefore not that any given author can finally control how her ideas are taken up and used but that an author can at least dramatically increase the likelihood that her ideas *will be* taken up and used. And the more likely that an author's ideas are to be used, the greater the number of that author's ideas that are likely to circulate broadly. Finally, Plato also seems to have thought that, whenever an author's ideas are systematically linked to each other through metaphorical structures and as the number of such linked concepts that are taken up by other users increases, the less will the new uses of those concepts deviate from the author's own original conceptual schema. It is when we can see sets of linked concepts that appeared in the work of a philosopher appearing again in social discourse, still linked in the same ways, that we can say not merely that people have begun to use these new concepts but also that the thinker who produced them has had an influence. And when we can see that people are using such sets of linked concepts to define decisive political choices for themselves, we can say that the philosopher has had an influence on politics.

Many people reading this book will think that Plato's view of the quantities of social power available to be tapped through the careful use of language is optimistic in the extreme, and even inclines to folly. Indeed, Plato seems to have thought that the kinds of linguistic power that he analyzed, developed, and propounded, particularly in the *Republic*, which lays out the structure of a utopian city, depended for their full effects on operating within a homogeneous community. His political thought included an argument for a sort of ethno-nationalism, and in the *Republic* Socrates argues that the disintegration of the utopian city will begin when the city ceases to provide its young with the right sort of education in symbols, a failure that is cast as simultaneous to a breakdown of the utopia's eugenic match-making practices.²³ A homogeneous community can maintain a more stable linguistic universe over time; communications among its members should transpire with a higher ratio of signal to noise than in contexts of diversity.²⁴ Plato's theory of linguistic power, and his press to maximize such power with his own texts, would be blunted in a world of diversity where the anarchic structure of the lives of human beings in language is heightened.

Yet this does not mean that we, living with diversity of necessity and by choice embracing it (I hope), should disregard Plato's arguments about how the work of intellectuals affects social life. There is something right about his theory of the power of metaphor, of the psychological consequences of maternal proximity, paternal charisma, and the fear of death, and

of the discursive basis of our material lives. He hasn't gotten the whole story right – about how ideas come to have social power and effects – but he has gotten *something* right. If we wish to understand the role played by ideas in social processes, we could profit from taking Plato's account seriously. Once we have understood it, we can proceed to revise it, or to build an alternative.

The primary focus of this book, then, is on Plato and on answering the question, Why did Plato write? – but the answer requires beginning to identify the theoretical positions outlined just above. For the time being, I can make only a beginning of the latter work. A full account of Plato's theory of language and its usefulness for understanding the relationship between ideas and events, or discourse and structure, will have to wait. My hope, though, is that this book, in addition to answering the question of why Plato wrote, will mark trailheads that might be pursued toward the goal of answering our long-lived questions about the relationships between ideas and events.

Who Was Plato?

When Plato, son of Ariston and Perictione, was born to an aristocratic family in Athens in 424/3 BCE, he had two elder brothers, Adeimantus and Glaucon, roughly eight and five years older. Glaucon, at least, would soon be an aspiring politician.¹ Plato also had two uncles, Critias and Charmides, who were intensely involved in Athenian politics and who, in 404/3 BCE, joined a group of aristocrats in an oligarchic take-over of the democratic city.² It seems they invited young Plato to join them. He was then just twenty, the age at which young Athenian men usually got involved in politics, but he declined the invitation. Some years earlier his life had already taken an interesting turn; he had met the famous wise man Socrates, who lived from 469 to 399 BCE. Now, at age twenty, he began to follow Socrates formally.

