

## A SYSTEMATIC READING OF PLATO'S COMPLETE WORKS

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This summer I prepared a solid foundation for my future studies in politics and philosophy by completing a simple, yet time-intensive project: a systematic reading of the Platonic corpus.

When I began my research this summer, I planned to spend the summer studying the ancient Greek concept of sophistry. While researching sophistry I quickly determined that out of all the ancient sources on the topic, the dialogues of Plato provided the most extensive and perplexing portrayal of the sophists. No two sophists that Plato depicted engaging with the philosopher Socrates were alike. Without giving readers a uniform sketch of the sophist, Plato moves readers to look beyond individual dialogues for an understanding of sophistry. For as much as Plato reveals about particular historical sophists and their activity, it is only when one looks to the whole of his works that an adequate picture of sophistry arises.

More profound and more meaningful when studied in the context of Plato's entire philosophical project, the subject of sophistry is emblematic of nearly every major theme that unites the Platonic dialogues into a single whole. Realizing the value of reading Plato in light of his other works, I shifted the focus of my project from researching sophistry in isolation to reading the Platonic corpus in its entirety. My goal in reading the entire corpus was to better understand sophistry, but also other major Platonic themes that can only be identified after reading several dialogues. Rather than do a rough chronological reading of the corpus (it is impossible to date each dialogue precisely), I chose to follow the system that originates with the 1<sup>st</sup>-century scholar Thrasyllus. Thrasyllus organized the thirty-six Platonic works into a set of nine tetralogies—each tetralogy having its own theme—as if they were tragic plays.

Reading Plato's complete works in the order of Thrasyllus' tetralogies this summer helped me recognize the interconnectedness within the dialogues of the Platonic corpus. Many of the recurring ideas and fundamental philosophical problems contained in the works that make reading Plato so edifying only appear when one steps back and apprehends the whole of Plato's work. After reading the corpus, one finds hidden wisdom that often goes unnoticed when the dialogues are read as single texts, outside of the context of the corpus as a whole. For example, where I had once thought the significance of *Euthyphro* was its insights on piety and religion, I now see its significance in early articulation of the theory of Forms. A dialogue that is both first in Thrasyllus' system and considered one of Plato's earlier writings, the *Euthyphro* introduces the reader right off the gate to the Plato's long-studied and influential theory of the Forms—Plato's assertion that there exist eternal truths, which remain unchanged despite the constant flux of the material world.

Although my research this school year will not focus on Plato explicitly, I will be reading philosophers who wrote their work as a direct response to Platonic philosophy. The work of these philosophers challenges and often strongly opposes the ideas of Plato, but it always relates and takes inspiration from them. Despite reading Plato all summer, I know I will return to the dialogues continually throughout my life, referring to the ancient Greek with which they were written for the ultimate intellectual challenge and engagement with the genius of the past.

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