In terms of philosophical content, all the passages that I have interpreted in this book—drawn from Plato’s *Apology, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Meno, Phaedo, Protagoras,* and *Republic* 1—are primarily concerned with ethics and support the same position of specific conclusions and general themes about human excellence (chapter 15). Other dialogues share the same primary concern and contribute to the same position, in particular the *Charmides, Gorgias,* and *Hippias Major* and *Minor.* It is no surprise that scholars who group Plato’s doctrines by philosophical content tend to place these dialogues together.1

In contrast, the *Phaedo* appears non-Socratic in its content. In the *Phaedo,* the character Socrates investigates metaphysics, not ethics, giving a series of arguments that the human soul is immortal. The final argument of the *Phaedo* requires a metaphysical account of change in terms of eternal, unchanging Forms, such as Tallness, distinguishing “Tallness itself” from “the tallness in us” (102d6–7). In addition to this change of subject, there are changes in the form of the conversation. Instead of an inquiry ending in a puzzle, it is a positive demonstration (106e–107a). Instead of ending with a profession of ignorance and an exhortation to continue inquiry into the nature of human excellence, Socrates, after proving the soul is immortal, relates a story of the journey of the soul at death (107d–108c), asserting unprovable beliefs (108d–e) about the geography of earth (108e–114d). The dialogue, instead of reading like an edited transcript of actual oral conversation, reads like an intricate literary composition.
Aristotle on Socrates

Whereas both the Phaedo (among many other such dialogues) and the Socratic dialogues feature a character named Socrates, Aristotle gives us reason to think that the Socratic dialogues give us a portrait of the historical Socrates, while the Phaedo, among others, gives us a mouthpiece for the views of Plato himself.

On the one hand, Aristotle’s Metaphysics (991b3–4) mentions the Phaedo in the course of criticizing Plato for thinking that Forms [such as Tallness itself] are distinct from forms in the world of change [such as the tallness that comes and goes in us]. His On Generation and Corruption mentions “Socrates in the Phaedo” (335b9–17) in the course of criticizing Plato for thinking that such Forms explain change in the world. According to the Metaphysics (987a32–b10, 1078b12–1079a4, 1086a37–b11), to distinguish Forms themselves from forms in us [as in the Phaedo] is an error Plato, not Socrates, makes, an error attributable to Plato’s belief that the world we see is in constant change.

On the other hand, Aristotle also refers to “old man Socrates,” distinct from “the Socrates” of dialogues like Plato’s Phaedo. The distinguishing features Aristotle ascribes to old man Socrates are by and large consistent with the philosophical content present in what I called above the Socratic dialogues. While Aristotle never describes Plato as professing ignorance about how to live well, his work On Sophistical Refutations attributes a confession of ignorance to Socrates (183b7–8). The Metaphysics attributes to Socrates a concern with ethics and finding definitions of human excellences but, unlike Plato, no concern for nature as a whole (987b1–2, likewise Posterior Analytics 642a28–31). The Nicomachean Ethics speaks of Socrates but not of Plato denying the possibility that knowledge could be overcome by passion (1145b22–31, 1147b13–17). The same work criticizes Socrates, not Plato, for overstating the place of knowledge in human excellence, for reducing all human excellence to knowledge and ignoring the non-rational part of the soul (1116b3–5, 1144b17–30, likewise Eudemean Ethics 1216b3–10). All of these features are marks of the dialogues I have called Socratic, as opposed to the others, such as the metaphysical parts of the Phaedo. If Aristotle is reliable, we have a measure of confirmation that the dialogues I have called Socratic are portraying the historical Socrates, while the remaining dialogues give us Plato’s, not Socrates’, views.

How reliable is Aristotle? Aristotle joined Plato’s Academy about thirty-six years after Socrates’ death, staying for nearly twenty years. As just shown, he ascribes to Socrates doctrines consistent with the arguments I have interpreted in this book. Yet Aristotle shows no awareness of many of these arguments.
For example, the *Nicomachean Ethics* says, “Bravery seems to be an observable routine – hence Socrates thought it a branch of knowledge” (1116b3–5). Not one of the Socratic dialogues infers that bravery is a branch of knowledge from bravery’s *being observable*. On the contrary, in the Socratic dialogues the inference is always from bravery’s *being good* to its being a branch of knowledge (see chapters 4 and 6). The *Nicomachean Ethics* also attributes to the historical Socrates the view that “All the human excellences are [numerically distinct] branches of intelligence” (1144b17–18). But in the Socratic dialogues the arguments consistently reduce the excellences to *one* branch of knowledge, the knowledge of human well-being.