The word philosopher wasn't yet much in use during the years that Socrates frequented the Athenian city center and market-place or *agora*; Socrates would generally have been called a *sophistês*.³ This word literally means "wise man" but came to have the negative connotation of "sophist," a person who fast-talks his way out of moral, intellectual, and practical quandaries or trickily leads others into them. Plato probably met Socrates in his early or mid-teens, and even then earned the older man's admiration; he would have been sixteen in 408–407 BCE, which appears to have been the year that Socrates undertook to educate Plato's older brother Glaucon in wise political leadership, a conversation that both Xenophon and Plato record.⁴ Xenophon represents Socrates as having struck up the conversation with Glaucon as a favor to Plato, so the latter must by then already have been a regular associate of Socrates.⁵

Plato's record of such a conversation occurs, of course, in the very famous dialogue, *The Republic*, in which Socrates leads Glaucon (and Adeimantus too) through an answer to the question, "What is justice?" Over the course

of the conversation, Socrates builds an argument for a utopia led by philosopher-kings and queens and protected by a class of guardian-soldiers, including both men and women, who hold their property in common, have egalitarian gender relations, and enjoy open marriages. But the historian Xenophon also records a conversation between Socrates and Glaucon about political leadership. In a book called *Reminiscences of Socrates*, Xenophon represents the conversation between Socrates and Glaucon as having been unextraordinary (*Mem.* 3.6.1 ff.). According to Xenophon, the wise man asked Plato's brother questions like: "Tell us how you propose to begin your services to the state"; "Will you try to make your city richer?"; "In order to advise the city whom to fight, it is necessary to know the strength of the city and of the enemy . . . tell us the naval and military strength of our city, and then that of her enemies." Although the questions are conventional, Glaucon fares poorly. So Socrates admonishes him: "Don't you see how risky it is to say or do what you don't understand?"

Plato's involvement with Socrates ended prematurely – even before Plato was out of his twenties. In 399 BCE, the citizens of Athens condemned his teacher to death. Why? Five years earlier, in 404 BCE, the group of oligarchs, among whom Plato's uncles numbered, had taken over the city in an oligarchic coup; Socrates was associated with several of the participants. Within a year, the democratic resistance had in turn overthrown the oligarchs. Admirably, the reinstated democratic citizenry sought reconciliation among different factions in the city and issued a broad amnesty (for all except the leaders of the coup) in which the citizens swore not to remember past events.⁶ Yet despite this amnesty, some legal cases continued to emerge from the controversies. The plausibility to the Athenians of the charges against Socrates – of impiety and of corrupting the youth – is generally thought to have depended on the preceding political turmoil.⁷

Both Plato and Xenophon wrote accounts of Socrates' trial and speeches, each titled *The Apology*. In the original Greek the word, "apology" simply meant "a defense speech," and Socrates was not the only citizen to have to deliver a highly politicized one in 399 BCE. In the same year, the orator Lysias wrote an apology for an anonymous citizen who had been charged with subverting the democratic constitution. And these were just two out of six major public trials in the year 400/399 BCE that somehow related to the previous events.⁸ Nor was Socrates the first philosopher to be brought to trial in Athens. Approximately thirty years earlier, at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, another time of political stress in the city, the Athenians reportedly prosecuted Anaxagoras.⁹ Late in the fourth century, they would go after philosophy again, as their subjection to Macedon was becoming permanent. They would prosecute (and acquit) Theophrastus sometime between 317 and 307 BCE and then directly legislate against philosophy in 307 BCE.¹⁰

How did Plato react to the judgment and execution of his teacher? He attended the trial and wrote himself into his account of Socrates' defense speech. In his *Crito*, he represents himself as having offered to put up money so that Socrates could pay his penalty with a fine rather than with his life. This is the only place in his dialogues that Plato himself shows up. But versions of Plato's life story, which help answer the question of how he reacted to Socrates' death, appear in several other texts, among them an allegedly autobiographical letter dating to 354 BCE. Plato supposedly wrote this letter to a group of politicians in Syracuse on the island of Sicily, where he had spent considerable time, but scholars now generally agree that Plato did not himself write this letter. Whoever did, though, knew Plato's dialogues well and wrote from close proximity to him; the author was probably someone involved in Syracusan politics.¹¹ We can therefore take seriously what this letter – called the *Seventh Letter*, as one of thirteen attributed to Plato – tells us about his life.

