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## Plato

(b. Athens [?], 427 B.C.; d. Athens, 348/347 B.C.)

*theory of knowledge; advocacy, in theory and practice, of education based on mathematics; organization of research.*

Plato's enthusiasm for mathematics, astronomy, and musical theory appears everywhere in his writings, and he also displays a far from superficial knowledge of the medicine and physiology of his day. In ancient times competent judges held that he had promoted the advance of mathematics, especially geometry, in his lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Theodore of Cyrene and Archytas of Tarentum were his friends, and [Eudoxus of Cnidus](#), Theaetetus, and Menaechmus his colleagues or pupils. His critics assert that his theory of knowledge rules out any empirical science and that, owing to his idealism, he had a radically false idea of the procedure and value of the mathematics that he admired. Even so, it can be said that the Academy, founded by him at Athens at a date not exactly known (380 B.C.?), became a center where specialists—not all of them sympathizers with his philosophy and epistemology—could meet and profit by discussion with him and with one another.

Our object here must be to trace Plato's intellectual development and, incidentally, to submit part of the material upon which an estimate of his services or disservices to science must be based. It must be considered how far he is likely to have carried out in his school the project, sketched in the *Republic*, of a mathematical training preparatory for and subordinate to dialectic, and whether, in the writings believed to belong to the last twenty years of his life, he took note of recent scientific discoveries or was influenced by them in matters belonging to philosophy.

As for sources of information, the account of Plato's life and doctrine by [Diogenes Laertius](#) (probably early third century A.D.) is based on previous authorities of unequal value. He reports some evidently reliable statements by men who were in a position to know the facts and who were neither fanatical devotees nor detractors, and he has preserved the text of Plato's will. Aristotle gives us a few details, and Cicero a few more.

The *Epistles*, ascribed to Plato and printed in the Herrmann and Burnet editions of the Greek text of his works, would, if genuine, furnish us with a personal account of his conduct at important crises in his life; and, what is more, they would tell far more about his ideals of education and the work of the Academy than can be gathered from the dialogues. Unfortunately, opinion regarding authenticity of the *Epistles* is so divided that caution is essential. In the ensuing account, where reference is made to this source, the fact has been indicated.

Plato's writings have been preserved entire. But the double fact that they are dialogues and that the scene is usually laid in the past leads to difficulties of interpretation which are sufficiently obvious. Moreover, nothing definite is known about either the manner of their first publication or their relative order, still less the dates. Some hypothesis about the latter is a presupposition of fruitful discussion of Plato's development.

A statistical study of the style of Plato's works, in which the pioneer was the Reverend Lewis Campbell (1869), has led to results which have met with wide approval: many scholars hold that *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus* were written later than the *Republic*, and that a group of dialogues having close stylistic affinity to one another and to the *Laws* (which is plainly a work of old age) came still later. This is credible from a philosophical point of view, and its correctness is assumed here; but such a method can only yield a probable result.

Several members of Plato's family are mentioned, or appear as characters, in his dialogues. He himself was the son of Ariston<sup>2</sup> and Perictione, and was born either at Athens or Aegina, where his father may have gone as a settler when the Athenians occupied the island. Nothing reliable is known of his father's ancestors, but those on his mother's side were men of distinction. Perictione was descended from Dropides, a close friend (some say brother) of Solon, the famous poet-statesman of the sixth century B.C. She was a cousin of Critias, son of Callaeschrus, an intellectual daring in both speculative thought and action. It was Critias who in 404 B.C. led the extremists among the Thirty Tyrants and put to death the moderate Theramenes. He became guardian of Perictione's brother Charmides and drew him into public affairs. Both perished in the battle which put an end to the Thirty's six months of power.

Plato was one of four children. His brothers Adeimantus and Glaucon take a leading part in the *Republic*, where they are depicted with admiration and a clear impression of their personality is left. They appear once more briefly in the *Parmenides*,

and Xenophon presents Socrates proving to Glaucon the folly of his trying to address the Assembly when he is not yet twenty.<sup>3</sup> The brothers were considerably older than Plato, and his sister Potone (mother of Speusippus, who followed him as head of the Academy) was doubtless born in the interval.

