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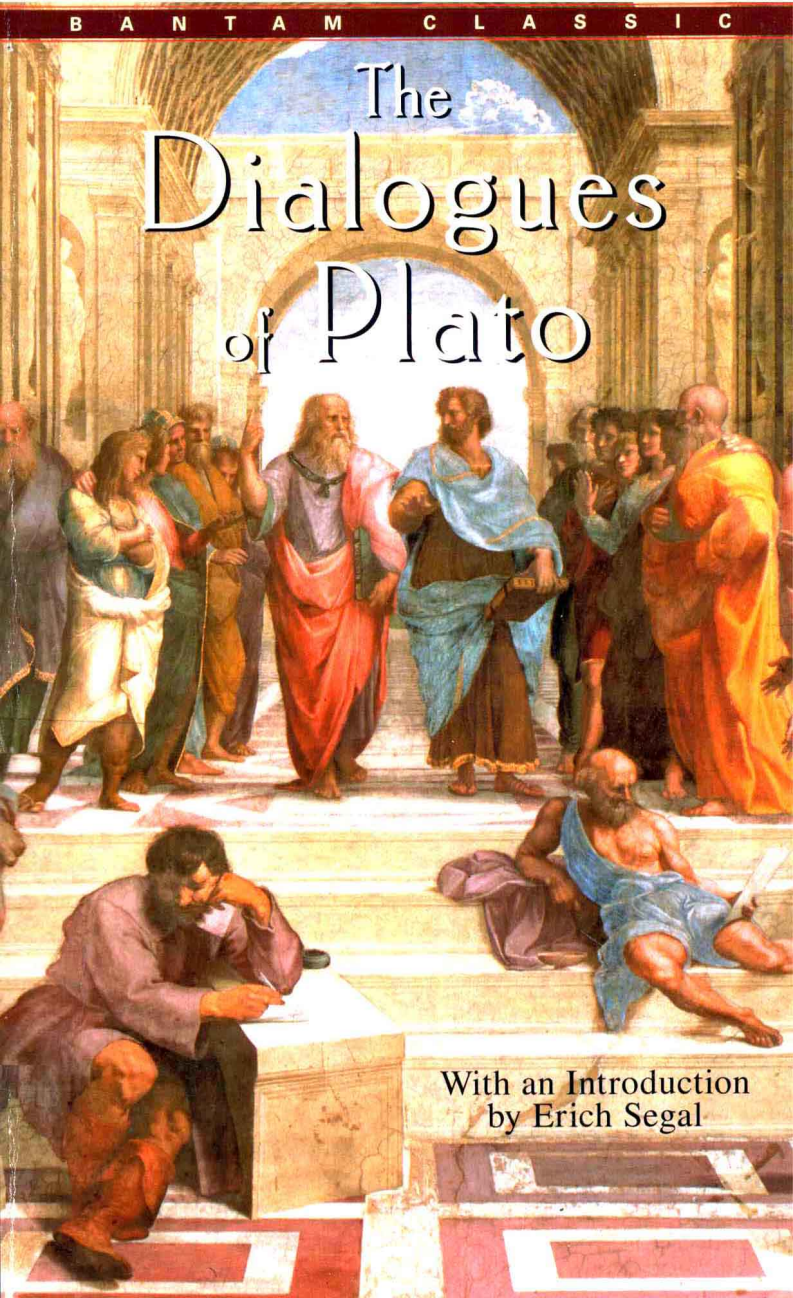
The Dialogues of Plato



With an Introduction
by Erich Segal

THE DIALOGUES OF PLATO

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A BANTAM CLASSIC

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PUBLISHING HISTORY
Bantam edition published June 1986
Bantam Classic reissue / May 2006

Published by
Bantam Dell
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

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ISBN-13: 978-0-553-21371-3
ISBN-10: 0-553-21371-7

Printed in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in Canada

www.bantamdell.com

OPM 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22

PLATO, with Socrates and Aristotle, is the founder of the Western intellectual tradition. Like his mentor Socrates, he was essentially a practical philosopher who found the abstract theory and visionary schemes of many contemporary thinkers misguided and sterile. He was born about 429 B.C. in Athens, the son of a prominent family that had long been involved in the city's politics. Extremely little survives of the history of Plato's youth, but he was raised in the shadow of the great Peloponnesian War, and its influence must have caused him to reject the political career open to him and to become a follower of the brilliantly unorthodox Socrates, the self-proclaimed "gadfly" of Athens.