According to the *Seventh Letter*, the death of Socrates changed Plato's life. Having thought that he wished to enter Athenian politics, he abandoned that path and sought philosophical associates instead. He moved to Megara, on the border of Attica, where a community of philosophers, who had left Athens in the trial's wake, had gathered. Then Plato appears to have traveled more widely, arriving in Syracuse in 384/3 BCE, where he became involved with the family of the Syracusan tyrant, Dionysius I, as a teacher and political advisor. Plato's first stay at Syracuse was brief. By 383 BCE he had returned to Athens and opened his philosophical school, the Academy, just outside the city center of Athens.¹² This means that within two decades of Socrates' death, Plato had already written dialogues important enough to generate a philosophical reputation that could justify opening a school; these dialogues would have included the *Apology*, *Gorgias*, *Symposium*, and Book 1 of the *Republic*.¹³ Plato's time of travels had also been time to write. He then spent the rest of his life at the Academy but for two more stints in Syracuse (in 367 BCE and 361 BCE), where he was again politically entangled. By the time of his second visit in 367 BCE, he had finished the *Republic* and three other major dialogues. And by the time he died in Athens in 348/7 BCE at the age of seventy-six, he had written, over roughly fifty years, more than two dozen dialogues. Plato, in contrast to his teacher, had lived a writer's life.

One might think that, with all those books by Plato to consult, scholars would long ago have come up with settled answers to the questions of what Plato thought and what his relationship to Athenian politics was. Yet these two questions have been continually vexing. After all, although Plato wrote more than two dozen dialogues, he speaks in his own voice in none. And since Socrates is often the central character in the dialogues, we are constantly confronted with the difficulty of distinguishing Socratic from Platonic elements in them. The second question – about Plato's relation to Athenian

politics – flows pretty directly from the first. Because of the great difficulty in identifying what Plato himself thought, scholars are at a loss for how to interpret the relation of his richly elaborated political theory to actual politics. Indeed, scholars have taken quite opposing positions on how Plato expected his theory to relate to practice.

At one extreme, some scholars have seen the arguments in the *Republic* as a straightforward constitutional blueprint that Plato hoped to see implemented. Those adopting this view have seen Plato as a would-be totalitarian advocating the creation of a fascist state.¹⁴ At the other end of the spectrum, scholars have seen the arguments of the *Republic* – and particularly the arguments for the equality of women and communistic property arrangements – as so obviously laughable (as the comic playwright Aristophanes made similar ideas in comedies like *The Assemblywomen*) that the dialogue must be making a point of their impossibility, not their desirability.¹⁵ These scholars see Plato as arguing against any pursuit of radical change in the structure of human life. On this view, the conversion of Plato's theory into a practical politics mainly entails educating moderate, conservative rulers whose respect for philosophy will help them steer their societies along moderate, conservative courses.¹⁶

The *Seventh Letter*, which ruminates in Plato's name on why the philosopher engaged with Syracusan politics, provides support for both positions. The letter claims that Plato desired to see his theoretical plans made real: "If anyone ever was to attempt to realize these principles of law and government, now was the time to try, since it was only necessary to win over a single man and I should have accomplished all the good I dreamed of" (328b–c).¹⁷ Yet the advice given by Plato to the Syracusans does not directly mirror the blueprint provided in the *Republic*. For instance, in the *Republic*, Socrates argues that the construction of a utopian city requires first banishing everyone over the age of ten; the philosopher-rulers need a clean slate from which to start work. But in Syracuse, according to the *Seventh Letter*, Plato eschewed such political violence. He always sought, the *Letter* insists, repeating the point three times, to bring about "a blissful and true life" without resorting to massacres, murders, and exiles (327d, 331d, 351c).

