George Grote (1794–1871) produced one of the first multi-volume studies of Plato that have since become standard reference works for many students of ancient Greek philosophy. Like W.K.C. Guthrie’s *History of Greek Philosophy* and Paul Friedländer’s *Plato*, Grote’s account of *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* begins with a brief survey of earlier “pre-socratic” philosophy to set the context in which Socrates and then Plato emerged. Like Guthrie and Friedländer, Grote then proceeds to discuss each of the dialogues separately. In striking contrast to both Guthrie and Friedländer, however, Grote does not present the dialogues in terms of Plato’s philosophical development as indicated by the stage in his career at which he is thought to have written them—early, middle, or late. The author of a history of Greece is by no means opposed to developmental or contextual accounts of the philosophical works of individual authors. However, as a historian he observes that there is little to no evidence concerning the dates at which Plato wrote the dialogues. He suggests, therefore, that each dialogue should be treated as an independent work and that the differences among them should be attributed to the “occasion,” the circumstances under which Plato was writing (although, strictly speaking, these are unknown) or the particular problem Plato was addressing in each, and his recognition of his inability, in the case of the elenctic dialogues, to solve it. Like Grote himself, Plato thought that it was worthwhile simply to work out and state the difficulties encountered in answering a question—for example, what is virtue?

Although the historical, developmental account of the Platonic dialogues in terms of a supposed “chronology of composition” became dominant in the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth century (as illustrated by the work of Guthrie and Friedländer), scholars have recently become increasingly aware
of the paucity of external evidence for that dating that Grote had already pointed out. As a result, some contemporary scholars have begun to express more sympathy for Grote’s explicitly “unsystematic” approach. Unfortunately, Grote’s critical observations concerning the lack of external evidence both for the dating of the composition of the dialogues and for arguments about the inauthenticity of the authorship of many of the dialogues traditionally attributed to Plato are more rigorous than his own interpretive practice. Although he emphasizes the absence of any evidence for the “development” of Plato’s thought, Grote finds it difficult to believe that Plato had worked out his entire “system” (or a coherent understanding of things) when he began writing dialogues. Grote thus speculates that some were written early or are drafts of works Plato himself never completed. Moreover, by sorting the dialogues in his three volumes, in effect, into three different kinds—the purely elenctic “dialogues of search”; dialogues beginning with the Protagoras which contain some positive teachings, but leave the answers suggested to the major questions raised tentative or hypothetical and explicitly subject to revision; and finally dialogues such as the Republic, Timaeus, Kritias, and Leges, in which Plato makes not merely dogmatic, but dictatorial political recommendations—Grote implicitly traces a development in Plato’s thought that he does not defend as such. His attempt to treat each dialogue as an independent work leads him to notice important differences not only in the arguments but also in the philosophical spokesmen and their interlocutors. Because he treats (and, in effect, dismisses) such dramatic details as merely adding interest or “charm” to the arguments, however, he does not ask why Plato might have used different philosophical spokesmen to put forward different arguments, at different times and places, to different interlocutors, with markedly different results. On the basis of the


4 Like Grote, Leo Strauss, The City and Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 50–63, argues that each dialogue should be read, initially, as an independent work. Unlike Grote, however, Strauss also sees that it is necessary to explain not only why and in what way