

# IS THERE SOCRATES WITHOUT PLATO ?

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After being convicted of the corruption of youth in ancient Athens, Socrates took his own life with a vial of hemlock. At the time of his death, he was surrounded by his friends and colleagues in a final demonstration of ideological fealty and purity. Notably absent from his last act was Plato, his protégée and future crown prince of western philosophy. Plato's excuse was that he was ill on that famous day, a surprising response given the close relationship between the two philosophers. Some scholars argue that Plato could not bear the sight of his mentor and friend taking his own life.

The Phaedo, Plato's masterful dialogue on the immortality of the soul, was a direct consequence of the effects of Socrates' death on Plato's subsequent emotional state and philosophical beliefs. The Phaedo's influence on western philosophy has been immense, a landmark philosophical treatise that extols the virtue of Socrates and his legacy. It is in many ways a sincere tribute to the genius of his Plato's mentor, friend, and confidant. Their special relationship heightened both their ranks, and the world benefited as a result.

There may have been no Plato without Socrates. However, would there have been a Socrates without Plato?

While the strength of the relationship between Socrates and Plato is dramatic, it is also archetypal, crossing disciplines and generations. Examples abound in medical and non-medical fields. The father of modern neurosurgery, Dr. Harvey Cushing, was mentored by a giant in Internal Medicine, Dr. William Osler. In some ways analogous to The Phaedo, Cushing took a two-year sabbatical at the peak of his surgical career to write Osler's biography (a two-volume tome that won the Pulitzer Prize). Warren Buffett credited his business school mentor Benjamin Graham with his investment success. Ralph Waldo Emerson taught Henry David Thoreau. Gerald Gunther mentored Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Justin Bieber shouts out to Usher. The list of famous mentor-mentee relationships is endless.

### Who is your Socrates ? Who is your Plato ?

It is unsurprising that one of most reliable factors in medical student selection of sub specialty selection is mentorship. Clearly, there are other factors that are just as important-clinical interests, lifestyle, patient population, and general fit. However, most medical students point to mentorship, which is

a remarkable way to choose a career, an outside influence on a young person's life decisions.

Trainees are both a responsibility and a privilege. Mentorship comes with challenges. Trainees ask questions, requiring basic training, call for meetings, and require letters of recommendations. However, well-treated trainee extoll the clinical and academic prowess of their institutions (and mentors). Ultimately, this superior training and guided mentorship takes them to heights where they can return the favour to future trainees.

### How are you treating your trainees?

Each generation views the incoming generation of trainees as a lesser sort. The sentence starting, "Back in my day..." seems to roll off the tongue easier with every passing year of experience. Naturally mentors of every generation feel the same way. Change is inevitable -curriculums change, work hours change, the nature of "scutwork" changes, and patient expectations change. New trainees need a different skill set in 2019 compared to 1989. In short, trainees should not be viewed as a burden, but instead an extension of yourself.

The best salve for all these mentor-mentee wounds is exemplary behavior on the part of the mentor. Our treatment of patients, our devotion to craft, and the respect with which we treat the hospital staff are timeless qualities of exemplary behaviour. These are also ways to model behaviors for our trainees, a form implicit mentorship. Exemplary behaviour does not entirely take the place of discrete mentorship, of doing what you can to help a trainee succeed in his or her career, but it is a start.

It is no coincidence that institutions that have a record of exemplary mentorship are at the pinnacle of their fields. Trainees gravitate, unsurprisingly, to where they think they will be kindly trained and mentored (Plato, by the way, established an Academy in ancient Athens and mentored Aristotle).

In our opinion a culture of mentorship should be at the core of every medical school, where the long-lasting mentorship relationships can be formed.

We may not be philosophers, but we should still ask ourselves...

### Who will be my Plato ?

