The Last Days of Socrates Study Guide

The Last Days of Socrates by Plato

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This a work devoted to one of the ancient world's most famous philosophers. Included in the book are four books, known as dialogs. These take place during the year that turned out to be Socrates' last. They have been assembled as a group of four. These are individually entitled: Euthyphro, the Apology, Crito, and the Phaedo. Readers interested in discovering the plot as they proceed should avoid reading the introductions until the end, as "all is revealed" in them.

Socrates lived and worked in Athens. A philosopher, he was usually employed in some other capacity and was not one of the wealthier people in town. He is known to have had a wife and children. One of the jobs he held was that of city guard. Sadly, his reputation as a husband, even two millenia later is not good.

His reputation in Athens was nurtured strongly by one of his powerful social connections: that of the local oligarch, Plato. Plato often had parties at which philosophical discussions flowed as freely as the wine and Socrates became a well favored guest. However, once he had a strong reputation, Socrates began to chafe at the body politic of the city-state of Athens. Over time, local politicians perceived him as a growing danger, until threats against his life began to develop.

Eventually, Athens delivered Socrates a final ultimatum: either get out of Athens forever or die in Athens soon. Socrates, given the choice, decided to let himself be killed off by the local government as preferable to living anywhere else. He claimed, upon acceptance of the punishment, that he really loved the city-state of Athens and her people. The year that he was taken as a political prisoner and tried was 399 BC. He lost his case and was sentenced. This resulted in his premature death by the imbibement of poison hemlock.

A few years after his death, Plato, one of his most beloved student admirers, began to write about him. Plato is famous is in his own right as both a philosopher and as a professional instructor. He was mentored by Socrates and in turn mentored Aristotle, even though the latter became somewhat of an opponent. Aristotle learned a tremendous amount from Plato but once fully matured he developed and taught his own ideas rather than spending his entire adulthood under Plato, or strictly furthering Plato's thought. Plato is also famed for having preserved the legacy of Socratic methodology.

What follows are the four dialogs set prior to the death of Socrates. The philosophical matters that relate directly to the lengthy conversations are covered. Those that pertain to the trial and reputation and sentencing of Socrates are distinguished from those that go beyond those matters.

There is an extensive reading list, filed under Plato rather than under Socrates. Tarrant tells readers that the eldest known document accurately recounting what Plato originally wrote comes from the 9th century, well over one thousand years after the work was originally drafted.

There is one additional point that needs to be addressed—the nature of the translations. The English translators wrote from a monotheistic bias. The work used is from the 900s AD/CE. Due to this, word choice may not best reflect what was intended, especially their choice of the word "God." However, the Delphic oracle was a Temple of Apollo, and the intimate connection between light, the Sun and benevolence can be interpreted so as to view Apollo as a naive precursor to the "One True God," thus later writers translated Socrates' references to "the god" or "gods" as "God." There are some instances in this summary in which God has been used, in reference to Apollo, by the editors for this reason. It is important to an understanding of Socrates to determine whether or not this usage is just.

Book 1, The Last Days of Socrates: Chapter 1, Introductory Notes

Book 1, The Last Days of Socrates: Chapter 1, Introductory Notes Summary and Analysis

This book has been prepared by scholars and professional editors. It is designed to be able to serve the educational market, especially university and college students. Many of the notes are provided for a specific reason. There is much that it considered to be timeless about the material, and immediately valuable to readers of today. At the same time, it is an ancient text and as such, scholars readily admit that providing information that helps readers to put the contents into context is really very helpful.

Readers should be aware that each of these dialogs is so famous, especially within the field of philosophy, that multiple editions are readily available from a variety of publishers. The bulk of these will be quite good. The edition used for this book summary is unique in its notes and pagination. Readers should view themselves both forewarned and forearmed regarding this.

A note regarding the translations. There is apt to be some variance with respect to this. In good news, the efforts of expert scholars have been conscientious and of high quality. As a direct consequence, only hair splitting will cause the differences in the translations to be troublesome. The works have been effectively, and consistently translated into many modern languages. This being the case, although pagination may be off from edition to edition, when readers go by content that confusion can be eliminated.

During the general introduction, authored by Harold Tarrant, a great deal is explained. This includes basics on how these works have been presented to students at universities over the course of decades. These same notes can of course make the works accessible to members of the public who are interested. Readers of that type should rejoice, because the truth is that Socrates was just such a man himself. Intensely curious, undeniably bright, he was also known to have been unable to afford the local higher education services. Not to be put off, he then pursued the company of learned men and found ways to engage them in conversation. In this way he could at least exercise his intellectual muscles and might be able to pick up at least part of what would otherwise only come to him as part of a paid for course of study.

Other facts provided about Socrates' life by the English scholar Tarrant hint at his loyalty to Athens. He was an experienced soldier. There had been a particularly challenging battle at Thrace. The scholar gives the impression that Athenians viewed it as having taken great courage for Socrates to have survived. Tarrant also explains that others had the feeling that this had something to do with another quality of Socrates' that they referred to as an "other worldliness."

There is an entire set of introductory material prior to the first dialog in this work. In fact there are five different groups of information. These range from a charted chronology to give readers a sense of the time line to various discourses informing readers on other aspects about the circumstances surrounding the philosopher's life and the culture of Athens back two millenia plus three and a half centuries ago.

The four dialogs presented in this document have been assembled as a group. This is explained as having been done according to their theme. Of the Socratic dialogs written by Plato, the scholar explains to readers that the four included in the Last Days of Socrates are in accordance with the title of the work readers find before them. Tarrant also explains that this arrangement has been made by a man named Thrasyllus, who was a scholar of the first century under a Roman Emperor. The works themselves, however, were not generated in the order that Thrasyllus arranged them into later on. The first three found here were written closer together in time. The fourth one found here was written nearly a decade later.

The next section of introductory text alerts readers to the difference between the actual philosopher Socrates and the various literary characters modeled on him and used by more than one Grecian writer. Several facts about the individual called Socrates who lived in history are provided. Scholars have determined that there was both an actual philosopher about whom we have certain limited knowledge and that the same individual was used by writers to express a variety of ideas although Socrates may not have agreed with or held those same ideas at all.

Following this, Tarrant shows readers an ironic truth. Socrates did not profess to teach. In fact, he claimed that he was anything but an expert. In reality it was just that he was an inquisitive man. When people brought up the matter of his special wisdom he professed that at this point all he knew that he had grown aware of his own ignorance regarding many points. Some of these points are about matters that take up a great deal of the dialogs and led to his political strife. Tarrant expresses that there are times when Socrates becomes contentious regarding his beliefs.

Tarrant goes on to place readers into the entire world of Plato's dialogs, as known through facts of Socrates. Following this, the English scholar elucidates a few points about Socratic philosophy. In this case, he refers to piety and justice, going on to explain that these are often found together. Even so, there is yet another piece of introductory writing prior to the first dialog. This one informs readers that the quality and accuracy of the original dialogs written by Plato are very high. The oldest presently existing version of it is from the 9th century AD/CE, making it a manmade miracle equidistant in time from the life of Plato and today.

