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DID PLATO WRITE DIALOGUES BEFORE THE DEATH OF SOCRATES?

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In an appendix (with the above title) in his *History of Greek Philosophy,* vol. 4 (Cambridge 1975), pp. 54—56, W.K.C. Guthrie, after surveying nineteenth and twentieth century views on this question, sides with Grote and Taylor in answering in the negative.[1] As this view, promulgated in what will deservedly become a standard source of reference, is likely to prevail if not challenged, I hope to show that the arguments against Plato's having written dialogues before 399 B.C. do not stand up to close examination; and, further, to show that the case for a positive answer can be strengthened.

The arguments against fall under the following heads:

1) *The argument from propriety.* Respect for the living Socrates would have kept everyone, Plato included, from writing either accurate or fictitious accounts. "The greater was the respect felt by Plato for Sokrates, the less would he be likely to take the liberty of making Sokrates responsible before the public for what Sokrates had never said" (Grote, *Plato,* vol. 1 (London 1865), p. 199). Taylor speaks of "the absurdity of the conception of Plato 'dramatizing' the sayings and 'doings' of the living man who he revered above all others" *Plato: The Man and his Work* (London 1926), p. 21.[2]

2) *The historical argument.* The last decade of the fifth century was not conducive to the writing of philosophical dialogues. Plato in particular, on the evidence of the Seventh Letter, had not yet abstained from political activity. So Grote 200—204, followed closely by Guthrie.

Neither argument[3] is very impressive. Let us take the second first. Even if the turmoil of 411 and after was such that it consumed all of Plato's time (a supposition which is, I submit without argument, not very likely), surely the end of the war followed soon after by the death of Plato's relatives Critias and Charmides provide him with at least three years in which to find some time for non-political activities. Plato, in fact, refers in the Seventh Letter to a *first* withdrawal from politics, which occurred between the episode of Leon of Salamis and the overthrow of the Thirty. Afterwards, he again felt the desire to return to politics (although still too young to hold office), but this time "less strongly" (βραδύτερον) than before (Ep. VII 324e—325b). Grote may be correct in saying that "these were not times for a young citizen, of good family and robust frame (!), to devote himself exclusively to philosophy and composition" (p. 210), but if we take away the word "exclusively," and consider the stretch of time from 411 to 399, surely we can allow Plato some time to himself. No Greek would have found it odd that a man involved in politics would also engage in literary compositions or philosophical theorizing. One can adduce as examples Thales, Pittacus, Bias,[4] Melissus, Sophocles, Protagoras, and Critias. If it is objected that we do not know that these men engaged in writing or speculation while also engaged in politics, then one is forced further to adduce the example of Socrates himself, the man who could lose himself in thought in the middle of a military campaign. (But Socrates is admittedly an extreme case, whom even the Greeks found odd.)

So much for the historical argument. I shall now consider some ancient evidence that pertains to the argument from propriety (and which also has some

relevance to the historical argument), most of which is, surprisingly, ignored in the discussions on this point. It is admitted at the outset that no one passage tips the scales, and that some passages have little if any historical validity. The weight of the ancient evidence, nevertheless, definitely favours a positive answer to our question.

1) D.L. 3.35, "They say that when Socrates heard Plato reading from the *Lysis,* he said, 'By Heracles, what a pack of lies this young man (νεανίσκος) is telling about me.' " This same anecdote appears in amplified form in the Anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy,* c. 3 (p. 19 Hermann, p. 9 Westerink), "After studying moral philosophy with Socrates and giving Socrates himself a great deal of trouble in the discussions he had with him, he began to write, and, Socrates being still alive then, it came into his hands. The dialogue he has written was the *Lysis;* and when Socrates had read it he said to his friends: 'This young man (νεανίας) takes me wherever he likes and as far as he likes and makes me talk to whomever he likes.' "' The words ἔτι ζῶντος Σωκράτους may be hinting at a contemporary, i.e., Sixth Century, dispute on the very question we are now considering. Grote not only rejects the historical truth of this story (as does just about everybody else but Stallbaum and Hermann), he manages to use it as evidence for his position: "This story merits no credence as a fact: but it expresses the displeasure which Socrates *would be likely to feel* on hearing that one of his youthful companions had dramatised him as he appears in the Lysis" (my emphasis).

