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William J. Prior  
*Santa Clara Univeristy*

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# *Why Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?*

William J. Prior

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## I Introduction

The reader will discern in the title of this paper a reference to a classic article by Charles Kahn.<sup>1</sup> In this article and in a number that have followed,<sup>2</sup> Kahn has criticized the dominant contemporary interpretation of Plato's early dialogues and suggested an alternative of his own. I do not think Kahn's positive views are correct;<sup>3</sup> however, I think he succeeds completely in showing what is wrong with the standard interpretation of the early dialogues. He does not show, in other words, what Plato's motives were for writing his early dialogues; but he certainly shows what were not Plato's motives. In what follows I shall build on Kahn's critique in order to pave the way for a statement of my own positive account of the nature and purpose of the early Platonic dialogues.

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1 Kahn (1981)

2 For a list, see the Bibliography.

3 Kahn has been criticized by Mark McPherran. See also Kahn's response, in his (1991).

## II Methodological Preliminaries; the Historical Approach

The business of scholars of ancient philosophy is interpretation. That is, it is our job to bring out the meaning of ancient philosophical texts. Interpretation begins when we bring questions to these texts. The interpretation we produce depends in large part on the questions we ask. Many interpreters of ancient texts have aims that are primarily historical; that is, they seek information about the philosophical views of historical figures. Interpreters seeking information about the philosophical views of the historical Socrates must come to Plato's early dialogues with that question in mind.<sup>4</sup> That is, they must view these dialogues as a source of historical data; and if they are viewed in that light, some very predictable questions about the evidential reliability of the early Platonic dialogues naturally arise.

A scholarly consensus has developed that these reliability questions can be answered positively, and thus that the early Platonic dialogues provide material for the reconstruction of the philosophical views of the historical Socrates.<sup>5</sup> I shall attempt to show that this consensus is unjustified below. For the present, let me note that this historical approach not only demands that we view the early dialogues as a source of historical data, but also strongly suggests that at least one of Plato's aims in writing them was the preservation of the historical Socrates' views. This in turn suggests that we should think of Plato, whatever else he may have been, as Socrates' biographer.

## III The Biographical Hypothesis

An extreme version of this interpretive hypothesis can be found in the work of Burnet and Taylor in the early decades of this century.<sup>6</sup> Burnet and Taylor thought that Plato was so faithful to the philosophy of his master, Socrates, that he only represented the character of the dialogues

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4 This question was the object of Gregory Vlastos' investigation in his (1991); see esp. Ch. 2.

5 Cf. e.g., Terry Penner (124).

6 See for instance the introduction to John Burnet (1911); Chs. 8 and 9 of his (1914); the first chapter of A.E. Taylor (1933); and his (1917-1918, 93 ff.).

as holding views that the historical Socrates held, and reserved the expression of his own philosophical theories to characters such as the Eleatic Stranger. The merit of this radical view was that it at least provided a consistent analysis of the character Socrates: we could be sure, if Burnet and Taylor were right, that when Socrates spoke in the dialogues it was the thought of the historical figure that was expressed. The major defect of the interpretation was that it required the attribution of the Platonic Theory of Forms and related doctrines in epistemology and psychology to the historical Socrates; and this seemed so implausible and inconsistent with our other historical evidence that virtually no scholar has found the Taylor-Burnet view acceptable.<sup>7</sup>

In place of the extreme position held by Burnet and Taylor, recent scholars have defended a more moderate version of the biographical hypothesis. On this version only the early dialogues give us the historical Socrates; the middle dialogues give us Plato. In Gregory Vlastos' particular formulation of this hypothesis the doctrines of the historical Socrates portrayed in the early dialogues are strictly incompatible with the doctrines defended by the Socrates of the middle dialogues; this is one of the things that enables us to distinguish the views of Plato (those attributed to Socrates in the middle dialogues) from those of the historical Socrates (those attributed to Socrates in the early dialogues).<sup>8</sup> Many scholars who don't agree with everything Vlastos says, including this claim about the strict incompatibility of the early and middle dialogues, do however, agree that the early dialogues give us a picture of the historical Socrates, and that it was Plato's intention to do so.