Book 2, The Euthyphro: Chapter 1, The Euthyphro

Book 2, The Euthyphro: Chapter 1, The Euthyphro Summary and Analysis

This is the first of the actual dialogs. The translated version was worked or reworked by the other English scholar most closely associated with this text, Hugh Tredennick. It opens with another introduction. The scholar admits that the exact date that this document was written has been muddled by antiquity.

Contemporary readers of classical literature often find there are confusing elements of the text. There are two charges being pressed against the philosopher in Athens. One accusation is that he is corrupting the younger men of the city. The other is that he is impious, perhaps even a blasphemer and they describe this by saying that he is trying to replace Athenian deities with foreign ones. Euthyphro has heard why; apparently Socrates is known to have some kind of a "daemon," some sort of guiding divine voice but it is not clearly and straightforwardly one of the Athenian gods.

A man named Euthyphro initiates the conversation. He inquires of Socrates as to his purpose at a place where there are trials. Socrates explains that he is being prosecuted by a young man called Meletus. Socrates makes it clear that in his own view, the accusation is major.

Euthyphro shares that predicting the future is often ridiculed but this is unable to turn the very truth itself into a fiction. Euthyphro explains that he is prosecuting his own father for the crime of murder. Socrates objects to doing such a thing to his own father and finds some solace that the victim must be some kind of relation or member of the household.

Euthyphro admits that his father killed one of Euthyphro's own workers. However, he asserts that it is the principle of the thing and is mildly horrified or of a different mind than is Socrates, who has immediately revealed that personal loyalty is surely above the laws of magistrates. Euthyphro states clearly what has become idiomatic: that it is "the principle of the thing," regardless of who has committed the offensive action. This of course, brings the case into the realm of timeless wrangling regarding ethics.

The two go into more detail about the ethical situation, and they do so in reference to religion and therefore to the gods. Socrates asserts that it is the greater danger of unholiness to so prosecute one's own father whereas Euthyphro says that it is holy and necessary to pursue the criminal regardless of his [or her] relation to oneself. Euthyphro refers to Zeus, their patron deity, and to other cases where a son zealously assaulted his father justly. Euthyphro is aware that many others are offended that he would prosecute his father this way, even when the crime committed is homicide, especially

since the man his father caused to die was attacked because of having committed murder against a third party.

The arguments develop into a rather confusing state of affairs. The confidence of Euthyphro in his beliefs has been steadily undermined by the persistence of Socrates' questioning. The divine beings are definitely taken as legitimate authority and their approval is proposed as a measure of any given action. The differences of opinion amongst them, caused by the polytheistic conditions, confuse this issue. There is the claim that perhaps there is some objective scale of justice other than to please the authorities, albeit that of gods rather than of mere mortals.

Socrates insists that he wants to learn from Euthyphro, but that Euthyphro needs to really teach him. It may be that Socrates is trying to circumvent the confident pride of a young man with education and social status by professing ignorance and asking to be taught and helped. It is also possible that the older man is simply being sincere; that despite his age he does not presume to know best and is willing to hear experts, be they younger or older.

This is just the sort of behavior that causes Socrates to end up being prosecuted. The discussion continues into religious practices. The relationship between mortal and deity is viewed as mutual. Socrates and Euthyphro even discuss the interplay between the mortal and the divine being or beings. Offering sacrifices are a kind of giving, whereas prayer is described as making a request or set of requests—a kind of receiving. The two men agree easily enough on this point but not on all the others.

By the end of the dialog the men seem to have fallen into a state of what is either unknowing or confusion. Socrates says that they have discerned that perhaps what the gods agree is good is so and that all actions that meet with their approval are holy ones. An alternative view is disconcerting, however, because it forces them to admit that they do not even know for sure, which can itself readily undermine their sense of confidence with respect to innumerable ethical decisions. The gods apparently only receive gratification from divine service, according to the conversation that Euthyphro has with Socrates. Having unearthed a circular argument, Socrates wishes to begin again, but the younger man Euthyphro has had his fill, sufficiently unmoored or beset by his own schedule that he brings an end to the conversation thereby avoiding any further delving into this matter.

There is still time before either gentleman is forced to make his case. Socrates may have done nothing but enjoyed a discussion and found out that he does not even know with certainty what is holy, what is not, and how to formulate definite and certain conclusions about this. In the field of philosophy this problem is called epistemology—how to have and to acquire knowledge.

Book 3, The Apology: Chapter 1, Introduction & The Apology

Book 3, The Apology: Chapter 1, Introduction & The Apology Summary and Analysis

The introduction reminds readers that Socrates became sufficiently well-known amongst the literary set of Athens that he was written about by more than one person. In addition to being used by Plato, and beyond the local court records and other basic documents, there are also other accounts of Socrates. One of these has already been mentioned. He was also written of by a fellow Athenian named Xenophon who wrote three works that included him, one of which was entitled Memorabilia. The playwright Aristophenes further helped to proverbially immortalize him by writing The Clouds. Readers must understand that the meaning of the word 'apology' in this context is unlike the usual meaning of the modern era and society. It is intended to indicate Socrates' entire defense at the trial. This dialog runs about 40 pages in published text.

The actual event took place in public. The jury was vast by modern standards, consisting of about 500 people. Socrates represented himself legally rather than relying upon another throughout his trial. The English scholar Tarrant explains to readers the manner of Socrates. His self-presentation during the contents of the Apology is described as 'aloof'.

The introduction provides an incredibly brief synopsis. Essentially, Tarrant explains to readers, Socrates held to the end to his principles and to the guiding voice that he referred to as a divine sign or "daemon." The people of the city, in close association to what Tarrant refers to as "the state religion," ultimately condemn Socrates. The English scholar agrees with the condemnation of the civic authorities in this matter.

Socrates begins by assuring the jury and those who function as judges that he is innocent. He tells them that he will be using plain language in his address. Others, apparently have grown suspicious of him and reported that he makes all manner of inquiries into the state of the heavens and of the earth. Socrates denies this before the jury, in this translation. At the time of this apologetic speech, Socrates is a 70 year old man.

Socrates then goes on to address another topic. He denies the claim that he has been teaching. He goes on to describe people he knows who do teach. He gives some detail about their behavior. He describes both students and instructors.

Socrates begins to explain what has transpired to the jury. He tells of how one of his good friends Chearephon went to the Apollonian oracle at Delphi. The man happened to ask the oracle whether or not there was anyone wiser than his friend Socrates. The priestess of the oracle at Delphi told Chearephon that the answer was "no."

The entire situation of Meletus' prosecution against Socrates is rooted, according to the philosopher himself, in the simple fact that some time after Chearephon received this message from Apollo's female oracle he began to inquire about it. The reason he began to search for contradictory information was because this was such a bold assertion and that he, Socrates, found it to be nigh to impossible to believe. This motivated him to seek out men who had the reputation for wisdom there in Athens.