Indeed the *Seventh Letter* describes Plato as pursuing a blissful and true life for Syracuse mainly through the education of its young ruler, Dionysius II, into a love of philosophy. This provides some support to those scholars who see Plato's relation to politics as resting primarily on his interest in educating elites. But neither the view that Plato's theoretical ideas provided a blueprint for political change nor the view that he sought primarily to educate elites helps us understand his relationship to politics in Athens. After all, we have no evidence that he worked in legislative arenas to change Athenian institutions in the directions described in the *Republic*; nor in Athens did he have

occasion to educate a tyrant or monarch, or even a closed and controlling political elite, as he had had in Syracuse. Yes, he educated elites but not an oligarchical elite.

A third account of how Plato thought his philosophy related to politics focuses on Plato's role as a critic in Athens. His dialogues are full of probing commentary on Athenian culture and political leaders as well as being full of metaphors, for instance from the theater and practices of spectatorship, that themselves emerged from Athenian culture. These facts are the basis for an argument that Plato, through his dialogues, acted on Athenian politics as a constant critic showing up its defects.¹⁸ Again, the *Seventh Letter* provides some support. According to the *Letter* Plato believed that "if to the man of sense his state appears to be ill governed he ought to speak, if so be that his speech is not likely to prove fruitless nor to cause his death" (331cd). Since Plato managed to publish texts critical of Athens over the course of his entire life without suffering punishment, he must be recognized as having succeeded at just such a project of sustained dissent.¹⁹

But what about all the positive arguments in his dialogues for an alternative set of political ideals? Plato's project was not merely critical but also constructive. Some scholars have recognized this, focusing in particular on Plato's use of the dialogue form to enact an open-ended, and therefore (on their argument) democratic method of engaging with important questions thrown up by democratic life.²⁰ But how did Plato's investigations of political questions (whether tending in an anti-democratic or democratic direction) feed back into Athenian politics? How did he hope they might feed back? These scholars do not ask or answer this question. And neither the blueprint theory nor the theory about the education of elites fully explains how Plato's positive project related to Athens. Each of the three existing scholarly accounts of how Plato related to Athenian politics gives us a spark of truth, but the matter isn't yet fully illuminated. This is because we have not yet asked and answered the fundamental question: Why did Plato write? The fact that Plato wrote distinguishes him absolutely from Socrates. If we can discover why Plato wrote, we will have identified a cornerstone of his philosophy.²¹

Figuring out why Plato wrote is a tricky operation. In general, pursuing an author's intentions is unfashionable but even if it were a more conventional undertaking, it also remains, simply, difficult. After all, Plato did not invent the concept of the Socratic dialogue; more than a dozen of Socrates' students (or students of his students) wrote them.²² How could we distinguish Plato's intentions from those of any other writer of dialogues? And even Socrates seems to have engaged in some literary experimentation, at least at the end of his life.

In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue in which Plato recounts Socrates' last days, we hear that in prison Socrates has been busily writing a hymn to Apollo. When

asked by his student Cebes, why the aged wise man who had never composed poems should spend his final days versifying, Socrates answers:

I composed these verses not because I wished to rival [the poet] Evenus or his poems, for I knew that would not be easy, but because I wished to test the meaning of certain dreams, and to make sure that I was neglecting no duty in case their repeated commands meant that I must cultivate the Muses in this way. They were something like this. The same dream came to me often in my past life, sometimes in one form and sometimes in another, but always saying the same thing: “Socrates,” it said, “make music and work at it.” And I formerly thought it was urging and encouraging me to do what I was doing already and that just as people encourage runners by cheering, so the dream was encouraging me to do what I was doing, that is, to make music, because philosophy was the greatest kind of music and I was working at that. But now, after the trial and while the festival of the god delayed my execution, I thought, in case the repeated dream really meant to tell me to make this which is ordinarily called music, I ought to do so and not to disobey. For I thought it was safer not to go hence before making sure that I had done what I ought, by obeying the dream and composing verses. So first I composed a hymn to the god whose festival it was; and after the god, considering that a poet, if he is really to be a poet, must compose myths and not speeches, since I was not a maker of myths, I took the myths of Aesop, which I had at hand and knew, and turned into verse the first I came upon. (60d–61b)

This passage reveals Socrates to have experimented with poetry after a lifetime of avoiding it. Importantly, though, it does not in fact reveal him to have written his poems: the verbs for writing are never used in this passage; Socrates is described simply as composing (*poieô*) poems. Even at the end of his life Socrates seems to hold back from putting his words into durable material form. Yet this passage does reveal that Socrates was self-conscious about the genre of communication that he had employed throughout his life and thought that the divine spirit guiding him wished to direct him specifically to one or another form of communication. The questions of how to communicate, of whether to write, of what to write, if one wrote, were clearly fraught for Socrates and his students.