Socrates' death in 399 B.C. turned Plato forever from politics, and in the next decade he wrote his first dialogues, among them *Apology* and *Euthyphro*. At age forty, Plato visited Italy and Syracuse, and upon his return he founded the Academy—Europe's first university—in a sacred park on the outskirts of Athens. The Academy survived for a millennium, finally closed by the emperor Justinian in A.D. 529. Plato hoped his school would train its pupils to carry out a life of service for their communities and to investigate questions of science and mathematics. In time, the Academy attracted young men from across Greece and became a major seat of learning. Plato's old age was probably devoted to teaching and writing, and he died in Athens in 348 B.C.

INTRODUCTION

by Erich Segal

It is impossible to tell what deep levels of the Western mind Platonic notions have penetrated. The simplest sort of person regularly employs expressions and portrays views which are derived from Plato.

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

For Eric Havelock, *magistro Socratico*

IT IS one of the great paradoxes of history that the birth of "modern" philosophy should coincide with the death of its first practitioner. For one may seriously question whether Plato would ever have begun to set down thoughts for posterity had he not been so moved by the execution of his great teacher, Socrates, in 399 B.C. This tragic event marked the end of what is perhaps the most intense period of intellectual creativity the world has ever known.

Fifth-century Athens had seen the development of comedy and tragedy to the point of sublimity and significant advances in science and the art of medicine, as well as in historiography and oratory. It also saw a radical change in the methods of educational theory (establishing the paradigm of the modern university).

PHILOSOPHY BEFORE PLATO

Though Plato is the first Western philosopher in the modern sense of the word (indeed the first to employ the term

philosophos),[1] he was preceded by a series of what one might call protophilosophical thinkers, which may be divided into two groups:

1. The so-called *pre-Socratics,* beginning with the sage Thales of Miletus (early sixth century B.C.). They were a diverse collection of natural scientists generally centered in Asia Minor (e.g., Anaximander, Heraclitus) or in the Greek cities of southern Italy (e.g., Pythagoras and Empedocles). But their work exists merely in fragments and, with rare exceptions—such as Parmenides' denial of the possibility of motion or Zeno's paradoxes—did not generate a long productive tradition of inquiry.[2]
2. The *Sophists,* who flourished in the fifth century B.C. The original connotation of *sophistēs* was merely "wise man" or "master of a craft," and totally lacked the pejorative connotation of the modern word. These "experts" came to Athens from all parts of the Greek world and claimed to be able to teach all types of *technai*—"skills," "techniques," "tricks"—to the young men of the city.

While some of the Sophists were mere hucksters, others were what we might call freelance professors, whose specialty was teaching the art of rhetorical persuasion. The latter was a potentially pernicious technique inasmuch as it twisted morality merely for the sake of winning an argument. Socrates' unyielding determination to achieve *absolute* truth is in one sense a reaction to the Sophists' "moral relativism."

[1]Writing in the 1st century B.C., Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* 5.3.9) claims that Pythagoras, who lived more than a hundred years before Plato, was the first to coin the term *philosophos*. But the question of nomenclature is of secondary importance.

[2]This point is not undisputed. In "Back to the Presocratics," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958–59): 1–24, Karl Popper argues that these thinkers were the first practitioners of the experimental method in science. Popper's essay is reprinted in his anthology *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: 1963), 136–153.

The principal Sophists, Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, and Prodicus, appear in many of Plato's dialogues as Socrates' antagonists, and more often than not Socrates demolishes their theories. Indeed, the Platonic dialogues have been viewed as giving the coup de grace to their pseudoscience.

Plato constantly disputes the Sophists' claim that they are philosophers in the true sense and often satirizes them for their long, ornamented speeches, their penchant for nitpicking debate, and their confusion of opinion with knowledge.

Though their work also survives only in fragmentary form, we should note that it was not totally devoid of later influence. For Plato seems to have some respect for Protagoras, the most eminent of them, and Socrates, even though he opposes them, is quite often obliged to employ their terminology and adopt some of the methods to his dialectic.[3]

Plato himself was born around 429 B.C. (the third year of the Peloponnesian War, and the year Pericles died). He was of noble lineage, the sort of youth who might well have studied with the Sophists. There is also some evidence that as a young man he was a champion wrestler (a sign of excellence in the "old-style" education) and that at some point he aspired to enter politics. There is also a tradition that he composed dramas, which he went home and burned after he heard his first lecture by the man destined to change his life—and the world's thought—Socrates.