Readers here should be aware of who Apollo is. Apollo may well have been the Sun, as he was the god of light, of music, and was known to be wise. He was the son of Zeus and Leto, who was not Zeus's wife. The other fact which suggests that Apollo is the Sun is that his twin sister Artemis is the Moon. Seen from the ground, when the Moon is full they are about the same size and are obviously closely associated with one another. Apollo, as a personality, was kind and benevolent and gentle—except when he needed to protect his mother, in which cases he was an aggressive advocate. The god desired to help people; one way was to answer their questions. Ancient Grecian deities have a tendency to have very human limitations, and as such Apollo did not have enough time to answer all the inquiries. To redress this, he had a temple at the city-state of Delphi develop an oracle. An oracle is typically a priestess, but can be another male, appointed to speak on his behalf. Oracles were required to have certain special abilities. While considered true, their answers were sometimes very puzzling. It is because of this last point that Socrates would have felt that it was reasonable to ask questions in an effort to find out how to interpret what the Apollonian oracle had told one of his friends.

Something happened when he pursued his inquiries in Athens. He informs the jury that in each case, the man seemed sure of his wisdom at first but that after they pursued some questions, each one seemed to "fall" in this regard. He goes on to tell the jury that as a result of this, the only conclusion that he could come to was that there was one very limited and specific way in which Socrates might be exceptionally wise—it must be only in that through self-awareness about the great extent of his own ignorance, which he admits is vast and deep. Perhaps this awareness could be called a type of wisdom. Readers who have not been previously learned about Socrates need to be aware that it is a generally accepted fact that he has this specific type of wisdom. The methods that he uses to expose his own and other people's ignorance is also part of why he is still famous over two thousand years after his death.

Socrates liked the skilled craftsmen best. His main criticism was that he uncovered ignorance in many. His other major observation was that politicians and poets tended to pretend to knowledge that they lacked. He remarks to the jury that he likes what readers know as common sense. Similarly, readers will find that many of the Athenians' observations are a mixture of refreshing reminders to take caution when it comes to ideas, and the typical distinctions in temperament and preferences when societal classes are divided by education, art, money and interests. In some respects, Socrates is just some smart working class man who is willing to accept his own ignorance and who finds it easy enough to uncover that of others.

Halfway into the dialog there is another discrete note from one of the editing scholars. It remarks that the city-state of Athens actively and specifically urged admonished

Socrates to just stop his practice of philosophizing interactively through these troubling conversations. This gives readers the decided impression that Meletus's prosecution at the King's Porch was the culmination of trouble that had been brewing for some time. These dialogs are presented as if the ending is known even at the beginning. Utlimately, Socrates does not desist only to show that his life and his behavior are united: indivisible to the end. He readily admits this to the jury.

Socrates also makes a decidedly, almost suspiciously, spiritual claim. He tells the jury two things. First, that he is so dedicated to what Apollo has directed, through the "spiritual signs," that he has become impoverished through spending the bulk of his time encouraging his fellow Athenians towards the life of searching for truth and understanding. Some will call this the spiritual life, others the philosophical, still others will refer to it as a form of the intellectual life. The other comment that he makes is one echoed by other religious writers: Socrates assures the jury that they cannot harm him even if they do kill him or have him put to death. He insists that they harm themselves much more by such an action. He also openly tells them that if they only grant him an acquittal if he will stop philosophizing around the city-state, he will ignore them.

Plato is mentioned halfway into the Apology. He is referred to casually and inclusively. He is spoken of as special but only in the manner as one of many friends within a large circle of younger men of Athens who enjoy a great deal of his company.

The editor Tarrant includes a note. Socrates has been found guilty. However, what readers may not have known, was that the verdict was far from unanimous. With a 500 member jury, he was convicted by approximately 60 votes. The dialog resumes with Socrates discoursing with the jury regarding their sentencing of him. Meletus, the prosecutor, has requested the death penalty.

Socrates receives the death penalty. The remainder of the Apology is devoted to responding to this. He addresses the jury and shows a great deal of acceptance of the verdict and sentence. He explains that his age makes this preferable by far to banishment. He goes on to assure the jury that he will not alter his behavior should he continue to live, whether in Athens or elsewhere. In fact, he assures them, that should he go elsewhere he will in fact only continue to behave the same way. As such, and because he feels strongly that he would be more devastated by any misguided effort to change his ways in this respect, that death of his body is far preferable to the death of his soul or spirit. He warns those who have condemned him that they will be punished for doing so, due to the reasoning behind their decision. He further confesses that he harbors no grudge against any of the jury for what they have done. He also tells them that the penalty will give them the false impression that they are harming him in some way.

The philosopher goes on. He begins to talk about how much he will enjoy being able to meet people who have already died. He discusses advantages of the after-life and assures the jury that he feels that death is certainly nothing to fear. The fact that Socrates was a real soldier may have influenced his capacity to face the end with such courage but then again this attitude may have come from old age or simply his

hardened position. To complete the entire dialog, Socrates assures them he feels he has only been doing as Apollo has asked and that this view has been confirmed by what he calls his "divine sign." Lastly, he tells those who voted for him to be spared that they need not worry.

Book 4, The Crito: Chapter 1, Introduction & Crito

Book 4, The Crito: Chapter 1, Introduction & Crito Summary and Analysis

This is the first of the dialogs that takes place after Socrates has been sent to prison. It is rapidly described as the shortest one. The introduction gives the editor, an English scholar living in Australia, the opportunity to express the focus of the Crito. One powerful facet of the dialog is the fact that Socrates chooses to not escape from prison. This is even though his friends attempt to rescue him. The editor also clues readers into a prominent psychological element: the moral judgment of justice and the intellectual effort involved with coming to understand what this is.

The dialog opens in a prison cell in Athens. Two old men are there. One is Socrates, who is sleeping. The other is Crito. Crito has come to visit Socrates out of friendship. Socrates awakens and the two old men begin to converse. Socrates' acknowledges the other's affections.

Socrates describes a dream and his interpretation of it. Crito finds it strange and mysterious. Socrates feels the meaning is absolutely clear. Socrates tells Crito that through the dream he believes that he has two days, not just the one freshly dawning, to live.

Crito begins to exhort his friend to escape from the sentence and from the prison. He starts his argument with a purely emotional admission that he and the other friends of Socrates will miss him very much and would strongly prefer that he carry on living as long as possible. Next, Crito discusses the matter of reputation. He argues that others will view him quite badly if he does not rescue his friend from this predicament. After this appeal to reputation Crito even informs Socrates that he can provide him with a safe haven in Thessaly thanks to his personal connections.

Socrates refutes this. He continues but develops what initially appears to be circuitous reasoning. He probes Crito. He has Crito show that he agrees that the views of qualified individuals and experts, including when there is only one of these, are right to have the control of a given set of circumstances or relationship. When in training, Socrates and Crito agree, one should heed the trainer and not the others. Likewise, this is why a school child obeys the teacher, not the other students. Socrates, is then beset again by Crito to let Crito assist his escape. Socrates assures him that this is not the best way. The old philosopher takes his turn at the art of persuasion and asks his friend to listen to him because Socrates wants Crito to be at peace with the decision that Socrates has made.

