

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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VOLUME XXXIX (No. 6)

JUNE, 1925

(No. 829)

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## The Open Court Publishing Company

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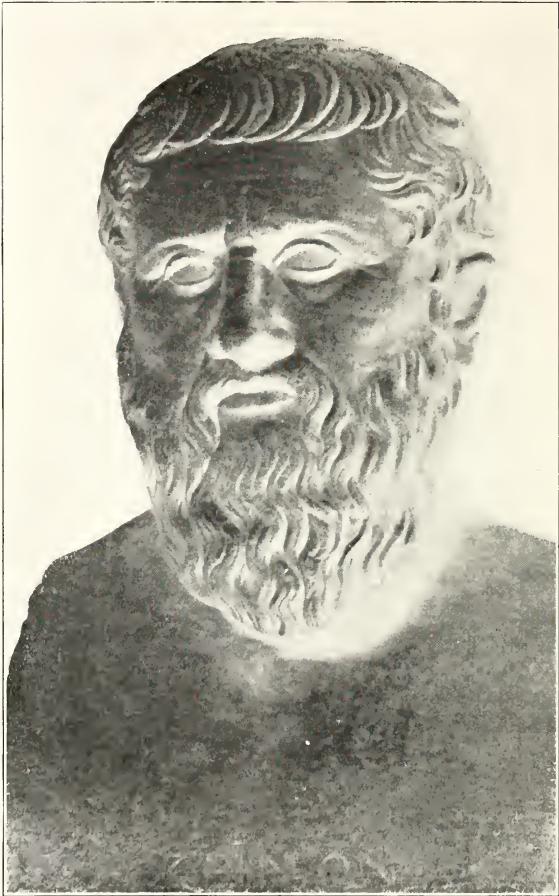
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PLATO

From *Greek and Roman Portraits*, by Dr. Anton Hekler

*Frontispiece to The Open Court*

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## THE ORIGINS OF PLATONIC DIALOGUE

BY JONATHAN WRIGHT

IN a preceding essay,<sup>1</sup> I have been at pains to deal with the legend of Socrates apropos of a recent book<sup>2</sup> by Professor Dupréel of the University of Brussels. Interwoven with the Socratic legend is the interesting question of the origin of Socratic and Platonic thought. However, we may look upon the problem of the Socratic legend it must be highly probable in the view of all thinking readers of the dialogues that the theories of Plato were wider and more inclusive of all the domains of thought than those traversed by his master in life.

A remark of Aristotle<sup>3</sup> leads us to suppose Socrates was chiefly concerned with ethical problems of general application. In this we infer he was engaged when he had Plato as a listener, for he is said to have applauded him. I prefer to believe it was Socrates and not Plato, unless they were the same in doctrine, when Aristotle writes of Socrates elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> He makes very abundant reference to Plato himself when his concern is wholly or chiefly with him. It is in the *Ethics*<sup>5</sup> we find Aristotle finding fault with Socrates for confounding virtue with prudence, not finding fault with Plato who wrote the dialogues in his early manner, where this is a prominent theme and there is every probability that Plato is there representing the thought of Socrates and copying much of his manner of dialectic. As we become familiar with the drift of thought in these early dialogues and then with that in those supposed to be the last Plato

<sup>1</sup> *The Open Court*, September, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> *La légende socratique et les sources de Platon*, par Eugene Dupréel, Buxelles, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, vi.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, VI, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I, ix; III, xviii.

wrote we find a different trend of it, a dimming of the figure of Socrates and a diminution in the art which is so seductive for us in his earlier works. This has its significance also for the so-called legend of Socrates, for it intimates to us that he it was who arrested the attention of his contemporaries and became, as he said, the mid-wife of thought for them. He doubtless had his part in the political and social and idealistic development of Plato also, for we see how these tendencies of thought are worked into the dialogues, attributed by critics to the middle period, with the ethical precepts of a great moral teacher as in the *Phaedo* for instance. Most of this is lost in the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*.

