

would be equally surprising if the substance of the conversation were not of a high order. Trivialities, commonplaces, scandal there were, no doubt, but the staple subject, amongst the nobler spirits at least, would be some public event or broad question of the hour. It was natural that Plato, growing up in this atmosphere, should have found the dialogue to be the most adequate instrument for the presentation of his theories, and have become a master of prose style.

(b) Not the home only, but also the study plays an unimportant part in Greek life. Even after Plato's time, when philosophy had become a separate training, and had begun to assume the form of continuous exposition, it was the debate of the school, which to some extent superseded the conversation of the gymnasium. Though the general, the statesman, the poet, in their distinctive capacities disappear in the school, and all stand upon the level of "lovers of the sight of truth," ideas were still moulded largely through the oral interchange of opinions. Just as the ordinary philosophical treatise of to-day reflects the process by which the writer, in the solitude of his study, organizes his conceptions, so Plato in his earlier dialogues reflects the sparkling variety of the gymnasium or market place, and in the later dialogues the more uniform discussions of the incipient school.

(c) That the talks of Socrates not only inspired Plato to devote himself to philosophy, but furnished him with the dialogue is manifest. More than that, the dialogue is already partly formed in the conversations of Socrates. But we have to turn to the spirit and manners of the time in order to find out why his conversations are his philosophy.

2. Conversational the dialogues of Plato certainly are, but it would be a mistake to infer from this fact that they were in form mere reproductions of the conversations of the street. In two ways they differ from ordinary intercourse, (a) in their substance, and (b) in their form. (a) Doubtless the conversation of the street was of an exceptionally high quality in Athens at Plato's time. But, if we are to judge from Aristophanes, the brilliancy and acuteness of mind visible in the usual street talk, was limited to the objects and events of the time, to the great war, for example, and the subsequent kaleidoscopic changes of government; but a consistent examination of a moral principle,