There is a conversation about justice. The two old men agree that harming others is always unjust, even when one acts purely in retaliation. They also agree that this reaction is very natural and normal but that despite this, acting upon it does not yield justice. Socrates asks his friend to be cautious so that they can determine their true views and one another's beliefs about what is just.

Socrates then proceeds to have a look at the Laws of the land. He shows how they both serve and control members of the society. He speaks almost equivocally to Crito with respect to whether he is asking a question of making a statement. After some discussion he says, "Does not this show that we are duty bound to submit to the Laws of the land...That it is just that we do so." Crito, hopefully with some reflection, agrees.

During the discussion that follows, Socrates makes it very clear that he expects to be judged once he has passed through the gates of death, upon entry into the Underworld. He also admits that there is the possibility of complete annihiliation, which he readily acknowledges is not objectionable when contemplated as a state of being or of consciousness. He confesses that he has submitted to an urge to act in accordance with justice to the best of his ability. In this case, it includes submission to the Laws of Athens and their sentence due to his behavior, even though he feels that the jury has committed an injustice against him.

The dialog comes to an end. Crito submits to Socrates' analysis of the circumstances.

Book 5, The Phaedo: Chapter 1, Introduction & The Phaedo

Book 5, The Phaedo: Chapter 1, Introduction & The Phaedo Summary and Analysis

This is the final of the 4 dialogs in The Last Days of Socrates. It has a rather lengthy introduction. It is designed to make clear in other ways what is also expressed in the dialog. This is the longest of the three dialogs that are presented together as The Last Days of Socrates.

The Phaedo includes Socrates' beliefs regarding mortality and immortality of the human soul. The intended audience of this dialog are philosophers whereas the others were designed for a more general readership. The particular school of thought was the Pythagorean school. This was a powerful group in the era. Mathematics, music and philosophy were all areas of expertise amongst them.

This dialog was written later by Plato than the preceding three. The editors provide a glimpse into the life of Phaedo. He suffered terribly. The names of the characters of the dialogs are all presumed to have been real living people. It is also acknowledged that there has been some literary creativity employed by Plato. At times this has been so that Plato can espouse his own views through one of the characters and in other cases it may be the result of the reconstruction of conversations.

There is significant discussion in the introduction and in this dialog about death. The reason is due to the difference between causes or efforts worth risking or experiencing loss of life and contrasting this to such destruction of life as "garden variety" suicide. In the latter case release from pain or consequences are the most probably cause. In the former case, the virtues of justice and protection of other life are primary motivations. Honor, and loyalty are viewed by Socrates and some others as legitimate reasons for tolerance and endurance of dangerous circumstances. The editor assures readers, that the ethics of the Greeks were not Christian and they had no place for what Christians term "altruism." Tarrant provides an excellent example of differing levels of mentality in the section on death and suicide. The case is: 1) there is a domestic slave who has been granted freedom, but remains enslaved while awaiting his release; 2) the slave master may be timing the release with what is best for the entire household, hopefully including the best interests of the freeman-to-be; 3) The slave is probably only thinking of how he is going to get to be a free man again, rather than considering everyone's best interests; 4) this is the difference in mentality.

After this, the English scholar elaborates on ancient Grecian ideas and beliefs concerning the afterlife. They did harbor a belief in the soul and in the perpetuation of the thoughts, ideas, feelings and even communicative powers from the Underworld or "shades," even when it had been successfully separated from all the needs of the

senses and the physical world of the living. Such beings, the souls of the deceased, could continue to have many experiences. According to Tarrant, the trouble is that even the dead have emotions and thereby can most assuredly have "good times and bad." All of this pertains to the arguments associated with Socrates' choice to accept the death sentence by "voluntary" hemlock poisoning. The truth is simply that he was able to retain some control of this situation and numerous other aspects of control were taken from him.

The Pythagoreans were mathematicians and physicists. They believed in exploring what are now known as "physical and scientific causes of things." Tarrants informs readers that the Pythagoreans with whom Plato discoursed circa 350 BC were able to draw the same conclusion as alchemists, mathematicians and physicists, including the likes of Einstein and those who derived the periodic table of the elements and nuclear theory. All agreed that the entire manifest cosmos is composed of underlying invisible yet real substance. Further, energy is somehow preserved and perpetuated but life and the usual physical forms of the world all transform. These forms can be created, destroyed and preserved. From this perspective it might be argued that it required 1500 to 2500 years for the accurate insights of the Pythagorean philosophers to be thoroughly examined and corroborated by others sufficiently skilled and dedicated to the task. Complete examination of this led Plato and the Pythagoreans to ideas of an eternal and unchanging soul.

Tarrant goes on to provide a cursory description of some of the other prevalent philosophical ideas bearing the greatest influence within the context of Plato's dialog the Phaedo. These are helpful for both students of formal education and the lay reader. Readers will likely discover that some of these theories and ideas have since died or been refuted whereas others continue to flourish but with the alterations and reformulations that centuries of science and religion have allowed. The current debate about Intelligent Design is one such relevant subject.

The editor explains that philosophers are as the term indicates: lovers of wisdom.

Only after this extensive debriefing does the actual dialog begin. There is another editor's note, this time it provides the setting. Phaedo is one of Socrates' friends. He was with the old man on the day of his death.

At the beginning there is an explanation of why Socrates's life was extended after his trial. It was due to the timing and an Athenian practice that on the surface had no connection to Socrates. The speaker, whose name is Phaedo, tells Echecrates of this and of the final end. He assures the other that it was peaceful but that Appollonius lost control of himself due to the intensity of his emotions regarding the matter.

This being by far the lengthiest of the dialogs, the summary has more chapters devoted to this one. The next follows on immediately. It begins already into the dialog.

Book 5, The Phaedo: Chapter 2, The Phaedo Continued

Book 5, The Phaedo: Chapter 2, The Phaedo Continued Summary and Analysis

There were more than 15 people present at the death of Socrates. Phaedo lists them at the behest of his partner. They note that Plato was absent due to having been unwell himself. After a short description of the scene Phaedo begins to recount the philosophical discussion.

There is a woman with a young child present. There is no indication of whether she is a relative or not. Crito takes her home; she is very openly distraught with tears at the time. No one can tell whether or not she held any interest in the conversation or subject matter, from the text itself.

Those present turn directly to their usual manner of conversation. The reality of the situation is not lost on them. As it happens, the old man has tried something brand new while under the penalty in prison. He has written some poetry. His friends request an explanation which he supplies. He has had some dreams. For not the first time, he is attempting to comply with what he believes is the authority of the gods.

There is an entirely different subject during part of this section. They begin to discuss, once more, how it is possible for them to hold two beliefs at once. First, that suicide is not acceptable. Second, that there are other ways in which it is acceptable for people to subject themselves to situations which could lead to their own death. Mainly, the arguments are that preservation of life is valuable. Further, destruction of something precious is viewed negatively. Therefore, the common mind set is: even if death will result, it must be that the greater good and highest values will be served. This is only all the more true in the event that such a sacrifice of life is made.

