

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jul '08

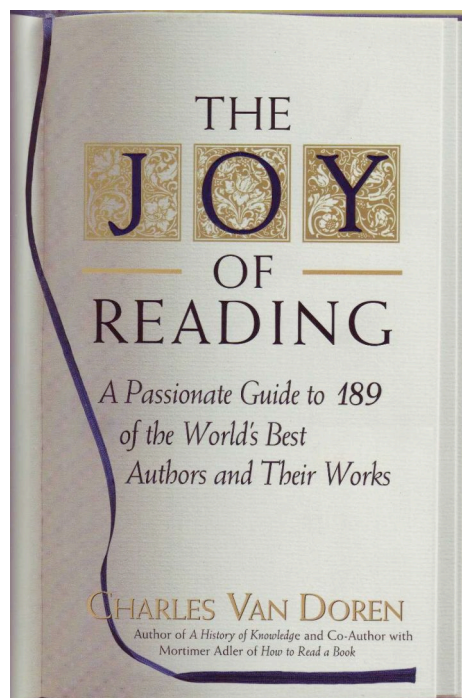
Nº 481

*This book is as contagious as it
was intended to be.*

—Mortimer J. Adler

Like a professor whose enthusiasm inspires his students, Charles Van Doren explains what's wonderful in the classic and contemporary books you've missed, and awakens your desire to reopen the works you've loved. This engaging love letter to reading explores the work of the authors who transformed the world: from Aristotle and Herodotus in ancient Greece to Salinger and Vonnegut in 20th century America.

Divided chronologically by the eras in which these books were written, each work is put in historical context and brought to life by Van Doren's sometimes surprising and always insightful comments. *The Joy of Reading* delves into a wide range of genres—fiction, poetry, drama, children's books, philosophy, history, and science. Also offered is a unique ten-year reading plan, made up of a grand variety of the world's greatest books.



THE JOY OF READING

CHARLES VAN DOREN

PLATO

428?-347 BCE

The Republic

The Symposium

The Trial and Death of Socrates

Plato was born in Athens about 428 BCE, the son of aristocratic parents who traced their lineage, on his father's side, to the god Poseidon, and on his mother's to the lawgiver Solon. Plato's early ambitions were political, but the last quarter of the fifth century in Athens was no time for an honest politician, so Plato instead founded a philosophical school, the Academy, which was in many respects the first university (besides philosophy, it taught and underwrote researches in all the sciences, law, and medicine). Plato's own favorite study was mathematics, and he was closely associated with all of the mathematical discoveries of the fourth century. He had one eventful, and finally dangerous, brush with practical politics. He journeyed twice to Sicily, the leading Greek colony, to try to educate its unruly rulers, but gave up when he realized how little rulers desire to be educated. As to his character and talents, perhaps it is sufficient to quote Aristotle, who declared him to be a man "whom it is blasphemy in the base even to praise." Plato lived to be about eighty years old. His Academy survived him by more than eight hundred years.

Plato wrote dialogues throughout his life. Most of them have as their main character Socrates, who was Plato's teacher. Socrates plays many roles in the dialogues of Plato, but he is always the center of the drama as well as being—we must assume—the presenter of Plato's own views. In his last dialogues (for example, the *Laws*), Plato discards Socrates and replaces him with an "Athenian Stranger" who is surely Plato himself. This protagonist is nowhere as interesting as Socrates, who enlivens the many dialogues in which he appears with his odd mannerisms and his unique way of discussing philosophy. In a sense, Socrates and Plato, although in fact two different men, are inseparable in our minds. Certainly each of them owes most of his fame to the other.

The *Republic*, the greatest as well as the longest of Plato's Socratic dialogues, cannot be dated accurately, but we can guess that Plato wrote it during his middle years. It retains the freshness and charm of his earliest writings but at the same time reveals a profundity of philosophical thought that is characteristic of his later works.

Like all of the Platonic dialogues, but especially the early ones, *Republic* is both a dramatic and a philosophical work. It is written in the form of an account by Socrates, Plato's teacher, of a long conversation that had occurred on the previous day, involving a number of different people of varying opinions, and also involving some very heated interchanges. Socrates had been the main speaker.

The subject of the dialogue is justice, the search for which had obsessed Socrates for years. What does justice mean? Can it be shown that justice is always a good and injustice always an evil, apart from any consideration of consequences? Socrates maintains that this can be done. The *Republic* is Plato's attempt to do it.