Let us grant that the anecdote is apocryphal. There is still a positive, if minimal, conclusion to be drawn; namely, that Diogenes Laertius, and, doubtless, an earlier source (as well as the author of the *Anon. Prol.*) were not at all disturbed by the idea of Plato's having written while Socrates lived. Note that there is no defensive ἔτι ζῶντος in D.L.

This minimal conclusion can be reinforced, for, while there is no other ancient evidence attesting to *Plato's* having written before 399 B.C., there are several anecdotes in which others did so. And if others could, the case against Plato's having done so is considerably weakened.

2) For the sake of completeness, I mention an anecdote for which apocryphal is too kind a description: D.L. 2.60, Aeschines' dialogues were really written by Socrates himself! This, too, however, supports our minimal conclusion.

3) Somewhat more believable is the story of Simon the shoemaker (D.L. 2.122 f.): "When Socrates came to his shop and would engage him in conversation, he would make notes[6] of all that he could remember. Hence his dialogues are called leathern. οὗτος, φατί, πρῶτος διελιέχθη τοὺς λόγους τοὺς Σωκρατικούς." This last sentence is somewhat puzzling. It seems to say that Simon was the first to *speak* Socratic dialogues, but eager as the Greeks were to discover the *protos heuretes* for every human achievement they surely would have balked at finding the first person with whom Socrates conducted what would later be called a Socratic dialogue. Moreover, the phrase *Sokratikos logos* elsewhere refers to literary dialogues, not the actual conversations of Socrates. Note the confused translation of Hicks in the Loeb edition: "He was the first ... who introduced the Socratic dialogue as a form of conversation." Whether the trouble lies with the text or with D.L.'s careless compilation (I suspect the latter), we are probably safe in assuming that what underlies this passage is a statement that Simon was the first to write *Sokratikoi logoi.* Of course, Simon need not have published them until after 399 B.C., but the implication is clear that he probably made his notes very soon after his conversation. Plato,

too, may have waited until after Socrates' death to publish whatever he may have written; but it is with composition that we are concerned, not publication.

4) Also in the running for first place is Alexamenos of Teos. Athenaeus 505c = Aristotle *Peri Poieton* fr. 3 Ross (72 Rose), "... dialogues ..., the form of which (Plato) did not invent, since Alexamenos of Teos discovered the literary form before him, as Nicias and Sotion relate .... Aristotle in *Peri Poieton* writes as follows: ... τοὺς Ἀλεξαμενοῦ τοῦ Τηίου τοὺ ςπρώτου γραφθέντας τῶν Σωκρατικῶν διαλόγων, in which passage the learned Aristotle clearly says that Alexamenos had written dialogue before Plato." Alexamenos has also to compete with Zeno for the honor of having been the first to write dialogues: D.L. 3.48 "They say that Zeno of Elea was the first to write dialogues; but Aristotle in his *Peri Poieton* says it was Alexamenos of Styrea or Teos, as also Favorinus" (FHG 3.579). Here, there seems to be further confusion on D.L. It is *dialektike,* not the dialogue, for which Zeno should be given credit.[8] But if someone had any reason to believe that Zeno and Alexamenos could in fact be rivals for the same honor, we would have Alexamenos writing (if not inventing) dialogues in, say, 450 B.C.[9] And if this is true, while it is not impossible, given the longevity of some Greeks, that Alexamenos was still around to write Socratic dialogues after 399 B.C., it is more likely that he did sometime before.

5) The last piece of evidence to be presented has, it seems, never been considered in regard to our question, although it may be the most telling. In the introduction to the *Theaetetus,* Eukleides and Terpsion of Megara, younger contempories of Socrates, are reminded by the imminent death of Theaetetus of a conversation he had thirty years earlier (i.e., in 399 B.C.) with Socrates. Eukleides says that (i42cd) Socrates repeated the conversation to him, and that (143a) "I made some notes at the time, as soon as I got home, and later on I wrote out what I could recall at my leisure. Then, every time I went to Athens, I questioned Socrates upon any point where my memory had failed and made corrections on my return. In this way I have pretty well the whole conversation written down" (tr. Cornford). As Terpsion has never read it or heard it, we are to imagine that Eukeides did not publish the dialogue. It does not matter that the frame of the *Theaetetus* is fictional, that Eukleides, who did write dialogues,[10] did not write the *Theaetetus* we have. For us, the inference to be drawn is that Plato saw nothing strange in the writing of complete (and evidentally polished) Socratic dialogues while the master was still alive.