Another Platonic dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, does actually describe Socrates as contributing to the writing of a dialogue. The dialogue begins when its narrator, Euclides, offers to have a slave read out a text recording a conversation between Socrates and Theaetetus. Euclides reports that when he visited Socrates in prison during the wise man’s final days, Socrates recounted to him this conversation from years earlier; once he was home, Euclides wrote it down in order to remember it better; and then, on his subsequent visits to Socrates, Socrates read and corrected his text until they had recorded the conversation accurately. Plato, in other words, fictionally

attributes the written production of the text of the *Theaetetus* not only to Euclides but also to Socrates (142a–143c). This is the nearest we come to seeing Socrates himself write a dialogue. According to Diogenes Laertius, who wrote his biography of Plato some time between the third and fifth centuries CE, Plato, like Euclides, also read out a dialogue to Socrates. But that reading, of the *Lysis*, supposedly elicited from Socrates not editorial collaboration but criticism: “O, Hercules! what a number of lies the young man has told about me!” (Diog. Laert. 3.24). Was Plato writing different kinds of dialogues than Euclides?

Whatever the case, from Plato’s account of the genesis of the *Theaetetus* we learn that Socrates was understood to have endorsed some writing projects, despite not undertaking any of his own. In particular, Socrates is represented as a willing supporter of a student who wished to produce a text to aid efforts to remember a Socratic conversation. We can’t know, though, what Socrates really thought about Plato’s dialogues or even whether Plato had started writing before Socrates’ death.²³ Yet Socrates’ general position toward the efforts of his students to write dialogues must have been affirmative, since so many made the effort. The restraint required of Socrates – of not writing – appears not to have been required of anyone else.

One scholar has made the helpful point that in the *Apology*, when Socrates describes the life of philosophy, he actually presents not one but two philosophical projects, one for himself, which can be called missionary philosophizing, and one for everyone else, which can be called lay philosophizing.²⁴ Socrates’ missionary philosophizing was a duty owed to the god and required that he question people to the point of irritating them. Lay philosophizing, in contrast, is motivated not by an external obligation to a divinity but only by each individual’s internal desire to pursue her full flourishing. Lay philosophizing requires each individual to seek to know herself but does not require her to force others into self-awareness too. The basic idea is that there must have been a well-understood distinction between philosophy as Socrates had to practice it, because of his divine injunction, and philosophy as everyone else should practice it. This is surely right. The fact that while Socrates did not write so many of his students did is enough to indicate that his philosophical life and theirs were fundamentally different.

But if so many of Socrates’ students wrote, why should we expect to learn anything special from an understanding of why Plato in particular chose to write? Let’s go back again to the conversation between Socrates and Cebes about Socrates’ eleventh hour versifying.

That exchange reveals that Socrates’ followers were engaged in explicit discussion of which modes of literary activity were appropriate to philosophy. Cebes does not merely on his own account ask why Socrates has now taken up versifying. Cebes has already heard others talking about this change and, for that matter, another friend has also asked him to ask Socrates about it.

Plato, in other words, presents a picture of Socrates' followers as trying, even on the eve of his death, to understand why he values or criticizes one or another form of discourse. Since Cebes was self-conscious about the sorts of discourse and intellectual production that Socrates might or might not endorse, it makes sense that Plato, who polished the dialogue form, would be *at least* as self-conscious as Cebes. Indeed, his dialogues, and the *Seventh Letter* too, regularly thematize the relative value of oral and written forms of discourse.