In the dialogue, Socrates first describes a conversation with Cephalus, an elderly rich man of Athens who has been Socrates' friend for many years. Like so many others, Cephalus does not care to strive to understand justice. The next interlocutor is Thrasymachus, the Athenian general, who is certain he already understands it: justice is the interest of the strong. Might makes right, no bones about it. Socrates describes his spirited battle of wits with Thrasymachus, who retires from the fray disgruntled and unhappy.

Socrates is not happy either. He knows that making your opponent look like a fool isn't the best way to win an argument. Two young men, followers of Socrates, agree, and ask their master to take the time and make the effort to instruct them in the meaning of justice. I will do so, Socrates says, if you will help me, and the search begins.

It ranges far and digs deep. Plato has Socrates concede from the start that justice is a hard idea to understand in the life of a man—so hard he proposes to magnify it, as it were, and view it in the context of a state. A state is good, he finds—that is, just—when every member of it takes his rightful and proper place within it and performs his rightful and proper role. Those who are naturally laborers and merchants take those jobs, those who are naturally soldiers find themselves guarding the state, and the most competent and intelligent of all are rulers. When philosophers are kings, Socrates says to Glaucon and Adeimantus, and kings philosophers,

then and then only will states be truly just. Once this conclusion is reached it is applied to individuals. The three types of citizens correspond to three parts of the soul, and only when a man is ruled by his intellectual part, with his appetitive and spirited parts playing their necessary but subservient roles, can he be said to be just.

The conversation, which occupied an entire day and the account of which fills three hundred pages, covers many subjects. Two of them are the system of education to be developed in the ideal state—the “republic” of the title—and the place of artistic productions, notably music and theater, in such a state. Socrates’—or Plato’s—ideas about education are both radical and modern. Plato held, for example, that education should be the leading concern of the state, that it should be provided free to all, and among the “all” he included girls and women, maintaining that there should be no difference between their education and that of boys and men. He was the first serious thinker in human history to take this position and one of the very few to take it before modern times.

Regarding the place of art in a just society Plato was not nearly so modern; in fact he proposed and seems to have believed, that works of imaginative artistry—poems, songs, plays, and so forth—should be banned altogether as being essentially subversive of the state’s true health. Plato left a loophole in this severe position, and Aristotle took advantage of it in his *Poetics*. It is an interesting, if not a pleasant, theory nevertheless.

The English philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead once said that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” He could have said footnotes to the *Republic*, for almost all of Plato’s ideas are at least touched upon in this dialogue. Plato puts these ideas in the mouth of Socrates, of course. The real Socrates, on the other hand, may have been the source, or at least the inspiration, of the dialogue’s most potent images. No reader who has seriously read this greatest of philosophical books will ever forget the story of the Cave, the account of the Divided Line of knowledge, or Socrates’ retelling of the Myth of Er, which closes the dialogue. These and other moments are wonderfully dramatic whether or not they are also profoundly true. (I think the myth of the cave, when properly understood, is true.)

The *Republic* of Plato is far from a mere entertainment for an evening. Purchase or borrow a good translation (I suggest that of F.M. Cornford, with copious notes), block out a period of some consecutive days—ten or more would not be too many—accept no en-

gagements of any sort, prepare a quiet space with a table close by with paper and pencils on it (for your own inevitable notes), and begin the incomparable journey. Everyone who counts for anything has taken it, and in twenty five hundred years very few, I believe, who have seriously made the effort have been other than glad they did.

Every one of Plato's dialogues is a human drama as well as an intellectual discourse, but none is more entertaining than the *Symposium*, or banquet. Here is what happens on that night when there occurred one of the most famous dinner parties ever held.

The company is large and all male. Some twenty men sit, or rather recline, on couches, around a long, low table. Socrates was not among those originally invited, but he is brought by another guest and warmly welcomed by the host, Agathon, who the day before has won the prize for his first tragedy; the party is in celebration of the victory. The first question asked by the host is whether the company shall drink hard or not. The majority say not, which opens the way for rational discourse unspoiled by drunkenness, and the female flute players, whose activities would also spoil rational discourse, are sent away. A subject is chosen, and it is decided that each guest shall speak in turn, going around the table and ending with Socrates, who all agree is the best speaker.

The subject is love. Fine speeches are made about it, but all are rather solemn until that of Aristophanes, the comic poet. To explain the power of love, Aristophanes says that once upon a time we were not divided into two sexes but instead were wholes, with both sexes in one person; round creatures, we rolled from place to place and were contented with our lot. But the gods, to punish us for some transgression, split us in half and now we go through the world seeking our other half and are not happy until we have found him or her. "A likely story!" the other guests cry. Aristophanes smiles, knowing full well that his tale is worth a dozen of their speeches.

