Diogenes Laertius (lived 3rd century, C.E.) is analogous to a modern day editor of People magazine. He wrote about the lives of the eminent philosophers, via what he had heard about them, what he had read about them from others, or of their works, etc. One should not take these words as definitive and absolutely true, given the time passed between Plato’s death and Diogenes’ birth. Here are some items I found interesting when I read what he had to say about Plato (all translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library, Volume 1 of “The Lives of the Eminent Philosophers,” R.D. Hicks, trans., and I have numbered them so we can refer to them by number in class):

1. “Apollodorus in his Chronology fixes the date of Plato’s birth in the 88th Olympiad, on the seventh day of the month Thargelion, the same day on which the Delians say that Apollo himself was born. He died, according to Hermippus, at a wedding feast, in the first year of the 108th Olympiad, in his eighty-first year.” (III.2)

2. “He was taught letters in the school of Dionysius, who is mentioned by him in the Rivals. And he learnt gymnastics under Ariston, the Argive wrestler. And from him he received the name of Plato [DY: Greek for “broad”] on account of his robust figure, in place of his original name which was Aristocles, after his grandfather, as Alexander informs us in the Successions of Philosophers. But others affirm that he got the name Plato from the breadth of his style, or from the breadth of his forehead, as suggested by Neanthes.” (III.4)

3. “Others again affirm … that he applied himself to painting and wrote poems, first dithyrambs, afterwards lyric poems and tragedies. He had, they say, a weak voice; this is confirmed by Timotheus the Athenian in his book On Lives. It is stated that Socrates in a dream saw a cygnet on his knees, which all at once put forth plumage, and flew away after uttering a loud sweet note. And the next day Plato was introduced as a pupil, and thereupon he recognized in him the swan of his dream.

At first he used to study philosophy in the Academy, and afterwards in the garden at Colonus … as a follower of Heraclitus. Afterwards, when he was about to compete for the prize with a tragedy, he listened to Socrates in front of the theatre of Dionysius, and then consigned his poems to the flames, with the words: “Come hither, O fire-god, Plato now has need of thee.” From that time onward, having reached his twentieth year (so it is said), he was the pupil of Socrates. When Socrates was gone, he attached himself to Cratylus the Heraclitean, and to Hermogenes who professed the philosophy of Parmenides. Then at the age of twenty-eight … he withdrew to Megara to Euclides, with certain disciples of Socrates. Next he proceeded to Cyrene on a visit to Theodorus the mathematician, thence to Italy to see the Pythagorean philosophers Philolaus and Eurytus, and thence to Egypt to see those who interpreted the will of the gods; and Euripides is said to have accompanied him thither. …. Having returned to Athens, he lived in the Academy, which is a gymnasium outside the walls, in a grove named after a certain hero, Hecademus ….” (III.4-7)

4. “For they say he was well off, having received from Dionysius over eighty talents.” (III.9)
5. “He made three voyages to Sicily, the first time to see the island and the craters of Etna: on this occasion Dionysius, the son of Hermocrates, being on the throne, forced him to become intimate with him. But when Plato held forth on tyranny and maintained that the interest of the ruler alone was not the best end, unless he were also pre-eminent in virtue, he offended Dionysius, who in his anger exclaimed, ‘You talk like an old dotard.’ ‘And you like a tyrant,’ rejoined Plato. At this the tyrant grew furious and at first was bent on putting him to death; then, when he had been dissuaded from this by Dion and Aristomenes, he did not indeed go so far but handed him over to Pollis the Lacedaemonian, who had just then arrived on an embassy, with orders to sell him into slavery. And Pollis took him to Aegina and there offered him for sale. And then Charmandrus, the son of Charmandrides, indicted him on a capital charge according to the law in force among the Aeginetans, to the effect that the first Athenian who set foot upon the island should be put to death without a trial. This law had been passed by the prosecutor himself, according to Favorinus in his Miscellanea. But when some one urged, though in jest, that the offender was a philosopher, the court acquitted him. There is another version to the effect that he was brought before the assembly and, being kept under close scrutiny, he maintained an absolute silence and awaited the issue with confidence. The assembly decided not to put him to death but to sell him just as if he were a prisoner of war.

Anniceris the Cyrenaic happened to be present and ransomed him for twenty minae – according to others the sum was thirty minae – and dispatched him to Athens to his friends, who immediately remitted the money. But Anniceris declined it, saying that the Athenians were not the only people worthy of the privilege of providing for Plato. Others assert that Dion sent the money and that Anniceris would not take it, but bought for Plato the little garden which is in the Academy.” (III.18-20)

6. “The second time he visited the younger Dionysius, requesting of him lands and settlers for the realization of his republic. Dionysius promised them but did not keep his word.” (III.21)

7. “The third time he came to reconcile Dion and Dionysius, but failing to do so, returned to his own country without achieving anything. And there he refrained from meddling with politics, although his writings show that he was a statesman.” (III.23)

8. “There is a story that he pleaded for Chabrias the general when he was tried for his life, although no one else at Athens would do so, and that, on this occasion, as he was going up to the Acropolis along with Chabrias, Crobylus the informer met him and said, ‘What, are you come to speak for the defence? Don’t you know that the hemlock of Socrates awaits you?’ To this Plato replied, ‘As I faced dangers when serving in the cause of my country, so I will face them now in the cause of duty for a friend.’” (III.24)