Even more importantly, Plato chose not merely to write but even to live a life of writing. The sheer volume of his literary production makes this clear, and his choice must have been ultra serious, since Socrates considered the question of how best to make philosophical music a theological matter. Given the decisiveness of Plato's methodological break from his mentor and the background conversation clearly under way about the value of different kinds of literary project, we can assume that Plato's decision to write was not simply deliberate but, more important, philosophically serious. To ask the question of why Plato wrote is to recognize the philosophical seriousness of his choice.

So why did Plato write? The dialogues contain arguments both for and against philosophical writing; these arguments are placed in Socrates' mouth. Socrates argues *contra* at the end of the *Phaedrus* and *pro* in the *Republic*.²⁵ When Socrates of the *Republic* argues against Socrates of the *Phaedrus*, we are presented with the structure of the argument about philosophical writing that must have lain behind Plato's decision to choose a writer's life. Since we have no reason to doubt that Plato genuinely revered Socrates, he must have given Socrates the strongest possible arguments on each side of the case. We will have to turn to these two dialogues, then, to answer the question of why Plato wrote. The answer will be very rich, and will lead us to answers to both our central questions: Who was Plato? And what was his relationship to Athenian politics?

Yet these philosophical arguments *pro* and *con* writing, placed in the mouth of Socrates, are not our only resource for analyzing Plato's decision to write. In the *Republic*, through Socrates, Plato offers very precise analyses and moral evaluations of different formal techniques used by poets and storytellers.²⁶ How do Plato's own dialogues fare on the rubrics he proposes? After we consider the arguments for and against writing, we can learn still more about why and how Plato wrote by testing the dialogues against his own criteria of literary evaluation, the very ones elaborated in the *Republic*. When we do, we see that his works exemplify just the kinds of writing endorsed there by Socrates. Since Plato's writerly actions harmonize with Socrates' arguments in the *Republic* in favor of philosophically serious writing, we can confirm that those arguments are intended to provide an account of Plato's decision to write. They are not meant ironically.

This book therefore proposes a rereading of the *Republic* to make an argument for a fourth way of understanding the relation between Plato and Athens specifically, and between philosophy and politics generally. What is political in the *Republic*, and the rest of the dialogues, is not Plato's creation of a utopian plan but his effort to refashion Athenian political language.²⁷ The utopian image is a tool used for the latter purpose. Because Plato not only made an argument about the role of language in politics, but also tested his theory by writing his dialogues, we can in turn test the value of this theoretical argument by considering how well the particular ways in which Plato influenced Athenian politics align with his theory about the kind of influence his dialogues ought to have had. For have an influence on Athens Plato most certainly did. Traditionally, scholars have thought that in fourth-century Athens philosophy and politics lived lives apart.²⁸ In fact, as I have indicated, distinctively Platonic (and Aristotelian) political vocabulary migrated into Athenian politics in the late fourth century; at least a few Platonic institutions followed thereafter; and at least two orators, as we shall see, considered these changes revolutionary. This book will first answer the question of why Plato wrote and then consider the nature of his influence on Athens, as a way of testing his claims about the power of the philosophical language that he had designed.

But there is more too. As I argued in the Prologue, Plato's decision to write flowed from a comprehensive analysis, presented in the *Republic*, of the role of language in politics. Plato's analysis is comprehensive – that is, it takes within its purview language as a total phenomenon – because he considers questions that are now conventionally distinguished from one another as philosophical, psychological, or sociological.²⁹ Plato considers how language functions as a system of meaning – a philosophical question; he explains how human cognitive capacities relate to language's functioning – a psychological question; and he analyzes how culture, or systems of value shared by any particular community, are built out of and disseminated through language – a sociological (or anthropological) question. This comprehensive theory of language provides the basis not for Plato's anti-democratic political argument, which has a metaphysical foundation, but for the conversion of his metaphysical commitments into an enacted anti-democratic politics. Most interpretations of the *Republic* focus on Plato's metaphysical arguments and on the ethical and political commitments that flow from them. These arguments establish the ends toward which Plato directed his political activity. By focusing instead on Plato's theory of language, and the question of why Plato wrote, I focus on the means by which he expected to conduct political activity. I have a view about the ends Plato sought, and that will become clear, too, over the course of the following chapters, but I will not be arguing here for that view because my present focus is on the methods, not the ends.