The friends cover another belief found in formal education within philosophy. However, as a cultural idea, it is not presently popular. This is the idea that there is no such thing as learning anything new. Instead, it is only possible to remember knowledge and truths that already exist. This theory was heavily effected by the lack of scientific knowledge of both the brain and mind. This was also another symbol of the importance of the branch of philosophy known as epistemology: theories of knowledge. Here the theory reconnects with ideas of the eternal and immortal. Plato is the founder of what is called Idealism in philosophy. This means that principles and ideas are seen as having a level of existence all their own. There is lack of clarity regarding whether these ideas are inseparable from the mind or not. All knowledge therefore has existence, just as a tree and a rock exist even though ideas are ethereal as air. This being the case, as a human being grows and develops, he or she remembers knowledge that already exists. This

appears to be learning. The Greeks surrounding Socrates on the day of his death review this. In it, they see evidence of immortality as the transmigration of souls.

The transmigration of souls means simply that the knowledge, ideas and possibly some elements of personality exist, like knowledge and ideas as shown above, before, during and after any given individual's life. Obviously, this is pertinent to them all, as they are facing the death of one of their beloved friends. They draw from this conversation the notion that people must have lived prior their current incarnation and that after some time in the underworld they will remerge once again amongst the living as mortals. Of course, they are seeking comfort in this, as they have no foreknowledge that Socrates will be, if not immortalized, famous and honored thousands of years after his death by people he and friends have not ever imagined.

There is enough argument in the dialog for others to criticize and to work within their efforts to reach their own conclusions. One matter is the question of whether invisible ideas are consistently unchanging.

Debate regarding these matters continues in the dialog itself. A small number of prevalent theories about the afterlife are brought forward by those in attendance. The editor notes to readers that each theory represented seemed to show their intimacy with the entire reality and conception of "soul": what one is, whether or not it is or can be separate from a living body. How it can or cannot be, and what it is impervious to and what it might be susceptible to.

There is a crisis point about halfway through the dialog. Socrates and Phaedo have been temporarily defeated by Simmias and Cebes regarding the nature of the human soul. Here they face a stark reality most readers will be able to relate to. There are the ideas and beliefs of which they are aware. There is what they hope the truth to be. There is the truth. Then is the question of how to get at the truth and how to know it with certainty when it is found. Finally, it might be necessary to cope with the truth if there are disruptive implications of within one's own mind or even for a given culture. At this juncture, there is a display of physical affection between Phaedo and Socrates and a joint plea on how to carry on with the discourse and overcome the difficulty. Socrates strongly suggests assistance which seems to surprise his young friend.

There is a digression that has value in its own right. Socrates covers two topics. One is what he calls "mislogic" and the other is misanthropy. He says that both stem from disappointment based upon a misapprehension of the truth in the first place. There is a metaphor to explain it. When you know what something is really like: whether it be a tree or an individual or the system of logic, then you understand its limitations reasonably well. As such, you place upon it only demands which can be met and do not suffer from disappointment when it cannot comply to some request that is entirely inappropriate or inapplicable. Disappointment is less likely and real when requests and judgments are made within proper reason and based upon appropriate expectations. This will not release people from all disappointment but is less apt to lead to misanthropy. Commonly this is called disillusionment, when a fantasy image collapses into knowledge of the reality. Socrates is just saying that people need not hate logical

argument just because there is a limit to what one can do with them and that there are times when one's own limits or logic's limitations will bring results that are less than desired.

Book 5, The Phaedo: Chapter 3, The Phaedo Conclusion & Notes

Book 5, The Phaedo: Chapter 3, The Phaedo Conclusion & Notes Summary and Analysis

This is the second half of the final dialog. Unlike the other dialogs there are notes after the end of the book as well as before. Together these describe the The Last Days of Socrates. There are a number of other dialogs written by Plato in which Socrates is a major figure. Readers might be impressed by the discretion and subtlety of Plato in terms of his relation to Socrates within the dialogs. He is not unheard of, but he is "just one of those who are counted amongst his friends."

This begins in the midst of the dialog, right after Socrates and Phaedo have felt overwhelmed by the strength of the arguments put forward by some of their other friends. Socrates explains that when people understand the reality of human nature then they will not tend towards misanthropy because they will have reasonable expectations regarding human behavior. The acceptance of reality serves to protect them against misjudgment and disappointment.

Socrates sets forth the distinction between searching for the truth and winning. Argument can be used for both. He admits that while in reality they need to seek the truth, his emotion of the moment is purely competitive: he just wants to win, or at least try to, irrespective of the truth of the matter. He calms himself and proceeds. Readers may be improved by knowing that it is normal for there to be times when one comes upon an idea or an argument that is astonishingly powerful and unexpected and which has an unpredicted effect upon one's own mind or position.

The next part of the dialog is devoted to a further examination of what happens to people at death. They want to see if they can defend the attunement theory or not, after what has come before. To do this, Socrates turns to the area of natural philosophy. This does involve how bases for arguments and what constitutes knowledge intertwine in the development of arguments. Readers should be alerted to circularity of arguments where a rooted presumption winds up having the form of a long and drawn out conclusion. There are ways in which this makes sense, but at times it may only reveal what one depends upon as a starting point.

Later, Socrates gets into a very different aspect of philosophy and life. Here he gets into reasons for doing things and also describes how some matters are not reasons but that attributing reasons to some occurrences is a type of misjudgment. He admits that he has had to become a certain way in order to be able to do what it right in the case of his trial and accepting the sentence. However, he says that the factors that enabled him to do what is right, although necessary, are not the reason for it. Later on in philosophy this line of reasoning comes to be known as necessary and sufficient causes. Just as one

cannot drive a car without having a vehicle, even when having the skill, if one knows what is right or just but due to some other cause does not have the power to do it, then this means that some necessity is lacking in relation to action. In this way, Socrates means that he is staying in Athens and is going to drink hemlock because it is just; fortunately he has the disposition to meet the challenge rather than running away; that is necessary but is neither the reason nor the purpose. However, everything in his life that made him such that he could hold his ground and meet his fate has been valuable as it ensured that he was able to meet necessary conditions to do what is just.

Further into the discourse, Socrates takes up a line of conversation in which there is an effort to distinguish between essential qualities and those that can be altered without ruining or destroying the identity of an individual. This has a relationship to both personal limitations and to immortality. One's given language or culture or religion are all parts of life that can be involved with this. Socrates is such that, apparently, being Athenian is an integral portion of his identity. If it were not the case, then leaving Athens, due to the trouble, would not be so problematic. Everything that can be altered about a person without the change destroying the person's identity is called "accidental" by the philosophers.

Socrates is visited. The distinction between the little interaction between himself and even his wife and children when compared with the amount of attention that he pays to his friends is something that many readers may find upsetting. Apparently, he puts his friends before and after his family.

The orders arrive. The man who delivers it is openly grateful for the graciousness with which the philosopher is so willingly meeting his fate. Crito takes his friend to bathe and then returns, refreshed. Shortly thereafter the poison is brought in. He asks if he can offer any of it to the gods and is told that there is not enough for that. The weeping of his friends increases. He admonishes them, and they all feel ashamed. He tells them that the crying and whatnot are the only reason that he did not allow the women to be there. This being the case he does not want to simply tolerate the same behavior from the men.

