

On the relationship of socrates and plato



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

From historical sources it is known that Socrates was Plato's teacher and that Socrates was Plato's elder by at least a few decades. Other than this, things become far less clear when examining the relationship between these two founders of western philosophy. Since Socrates never wrote down anything, scholars have become totally reliant on the works of his students to figure out who he was and what his philosophical ideas were. In Phaedrus, Plato presents a Socrates who says that writing is "inhuman, pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind" (Phaedrus 275a). Socrates was a master of oral speech and this was evidently his preferred method of engaging his interlocutors and teaching his students. However, when comparing the works of those who mention Socrates contradictions arise and these works disagree in places. Kierkegaard believes that Xenophon is unreliable because he is shallow, Plato is unreliable because he tries to idealize his teacher, and Aristophanes is too heavily influenced by his nature as a comic playwright.

Despite these inconsistencies it is important to look at the works of these three individuals because it is the only way of beginning to understand Socrates. Due to the very large amount of Plato's works that incorporate Socrates, Plato is generally the go to source for examining the philosophy of Socrates. Consequently, understanding the relationship between these two becomes incredibly important. Many scholars, including Kierkegaard, consider the Apology to be the one work that gives a truly reliable picture of the actual Socrates. Some scholars extend this to include Euthyphro and Crito because they also come from what many consider to be Plato's "early period." No one believes that Plato actually recorded the words or speeches

of Socrates verbatim, but there is nothing in the Apology that stands out as being something Socrates would not have uttered at his historical trial.

It is important to examine the four main views held by scholars about Plato's dialogues and their depiction of Socrates. These views all have vastly different implications for the relationship between Plato and Socrates. The first view, called the Unitarian view, argues that everything found in Plato's works is a single philosophy characterized as Platonic philosophy. The second view, called the Literary Atomist view, treats every dialogue as a complete literary work and says that all works can be interpreted without referencing other works so there is no reason to group the dialogues. Essentially these first two views give no reason to ever talk about Socratic philosophy because everything written by Plato is his own philosophy. The third view, called the Developmentalist view, points out the differences between the early and later dialogues and claims that the differences represent developments in Plato's own philosophical views. This theory divides Plato's works into two categories: Socratic and Platonic. This paper advocates for the final view, called the Historicist view. This view recognizes the developments in Plato's dialogue, but attributes the earlier dialogues to Plato's desire to represent the historical Socrates. Later on, however, Plato began to more freely put his own views into the mouth of Socrates.

In Plato's "early" or Socratic dialogues, Plato is serving as a mouthpiece for Socrates because without Plato we would not know the philosophy of Socrates. Socrates was particularly well known for his dedication to careful reasoning. He wanted far more than victory over his interlocutors, Socrates was seeking genuine knowledge. Socrates had a willingness to call

<https://assignbuster.com/on-the-relationship-of-socrates-and-plato/>

everything into question and would accept nothing less than an adequate account on the nature of things. In the Apology Socrates claims that “ the unexamined life is not worth living” (Apology 38a) and that “ there is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance” (Apology 28a). Socrates saw it as his mission to awaken the citizens of Athens and help them live an examined life (Apology 30e). He went about this by simply asking questions in order to expose his interlocutors’ confusions, while claiming his own ignorance on the subject at hand. This method came to be known as the Socratic Method.

Through his Socratic Method, Socrates began to showcase his own philosophical thoughts, most of which were ethical positions. Socrates held the view that only virtue is good just by itself: anything else that is good, is good due to its ability to serve or be used for or by virtue (Apology 30b; Euthydemus 281d-e). Socrates also claimed that doing injustice harms one’s soul, the thing that is most precious, and thus it is better to suffer injustice than to do it (Republic I. 353d – 354a). Within this primarily ethical discussion facilitated by Socrates some of his other views also came out, which were related to subjects such as religion, politics, and epistemology. In the Crito, Socrates proposes that if a citizen has agreed to live in a state they must always obey the laws of that state, with the only alternatives being to change the law or leave the state (Crito 51b-c, 52a-d). From a psychological perspective, Socrates believed that all wrongdoing is done in ignorance, for everyone desires only what is good (Protagoras 352a-c; Gorgias 468b).