9. “He was the first to introduce argument by means of question and answer, says Favorinus …; he was the first to explain … the method of solving problems by analysis; and the first who in philosophical discussion employed the terms antipodes, element, dialectic, quality, oblong number, and, among boundaries, the plane superficies; also divine providence.” (III.24)

10. “Heraclides declares that in his youth he was so modest and orderly that he was never seen to laugh outright.” (III.26)
11. “They say that, on hearing Plato read the *Lysis*, Socrates exclaimed, ‘By Heracles, what a number of lies this young man is telling about me!’ For he has included in the dialogue much that Socrates never said.” (III.36)

12. “… Idomeneus asserts that the arguments used by Crito, when in the prison he urges Socrates to escape, are really due to Aeschines, and that Plato transferred them to Crito because of his enmity to Aeschines.” (III.36)

13. “Being asked whether there would be any memoirs of him as of his predecessors, he replied, ‘A man must first make a name, and he will have no lack of memoirs.’” (III.38)

14. “He advised those who got drunk to view themselves in a mirror; for they would then abandon the habit which so disfigured them. To drink to excess was nowhere becoming, he used to say, save at the feasts of the god who was the giver of wine.” (III.39)

15. “He also said … truth is the pleasantest of sounds. Another version of this saying is that the pleasantest of all things is to speak the truth. … thus in the *Laws*: ‘Truth, O stranger, is a fair and durable thing. But it is a thing of which it is hard to persuade men.’ [*Laws* 663e].” (III.39-40)

16. “His death, the circumstances of which have already been related [See first quotation, III.2], took place in the thirteenth year the reign of King Philip, as stated by Favorinus in … his *Memorabilia*, and according to Theopompus honours were paid to him at his death by Philip. But Myronianus in his *Parallels* says that Philo mentions some proverbs that were in circulation about Plato’s lice, implying that this is the mode of his death. He was buried in the Academy, where he spent the greatest part of his life in philosophical study. And hence the school which he founded was called the Academic school. And all the students there joined in the funeral procession. The terms of his will were as follows:

‘These things have been left and devised by Plato: the estate in Iphistiadai, bounded on the north by the road from the temple at Cephisia, on the south by the temple of Heracles in Iphistiadai, on the east by the property of Archestratus of Phrearrhi, on the west by that of Philippus of Chollidae: this it shall be unlawful for anyone to sell or alienate, but it shall be the property of the boy Adeimantus to all intents and purposes: the estate in Eiresidae which I bought of Callimachus, bounded on the north … south … east … west …; three minae of silver, a silver vessel weighing 165 drachmas; a cup weighing 45 drachmas; a gold signet-ring and earring together weighing four drachmas and four obols. Euclides the lapidary owes me three minae. I enfranchise Artemis. I leave four household servants, Tychon, Bictas, Apollonides and Dionysius. Household furniture, as set down in the inventory of which Demetrius has the duplicate. I owe no one anything. My executors are Leosthenes, Speusippus, Demetrius, Hegias, Eurymedon, Callimachus and Thrasippus.’

Such were the terms of his will.” (III.40-43)

17. “The following epitaphs were inscribed upon his tomb:

Here lies the god-like man Aristocles, eminent among men for temperance and the justice of his character. And he, if ever anyone, has the fullest meed of praise for wisdom, and was too great for envy.
Next:

Earth in her bosom here hides Plato’s body, but his soul hath its immortal station with the
blest, Ariston’s son, whom every good man, even if he dwell afar off, honours because he
discerned the divine life.

A third of later date:

a. Eagle, why fly you o’er this tomb? Say, is your gaze fixed upon the starry house of
one of the immortals?

b. I am the image of the soul of Plato, which has soared to Olympus, while his earth-
born body rests in Attic soil.

There is also an epitaph of my own which runs thus:

If Phoebus did not cause Plato to be born in Greece, how came it that he healed the minds
of men by letters? As the god’s son Asclepius is a healer of the body, so is Plato of the
immortal soul.

And another on the manner of his death:

Phoebus gave to mortals Asclepius and Plato, the one to save their souls, the other to save
their bodies. From a wedding banquet he has passed to that city which he had founded
for himself and planted in the sky.

Such then are the epitaphs.” (III.43-45)

18. “His disciples were Speusippus of Athens, Xenocrates of Chalcedon, Aristotle of Stagira,
Philippus of Opus, Hestiaeus of Perinthus, Dion of Syracuse; Amyclus of Heraclea, Erastus and
Coriscus of Scæpsus, Timolaus of Cyzicus, Euaeon of Lampsacus, Python and Heraclides of
Aenus, Hippothales and Callippus of Athens, Demetrius of Amphipolis, Heraclides of Pontus,
and many others, among them two women, Lastheneia of Mantinea and Axiothea of Philus, who
is reported by Dieaearchus to have worn men’s clothes. Some say that Theophrastus too
attended his lectures.” (III.46)

19. “Dialectic is the art of discourse by which we either refute or establish some proposition by
means of question and answer on the part of the interlocutors.” (III.48)