#### **IV Critique of the Biographical Hypothesis**

This interpretive approach, as Penner has indicated, represents a consensus among contemporary scholars of Socrates writing in the mainstream of British and American scholarship. According to Kahn,

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7 The Taylor-Burnet view is a striking example of how our interpretation of the early Platonic dialogues can be decisively shaped by an assumption (in this case Plato's historical fastidiousness) the interpreters bring to the text. It ought to serve as a lesson in restraint when we seek to apply our own, more currently fashionable assumptions, to the interpretation of the early dialogues.

8 (1991), Ch. 2

'all the best scholarship in Greek philosophy in the last 150 years'<sup>9</sup> has been characterized by this approach (except of course for his own). It faces, however, three difficulties, none of which it can solve and each of which is sufficient to raise doubt about its viability. The first is that we lack the independent, objective evidence about the philosophical views of Socrates needed to confirm the accuracy of Plato's portrait in the early dialogues. Our other sources from the period are flawed: Xenophon had his own interests, some of which he attributed to Socrates in his works, may not have been all that closely acquainted with Socrates, and certainly lacked Plato's philosophical acumen; the independence of Aristotle's testimony from that of Plato is questionable,<sup>10</sup> and few take the portrait of Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds* to be a serious source of information about the historical Socrates. We lack any direct evidence about Socrates' philosophical views that is not mediated by the viewpoint of another thinker. All scholars can do is attempt to triangulate from these flawed and often incompatible portraits to the genuine views of the historical Socrates, and this effort, when adjustments are made for evidentiary weight, looks much more like informed guesswork than science. In such an attempt the vividness, philosophical interest, and artistic power of the early Platonic dialogues almost inevitably produce in the reader a conviction of their historical accuracy that can't be justified on objective grounds. As Kahn notes,

The historicist reading of the Socratic dialogues seems to be due to a kind of optical illusion produced by Plato's uncanny gift for creating lifelike pictures of the past. But this reading commits the straightforward fallacy of treating fourth-century works of dramatic fiction as if they were historical documents from the fifth century.<sup>11</sup>

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9 (1988c), 99

10 For a critique of Aristotle's account of Socratic philosophy see Kahn (1992 [235-8]) and John Beversluis (1993 [298-301]). Beversluis also offers criticism of Vlastos' use of Xenophon as a source for the philosophy of the historical Socrates.

11 (1988b), 35

We believe we are seeing the historical Socrates through the medium of the dialogue, when what we are actually seeing is the creative work of a great artist and philosopher.

The second difficulty with the biographical hypothesis is that it presents an implausible picture of Plato's artistic and philosophical development. In brief, it makes Plato a philosophical acolyte and intellectual historian until his mid-forties, after which he blossoms as an original philosopher. Kahn asks, 'Is it plausible to assume that a philosopher with the unrivaled creative powers of Plato could remain fixed in a single philosophical position, that of his master, for 12 or more years after the master's death?'<sup>12</sup> The fact that needs explaining here is the sudden, dramatic emergence of Plato as a philosopher at the time of the middle dialogues. During his years as a faithful biographer of Socrates was he secretly developing his own philosophical skills and theories, but refraining from committing them to writing? Or did he become discontented with the role of biographer in mid-life and branch off on his own? Neither view does justice to an intuition that cannot fail to grip any philosophically minded reader of the earlier dialogues: that the author of these works, and not just the main character, is a great philosopher.

The third difficulty is that the biographical hypothesis can't explain why Plato chose Socrates as the spokesman for both the Socratic philosophy of the early dialogues and the Platonic philosophy of the middle dialogues. This problem is particularly acute for those who think, like Vlastos, that the doctrines of the early and middle dialogues are incompatible, but it is a real problem for all who think (and who doesn't?) that the doctrines of the middle dialogues go beyond those of the early period. On the biographical hypothesis, Plato must have abandoned the attempt to represent the views of the historical Socrates at a certain point, either without being aware of what he was doing or being aware of it but not informing the reader of his change of intention. I think he was too good a philosopher to be unaware that the philosophical theory of *Phaedo* 95-107, say, was significantly different from anything in the *Apology*, and I think he was too good an artist to fail to bring a shift of focus of that sort to the reader's attention. (Note in this respect how he uses new main characters in the later