However, in the middle period of Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is suddenly willing to defend his own theories on many subjects that he considers to be

important. This is what marks the switch over to Platonic dialogues. Plato's views on philosophy have not evolved at all; he is simply straying away from his earlier method of representing the historical Socrates in favor of presenting his own views. Another change in this period involves the subjects that are discussed; Socrates primarily stuck to a philosophical agenda concerning ethics and the portrayal of virtue, but Plato's interests are expanded and involve countless areas of inquiry. The philosophical positions advanced in many of these middle dialogues are far more systematical and involve broad theoretical inquiries. While Socrates recognizes the full extent of his own ignorance, Plato uses Socrates in his later works to acknowledge the possibility of infallible human knowledge. This is especially prevalent in the simile of the divided line in Book VI of the Republic and in the allegory of the cave in Book VII of the Republic.

Perhaps the most definitive aspect of what is now considered Platonism is Plato's Theory of Forms. The Theory of Forms keeps reappearing throughout Plato's middle period dialogues and it is through contact with the Forms that infallible human knowledge is possible. For Plato these Forms serve as perfect examples of what they represent; the Form of Beauty is perfect beauty (Symposium), the Form of Justice is perfect justice (Republic), the Form of Tall is perfect tallness (Phaedo), and so on. Another huge difference between Socrates and Plato is their views on morality. Socrates advanced the idea that one can never do what one actually believes is wrong, and therefore all wrongdoing is the result of some sort of cognitive error. Plato, on the other hand, advocated for *akrasia*, also known as moral weakness. *Akrasia* means that it is possible for one to find them self engaging in some

sort of act that they believe is not the right thing to do (Republic IV 439e – 440b).

The last way in which Plato used Socrates is in the act of self-interrogation. In the Parmenides, Plato is critiquing his own Theory of Forms. The most well-known argument advanced in the Parmenides is the “ Third Man Argument,” which suggests that the concept of participation in a form is prone to infinite regress. However, since Plato continued to use his Theory of Forms, it shows that his thoughts on them didn’t develop; he was simply aware of possible shortcomings of his theory.

In Plato’s last dialogues, Socrates is even further marginalized. In both the Sophist and the Statesman, he is shown as a mostly silent bystander and in the Laws and Critias, Socrates is completely absent from the dialogue. Once again, this change in the portrayal of Socrates does not represent a change in the philosophical views of Socrates or Plato. Plato has just gotten to the point where he doesn’t need Socrates to advance his own philosophical and political views.

In conclusion, Socrates and Plato remain static figures through their lifetimes as far as their philosophical views are concerned. The only thing that changes is who is playing the role of a mouthpiece. In Plato’s “ earliest” or Socratic dialogues, Plato is serving as Socrates’ mouthpiece because without Plato we would not know much about Socrates and his philosophy. However, in Plato’s “ later” or Platonic dialogues, Socrates is serving as Plato’s mouthpiece. Plato uses Socrates as a character in his dialogues in order to advance and question his own philosophical positions. Despite their

differences in philosophical views, they also have many similarities and in the end understanding Plato is vital to understanding Socrates and understanding Socrates is vital to understanding Plato.

Bibliography

Plato, John M. Cooper, and D. S. Hutchinson. Complete Works. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1997. Print.

Centrelli, Joseph. "Socrates: The Founder of Western Philosophy Never Wrote a Thing?" Unenlightened English. N. p., 13 July 2009. Web. 28 June 2015.

"Plato & Socrates." Plato & Socrates. N. p., n. d. Web. 28 June 2015.

"Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. N. p., n. d. Web. 29 June 2015.