This focus on Plato's political methods has an important consequence for our understanding of what kind of philosopher he was and of his philosophical contributions. By scrutinizing his comprehensive theory of language, we will see that Plato conjoined metaphysics and pragmatism. This claim should come as a surprise, since pragmatism is usually described as setting itself against just the sort of metaphysical stance taken by Plato. By pragmatism I mean something like the philosophical approach made famous in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the American philosophers Charles Peirce and William James. James describes the core ideas of pragmatism thus:

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object.³⁰

In order for this description to fit Plato's work, we need to modify it in two modest ways. First, we need to strike the "only" in the first sentence. For Plato, this pragmatic method is not the only way to achieve truth but just one, and the inferior, of two possible ways, with the second being dialectic, or oral examination in search of the truth, for those who are able to practice it.³¹ Although Plato does, it is true, see the pragmatic method as inferior to metaphysics, it will be important to recognize that he does nonetheless consider it an additional method of ascertaining the truth content of beliefs. The pragmatic method does some of the same work as metaphysics, if not as well.

Second, we need to revise the phrase "our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" to "our conception of these effects is a necessary but partial component of our conception of the object." In Plato's argument understanding the effects of a concept must be combined with metaphysical analysis of it. But the need for metaphysical analysis does not actually invalidate pragmatic analysis or make it superfluous, and vice versa.³²

As we will see, Plato was very concerned to understand how people's beliefs shape their actions. His focus on the relation between belief and action leads him ultimately to the conclusion that by shifting beliefs philosophers can also shift action and so politics. That is, Plato took an insight, that we more typically designate as a pragmatist insight, about the relation between effects and concepts and, by establishing the reverse direction for the relationship, made it the basis for an instrumentalist account of how language or concepts can have political effects.

As a consequence, Plato's pragmatism is ultimately very cynical. As we shall see, he will argue that an idea does not need to be true, in metaphysical

terms, to be effective and therefore valuable, or true, in pragmatic terms. Plato captures this idea of the union of pragmatic truth with metaphysical falsehood with the idea of a “noble lie” or *pseudos gennaion*. An utterance can be metaphysically false – a *pseudos* – but also “noble” or “true to its birth,” the core meaning of *gennaios*, provided that it leads people to act more or less as they would act if they knew the truth.³³ We will see exactly what this means in chapter 4, but here it is worth noting that this is a very dark idea. On its basis, Plato becomes an advocate of deception.

In the *Republic* he has Socrates argue that philosopher-rulers must be expert in the production of fictions:

“Help! I exclaimed. We’re going to need some extremely expert rulers, my dear friend” ...

“... But why do they have to be expert?”

“Because they are going to have to use some pretty strong medicine,” I replied ... “The probability is that our rulers will need to employ a good deal of falsehood and deception for the benefit of those they are ruling. And we said, if I remember rightly, that useful things of that kind all came in the category of medicine.” (459b–d)

The Greek word used here for “medicine” is *pharmakon*. Our words “pharmacy” and “pharmacology” come from it. In Greece, a *pharmakon* was a drug or potion of some sort that could be used either as medicine in order to cure someone or as poison in order to kill. Sometimes, in tragedy for instance, one character would use a *pharmakon* to kill another character in an act of revenge that would be as much cure to the killer as final destruction for the victim. What sorts of medicines or *pharmaka* do the philosopher-rulers dispense?