Plato ultimately founded a school, the eponymous Academy, and devoted himself to setting down the ideas of his master, complemented by his own. Scholars commonly distinguish three phases in Plato's work, dividing the dialogues as follows:

Early: *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito* (the last days of Socrates);
Laches, Lysis, Charmides ("aporetic" dialogues)
Hippias Minor, Ion;

[3]Cf. G. B. Kerferd. *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), the best general introduction to the Sophists in the English language.

Protagoras, Meno, Gorgias (longer dialogues with Sophists culminating in the major doctrines that virtue is knowledge and that no man willingly acts unjustly);

Phaedo (on the immortality of the soul, this work is sometimes ascribed to the next phase);

Middle: *Menexenus, Euthydemus, Cratylus;*

Republic (the centerpiece of Platonic thought, containing a full exposition of his theory of forms; the concept of the philosopher-king; the philosopher's method of dialectic; the analogies of the sun, the line, and the cave; the pessimistic discussion of democracy; the banning of most poetry from the ideal state on the ground that it has a bad moral influence);

Symposium (the famous discussion of *erōs*. Perhaps Plato's most artistic, dramatic, and vivid dialogue);

Late: *Phaedrus, Parmenides, Sophist, Statesman, Theaetetus, Critias, Philebus, Timaeus, Laws.*

The evidence for these divisions is mainly subjective. The periods are distinguished mainly by stylistic criteria and the way the philosopher seems to be developing his thought, beginning with the figure of Socrates and branching out into his own more complex direction. The continuing debate about what is Socratic, what purely Platonic, and what an admixture will rage eternally. This is further complicated by the possible influence of Pythagorean ideas.[4]

Moreover as R. M. Hare has expressed it, "the extremely deep and difficult investigations of metaphysical and logical questions which occupy many of the later dialogues are fairly obviously the result of Plato's own perplexities... their solution did not become clear before the work of Aristotle, if then."[5]

[4]The Pythagoreans anticipated such Platonic concepts as the transmigration of souls, the notion of the philosopher-king, organizing a separate community according to their philosophical principles, etc.

[5]R. M. Hare, *Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 15.

PLATO'S MAIN THEORIES

Plato's main theories will of course be referred to at the appropriate points in the commentary on individual dialogues, but for the sake of convenience the following is an overview of basic Platonic concepts:

1. *Dialectic* as a means to truth. Socrates believed that the authentic method of the philosopher is the analysis and intellectual progression through question-and-answer dialogue. (Cf. *Apology, Protagoras.*)

2. Virtue is knowledge and therefore teachable. (Cf. *Protagoras.*)

3. All knowledge is recollection (*anamnēsis*) based on previous experience of "what the soul has learned." (Cf. *Meno, Phaedo.*)

4. No man does harm willingly. (Cf. *Protagoras.*)

5. To cause injury to another is worse than suffering it, since one is harming one's own soul. (Cf. *Gorgias.*)

6. The theory of *Forms* or "Ideas": What we see in this world is a pale reflection of true reality. (Cf. *Phaedo, Republic.*)

7. Justice is the harmony of the three parts of the soul in the individual and the harmony of the three classes of citizens in the state (*Republic*).

8. The leader of the ideal state would be a philosopher-king, whose business would be to cling to the "form of the good" (*Republic*).[6]

[6]Numbers 7 and 8 are beyond the scope of this anthology but are too essential to Plato's thought to have been omitted. I have not, however, listed the rather esoteric doctrines of the later dialogues.

PLATO'S STYLE

The oft-quoted dictum that "the medium is the message" was never more appropriate than when applied to Plato's mode of expression. For by choosing to present his ideas in dialogue form, Plato is probably coming as close as possible to imitating the so-called Socratic method, the pedagogical technique of his mentor.

Despite arguments by scholars that the form has roots in Homeric speeches, Euripidean dramatic debates, and the general Greek fascination for verbal jousting and agonal argument, Plato's use of dialogue as a vehicle for conveying philosophy may be justifiably regarded as one of his most significant achievements. After all, none of his predecessors used this style. Sophists wrote handbooks, and the pre-Socratics for the most part composed in hexameter verse or pithy maxims (e.g., Heraclitus' "everything flows, nothing stays"). Thus, the philosophical dialogue would seem to be a genuinely Platonic invention.