Plato's profound genius sounded the problematic depths of the universe as far as the intellect of man could then reach. Socrates, we feel, has his feet planted firmly on the ground of experience and with a secure hand must have traced out the relationship of man to his fellow man, not only as they actually are in life, but as they should be in a better life. In the early dialogues Plato, fresh from the hand of his master, presents these moralities to us. He labors with his art and illuminates them with his genius, but we can hardly miss the threads of a Socratic discourse, which he must have had in mind when he touched them with his magic and made them live for all time. This was the material with which Plato is supposed first to have worked. We can see him reshaping the weapon of dialectics Socrates taught him to use with the living voice. How vast the difference is between oratorical art or dialectic converse and literary art no intelligent reader need be told. The verbal flights from the platform or the club chair which so entranced us the night before, on the morrow in cold print aroused but a flicker of interest. We may be sure Plato never wrote as Socrates spoke, but we can see in our mind's eye both men supreme, the one in the propaganda of the street and the markets, which led to his death, and the other tracing his magic on his wax tablets for us. We can see Plato in the *Charmides* and the *Laches* trying to excel in the art of exposition of doctrine and writing to catch the roving interest of the man of the street in literature just as Socrates lay in wait for the veritable man in the street. He deals with simple themes, temperance, friendship, courage, love. They are pleasant subjects for discourse in the porticoes of the gymnasia and under the shade of trees by running brooks, but they can also, when appropriately dealt with, serve for primers in the schools. We see him then dealing with sterner topics, justice, duty, dying. He carries in the *Apologia* and the *Crito*, the



same art much heightened, an art shorn of its artlessness, which in the earliest work intrudes itself a little. It is replaced by the earnestness of maturer years in Plato, but the iron in the fibre of Socrates stands forth in a way that overwhelms us and masters our souls. It is indeed the height of art and on the pinnacle high in air dwells the ideal of the duty of man.

It is in the *Phaedo* we not only begin to part with Socrates, indeed in this is the death scene, but we seem there also to enter definitely into the idealism of Plato. It seems that this is the beginning of his later dialogues in which though Socrates is still the inquisitor, he begins to grow indistinct. How near this may be to the impressions of other more attentive students of Platonic thought or to its critical analysis I need not stop to inquire. It is very possible Socrates had himself much to say of the nature of the soul and the limits of knowledge. In the *Phaedo* we get perhaps his own speculations as to a future life as in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere we get his views as to the relativity of knowledge. We find in the *Phaedo* mingling with precepts as to the conduct of life, an idealism and speculation that transcends a little the plane of thought on which those who shape the moral destinies of the world usually rest. In the *Protagoras*, supposed to be an early dialogue, we find a questioning of the sources of knowledge, and in this as in many of the other dialogues a doubting as to whether virtue is something that can be taught or not.

We may imagine that idealistic territories also were opened by Socrates to Plato, but it seems more than probable that Plato was the one who explored them more thoroughly and pushed his inquiries to the limits of the knowable and as often into the unknowable. We must be permitted to doubt if Socrates led him so far. In the *Republic* and the *Laws* and the *Timaeus* we find the Socrates, whom we knew in the *Charmides* and the *Apologia* even, far from home. Time had blurred the image of the master a little and Plato was not as careful as formerly to see that the drapery suited it. Plato was old and had to look back through the mists of forty years at the beloved figure of Socrates. He had traversed a long distance and could not carry it as before. He could not let him go, but he could no longer make the vision shine with the thought with which he once irradiated it. He draped it with his own which was not entirely that of Socrates. We are in a vaster world than in the *Laches* and the *Lysis*, not a Socratic world but a Platonic world. If we can not

go all the way with Dupréel we are his debtors for making us aware of this.

Any student of Plato must thus outline, or somewhat thus, the origin and the growth of Socratic inspiration in Plato, its growth and development into his own thought. There is a dimming of the figure of Socrates and the luminosity of the intellect of Plato carries us to regions where the vision of Socrates is all but lost. I can make no pretense to any ability to add weight of my own to any view of the chronology of Plato's writings, but as they are ordinarily arranged this is the impression they make on me—a mighty intellect starting on its course in contact with a personality, semi-divine in the reverence he excited, wholly human in the passionate love he must have inspired in those spiritually able to know him, wholly sublime from either standpoint and not less so because to the heights on which Socrates himself dwelt he led a mighty genius by the hand. Most of us have to let Plato go without us to ethereal regions where our pinions fail us, but with Socrates as we thus envisage him we are at home.