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12 (1992), 239

dialogues, such as *Parmenides*, *Timaeus* and the *Eleatic Stranger*, to introduce new perspectives. The obvious question to ask is, why not do so in the middle dialogues?)<sup>13</sup>

One may, of course, for all I have said, interpret the early dialogues in light of the biographical hypothesis. One might attempt to justify this approach by the light it sheds on this group of dialogues as a whole, or on individual dialogues in particular. But what one cannot do, in light of Kahn's criticism of this hypothesis, is to treat this hypothesis as the obviously correct or necessary approach to the early dialogues.

## V An Alternative Approach

In view of the difficulties faced by the biographical approach to the Socratic dialogues, we ought to welcome an alternative. From my remarks above, the ruling principles of that alternative should be clear. If Plato is not recalling the conversations of the historical Socrates, then he is composing original works of philosophy, and doing so with an artistic ability so great that it creates the illusion of historicity. Kahn and Vlastos agree that the early dialogues are works of philosophy; they disagree only on whether or not they are works of 'Socratic' philosophy. Kahn states, 'The dialogues belong to Plato and to the fourth century. So do the doctrines and arguments contained in them. Even where the inspiration of Socrates is clear, the dialogues are all Platonic.'<sup>14</sup> I agree with this judgment. We need not deny that the inspiration for the character Socrates in the early dialogues is the historical Socrates, or that the philosophical conversation in them is influenced by him, but we ought not to expect to separate the Socratic elements in these dialogues from the Platonic. We should not, therefore, approach the early dialogues primarily seeking answers to questions about the historical Socrates. Instead, let us place the author of the dialogues, and not 'the ambiguous figure [who is] at once Plato's historical master and his literary puppet,'<sup>15</sup> at center stage.

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13 Vlastos attempts to answer this question in his (1988 [109]); his answer, that Plato shared a moral project with Socrates, goes only part of the way to solving the problem.

14 (1981), 320

15 *Ibid.*, 305. Note in this connection a remark made over a century ago by George

I start by assuming, with Kahn, that Plato is both a creative philosopher and a master stylist from the start of his career. The questions I want to ask are:

What was Plato attempting to do in his dialogues?

Why did he write *dialogues*?

What role does he assign Socrates to play in these dialogues?

I shall attempt to answer each of these questions in turn, beginning with the last question and proceeding to the first (the reason for this order becoming clear, as I hope, as we proceed). Before I begin, however, let me note that it will be my aim to offer an account that applies not just to the early dialogues, but to the middle dialogues as well; indeed, to all the dialogues in which Socrates is the primary speaker. Kahn remarks that:

There could be no objection to the term "Socratic dialogue" if it meant simply to refer to dialogues in which Socrates is the principal speaker. In that case it would refer to the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* as well, in fact to all of Plato's writings before the *Parmenides* and *Sophist*. But that is not how the term is used. It always refers to dialogues earlier than the *Symposium-Phaedo* ...<sup>16</sup>

Like Kahn, I do not want to depart from common usage; but, as I think there is a single hypothesis that explains Plato's choice of Socrates as chief speaker wherever he plays that role, I shall in fact be concerned with all the dialogues that Kahn says might unproblematically be called 'Socratic'.

Let me also note that the following account will be necessarily programmatic. It is in fact a sketch for a larger project on the nature of the dialogues in which I am currently engaged. For reasons of space much of the presentation of evidence necessary to make the project plausible must be omitted here.

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Grote: 'We continually read from the pen of the expositor such remarks as these — "Mark how Plato puts down the shallow and worthless Sophist" — the obvious reflection, that it is Plato himself who plays both games on the chess-board, being altogether overlooked' (1883 [164-5]).

