

**CHS—How and why to read Plato in the early common era
Fowler**

a. Albinus *Introduction to Plato's Dialogues (Eisagōgē or Prologos)* 1

This is for the person about to delve (*entunchanesthai*) into the dialogues of Plato, it is appropriate first to understand this: what a dialogue really is.

b. Plato *Sophist* 263e

Stranger: Well, then, thought (*dianoia*) and speech (*logos*) are the same; only the former, which is a silent inner conversation (*dialogos*) of the soul with itself, has been given the special name of thought (*dianoia*). Is not that true?

c. Lucian *Literary Prometheus* 6

For one thing, there was no great original connexion or friendship between Dialogue and Comedy; the former was a stay-at-home, spending his time in solitude, or at most taking a stroll with a few intimates; whereas Comedy put herself in the hands of Dionysus, haunted the theatre, frolicked in company, laughed and mocked and tripped it to the flute when she saw good; nay, she would mount her anapaests, as likely as not, and pelt the friends of Dialogue with nicknames--doctrinaires, airy metaphysicians, and the like. [...] But Dialogue continued his deep speculations upon Nature and Virtue, till, as the musicians say, the interval between them was two full octaves, from the highest to the lowest note.

d. Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 3.3-4

“‘I delight,’ said I, ‘in such walks, where my attention is not distracted, for discussion (*dialogos*) with myself is uninterrupted; and such places are most fit for philology.’

“‘Are you, then, a philologian (*philologos*),’ said he, ‘but no lover of deeds (*philergos*) or of truth (*philalēthēs*)? and do you not aim at being a practical man so much as being a sophist?’”

e. Dionysius of Halacannarsis *On Literary Composition* 25

For the former [Isocrates] spent ten years over the composition of his *Panegyric*, according to the lowest recorded estimate of the time; while Plato did not cease, when eighty years old, to comb and curl (*ktenizōn kai brostruchizōn*) his dialogues and reshape them in every way.

f. Diogenes Laertius *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 3.48

They say that Zeno the Eleatic was the first to write dialogues. But, according to Favorinus in his *Memorabilia*, Aristotle in the first book of his dialogue *On Poets* asserts that it was Alexamenus of Styra or Teos. In my opinion Plato, who brought this form of writing to perfection, ought to be adjudged the prize for its invention as well as for its embellishment.

e. Basil of Caesarea *Letter 135.1*

I know that your intelligence is perfectly well aware that the heathen (*exōthen*) philosophers who wrote dialogues, Aristotle and Theophrastus, went straight to the point, because they were aware of their not being gifted with the graces of Plato.

f. Albinus 1

After all, they have not been written without a certain art or power, nor is it easy for someone unskilled in theoretical work (*theōrias peirōs*) to have technical knowledge (*technikōs gnōrisai*) of them.

g. Maximus of Tyre *Dialexis* 11

If someone having come upon Plato's discourses is in need of further explanation, and if the light that comes from him seems to be dull and he provides little of his clear brilliance, then that person may very well not see the sun rising, the moon's brilliance, the evening star setting, or the morning star's arrival.

h. Diogenes Laertius 3.55

Now, as you are an enthusiastic Platonist, and rightly so, and as you eagerly seek out that philosopher's doctrines in preference to all others, I have thought it necessary to give some account of the true nature of his discourses, the arrangement of the dialogues, and the method of his inductive procedure, as far as possible in an elementary manner and in main outline, in order that the facts I have collected respecting his life may not suffer by the omission of his doctrines.

i. Albinus 1

So, in order that we do not suffer this fate while delving into the dialogues of Plato, let us examine the very thing I started with: what a dialogue really is. Well, it is nothing other than an (uttered) speech (*logos*) composed of question and answer (*ex erōtēseōs kai pokriseōs*) concerning some sort of political or philosophical concern(s) (*pragmatōn*) together with a fitting characterization (*meta tēs prepousēs ēthopoiias*) of the persons (*prosōpōn*) taking part and the arrangement of (or according to) their diction (*kata tēs lexin*).

j. Albinus 2

A dialogue (ho dialogos), then, is said to be a "speech" (*logos*), just as a man [2.1] is said to be an "animal."