With great difficulty and artifice they comply. He drinks the poison. The results are apparently painless yet devastating. Cold and numbness set in, much in the same manner that people can freeze to death. His final words are a request that a rooster be given to Asclepius. Asclepius is a god of healing. It is most likely that the last words he ever heard spoken to him by another mortal were Crito assuring him that his dying wish would be carried out.

Characters

Socrates

This Athenian was born in 469 BC. He was very loyal to his homeland. During his adult life he developed a reputation within Athens. He made both friends and enemies by meeting and speaking with people. He was outspoken but also humble, curious, prepared to discover that he had been mistaken. He never did get a higher degree or certificate of education, but spent a lot of free time chasing after teachers and drawing them into conversation.

He lived through a military campaign in which Athens confronted the Spartans.

He is advertised as the focal point of these books but in truth he is not. Although when alive his numerous conversations provided plentiful attention and relationships with others, when one pays attention to what he is saying it is plain that he is dealing with timeless concerns that affect all of us. In that respect, the works of Socrates are not ever about Socrates.

Justice is one of the philosopher's famous key words. His pursuit of such topics began as socially acceptable inquiry but led to more. He cultivated spirited views so powerful, perhaps in part due to his socially prominent friends, that the local government began to develop an active but decidedly negative interest in him.

Plato

Plato was an oligarch of Athens. He was born in 428 BC. When an adult, he at some time became familiar with Socrates. He invited the older man to many parties, and strongly encouraged the man to both engage others in conversation and to also get drunk together with them.

Plato developed into a philosopher in his own right. He became very powerful in the city of Athens. He became a head instructor at a local educational institution, The Academy. Plato is the author of all of the dialogs in the book. He wrote in the Athenian Greek of the time.

At Plato's Academy in Athens philosophy and wrestling were studied in tandem because a healthy, vigorous approach on all these levels is strongly advocated by Plato. It is also true that some young men cannot sit still to learn math or philosophy until after they have spent a few hours grappling amongst themselves or with their instructors. Not only that, but ultimately, this may reduce some tensions that may come to the fore as argumentativeness or other manifestations of anger.

Aristotle

Aristotle was mentored by Plato. He was a Macedonian from the Kingdom that during his middle years became dominated by Alexander the Great, to whom he had been a personal and private instructor for two years during the King's youth.

For some time, Aristotle was such a prominent student that people watched to see whether he might become Plato's successor. With time it became readily apparent that the differences of opinion or philosophical outlook made this impossible.

This sad fact led to great things. Aristotle founded the second university of Athens. He turned into a fantastic philosopher in his own right. Unlike Plato, Aristotle permitted women students at his educational institution. A woman named Climenestra later taught his philosophy in Athens.

Aristotle is only located in a chronological table at the forefront of this book. He does not factor directly in the texts. When most of them were written, Aristotle had not yet even been born. Even so, the final work of this text was written at the time when Aristotle had developed into a force to be reckoned with.

The King Archon

This name is listed early on in the notes as well as in the text. He was a magistrate whose position included both religious and legal duties. There had been a change in how the people were organized such that, prior to his role as magistrate, a monarch had fulfilled all of his political functions.

Euthyphro

This is the name of a main figure who engages Socrates at length in dialog. The name Euthyphro is also listed at the back, right at the front of the notes.

Hugh Tredennick

This is a deceased English scholar. He was born in 1899 and died in 1982. He is credited with translating this edition of the Platonic dialogs. He achieved a double first in Classics from Trinity Hall at Cambridge. He taught classics at Royal Holloway College there in his home country of England and rose in the academic ranks to the level of Dean of the Faculty of the Arts where he presided in the giant city of London, England for four years,1956-1960.

After that, whilst in some ways receding into obscurity, in other respects he came forth as he became an editor. He is perhaps most publicly esteemed for his work providing translations of a work by Xenophon entitled "Memoirs" of Socrates.

Harold Tarrant

Harold Tarrant, like the man preceding him, is an English scholar. He was educated in Britain at Cambridge and Durham. Seeking an academic post in Greek and Classics, he moved to Australia.

While located in Australia, he has continued to be operative in the overlapping fields of philosophy and classics. He has continued to work on ancient Greek texts by Plato.

Athena: Athena Polias: Goddess Athena

This is the matron goddess of Athens, hence the intimate connection between the names of her and of the city. She is known for hunting, and for wisdom. Often depicted as armored, Athena has also been called a daughter of Zeus. Unlike his other children, however, the mighty goddess Athena was born out of her father's head.

Chaerephon

This is a dear friend of Socrates' at the beginning of the Apology. During the time of the trial, the man is deceased, but Socrates explains how it was in fact Chaerephon who raised the quiestion of Socrates' wisdom to the oracle of the god Apollo at Delphi. This man, not Socrates himself, was the one who asked the oracle "is there anyone wiser than Socrates?" The priestess-oracle serving Apollo told Chaerephon "No."

Apollo

This was a much loved ancient Grecian god. He was known for music and for light. He was reputed to be physically beautiful and also quite kind. He was protective of his mother and generous with his followers. He delivered knowledge and wisdom, amongst other gifts, to those loyal to him. He is referred to early in the Apology because it is one of his priestess's that tells Chearephon that the answer to the question, "Is there another who is wiser than Socrates?" is "No."

Meletus

This is a man of Athens, Greece in 399 BC. He is the one who prosecutes Socrates in Athens. Socrates refers to him during the Apology. He refers to Meletus as one of the poets who was offended by what is later renowned as Socratic inquiry.

Anytus

This was an Athenian politician of the years around 399 BC. Athens had re-established her democratic political stability. He was also personally offended by the questioning of

Socrates that seemed to undermine the sense of certainty regarding their own decisions and sense of personal wisdom. Socrates refers to him in the Apology, and he also appears in the notes for this dialog.

Lycon

This is another Athenian offended by Socrates. In the Apology, the term "interrogations" has been chosen to sometimes describe the probing and intimidating nature of the questions. In the Apology, Socrates refers to this man as representative of the entire body of local orators. In the notes it shows that he, like Meletus, has no known reputation beyond their being referred to in the dialog as local persons.

Anaxagoras

This is a philosopher. He is referred to by Socrates during the Apology. Socrates informs the jury that Meletus seems to have him confused with Anaxagoras by virtue of the way that Meletus has interpreted the beliefs of Socrates. Anaxagoras was known to have postulated that the Sun might be some kind of incandescent ball rather than solely a god, and that the Moon could well also be and have some physical cause. Although entirely correct, he was in fact persecuted extensively for this.

Thirty Tyrants

This was one label given to an oligarchy that ruled Athens for years between periods of democratic governance. These men were also known as the Thirty Commissioners. This comes up during the Apology when Socrates is explaining his life situation to the jury. He tells them that despite intimidation he did not succumb to the majority's wish for him to act against the Athenian Constitution under the tyrants.