16 (1988b), 33

## VI The Role of Socrates

What interests most non-specialist readers in the early and middle dialogues is the character of Socrates. They are not primarily attracted to his doctrines and arguments, which are often difficult and counter-intuitive, but to the fact that he lives out his convictions. Philosophy, for Socrates in these dialogues, is a way of life. In the dialogues written before the *Parmenides*, Socrates is the *only* representative of that way of life. Of the characters Socrates meets in the early and middle dialogues, none is a philosopher. These characters fall into three categories: ordinary people, political types, and professional teachers (sophists and rhetoricians). Some, such as Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*, are interested in and perhaps attracted to the life of philosophy; others, such as Simmias and Cebes in the *Phaedo*, may have entered upon the path of a philosophical life; but only Socrates qualifies as a full-fledged exemplar of a life dedicated to philosophy and lived in accordance with its principles.

When we see a feature repeatedly displayed in a group of dialogues, it seems fair to assume that it is not accidental, but that Plato put it there deliberately. It follows that Plato *intended* to portray Socrates as the exemplification of the philosophical life. Socrates *is* philosophy for Plato in these dialogues. It follows further that Plato's interest in Socrates was philosophical, not historical; he is using the character Socrates to depict the nature of the philosophical life, not to portray the views of the historical Socrates. Now it is obvious that the historical Socrates was the inspiration for this literary portrait; however, on my interpretation we need not even ask the historical question whether a particular doctrine or argument represents the view of the historical Socrates.

## VII Why Did Plato Write *Dialogues*?

If Socrates is Plato's representation of the philosophical life, if that is his role in the dialogues (and thus the answer to the third of the three questions I posed above), why did Plato choose to depict him in *dialogues*, that is in conversations with others? Obviously, given what I have said so far, I can't simply rely on the answer that the biographical hypothesis would give: that this was the way the historical Socrates actually philosophized.

To discover an answer to this question we must do what defenders of the dramatic interpretation of the dialogues have long been asking us to

do: we must look at Socrates' interlocutors. As I noted above, Socrates' interlocutors in the early and middle dialogues are non-philosophers. Notoriously, none of the interlocutors succeeds in understanding what Socrates is about; the early dialogues end in failure, and although Socrates in the middle dialogues attains philosophical knowledge his interlocutors follow him at best imperfectly.<sup>17</sup> They cannot enter into the Socratic conversation because they do not understand principles and values that underlie the philosophical life.

The interlocutors don't fail because they are stupid, though commentators often allege this. Plato was not interested in writing works that simply made fun of foolish views and the persons who held them. In particular, Plato portrays Protagoras as Socrates' intellectual equal throughout that dialogue, and he takes the views of Callicles and Thrasymachus very seriously as alternatives to his own. The dialogues are genuine debates between competing visions of life. The interlocutors fail to understand Socrates because they are committed to lives incompatible in principle with philosophy (though Socrates only talks with those who express an interest in virtue).

Since the failure of the interlocutors is so regular, we must believe that it is an intentional feature of the dialogues; Plato wanted us to see and reflect on this. The dialogues are *unhappy encounters* between the philosopher and non-philosophers, and the point of the encounters is to show the incompatibility between the life of philosophy and that lived by non-philosophers. Perhaps the best example of the unhappy encounter is the *Apology*. It is often said that the *Apology* isn't really a dialogue,<sup>18</sup> for

17 Kahn notes (1988c [85]) that not all the early dialogues end in *aporia*; he cites the *Crito* as an example of an early dialogue with a positive conclusion. But though *Crito* at the end of the dialogue is no longer able to oppose Socrates, the reader feels that this is not so much because he has fully grasped Socrates' argument as because he has been overwhelmed by Socrates' rhetoric, and in particular the speech of the Laws. For examples of the imperfect comprehension of the interlocutors to the presentation of philosophical knowledge in the middle dialogues, see e.g., *Phaedo* 76b (where Simmias states that only Socrates, among men then living, could give an adequate account of the Forms), and *Republic* VII, 533a, where Socrates tells Glaucon he will be unable to follow the account of dialectic and its apprehension of the Good. In the *Symposium* it is Diotima who plays the role of the expositor of philosophical doctrine, and, ironically, Socrates to whom the role of uncomprehending interlocutor is assigned (209e-10a).

18 E.g., by Kahn (1981 [307]).

it contains only a brief passage of argumentative give and take with Meletus. In fact, however, the *Apology* is a dialectical interchange between Socrates and the people of Athens. Socrates presents the philosophical underpinnings of his life, from his profession of ignorance to his belief that virtue trumps all other goods to his claim that the life without inquiry is not worth living, and the jury responds with about as much understanding as Cassandra's hearers do to her prophecies. The *Apology* displays on a large scale the incomprehension of ordinary people when faced with Socrates, and the consequences of that incomprehension.