Plato also writes an exquisite and versatile prose, making eloquent use of simile, metaphor, parody, irony, and personification. At significant points he creates memorable allegories to illustrate his arguments. One thinks of the resurrection of the hero Er in *Republic X* or the soul as two steeds and a charioteer in the *Phaedrus*. He also employs striking images—such as democracy as a wild beast (*Republic*), the philosopher as a midwife of ideas (*Theaetetus*), and the shadows in the cave to illustrate his Theory of Forms (*Republic*).

Though Plato was notorious for banishing poetry from the ideal state, his entire work is a tapestry woven of strands from the "classical poets" such as Homer and Pindar and echoes of the more recent masterpieces of Greek tragedy. Perhaps, like the Roman philosopher Lucretius, he realized that, although poetry was dangerous, it could also be the most powerful mode of captivating a wide public.[7]

[7] Cf. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* IV.8ff., in which he offers the charming explanation that his philosophy is like a harsh medicine that sick children must take to make them better. Hence just as physicians rub honey around the rim of a child's cup to entice him to swallow the bitter liquid, the poet similarly coats his philosophy with sweet verse to make it more palatable to the general reader.

There is another significant characteristic of Plato's art that is less frequently remarked upon. Viewed as a whole, the dialogues present a kind of rich tableau of intellectual life in Athens of the late fifth century B.C. Significant historical personages appear and reappear in major and minor roles. We encounter the controversial politician Alcibiades, leading Sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias, the dean of comic poets Aristophanes, the avant-garde tragic playwright Agathon, the pretentious scholar-poet Ion, and various scientists and physicians. Stretching a point only slightly, one might say that Plato's oeuvre depicts the entire Athenian intelligentsia as Balzac's did the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie. Thus Plato is conveying not only ideas but a portrait of the society in which they were formed.

Of course, the most important and compelling figure in the dialogue is Socrates himself. The great philosopher was born in 469 B.C. and, after being indicted for "subversive" teaching, was tried and executed in 399. His personal crisis, which was also symptomatic of Athens' own paranoid state of mind, is the subject of the earliest four dialogues.

In his own words, Socrates was a "gadfly" for the Athenian conscience, relentlessly asking such essential philosophical questions as "what is virtue," "how should life be lived," and the like.

The fact that he was an eccentric, odd-looking character is attested to not only by Plato but by Xenophon and, perhaps most famously, by the caricature in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

Despite his comical appearance he was a man of extraordinary strength both physical and moral (the latter is demonstrated throughout the dialogues, the former by his conspicuous bravery at Potidaea and other battles during the Peloponnesian War). Moreover, quite unlike the Sophists, with whom Aristophanes playfully associates him merely for dramatic purposes, Socrates never demanded payment for his teaching. He was an extraordinary altruist and one of the noblest figures who ever lived.

How then could he have met such an unjust fate? We may never know for certain, but there are a number of plausible hypotheses.

To begin with, his new-style education, emphasizing independence of thought, unsettled conservative "aristocrats" (*kaloikagathoi*). It is also possible that he became suspect because many of his friends, such as Critias and Alcibiades, had either been involved in the subversion of the democracy or (equally important) were viewed as fundamentally antidemocratic.

There is another simple, if bitter, explanation. Athens fell in 404 B.C., and frightened people were looking for scapegoats. Even before its actual defeat, the city had been rife with anti-intellectual persecution, and as Sir Kenneth Dover has cogently argued, the trial of Socrates was "the last episode in a chapter of persecution."[8]

Whatever the reason, it is clear that Socrates could have survived had he been willing to compromise. But he was not. Indeed, the *Apology* shows him as gently defiant. Even if he is acquitted, he says, he will not change his lifestyle. Further, he argues that far from punishment, he deserves the kind of rewards and honor due an Olympic champion.

In the *Crito* he is given a chance to escape but refuses. This is not, as some have suggested, a display of self-willed martyrdom, but of genuine heroism. For like a Sophoclean hero, he will not yield his principles and would rather die to preserve them. Indeed, the manner of his death is perhaps his greatest object lesson.

Before briefly discussing the individual dialogues, one transcendent irony must be noted. Not only did Socrates, the first great systematic thinker, never publish anything, he was deeply ambivalent about the value of the written word.[9] The true philosopher, he seems to say, lives in the realm of ideas not of books,

[8]K. J. Dover, "The Freedom of the Intellectual in Greek Society," *Talanta* 7 (1976): 47.