Not only, therefore, is there no ancient evidence that it was considered improper to write Socratic dialogues before 399 B.C., we have now seen that several people, Plato among them, were quite comfortable with the idea. That Plato himself wrote dialogues at that time seems, at the very least, a reasonable inference.

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Notes

1. A minority view, to judge by those who have expressed themselves in print on the matter. Those believing (but not necessarily arguing) that some dialogues antedated Socrates' death include Schleiermacher, Hermann, Stallbaum, Susemihl, Uberweg, Wilamowitz, Ritter, and Friedlander.

2. Similarly, V. Rose, *Aristoteles Pseudepigraphicus* (Leipzig 1863), pp. 57—74, who adduces *veterum mos et religio* to support his views.

3. Grote also employs an argument used earlier by Schone, *Uber Platons Protagoras* (Leipzig 1862), p. 64, that Plato's dialogues are too good to have been written before Plato was 28 years of age (197 f.), and that the 51 years between the deaths of Socrates and Plato are sufficient time for the composition of the dialogues (204 f). One can accept the latter point without assigning any weight to it in deciding our question. On the former point,as Grote says, "each must judge for himself." Grote is on safe ground in arguing that the *Protagoras, Phaedrus,* and *Parmenides* (each of which had its proponents) cannot antedate 399 B.C., but others (including at least some of those usually considered spurious) could conceivably have been written by a genius of age 25.

4. On the political nature of Bias and Pittacus, see D. Sider, "The Apolitical Life: Plato, *Hippias Maior* 281c," *L'Antiquite Classique,* 46 (1977) pp. 180—183.

5. Tr. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam 1962), p. 8.

6. Ὑποσημειώσεις, probably made soon afterwards. Cf. D.L. 2.48 (Xenophon) πρῶτος ὑποσημειωσάμενος τὰ λεγόμενα εἰς ἀνθρώπους ἤγαγεν, Ἀπομνημονεύματα ἐπιγράψας. Only if *protos* goes only with the participle could this statement conceivably be true, as the *Memorabiloa* were written well after the death of Socrates. A statement as ambiguous as this had best be left out of account. For a recent study of Simon, see R.F. Hock, "Simon the Shoemaker as an Ideal Cynic," *GRBS* 17(1976)41—54.

7. πρώτους mss. πρότεποω Bake προτέρους Dobree. For a defense of the mss., see R. Hirzel *Der Dialog* vol. 1 (Leipzig 1895), p. 100 n.2. The question of primacy or priority is not settled by the recently published POxy 3219, fr. 1.5—10 οὐ γὰρ πειστέον Ἀριστοτέλει ὑπὸ τῆς πρὸς Πλάτωνα βασκανίας εἰπόντι ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ περὶ Ποιητικῆς (*sic*) καὶ πρὸ Πλάτωνος γεγραφθαι δραματικοὺς διαλόγους ὑπ' Ἀλεξαμενοῦ Τηνίου (*sic*). See M.W. Haslam, "Plato, Sophron, and the Dramatic Dialogue," *BICS* 19(1972)17—24.

8. Cf. Diels-Kranz *VS* 29 A 9, 10. If, as I think, D.L. is in error, the error spread to the *Anonymous Prolegomena* c. 5 εἰ γάρ τις εἶποι ὅτι καὶ Ζήνων πρὸ αὐτοῦ διαλόγους ἔγραψεν καὶ Παρμενίδης, ἐροῦμεν ὅτι οὗτος [sc. Πλάτων] μάιοστα αὐτῷ ἐχρήσατο.

9. This is a generously late date, as Zeno, who was born ca. 490 B.C., says (Plato, *Parm.* 128c) that he wrote his book when young — as mathematicians of all periods frequently do

10. D.L. 2.108. That they were Socratic dialogues is stated at D.L. 2.64. The title *Theaetetus* does not appear among those attributed to him in antiquity; for the ancient sources on Eukleides, see K. Doring, *Die Megariker. Kommentierte Sammlung der Testimonium* (Amsterdam 1972), pp 3—14.