In particular, Socrates argues, the philosopher-rulers will have to develop the fiction, conventionally identified as “the noble lie,” that the citizens of Kallipolis, the ideal city of the *Republic*, were all born with one of four metals in their souls: gold, silver, iron, or bronze. Those with gold in their souls become members of the guardian class; those with silver, merchants; and those with iron or bronze, farmers or craftsmen. Citizens are to be taught this story to reinforce and naturalize the city’s social hierarchy. Philosopher-rulers will generate other fictions too; they are to be experts at it. Plato refers to their misrepresentations as “some pretty strong medicine.”³⁴

The medical writer Hippocrates defines medications or *pharmaka* simply and broadly as things that shift the present state of things (*ta metakineonta to pareon*). *Pharmaka* are sources of change.³⁵ I will therefore say, a little whimsically, that the study of change might be called pharmacology.³⁶ I risk this flight of fancy partly to underscore our absence of a term to capture the study of social change but mainly to indicate that Plato, as a student of

pharmaka, was an analyst of social change. As Plato presents the discipline of “pharmacology,” it entails above all understanding how abstract concepts and their rhetorical conveyance, whether in images or stories or poems or even dialectical argument, shift the horizons of understanding and expectation and the normative commitments both of the individual and of the social group with consequences for lived experience.³⁷ Once one accepts the pragmatist’s understanding of the relation between belief and action, one must recognize philosophers – who work on our beliefs – as being also “pharmacologists,” whose expertise contributes to social change.

That Plato was a pragmatist philosopher, as well as a metaphysician, provides us with a fourth way of understanding his relation to Athenian politics. Plato’s acceptance of core elements of pragmatism led, I will argue, to the decisive break with Socrates manifest in the decision to write. Plato saw writing as the better instrument for fulfilling the pragmatist functions of the work of philosophy.

But in advocating deception, Plato pushed a pragmatist understanding of the work of philosophy well beyond any limits that I (or any philosopher conventionally identified as a pragmatist) would endorse. In order to get at his distinctive combination of metaphysics and pragmatism, we will have to ask and answer the question: “Why did Plato write?” And as we answer this question, we will also need to separate what is valuable from what is dangerous in Plato’s account of the role of language and philosophy in politics.

If we can do this, however, we will find a very powerful theory of language that explains how beliefs and actions come to be so tightly bound to each other and therefore also why the core pragmatist theses are correct. Seeing the value in Plato’s theory of language will require holding the theory apart from the ends to which he applied it.

Where to, then?

We must turn now to chapters 2, 3, and 4 to take up the arguments for and against philosophical writing. We will begin with the *Phaedrus* and Socrates’ argument against writing. Then we will turn to the *Republic* and Socrates’ argument for writing. In chapter 5, “What Plato Wrote,” we will evaluate Plato’s dialogues against the literary standards set by Socrates in the *Republic* in order to figure out what Plato might have thought of his own dialogues as literary products. As we shall see, the answer to the question of why Plato wrote will also lead us to an account of the methods Plato developed for engaging with Athenian politics. And once we have a clear view of the method of engagement that Plato crafted for himself, we will have a fuller understanding of the arguments and consequences of his political theory. In chapter 6, “How Plato Lived,” we will return to the *Seventh Letter* to see whether it provides support for this fourth account of how Plato understood his relation to politics. Then, in Part II (chapters 7, 8, and 9), “What Plato

Did,” we will be able to test Plato’s hypotheses about the role of language in politics generally and about the role of his own language in Athenian politics specifically. We will ask the question of whether his dialogues worked on the Athenian polity as he thought that writing of his kind should. The book then concludes with an epilogue, “And to My Colleagues,” which summarizes the scholarly contributions that I hope result from this effort to explain why Plato wrote.

To quote Diogenes Laertius again: “in his own city [Plato] did not meddle with political affairs, although he was a politician or political leader, a *politikos*, to judge from his writings” (Diog. Laert. 323). The Greek word *politikos*, which I have here translated as “politician or political leader,” had a semantic range running from “politician” to “statesman.” Plato wrote for political purposes, for other purposes too (as chapter 5 makes clear), but certainly for these. This book is an exercise in understanding that interpretation of Plato as a *politikos* and its philosophical significance.