It is thus a minor matter, but interesting nevertheless, to have Dupréel point out for us that though Socrates may have been a skilful sophist it was Plato polished the dialogue into the perfect weapon he places in the hand of Socrates. As we read the Socratic dialogue in the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon this is impressed upon us. When Plato, however, reaches the morasses of the *Phaedo* and the *Timæus*, the craggy fastness of the *Republic* and the *Læus* it is not the perfect weapon of the early dialogues. The *Apologia* and the *Banquet* and, for me, the *Euthyphro*, in vastly different genres, are strokes of skill and nature and satire beyond anything since in the art of literature. Plato may have plundered Prodicus and Hesiod and borrowed ideas from Hippias and Gorgias, as Dupréel suggests, but he has moulded them anew into imperishable forms of art and Dupréel has not made it clear at all that the Socratic moral teachings came from any but Socrates in the convincing form in which they appeal to us. In no civilization that ever existed, in no social organization even of primitive men can certain fundamental rules of man's conduct towards man be violated without disaster and of course such precepts in Athens in Socrates' day were common property and had been for ages. You can pick out plenty of them in the discourses of Socrates, but under his hand they start forth to our consciousness with a new force and significance. I suppose the same thing might be said of the teachings of Christ. It

is quite aside from the divinity of either to accuse them of plagiarism on that account.

This is only in a degree less self-evident as to philosophy and one may easily admit that a priori it is evident never has philosophical thought "evolved" so much as the thought of Plato. The use thus of the word "evolved" is misapplied, always, if it is meant to indicate a parallel with biological phenomena. Thought does not grow from a mystic power of protoplasm and its heredity. It is par excellence the product of its environment. Its esoteric source may indeed be large or small because of inherited mentality, but it grows chiefly because it feeds on the observation of its environment and it drinks from a thousand rivulets that flow from external sources. The ability to do that is the first essential of the process of any thought at all and Plato's ability in this way was supreme. Of course, he fed on others' pasture land, who doesn't? It is quite apparent why Plato seems to have accomplished so much. His very seeming to have done so much is a suggestion in itself. The philosophy of others, of those who preceded him, perished mostly because they lacked the vitality of his genius. In itself it carried the multiplication of the resonance of his fame. But even if his genius *may* not have been a dominance in the world of thought of his day, which Dupréel with something which seems very like perverseness alone alludes to, in the very fact of the survival since his day we would still find reason to think it dominant for another reason. Let us wipe out all the records of philosophic thought before Herbert Spencer and most of the records of intellectual activity contemporary with his and very much of that which has followed his death in the last twenty years and a reader two thousand years hence might well think him the dominating philosopher, not of his day alone, but despite his shortcomings, of all time, so much would he seem to have originated. We may admit this adventitious prominence of Plato's fame, but surely we could not say either of Plato or of Herbert Spencer they added nothing new to what they heired. Dupréel seems to go to this extreme. Why should Plato simply because of his mastery in exposition be excluded from originality of philosophical thought?

Of the dialogues *On Virtue* and *On the Just Man* and of some other dialogues, also regarded by most editors as spurious, Dupréel seems to form an opinion as to their authenticity largely, I am afraid, from the exigencies of his argument. In that on *The Just Man* he finds an indication that "all sinning is due to ignorance" is

a precept older than Socrates or Prodicus either, and much less ascribable to Plato, who has the credit of launching it for all time under the caption that Virtue is Knowledge. As has been said this must have been a commonplace when the world was very young and no intelligent person can have thought for a moment that either Socrates or Plato originated it. To have passed it on to future generations in the glowing colors that clothe it in the genuine dialogues is sufficient for their fame. When however in the *Euthyphro* Socrates turns savagely on the self-satisfied young fellow in the Porch of the King Archon, come to inform on his father for having committed a capital offence and infringed the laws of the country, there is something else than a platitude involved. Every citizen owes everything to the State—far more at least than to the family. This was new only when primitive man was emerging from the patriarchy and must have been a familiar doctrine in Athens for centuries. There are, too, always a lot of smart Alecks eager to show a progressive spirit.

“Surely Socrates, you can not be engaged in an action before the King Archon, as I am,” and he tells him that his father has killed a man and it is his duty to report him to the courts of justice.

“Your father! Good heavens, you don’t mean that. I suppose the murdered man was one of your relatives.”

Not at all, only a slave, but what difference does that make? Every citizen should not only obey the law, but the State demands every citizen should act in its enforcement.

When Socrates gets through with him the smug young man is in collapse. When Socrates asks him what is piety, what is patriotism, his complacency drags its plumes in the dust. His mentality is bewildered, his morale is wrecked.

“Speak out, my dear Euthyphro, and do not be abashed.”

“Another time, Socrates, I want to go home now.”

