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# Why Plato Wrote

Danielle S. Allen

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*For all my teachers and students*

ἐνθα πολιτείας μὲν οὐχ ἤψατο, καίτοι πολιτικὸς ὢν ἐξ ὧν γέγραφεν.

And in his own city he did not meddle with political affairs, although he was a politician or political leader to judge from his writings. (Diog. Laert. 3.23)

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Errors are mine.

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The information used to generate the map on p. 96 comes from R. Ginouvès and M. Hatzopoulos, eds. 1994. *Macedonia from Philip II to the Roman Conquest*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 48–49.

# Abbreviations

Aes.	Aeschines
<i>Ath. Pol.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Constitution of the Athenians</i> ( <i>Athênaiôn politeia</i> )
Dem.	Demosthenes
Diels–Kranz	<i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker</i> , ed. Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz. Zurich: Weidmann, 1985
Diog. Laert.	Diogenes Laertius
Din.	Dinarchus
Diod.	Diodorus
<i>F. Gr. Hist.</i>	<i>Fragmenta historicorum graecorum</i> , ed. K. Muller. Paris: Didot, 1851
Hyp.	Hyperides
Kassel–Austin, <i>PCG</i>	<i>Poetae comici graeci</i> , ed. R. Kassel and C. Austin. Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1983–
Kock, <i>CAF</i>	<i>Comicorum atticorum fragmenta</i> , ed. T. Kock. 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1880–1888
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
LSJ	<i>A Greek–English Lexicon</i> , ed. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, revised and augmented by Sir Henry Stuart Jones. 9th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 [1940]
Lyc.	Lycurgus
Meineke, <i>CGF</i>	<i>Fragmenta comicorum graecorum</i> , ed. A. Meineke, vols. 1–3. Berlin: Reimer, 1840
Paus.	Pausanias

Plato works:

<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apology</i>
<i>Def.</i>	<i>Definitions</i>
<i>Prot.</i>	<i>Protagoras</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Republic</i>
<i>Symp.</i>	<i>Symposium</i>
Plut.	Plutarch

Plutarch works:

<i>Dem.</i>	<i>Demosthenes</i>
<i>Mor.</i>	<i>Moralia</i>
<i>Phoc.</i>	<i>Phocion</i>

Thuc. Thucydides


TLG *Thesaurus linguae graecae*. Available online at <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>

Tod *Greek Historical Inscriptions from the Sixth Century BC to the Death of Alexander the Great*, ed. M. N. Tod. Chicago: Ares, 1985

SEG *Supplementum epigraphicum graecum*

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# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> He wrote – not solely but consistently – to change Athenian culture and thereby transform Athenian politics.<sup>10</sup> 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 hēpsato, kaitoi politikos ōn ex hōn gegraphen*).<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> But such citizenly literacy would have developed into higher forms only for a smaller circle of

elites who received formal education.<sup>13</sup> 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*.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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 *Laws* (810a).<sup>16</sup> 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*.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Theopompus mocks: "*For one thing is no longer only one, but two things now are scarcely one,*" as Plato says."<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.