Objects/Places

Athens

This is still a city in Greece. However, at the time that the dialogs take place, the region now known as the nation of Greece was internally governed by independently run cities commonly known as city-states. These were centered in constitutions that included extensive voting rights amongst citizens.

The city-state had a prosperous economy and was often the dominant city-state of the Grecian region. Her main competitor was the city-state of Sparta. The city-states would unite for the purposes of facing larger external enemies or other threats to the Greek way of life.

The people of the time were generally polytheistic pagans. During the era of Socrates, there had been a few philosophers who wrote of an underlying or overarching unity in the cosmos but the main one that survives is called Parmenides who claimed that everything is made up of water.

Greece

There has been thousands of years of political experience between the time during which this book was written in ancient Greece and the present day. The vast majority of the area that is presently the Greek nation was, at the time the book was written, culturally united and did have some inter-state councils to serve the group interests of the region, but there was no such thing as the nation of Greece. The cultural unity, however, set the stage for what has since developed into an actual politically organized nation.

Sparta

This is a city in the nation of Greece in South-Central Europe. It is located on the Northern side of the Mediterranean Sea. This was an independent city-state during the time that the dialogs were written. It was the other dominant city-state of the region controlled by culturally Grecian city-states.

The Spartans were famed for their devoted love of the military lifestyle and the entire culture of the city-state supported their soldiers. The women of Sparta were said of by many outsiders to have a noticeably large amount of liberty.

King's Porch

This is the location of the opening scene in the Euthyphro dialog. It is what readers know as a court—the location of the legal system and the place where trials and other litigation take place within a given legal jurisdiction.

Lyceum

This is a location where Socrates was known for spending a lot of his free time. It was a public, or semi-public place. It is called a gymnasium in the notes to the text. Most evidence of it comes from writings and as a consequence what exactly it was and what the atmosphere was like depends upon a combination of reconstruction and creative imagination.

It is most likely that only grown men were permitted at the Lyceum. Socrates was known to enjoy the company of younger men. Bisexual behavior was either very common amongst the Greeks of that time or it happens to have been the case that some of history's most prominent figures practiced bisexual lifestyles. Socrates is known to have had a wife with whom he had children. Even so, he was also known to relate to some men sexually. The Lyceum is one of the locations where he often spent time with other men.

The Robe

This is an item directly connected with religious celebrations. Every four years, this item is used to honor the goddess Athena Polias. The object had grown so sacred that it had become identified with the city herself. It is embroidered for the occasion.

Apparently there is some image upon it depicting a battle between gods and giants—a scene which mysteriously shows up in other cultures at other times.

Acropolis

These occur in locations where the norm was to fortify cities, to have walls, ramparts, armed guards and such many of means for protecting those living and doing business in the city from outside threats. The Grecian city-states had fortified areas for this purpose. The name of this part of the city of Athens is the Acropolis. It appears in the Euthyphro, early in the book and very late in the work amongst the notes.

Delphi

A city in Greece, a city-state during the era in which Plato and Socrates lived. It is North of Athens. It is mentioned in the second dialog of the book because of the oracle of Apollo that answered a question about Socrates.

Oracle

This is an individual who has a religious role. The position is more "occultic" than the standard cleric religious role. These persons, in the ancient Greek world were permitted to practice fortune telling, to use trance consciousness and other mystical means to generate true answers to questions in addition to applying the more customary means of learning and sharing knowledge. These were often women.

An oracle is mentioned in the Apology when Socrates in defending his case to the large public jury in the city of Athens in 399 BC.

Delphic Oracle

This refers to the woman working as an oracle at the Temple of Apollo in the city-state of Delphi in Greece during in the years surrounding and including 370 BC. The term includes the specific individual but also all the others who filled this same role. It comes up in the book with respect to the particular woman priestess of Apollo who responded to Chearephon's question for Apollo: "Is there another wiser than Socrates?" with the answer "No." Socrates relies upon this as motivation for a great deal of his philosophical inquiry in the city of Athens and in fact refers to it at his trial in 399 BC as having been a source of great impetus. He had endeavored to figure out what the oracle's answer meant.

The Assembly

This was a political body of Athens. Every citizen was free to attend. Socrates was permitted to go there but did not. It is mentioned in the Apology.

The Council

This was a political body of 500 people. This was part of the organizational system of the city-state. In the Apology it refers to the Council of the city-state of Athens. During the Apology, Socrates explains to the jury that the Council is the only civic function that he held in Athens. He refers to a time when Athens was ruled by democracy, then governed by an oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants, and then returned to the current state of democracy.

Clazomenae

This is a location in Greece closely associated with Anaxagoras. It comes up during the Apology in The Last Days of Socrates. Socrates is attempting to defend himself with respect to the religious views of the era and location.

Pyrateum

This is a location to which Socrates refers in the Apology. He refers to it as a place where it is possible to get food. He also describes it as a place for athletic champions.

Themes

Justice

One major theme of these dialogs is an exploration of "What is the meaning of justice?"

The reason why this matters so much is because it has a direct effect upon Socrates' behavior. He insists to Crito in the third dialog that his beliefs pertaining to what "just" means is the very reason why he has accepted the sentence.

This very question, "What is just?" is just the kind of thing that got him into trouble in Athens in the first place. This question is explored here and there in various dialogs but is crucial when Crito implores Socrates to permit him to assist in his friend's escape from prison.

It makes sense for readers who hold life as the highest value that Crito would urge this. However, for Socrates, although human life does have a high value, there are other values which are of such priority that they can even override those of life preservation. One such value is justice. Typically, it operates in life's favor. In fact, Socrates and Crito refer to preservation and protection of life to be part and parcel of "what is just." Ideas that are still prevalent include "protecting one's own." This to some extent also involves voluntary submission and cooperation with a greater socially organized body and set of systems. These include politics and law. This is why the twofold nature of rights & responsibilities has always been a matter of great social significance. Whoever is granted rights, must be able to fulfill the responsibilities that come along with those rights. Socrates has agreed to come under the rights and duties of Athenians. He has also agreed to submit to Apollo and has acted so as to say that he feels it more important to fulfill his divine duty than it is for him to live in accordance with the city's laws. However, he also admits and agrees that should the laws of the city-state directly effect this, that he will be consistent. This does take strength of character. In fact, it is this which Socrates asserts that he will take with him to the grave and beyond, pleased that he has not wavered.

Questions of Correct Knowledge

One of the themes running through the dialogs is the matter of truth. Some of the philosophers have suggested what in modern language is known as pre-scientific or scientific explanations of how the physical world works. The reason that this creates an issue is because of how such matters might be tested but also how such realities influence and impact religious views. In fact, this is one of the charges made by Meletus against Socrates at Athens.

Epistemology is what the study of knowledge is called within the field of philosophy. This area of research covers and seeks answers to fundamental questions: "How can we know?"; and "What do we know?" The present day's scientific methodology is one of the

most well developed and extensive means for coming into knowledge and having certainty of it. This has required a tremendous amount of effort on the part of millions over millenia to achieve. The method of Socrates' questioning of others has a connection with the beginnings of how and why the scientific method was devised. He does this because by asking people what they think and why, he reveals the patterns of their own "epistemologies" along with their ignorance. The idea and practice of being able to have knowledge and to discern truth from falsehood is of great importance throughout the world. The difficulty is the way that many of society's institutions, especially religious ones, felt threatened by such ideas. The situation of Socrates on trial in Athens, Greece in 399 BC exemplifies what can happen when there is a negative reaction when someone stirs up ideas or reveals false knowledge and ignorance amongst his own people.