Socrates had given a lesson in the difficulty of deciding how to reconcile knowledge with virtue—how difficult it is to teach it in circles where cocksureness as to ethics is dominant. At another time and place we could find him urging that virtue is knowledge but here we see him, if not denying it, uncertain how to arrive at either. George Fox had to turn to the Inner Light and we find Socrates often listening attentively to his demon, who, though never telling him what to do, always was right in restraining him from doing wrong. For many of us who have neither to depend on, the lesson is scarcely less impressive.

It is plainly a rather far conjecture that Socrates' famous half-jesting remark about himself Plato derived from the inscription on the temple at Delphi—"Know thyself." Out of this Dupréel supposes Plato invented the story of Chaerephon, a friend of Socrates, asking of the oracle who was the wisest man and being told it was Socrates. Of course, any one can believe this who chooses, there are none to deny it—or confirm it. There is some external evidence that there was a real Socrates put to death and that this was not because he went around Athens acknowledging he knew nothing, but because he was continually reminding other people and often publicly proving they knew nothing. There is nothing so surely leading to destruction as that and the report, fragmentary as it is, furnishes a very plausible explanation of any man's death. Insofar, feeble as it may be, it furnishes a support for the oracle story which the temple inscription suggestion does not.

The art of the sophist has come to mean the art of making the worse appear the better part, but that is not the full significance of the term. We have found Socrates in the *Euthyphro* turning on his own teaching and declaring there is no way of determining if virtue is knowledge or not, because we don't know what knowledge is. It is very likely the charge laid against the true Socrates was supported by evidence, if it was a question of impiety, providing the Platonic Socrates was the true Socrates. There was hardly a tenet, in the moral code at least, on which Socrates can not be found arguing at times for and at times against it. Such a sophist is one who examines impartially both sides of a question. The jurors could easily be convinced, no doubt, that he had said things in this process which were impious under the law in the common acceptance of the term. A skilful prosecutor could easily make them appear so. Plato spoke in defense of Socrates long after his death and one, in a way, is loath to believe the plea of Socrates could have been the masterly one Plato places in his mouth. No jury of real men, it would seem, could condemn a real Socrates after listening to that. Dupréel however fails to make this point in his otherwise searching attempt to prove Plato made his own Socrates.

Plato's life, so far as it is known to us, is involved in the political affairs of Sicily. There is so much reference in his dialogues to theory we have other intimation came from Sicily, it is a belief of most students of Plato that, if he did not acquire it in Sicily when he was there, he may well have got it from Sicilians in Athens. Dupréel is therefore in line with this belief in tracing one origin

of Plato's dialectics to Gorgias of Leontinum, who was a pupil of Empedocles, two generations older than Plato. Nevertheless one fails to see the specific connection chosen exactly. Empedocles was a great savant, a very great and a very long-winded poet and Gorgias was a very great orator and rhetorician whose dialogues were noted for their long-winded speeches. It might be said the Platonic dialogue originated in part as a reaction to this, since we find Socrates complaining ironically and begging his antagonist to cut it short as his memory is poor and in such long discourse he can not keep in mind at the last what was said at first and knew not what to reply in the *Gorgias*. I think he makes essentially the same remark more than once elsewhere, but as a matter of fact Socrates could string it out too, and does it in many places, especially in the dialogues of the later Platonic manner. The thrust at his antagonist in this strain is a disconcerting jibe, but scarcely to be considered as anything more. Gorgias did write dialogues with windy people as speakers no doubt, but we can hardly think of his being a model for Plato when the latter ridicules him and follows his longwindedness only when he pleases.

In the *Phaedrus*, however, he pointedly brings to our mind that the doubt engendered by dialectics is the blight of impassioned oratory. The hecklers frequently succeed in killing its force on our parliamentary platforms. We are reminded how the hecklings of Socrates set the politicians of Athens against him and it comes home to us that our own orators are frequently ready to hand such personages the cup. Could it have been different at Athens? The Platonic Socrates is a very natural and plausible Socrates. He spends some little time in the *Phaedrus* explaining to us that the orator to be eloquent must believe in the truth of his oratory, but it doesn't have to be the truth for all that. A man may grow eloquent quite as well over what is essentially false if he only mildly believes it true. He has not much use for eloquence. It is difficult to see any derivation of the Platonic dialogue from Gorgias in all this. However this influence of Gorgias on the development of the dialectic of Plato is not insisted upon. More emphasis is laid on the debt Plato owes to Hippias. He was a contemporary of Socrates and Protagoras and Dupréel is more earnestly set upon proving Plato got a minimum of inspiration from the former and a much larger derivation of theory and practise from the latter and from Prodicus, as well as from Hippias. Most of the information we have of these celebrities in Athens before Plato we have from

Plato and it is singular, as has been said, that Dupréel takes Plato's word about the works of those, whom he mentions incidentally and doubts his manifest avowal of Socrates as his teacher. Hippias and Protagoras both followed Gorgias in the fashion of long speeches in their dialogues but there is no necessity of repeating the objections one naturally feels for the view that Plato took either the long or the short form of speech in his dialogue from any of them.