[9]E. A. Havelock has made many thought-provoking observations about how contemporary ambivalence toward the written word affected the thought of Plato. For, according to Havelock, Plato composed at a very crucial period of Greek intellectual history, namely the moment when what had previously been an oral culture was becoming an age of (literate) analytical rationalism. Cf. *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), and more recently, *The Literate Revolution in Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

which merely offer pale reflections of the truth. As he remarks in a discussion about uncontested authority near the conclusion of *Phaedrus*:

> Anyone who leaves behind him anything in writing and likewise anyone who takes it over from him supposing that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent would be a fool.

Paradoxically he speaks this just when his contemporary Thucydides is composing a work that the historian intends to be *ktēma es aiei*—"a possession for all time." While Thucydides was not wrong, he lacked the sublime humility of the philosopher who was wise enough to recognize the limits of the human mind.

NOTES ON THE INDIVIDUAL DIALOGUES

The *Apology* purports to be the actual words spoken at Socrates' trial in 399 B.C. Most critics agree that it is very close to what he actually said (indeed some hold to the extreme view that this is the only truly "Socratic" dialogue). Socrates was being tried for corrupting youth and introducing new gods into the city, but in his speech he purposely notes "My opponents are of two kinds; one recent, the other ancient." By the latter he seems to mean the general anti-intellectual prejudices of the times and alludes to the fact that Aristophanes' (originally affectionate) parody seems to have subsequently gained ominous credence.[10]

Socrates' speech is in two parts, the first before the conviction, the second after, when the jury is deliberating the penalty.

Professor J. J. Keaney has recently put forth the provocative theory that Plato is here presenting Socrates as a kind of

[10]For a detailed discussion see K. J. Dover's introduction to his edition of Aristophanes' *Clouds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

"Achilles-figure."[11] For at the dialogue's end Socrates mentions his war record, his adamant refusal to act illegally on two occasions when he was under great public pressure to do so, and his readiness to die so that he can meet the great Trojan heroes in the underworld (pp. 27–28). Indeed, Socrates makes a direct reference to Achilles' willingness to risk death (p. 15).

On an equally heroic level there seems to be a similarity between Socrates and Antigone, for example, in Socrates' refusal even under threat of execution to mend his ways, and, still more specifically, in his statement (p. 16) that he prefers to obey the divine, rather than civic, law.

Socrates' intention to continue in his manner of philosophizing is exemplified within the *Apology* itself, for near the dialogue's beginning he briefly cross-examines Meletus his accuser. Thus, even when his life is in the balance, he persists with the "Socratic method."

There are many well-known aspects of this famous dialogue. It touches on, for example, the fact that the Delphic oracle had called Socrates the wisest man in the world because Socrates had insisted that he knew nothing and had made his entire life a quest for truth. There is also a reference to the "inner voice" that divinely guided him at crucial moments (p. 18). In a touch that is both poignant and ironic, Socrates says at one point that he could perhaps afford a modest fine, one of his guarantors being none other than Plato.

This dialogue also contains the oft-quoted utterance of Socrates, "the unexamined life is not worth living" (p. 24). Heroic to the last, he has composed his own—most appropriate—epitaph.

Scholars commonly refer to the *Apology, Crito, Euthyphro,* and *Phaedo* as a tetralogy, since they all deal with the trial and suicide of Socrates. Set in Socrates' prison during the last days before his death, *Crito* describes the visit of the title character, an elderly friend, who has come to urge the philosopher to flee into exile. Ignoring even the pleas that he consider his family's

[11]J. J. Keaney, "Plato," in *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome*, ed. T. James Luce (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982), 359ff.

welfare, Socrates refuses, arguing that escape would be a conscious injury to the laws, who are like our parents. And however greatly he has been wronged, Socrates cannot justify "requiting evil with evil."

Just after the midpoint of *Crito* (p. 39), Socrates begins an imaginary dialogue with personifications of the laws and the state. There is even a touch of humor in this ingenious discourse as the philosopher depicts them employing his own "Socratic method" on *him*. The essential concept is that the laws are parents who have given birth to and nurtured mankind and therefore deserve filial respect whatever the circumstances.

The subject of the *Euthyphro* is *hosiotēs,* "piety." Its dramatic chronology places it prior to the trial of Socrates when the philosopher is preparing himself for his ordeal. He encounters Euthyphro, a soothsayer, who is engaged in prosecuting his own father for accidental homicide—according to the narrow interpretation of the "old religion" and traditional morality. The dialogue is poignantly framed in references to Socrates' own forthcoming trial, whose outcome is already known to the reader.