k. Albinus 2

But “regarding the appropriate characterization of the persons introduced,” there are differences in our discussions throughout our lives: some are philosophical, others are sophistic, <and some are inexpert and private>. We must attribute the appropriate characteristics to each: for the philosophical—noble and simple and truth-loving (*philalēthes*); for the sophistic—the artfully changeable (*poikilē*) and unstable (*palimbola*, perh. “reversed”) and reputation-loving (*philodoxos*); and, for the private type—that which is appropriate <for the particular individual>.

l. Albinus’ categorization of the dialogues (4)

physical: Timaeus

logical: Cratylus, Sophist, Statesman, Parmenides

political: Republic, Critias, Minos, Laws, Epinomis

ethical: Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus, Symposium, Letters, Menexenus, Cleitophon,
Philebus

tentative: Euthyphro, Meno, Ion, Charmides, Theaetetus

obstetrical: Alcibiades, Theages, Lysis, Laches

probative: Protagoras

refutative: Hippias Major and Minor, Euthydemus, and Gorgias.

m. Albinus 4

Since, then, we have looked at the differentia (or “difference” διαφοράν, sg.) of the dialogues, how they develop naturally (κατὰ φύσιν), that is, their types (χαρακτῆρας), let us also state which one of the them someone should start with in order to understand (ἐντυγχάνειν, or “read”?) the doctrine of Plato, because there are differing opinions.

n. Albinus 4

Some people begin with the Letters, some with the Theages. There are those who separate them out into tetralogies, and they order the first tetralogy into the Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and the Phaedo—the Euthyphro, since it reports the charge against Socrates; the Apology, since it is necessary that he defend himself; thereafter is the Crito, because of the conversation in the prison; and then the Phaedo, since in this dialogue Socrates reaches the end of his life. This is the opinion of Dercyllides and Thrasyllus; however, they seem to me to have chosen to assign an order based on the dramatic characters and circumstances of their lives, which is perhaps useful for another reason, but not for our present concern. Instead, we want to discover the start and arrangement of instruction that is in accordance with wisdom (*archēn kai diataxin didaskalias tēs kata sophian heurein*). We say, then, that the start of Plato’s doctrine is not singular and set.

o. Albinus 4-5

His teaching (or “doctrine,” *logos*), being perfect, is like the perfect form of a circle: just as the start of a circle is not singular and determined, neither is his doctrine.

Therefore, we will not delve into his teachings in a haphazard manner. When someone needs to draw a circle, for example, he does not draw it starting from any point whatsoever; so, starting from whatever attitude each of us may have with regard to his doctrine, he will delve into the dialogues.

p. Albinus 5

Of course, our attitudes regarding his doctrines (*logon*, sg.) are many and different: one refers to natural aptitude (*kata physin*), for example, whether one is naturally talented <or> untalented; one refers to age, for example, whether one is the right age for philosophizing or past one’s prime; one refers to motive, whether for the sake of philosophy or history; one refers to habit (*kata hexin*), whether one has been previously instructed or ignorant (*prototelesmenos ē amathēs* [perh. “uninitiated”]); and one attitude refers to material conditions (*kata tēn hulēn*), whether one has time for philosophy or is dragged around by circumstances.

q. Albinus 5

Someone well-born by nature, who is at the right age to philosophize, who proceeds toward reason for the sake of practicing excellence according to his motivation, who was previously taught by instruction in the (mathematical) sciences according to his disposition, and who has been released from political entanglements—such a man will begin with the Alcibiades, for the sake of reversing (his previous course), and turning toward and recognizing what he ought to care about. Since it is a moral exemplar, so to speak, to see what the philosopher is, what his study is, and by what sort of hypothesis his instruction is carried forward, it will be necessary to delve into the *Phaedo* next in order; for Plato says in this dialogue what the philosopher is, what he studies, and, upon the hypothesis of its immortality, he goes through his account of the soul. After this it would be necessary to read the *Republic*; because Plato describes all the types of education—starting from the earliest age—by which someone would arrive at the possession of virtue. **In addition, since it is also necessary to have knowledge of divine matters, so that someone who has acquired virtue is able to become assimilated to them (*homoiōthēnai autois*), we will delve into the *Timaeus*.**