It seems likely that in Plato’s Academy there was an oral tradition about a man as memorably eccentric as the character in the dialogues I have interpreted, an oral tradition that Aristotle knew. As a rule, oral traditions are like gossip in that they may be superficially accurate but lack the detail and often the accuracy of personal observation. One way to account for the difference between Aristotle’s superficial reports and their discrepancies from the dialogues’ detailed record of argumentation is that Aristotle’s reports derive from an oral tradition distinct from Plato’s extensive familiarity with Socrates. If Aristotle is reporting such an oral tradition, his report is independent testimony confirming in rough outline Plato’s dialogues as an account of the conclusions of the historical Socrates.

**Plato’s Contemporaries**

We do not know the extent of Aristotle’s first-hand knowledge of Plato. The *Physics* refers to unwritten teachings of Plato (209b13–16) as well as to many of Plato’s written dialogues (writing as if neither is more valuable than the other as a source indicating Plato’s thought). The *Metaphysics* gives us biographical information about Plato (that as a young man Plato associated with Cratylus, 987a32–b1), information not found in any dialogue. However, even if Aristotle had a close acquaintance with Plato, we might doubt his accuracy as a biographer of either Plato or Socrates.

But we do not need to assume first-hand knowledge or scrupulous historical accuracy on the part of Aristotle. He was writing for a contemporary audience, discussing and distinguishing Plato and Socrates in order to criticize their views. If there had been any question at the time whether Aristotle was justified in attributing such wild statements as *there is a Form Tallness apart from the tallness in us* to Plato or *human excellence is nothing but knowledge* to Socrates, we would expect to find Platonic or Socratic defenders questioning Aristotle’s attributions.
Although much commentary on Aristotle and many reports of ancient disputes have survived, there is no hint of such a finding. The silence gives us reason to accept Aristotle’s distinction of Plato’s writings into Socratic as opposed to Platonic dialogues.\(^2\)

**Conclusion**

As a working hypothesis I accept Aristotle’s testimony that the Socrates of the *Phaedo* is a mouthpiece for Plato’s own views, despite the fact that I also accept, in the same tentative manner, that the death scene is an accurate historical account (chapter 16). Leaving aside Plato and the Forms, this book has shown that the Socratic dialogues do provide compelling arguments for the sort of wild conclusions Aristotle attributes to the historical Socrates. It remains impossible to know to what extent the many beautiful details of drama and argument are pure literary creation or accurate depiction. The accuracy in detail of death by hemlock in the *Phaedo* gives no certainty but does encourage us to conjecture that Plato is portraying not inventing the details of Socrates’ death, even though Plato reports himself as absent from the scene (*Phaedo* 59b). Plato associated with Socrates for at least the last 10 years of Socrates’ life and knew older associates of Socrates. Insofar as we are confident to conjecture that the death scene is portrait not invention, we might with a corresponding measure of confidence conjecture that the close psychological and logical details of drama and argument in the Socratic dialogues are more portrait than invention, despite the fact that Plato, born a quarter-century before Socrates’ death, set many of these dialogues at times prior to his own birth. Although such conjectures are far from certainty, they are comparable or superior to our grounds for trusting testimonies of the lives and teachings of, say, Confucius, Siddhartha, or Jesus.

In sum, the question is: do any of the dialogues that Plato wrote give us an accurate portrait of Socrates and his philosophy? The correct answer to this question is **no one knows.** The same answer is correct for many questions that arise in ancient history, modern history, and even current events. Police detectives know the unreliability of witnesses; professors know the unreliability of their students or colleagues to understand or accurately restate their arguments and conclusions. But we would lead inferior lives if we made it a general policy to dismiss all such testimony. The best approach must navigate between uncritical trust and complete dismissal, seeking no more certainty in our conclusions than can be expected from the premises, a point Aristotle makes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094b2–4), perhaps learning it from Plato’s *Phaedo* (89d–90b). This lack of certainty is not lamentable, since the
human value of the Socratic dialogues is not their historical reliability but the power of their arguments to save our lives.

notes

1 For a table comparing the content-based grouping of such scholars, see Debra Nails, *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy* [New York: Springer, 1995], p. 60. Such scholars sometimes add further subdivisions and conjecture that these dialogues were among those written earliest in Plato’s career.

The subtle science of stylometrics uses features of a writer’s style that, in the best cases, the writer would not be conscious of using. In Greek, these are features analogous to, for example, how frequently the letter “a” appears relative to other letters. Such statistical studies group these same dialogues together for reasons that have nothing to do with philosophical content. On the other hand, such studies fail to separate from this group some dialogues with non-Socratic content, such as Plato’s *Phaedo*. At present, stylometrics fails to provide evidence either for distinguishing any definite list as Socratic or for denying such a distinction.

2 In this and the previous section, including all references to Aristotle’s work, I follow chapter 1 of Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

further reading

Debra Nails, *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy*. New York: Springer, 1995. The book examines the relation between the historical Socrates and the character in Plato’s dialogues.