Finally it is Socrates' turn. He is as elusive, and his speech as strange and unexpected, as ever. He tells of a meeting long ago with a prophetess, Diotima, who taught him about love. Love is the desire for eternity implanted in a mortal being; we seek love, she said, in order through our offspring to overcome our mortality and leave something enduring behind us. Thus we can love our works as well as our children, Socrates is explaining, when suddenly the doors are thrown wide and into the banquet chamber bursts a com-

pany of half-drunken revelers who insist on joining the party—and who refuse to accept the rule of no hard drinking.

The leader of this ribald band is none other than Alcibiades, the greatest man of Athens (by now Pericles is dead), the hero who has been chosen to command the Athenian expedition against Syracuse that is to embark the next day. Alcibiades, brilliant, handsome, rich, and unpredictable, soon discovers what has been the order of the evening and demands to be heard, whether or not it is his turn. No one has ever denied Alcibiades, and he begins to speak.

His speech is one of the most moving ever made, and it produces a high drama in this dialogue. For Alcibiades discourses not of love itself but of Socrates his beloved friend, the man who above all, he says, has made him what he is but who also above all, Alcibiades admits, disapproves of what he is. For Socrates, says Alcibiades, is the most demanding of teachers and you can never satisfy him; he always wants more from you, indeed nothing less than all you can give.

Alcibiades tells stories about their life together, in the army and out, how Socrates once saved his life in battle, and how his own attempts to seduce Socrates into a life of pleasure and ease have utterly failed. Finally he describes Socrates in an unforgettable image. Socrates, says Alcibiades, is like those cheap little statues of Silenus, the god of drunkards, which are to be found in all the markets—little clay figurines that, when broken open, are found to enclose a sweet within. Socrates is just such a figure, says Alcibiades, with his short, squat body and his rolling gait, his simple courtesy, and most of all his homely manner of speech. But, says Alcibiades, when you break open those simple words and sentences and truly seek to understand them, “you find a delicious treasure at the center that is to be found in the words of no other person and which is, in short,” Alcibiades concludes, “the whole duty of a good and honorable man.” And, repeating that he will praise Socrates in this figure and drink to him, too, Alcibiades raises his glass and drinks deep. Thereafter he insists that all do likewise, whereupon the party disintegrates into a rout.

It ends hours later in another famous scene. Alcibiades is long gone, together with his companions; most of the other guests are sleeping, on or under the table; but Socrates, together with Agathon and Aristophanes and one or two others, are soberly discussing, as the first light of day shows in the windows, the nature of tragedy and of comedy. Socrates is defending the interesting proposition that “in the deepest sense they are the same.”

The banquet, or its consequences, did not end there, as Plato well knew. Alcibiades, on actually leaving this party, went on a drunken revel through the city. As a joke he, or some of his friends, or perhaps some of his enemies (in order falsely to accuse him later), defiled many of the little statues of household gods that stood outside of houses. This caused no comment at the time, and Alcibiades sailed for Syracuse in all the glory of Athenian might. Once he'd gone, however, Alcibiades' enemies became dominant in the government and accused him of impiously destroying the religious icons, and on failing to appear he was tried and convicted in absentia. No longer able to command the expedition, Alcibiades deserted to the enemy and gave over his command to Nicaeus, who shortly suffered the worst defeat in Athenian history. This led to the final defeat of Athens by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Socrates, harmed in reputation by his close association with the traitor Alcibiades, was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens—meaning Alcibiades—and put to death.

Was all this in Plato's mind when he wrote? Certainly. What then was he saying in the dialogue? Did he mean us to understand that when love is transferred from an ideal to a living person—from the idea of eternity to the man Socrates—it really does corrupt the lover? Did he mean that carelessness about solemn things, as exemplified in Alcibiades' interruption of Socrates' speech about love, was the real corruption of Athens and led to its fall? Or did he mean that despite these dire consequences life goes on much the same as ever, for the tragic and the comic are merely different versions of the same scene? It is interesting to speculate about these matters, but of course no final answers are possible. One thing, at least, is certain: Plato's *Symposium* remains one of the great entertainments.

If the Passion of Jesus Christ is the greatest story ever told, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, as described by Plato in four dialogues, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, is a close second. Socrates was an important early philosopher in his own right because he was Plato's teacher (as Plato was the teacher of Aristotle), but his memory survives primarily because of his martyrdom. Not a few great men and women have become immortal by dying unjustly at the right time and place.