In reality, Socrates was in a tough situation regarding the charges against him that he did not follow the local religion. The truth was that he was not against the religious life of Athens. However, it was true that his beliefs did not conform to the mold of standardized views on the local gods. He also openly acknowledged his "daemon" or "guiding voice" which he attributed to deity. In addition to this he explicitly tells the jury in the Apology that all the wisdom shown belongs to the deity rather than to himself. Whether Socrates believed this or felt compelled by the political circumstances to express it this way is not clear.

The fact that Socrates undermined many people's sense of security regarding some of their knowledge and wisdom was what really got him into trouble in Athens. This is because knowledge and belief often do influence human behavior, attitudes and feelings. This shows most clearly when Socrates confronts Euthyphro in the first dialog because he questions the motives and the underlying beliefs that have propelled the younger man's decision to officially and legally charge his father with the crime of murder there in the city-state. All this and more shows how important correct knowledge is. It is also sadly reveals that all too often humanity prefers a fine lie to the truth.

Style

Perspective

This work is complex in certain ways. There are four works by Plato included. The first three of these were written closest to one another in time. The last of the four was written many years later. Every one has been translated from ancient Greek into modern English through the conscientious efforts of a number of scholars.

There are copious notes provided in between the individual dialogs. These will seem unecessary or even redundant to those readers who find the original works easy to understand in translation. However, for those who are going to be taking exams on the material or who do not find it so clear, the notes are very helpful. People intrigued by the temporal distance will be happy that scholars have taken the trouble to give some account of the cultural context from which this work has emerged.

The notes have all been provided by Englishmen especially trained in Classics. The works are a cross-over between the fields of philosophy and classics, due to the historical nature and philosophical relevance of the dialogs.

The perspective of the dialogs are of course colored by their appearance in translation. There is no discernible narrative voice within any of the individual dialogs. The editors have padded each dialog with introductions and concise messages that serve as a narrator. These are most often suggestive that the text is being used by university or high school students as part of a formal educational course. Of course they are also handy for any person who has chosen to read the book but may not be familiar with the Socratic method.

The language is clear and is written much as spoken word. As in a play or other media script, the dialogs have more than one point of view, each delivered from a first person perspective but labeled. This marking of the names is the only reference point to make a third person interpretation of the entire work of prose.

Tone

The tone is mixed, depending upon whether the reader is working with the introductions, notes or the dialogs themselves. The works written by the editor-scholars are mainly for instruction. They provide readers with supplemental information that can be helpful for those who take a strong interest in what they are reading.

The tone of the dialogs themselves are conversational. The emotional tenor of each varies in accordance with the topic at hand within the dialog itself. It is mainly in this respect that the characters become known: through their ideas and their reactions to certain suggestions that Socrates or some other thinker puts forth.

The focus is on information but within the Socratic dialogs there is typically a personal and emotional element. Perhaps the author Plato was simply showing that these dialogs occurred as part of the philosopher's personal life. As such, none of them have the quality of cold objectivity that readers of today might closely associate with professionalism.

Structure

The Last Days of Socrates is actually an assemblage of Plato's works about Socrates. The book is comprised of introductions with notes from scholars and English translations of Plato's actual writings, each in themselves treated as a book.

The Socratic dialog is a particular literary form. It is nonfiction, but there is some artifice involved. However, the fictional part is more like speculation and theoretical models rather than literary fiction.

The entire composite is artistically yet realistically arranged. In this sense it culminates in the end of Socrates' life. The present book's format, linking these four dialogs into one unit was not made by Plato, but by Thrassylus a few centuries later. This is mentioned elsewhere in the summary because it is of great importance.

The four dialogs are interspersed with notes from the scholarly editors. These are often helpful but readers may choose to simply pass over them if they are very intent upon getting the original work. The published editions are apt to show the most variance in how the actual dialogs have been supplemented. It is mainly this that will cause variations in the pagination of the versions available on the market.

Quotes

"'No, it shall be done,' said Crito, 'Are you sure there is nothing else?'" p. 199.

"We only prepare what we regard as the normal dose," p. 198.

"Calm yourselves and be brave," p. 198.

"'And yet two and three are not opposites,'" p. 182.

"'So it is not only the opposite Forms which cannot face one another's approach; there are other things to which cannot face the approach of opposites," p. 182.

"'I follow and agree perfectly,' said Cebes," p. 182.

"...because this reason for the former becoming two is the opposite of the former one..." p. 172.

"Then listen and I will tell you, Cebes. When I was young I had an extraordinary passion for that branch of learning known as natural science," p. 170.

"...anyone who does not know, and cannot prove that the soul is immortal must be afraid, unless he is a fool," p. 170.

[from an editor's italicized insertion] "Here Socrates argues from one property of the soul to another, but not from what it actually is," p. 146.

"'What you and Cebes say is perfectly fair,' said Socrates. 'You mean, I suppose, that I must make a court-style defence against this charge,'" p. 123.

"When Socrates had listened to this, he seemed to me to be delighted with Cebes' persistence, and looking round at us he said, 'You know, Cebes is always tracking down arguments, and he is not at all willing to accept every statement at first hearing,'" p. 122.

[Tarrant's italicized insertion] "The philosopher avoids suicide but welcomes death," p. 120.

Topics for Discussion

Have the dialogs influenced your perceptions and ideas about God or the gods' existance?

Formulate a view about the use of the written dialog as a means to provide philosophical education. Is this a good idea or not? Why or why not?

Which of these four dialogs is your favorite? Explain why.

Agree or disagree with Socrates' arguments about life after death.

Agree or disagree with Socrates' decision to choose death by forced suicide over life in exile. Defend your answer.

Formulate a perspective regarding a known fact: Socrates was financially too poor or unwilling to spend his money on formal courses, or only opted for the cheap ones. Even so, he managed to find educated people and to engage them in conversation so much about intellectual matters that he ended up with a reputation as a practicing philosopher and in trouble with the law in Athens for this very activity.

Discuss this.

Define piety according to the Greeks of ancient Athens.

How much do you feel that the notes added by the modern scholars helped? Explain your answer.

What do you think of Alcibiades? Provide 3 sentences of opinion.

If the goddess Athena is revered by having statues of her in the city, is there any significance to having statues of "Lady Justice" prominently displayed at contemporary urban court houses? Explain how the two are connected. Also describe how these two examples of urban statues differ.

Which do you think is more important: laws of the land or the dictates of personal loyalties both within the bounds of the laws and beyond? Defend your answer.

Compare the view of ethics of Athens, Greece found in the dialogs to the situation in the location in which you presently live with respect to law and religion. Does your location clearly align itself more with the views of Socrates, or with the city-state of Athens? Explain your answer.