Not all of those who speak with Socrates reject his views. Crito accepts Socrates' arguments, as does Agathon in the *Symposium*. Simmias and Cebes and Glaucon and Adeimantus are favorably disposed to Socrates. None of these interlocutors, however, displays the understanding of Socrates' life that would mark them as philosophers in their own right. In the early and middle dialogues, I think, there is only one speaker who shows a real appreciation of what Socrates was about; and that is Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades' speech illustrates vividly the tension felt by someone bright enough to be attracted to the life of Socratic philosophy but unable to resist the allure of political power. Alcibiades records the reaction of every serious philosophical reader to Socrates' arguments: they 'turned my whole soul upside down and made me feel as if I were the lowest of the low' (215e; Joyce, trans.) When I listen to Socrates, says Alcibiades, 'he makes me admit that while I'm spending my time on politics I am neglecting all the things that are crying for attention in myself' (216a). This is of course the message Socrates puts forward in the *Apology* and other early dialogues, and it is clearly Plato's intention to depict Alcibiades in this passage as one who has received that message and been convinced by it.

Yet the encounter between Alcibiades and Socrates was not, despite Alcibiades' understanding of Socrates' message, a happy one. It was in fact the unhappiest encounter of all. For Alcibiades (and here I am referring to the character in the *Symposium*, not necessarily the historical figure) found a response to Socrates that Socrates apparently had not anticipated. Convinced by Socrates' arguments but unable to abandon politics, Alcibiades simply refuses to listen to Socrates (216a). His response is one of moral weakness: 'I know I ought to do the things he tells me to, and yet the moment I'm out of his sight I don't care what I do to keep in with the mob' (216b). This produces in him a sense of shame (216c) but no philosophical conversion. Alcibiades is a living refutation of the psychology of the early dialogues, according

to which knowledge is sufficient for virtue and moral weakness is impossible. I suspect that it was Platonic reflection on Alcibiades' failure that led Plato to the more sophisticated psychology of the *Republic* and to the conviction that reform of the governmental structure of the state was necessary to ensure that the Alcibiadeses of the world made proper use of their philosophical gifts.

### VIII What was Plato Attempting to do in his Dialogues?

If all of the dialogues record unhappy encounters between Socrates and various interlocutors, and if it was Plato's intention that they do so, then we have an answer to our second question. Plato wrote dialogues, I suggest, to depict the incommensurability between Socrates' philosophical conception of life and the other conceptions that predominated in classical Athens (as they do in North America today). But in order to depict unhappy encounters one must know what a happy encounter would be like. One must understand what the philosophical life, as depicted by Socrates in the dialogues, is about, be convinced of its superiority to other lives, and (unlike Alcibiades) form a firm desire to live it. I suggest that Plato saw his own encounter with Socrates as a happy one, perhaps the only happy one with which he was familiar; Plato thought that he, and perhaps he alone, understood and wanted to live the philosophical life exemplified by Socrates.

It follows from this that Plato saw Socrates and himself as engaged in the same fundamental project: the project of living philosophically. That means that Plato would *identify* with the aims expressed by Socrates in the early and middle dialogues; his attitude toward them would be that of a fellow devotee of the philosophical life, not that of a reporter. As a devotee, Plato would be concerned that the attitudes, beliefs, arguments and conclusions expressed by Socrates in the dialogues be those that best captured the nature of the philosophical life, not necessarily the views of the historical Socrates about the nature of that life.

But Plato, as a philosopher (that is, as one who is concerned with the philosophical life and how to live it), was not solely interested in depicting the philosophical life, as personified by Socrates, and contrasting that life with other types of life; he was also interested in defending the superiority of the philosophical life to all other lives. It is for this reason that we cannot view the dialogues as dramas, and Plato as a philosophical dramatist. A dramatist would be content with

bringing the philosophical life into conflict with other lives, but Plato's aims go beyond this.