Let us set the scene. Socrates, an old man (he is about seventy), has been accused by two enemies of corrupting the youth of Athens. It is a trumped-up charge, but much anger and frustration lie behind it. Athens has finally lost the long-drawn-out Peloponnesian War

and Sparta, the victor, has replaced Athens as the dominant political and economic force in Greece. The wealth and power of Athens are gone; there is not much to look forward to. Mean-spirited rulers have succeeded the great men like Pericles and Alcibiades who once led the city-state. The artistic force that had produced playwrights such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, painters and sculptors such as Phidias, and thinkers such as Socrates, seems to have played out. Business goes on but no longer with the imaginative brilliance that marked it before. From a growing, confident society, Athens has turned inward upon itself. Bitterness and nostalgic regret are the main emotions of the citizenry.

The trial itself—as was true at the time of all capital trials, for the accusers in this case are asking for the death penalty—takes place in the open, in the central place (or Agora) of Athens, before an audience of hundreds. All present male citizens of the city are jurors who will vote to decide the issue. The entire trial will occupy no more than one day.

The accusers speak first. Their charges are false, hollow. Socrates replies. His magnificent defense is, more than anything else, an explanation and justification of his entire mature life during which he has persisted, as he says, in being a kind of “gadfly” to the Athenians—an insect whose sting has driven the “animal of the state” onward to greatness.


He has been a teacher to the Athenians, he reminds them, and teachers, especially when critical of their pupils, are not always loved. Socrates knows this well. But he will not step out of character and cease to be the severe though caring teacher he has always been. He will not beg for forgiveness; he will not even beg for his life. When the verdict goes against him—by a vote that Socrates declares to be closer than he expected the question becomes one of punishment. His accusers propose death; Socrates himself proposes a monetary fine, which his friends, he concedes, will have to help him pay. Again the decision goes against him. Death it shall be.

He has one more opportunity to speak to the men of Athens among whom he has lived and played his strange, ironic role. He takes full advantage of it, typically chastising his fellow citizens and telling them how they must live if they are to remain free, telling them to be honorable and good. He wishes them well and bids farewell in the famous, enigmatic words: “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways—I to die, and you to live. Which is better God only knows.”

The three speeches of Socrates at his trial, as recounted by Plato in the *Apology*, are among the most moving ever written. No one who has any feeling for the Greece that gave us the arts and sciences, or who has any love for philosophy, can avoid the catch in the throat as he reads them. But there is more. The *Crito* is almost more moving than the *Apology*. Crito is an old man Socrates' age and a friend of long standing, who visits Socrates in prison. He tells Socrates his escape from prison has been arranged. It will be a simple matter for him to leave the city never to return and to sojourn with his friends in some pleasant spot for the rest of his life, discoursing on philosophy. But Socrates refuses to go. Not only would he find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to survive anywhere except in the city that has been his home throughout his life but, more important, what would the Athenians think of him if he were to flee and thereby show his contempt for the laws of his city? Would not their judgment of him at his trial be thus confirmed—that he was a bad man and deserved to be punished with death? Crito and the others attempt to persuade him, to no avail.

Finally, in the *Phaedo*, the last visit to Socrates by his friends, and their last conversation with him, is described by Plato. Not surprisingly, the talk turns to death and to the great question of what comes after it. I do not fear, says Socrates, for either I shall cease to exist altogether or, since I have been a good man, I shall enjoy the rewards of virtue in the afterlife. “For no evil,” he says, “can come to a good man, in life or death.”

The conversation ends. The executioner appears with the poison that Socrates must drink. He does so with the simple grace that has always marked his actions, and lies down to die. It does not take very long.

The Trial and Death of Socrates as described by Plato in this series of dialogues presents few problems for modern readers. Consequently many students are assigned the story to read at an early age, an age when they are not yet fully able to comprehend its meaning. It is well enough that the reading of Plato should start here, but it shouldn't stop here. Read the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, and then *Meno* and *Protagoras* and *Thaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* read—as much Plato as you can. But keep coming back to the *Apology* and the *Crito*. Here beats the heart and here shines the soul of one of the finest men who ever lived. He can be our teacher too, as he was the teacher of the Athenians many years ago. 



CHARLES VAN DOREN is the coauthor of the classic *How to Read a Book* with philosopher Mortimer J. Adler; the author of *A History of Knowledge* (which sold 30,000 copies in hardcover and 150,000 in paperback) and the author or editor of *The Idea of Progress*, *Great Treasury of Western Thought*, *The Annals of America*, *Second Chance: An American Story*, as well as several novels for young people and Webster's American biographies. He is an adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut, Torrington Campus. His father was Mark Van Doren, a Pulitzer Prizewinning poet and professor at Columbia.

EDITOR'S NOTE

It may interest you to know that reading the *Apology* and *Crito* forever changed Mortimer Adler's life and when I first read it 50 years ago, it forever altered my life and led me to find Dr. Adler.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Andre White

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.