With cutting irony Socrates keeps pressing Euthyphro to define piety, but he never receives a satisfactory answer. Indeed, the dialogue ends almost on a comic note as the much-discomfited soothsayer ultimately beats a hasty retreat, claiming, like the White Rabbit, that he is late for a very important date.

This type of dialogue, in which crucial questions are posed but left unanswered, is called "aporetic" (from *aporia,* "impasse"). We have similar examples in the *Lysis* on friendship, in *Charmides* on temperance, and in *Laches* on courage.

Phaedo, the longest, richest, and philosophically the most important dialogue of the Socratic tetralogy, takes place on the morning of Socrates' death.[12] During the discussion, most of the major tenets of Platonic philosophy are referred to: the doctrine of recollection, the immortality of the soul, the theory of Ideas.

[12]Despite its chronologically earlier subject matter, the *Phaedo* is frequently ascribed to Plato's "middle" period.

And we also have one of the great Platonic myths—the progress of the soul after death and the nature of the world and the underworld—that appears near the dialogue's conclusion (pp. 135–144).

Phaedo, the narrator, is retelling events that have occurred sometime earlier. This artistic distancing, that is, having one character tell another what has happened on an earlier occasion, is a typically Platonic narrative device—that per se has philosophical significance. For it implicitly undermines the validity of the written word to reproduce "truth" accurately. Socrates' principal interlocutors are Simmias and Cebes, with minor appearances by Crito, Apollodorus (who will again be present in the *Symposium*), as well as the sympathetic jailor. Plato is explicitly said to have been absent with illness (p. 73). The long and complex argument centers about the immortality of the soul, which is related to Plato's theory of Ideas (most fully exposed in the *Republic*).

The notion of the soul's eternal life is not new in Greek thought. It was expressed to some extent by Anaxagoras, the Pythagoreans, and even such poets as Homer and Pindar. But the novelty in Plato is that the doctrine is here not merely described but demonstrated by cogent argument.

The removing of Socrates' chains is a symbolic prefiguration of the argument he will shortly put forth, namely that the true philosopher should rejoice when he is about to die, for it releases him from the prison house of the body. As Socrates expresses it (p. 102), philosophy is "the practice of death" (*meletē thanatou*).

The proof itself concentrates first on showing that man's soul existed prior to birth (cf. the doctrine of recollection: we "learn" during life by "remembering" encounters from a prior existence). The second part, which argues that the soul must exist after death, elicits more objections from Simmias and Cebes. But they are finally satisfied (p. 136), when Socrates shows them that the *psychē* ("soul"), as part of its essence, is imperishable and can never have anything to do with its opposite, that is, mortality.

The dialogue concludes with the famous death scene. The touching vignette of Socrates stroking Phaedo's hair (p. 112) is a subtle link to the *Symposium*. Socrates' final words, "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius," show us a human being who died as piously as he lived. Crito closes Socrates' eyelids, marking the earthly end of the man who, in Plato's words, was the "best, wisest, and most righteous" who ever lived.

Protagoras, Meno, Cratylus, and *Symposium* constitute what might be called the "Sophistic tetralogy." For the dramatis personae of these dialogues constitute a veritable legion of avant-garde intellectuals. In addition to the title character, the *Protagoras* includes Prodicus, Hippias, and the rich amateur Callias. Meno himself, in the dialogue that bears his name, professes to be a student of Gorgias the Sophist, and the discussion begins with a very sophistic question, "Can virtue be taught?" The entire *Cratylus* discusses whether words have their meanings by convention (*nomos*) or nature (*physis*). The opposition of *nomos* and *physis* was extremely popular among the new thinkers, who were generally preoccupied with pinning down the precise definition of words (e.g., Prodicus, who is parodied in *Protagoras*). Although the subject of *Symposium* is *erōs* ("love"), we have a parody of the newfangled rhetoric in the "Gorgianic" (i.e., elaborately balanced, tintinnabulating, antithetical) speech of the tragedian Agathon.

In *Protagoras,* Socrates starts the discussion by asking the title character what will happen if Hippocrates becomes a student in Protagoras' classes. The Sophist replies that the young man will become better. Socrates demands to know in what way. The professor answers that he will instruct him in the art of politics (*politikē technē*) and how to become a good citizen.

The structure of the dialogue resembles an hourglass. At the outset, Protagoras affirms that *politikē technē* and *aretē* ("virtue") are teachable, while Socrates doubts it. By the conclusion, the positions are completely reversed.

The *Protagoras* conveys some of the real excitement caused by the Sophists' arrival in Athens. Though Socrates is playfully