Plato's philosophical aims are twofold: to describe the life of philosophy, and to argue for its superiority to other lives. Often the description occurs in the context of justification, as in Socrates' famous remark at *Apology* 38a: 'the greatest good for man is to fashion philosophical arguments each day about virtue and the other things you hear me discussing, when I examine myself and others, ... the unexamined life is not for man worth living.' Justification of the philosophical life takes two forms. The aim of the first is to show that only the philosophical life is worth living, as the passage just quoted states. The second form is more moderate in its aims: it aims only to show that the philosophical life is better than other lives. This latter aim is pursued in the *Republic*.

## IX The Early and the Middle Dialogues

In this penultimate section of the paper I want briefly to address the sharp distinction many scholars draw between the early and middle dialogues. I regret that my remarks here will be particularly sketchy in a paper that is already highly programmatic.

Though the doctrines and arguments attributed to Socrates do change as we move from the early to the middle dialogues, the attempt to justify the philosophical life is a unifying theme in both sets of dialogues. The philosophical life is the pursuit of wisdom. This pursuit can only be justified if there is such a thing as wisdom and if it is attainable by human beings. If truth is subjective, or relative, or out of reach of human beings, Socrates' life is a vain pursuit (though one with a certain integrity nonetheless).

The *Apology* indicates that there are two sorts of wisdom: that possessed by the gods and that possessed by humans. Socrates' success at the elenchus indicates to him that no human possesses divine wisdom, but he doesn't actually say that he thinks it impossible for humans to possess such wisdom. The ancient Greeks would not have seen the view that some humans possessed at least some of the wisdom of the gods as puzzling; their literature abounded with cases of communication between the gods and humans and the common account of poetic creativity presupposed communion between the poet and the Muses.

My general view about the doctrinal developments of the early and middle dialogues is that they result from Plato's meditations on the distinction of the *Apology* between divine and human wisdom. In this

distinction, I would argue, we find the germ (but only the germ) of the metaphysics of the middle dialogues.<sup>19</sup> The distinction between the eternal, intelligible world of being and the temporal, phenomenal world of becoming seems designed to reflect that distinction. The Doctrine of Recollection seems designed to explain how the philosopher can transcend the limits of human wisdom and attain the divine. The Theory of Forms does not merely offer an account of objective truth, but underlies a positive account of the nature of wisdom.

The salient metaphysical and epistemological doctrines of the middle dialogues are thus answers to questions that arise when one attempts to justify the philosophical life. The middle dialogues, with their characteristically Platonic doctrines, are thus not opposed to the early dialogues; they grow naturally out of the project of the early dialogues, and in fact contain solutions to problems that the project gives rise to.

I do not claim that Plato had the solutions to these problems in mind when he wrote the *Apology*; I am not defending a unitarian approach to the dialogues. Nor do I want to defend the view of Kahn that the early dialogues are to be read proleptically. There is plenty in each early dialogue to engage us without our needing to refer each argument in it to a corresponding argument in the middle dialogues. I do want to defend, however, the continuity between the questions raised in the early dialogues and the answers offered in the middle period works. The middle dialogues represent, not a radically new view of philosophy, as Vlastos would have it, but a series of Platonic solutions to problems raised in the early dialogues, and in particular the problem of the nature and attainability of wisdom.

## X Conclusion

In conclusion, let me summarize my thesis. It is that we may most profitably view the Platonic dialogues in which Socrates plays a prominent role not as historically accurate studies in philosophical biography, but as Plato's attempt to depict, describe and justify the life of philosophy

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19 Kahn makes a similar point when he notes that 'Platonic metaphysics and epistemology can be thought of as Plato's answer to the question. What kind of knowledge is required for the success of the Socratic elenchus?' (1988a [549]).

by placing the philosopher, in the person of Socrates, in dialectical confrontation with those defending other lives. Plato's aim in writing dialogues, from the earliest compositions on, was not historical, but philosophical. The early and middle dialogues form an extended meditation on the nature of the philosophical life; and, though the metaphysical, epistemological and psychological underpinnings of the portrait of the philosophical life offered in the *Republic* are not present in the *Apology*, the portrait itself is recognizable as a direct descendant of the portrait in that earlier work.

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