The heckling of orators and the play of question and answer between pupil and teacher and the dialogue giving life to scenes on the stage are quite sufficient to have started the dialogue out of a discursive dialectic which possibly may have been an earlier form of philosophical argument. It may have received some impetus from the philosophic dialogue of the Sicilian stage. It is scarcely necessary to think of any one influence or to enumerate more of them in an age of such alert mentality as the fifth century B. C. in Athens.

If it seems fairly admitted that Plato represents Socrates essentially as he was in life in his moral teachings, if indeed his doctrines may be conjectured to have had some part in the political schemes of the later dialogues, this can not be claimed with any assurance for the physics and science so largely resting on Heraclitus and pretty surely it is impossible to think of Socrates originating any, or at least but a small fraction, of the metaphysics. These go back to Pythagoras and had a great development in the millennium following Plato in their neo-platonic tendencies. It is Socrates the moral teacher who stands pre-eminently forth as a divine figure for us of the modern world and not neo-platonism.

While Diogenes Laertius traces the origin of the Socratic dialogue back to Zeno and quotes Aristotle and Favorinus to the effect it originated with Alexamenus of Teos, Dupréel pushes it still further back to Epicharmus at Syracuse at the beginning of the fifth century B. C. Epicharmus was a native of Cos. It must have been somewhat near this time that Sophron was writing mimes in Syracuse in the epoch of Xerxes and Euripides. We lose the trail there and it seems almost permissible to believe that philosophy proper had its first exposition in the form of dialogue, while we get the first glimpses of science in the poetry of the predecessors of Empedocles, Parmenides and Xenophanes and others among the early nature philosophers.

Plato's *Ideas* as the true realities seem to have been discussed before Plato. Cicero and Diogenes Laertius after him attribute them

somewhat to Euclid of Megara. There is a verse attributed to Timon of Phlius, who lived a hundred years after Plato, charging the Megareans with a rage for dispute, but it is not at all clear that Euclid of Megara indoctrinated Plato with the ideas of Pythagoras any more than that Zeno at Elis began the discussion of philosophical subjects in the form of the Socratic dialogue.

Dupréel, who considers the *First Alcibiades* a genuine work of Plato, says that this as well as the second chapter of the III *Memorabilia* of Xenophon, the *Eryxias* and *The Rivals* are inspired from the same source and he thinks this source is the writings of Prodicus, the *Eryxias* being of an origin in the fifth century B. C., earlier than Plato. These have an interest for us inasmuch as they discuss the rich man and the uses of wealth in a spirit which is astonishingly up to date even for this early part of the twentieth century A. D.

"Gold and silver and all things which are reputed valuable would be useful only to him who knows how to make proper use of them." It follows then that only good and honest men can be truly rich, however many dollars the greed and avarice of bad men heap up for themselves. It can not make them rich. Dupréel remarks that while these ideas float more or less through the genuine Platonic dialogues, they nowhere receive the plain and unmistakable expression they do in the *Eryxias*. Plato, it may be said was a pedagogue who drew his clientèle from people who do not like to be reminded of these things. These the author of the *Eryxias*, who also makes Socrates his mouthpiece, ascribes specifically to Prodicus and in the dialogue the President of the College (to put it in modern phrase) comes forward and says such things are of no use to teach young men and in fact pernicious. Prodicus was fired, a sophist and a vain babbler. Since the sophist acquired chiefly his bad name Plato, we may presume this dialogue written after him, too, instead of before. In the *Eryxias* too a blow is delivered at imperialism which still more tends to put the dialogue after the disastrous expedition against Syracuse and not in the earlier part of the fifth century B. C.

Despite the fact that I have found, rather presumptively, much to criticize in this book of Dupréel's, I am sure he has rendered a great service in reopening and directing intelligent criticism to the dialogues of Plato, whatever their source and however much of a legend Socrates has become.