Plato's father, Ariston, appears to have died young. Perictione then married Pylilampes, son of Antiphon, who had been prominent in state affairs as a close associate of Pericles; he was probably her uncle. Another son, called Antiphon after his grandfather, was born; this half brother of Plato's has a part in the *Parmenides*. Most of these persons are mentioned either in *Charmides* (155–158), or in *Timaeus* (20E), or at the opening of *Parmenides*.<sup>4</sup>

Plato's social position was such that he might well have aspired to an active part in public affairs, but it could not have been easy for him to decide what role to assume. Some scholars take it for granted that the example and writings of Critias left a deep impression upon him; others point out that it was only in the concluding phase of the Athenian struggle against the Peloponnesians that Plato's maternal relatives emerged as reactionary extremists, and that in his stepfather's home he would have been imbued with liberal opinions and respect for the memory of Pericles.

No one can say with certainty what the complexion of his views was at the age of twenty-four, except that he was obviously no friend to egalitarianism and full democracy. The story which he tells, or is made to tell, in Epistle VII seems probable. His friends and relatives among the Thirty at once called upon him to join them, but instead he determined to wait and see what they would do. They soon made the former regime seem highly desirable by comparison. Socrates was commanded to help in the arrest of a man who was to be put to death illegally under a general sentence, so that he would either be involved in their impious actions or refuse and thus expose himself to punishment. When the Thirty were overthrown, Plato again thought of public affairs—but with less eagerness than before. The democratic leaders restored to power showed moderation at a time when ruthless acts of revenge might have been expected. Nevertheless Socrates was brought to trial on the pretext of impiety and found guilty. As Plato grew older and the politicians, laws, and customs of the day displeased him more and more, he was thrown back on a theorist's study of ways of reform.<sup>5</sup>

None of this is inconsistent with what is otherwise known. Socrates' disobedience to the illegal command of the Thirty was a fact widely spoken of. Plato would probably have been impressed to an equal degree by Socrates' courageous independence in such matters and by his faith in argument (argument with himself when he could not find a respondent). He became conspicuous among Socrates' habitual companions, as distinct from the occasional listeners to his conversation. With Adeimantus he heard Socrates' provocative defense in court against the charge of impiety;<sup>6</sup> when a majority had found him guilty, Plato was one of those who induced Socrates to offer to pay a substantial fine, for which he would be a guarantor.<sup>7</sup>

Owing to illness, Plato was absent from the last meeting of Socrates' with his friends.<sup>8</sup> After the tragedy, he retried, with other Socratics, to Megara, the home of Euclid.<sup>9</sup> The attack on Socrates was personal, and perhaps the prosecutors did not desire his death. His Athenian friends can hardly have been in danger. But there are some hints in the *Phaedo* that he advised those present, among whom were the Megarians Euclid and Terpsion, to pursue the search for truth in common and not lose heart when plausible reasoning led them nowhere; rather, they must make it their business to master the "art of argument," *logōn techuē*.<sup>10</sup>

Probably his wish was piously carried out by his followers, and a few years elapsed before the different direction of their interests became clear. As a metaphysician Euclid was a follower of Parmenides, and accepted the Socratic thesis that there is a single human excellence, not a plurality of "virtues." His thought had no religious coloring, nor was he an educational reformer. His younger disciples turned in earnest for the hoped-for *logon technē*, and not without result; they prepared the way for the propositional logic of the Stoic school.<sup>11</sup> This might be supposed to go together with an interest in the sciences, but this is not recorded of the Megarians. Plato, on the other hand, began to turn in that direction; his first dialogues and the *Apology* must have been written during the years 399–388 B.C. He felt it his duty to defend the memory of Socrates, especially since controversy about his aims had been revived by hostile publications. As the chance of political action remained remote, he gradually developed the idea of a training of the young not in rhetoric but in mathematics—and in Socratic interrogation only after the mathematical foundation had been laid. Part of his diagnosis of the ills of Athens was that young men had bewildered themselves and others by engaging too soon in philosophical controversy; these ideas probably found little sympathy among the Megarians. How long he remained among them is not recorded, but he was liable to Athenian military service, probably as a cavalryman. A statement has indeed come down to us<sup>12</sup> that he went on expeditions to Tanagra (in Boeotia) and Corinth. This is credible in itself, and in the latter case the reference could be to an engagement in 394 B.C. outside Corinth, in which the Spartans and their allies defeated the Athenians and Thebans. But neither does it seem inconsistent with Plato's regarding Megara for a time as his home. About 390 he resolved to visit the West, where Archytas of Tarentum survived as a maintainer of the Pythagorean system of education and was also active in research.

Plato's views at the time of departure on his journey to the West are well seen in the *Gorgias*. It is his first major constructive effort as a moralist, but there is as yet no positive doctrine of knowledge and reality. When Callicles spurns conventional justice, as a means of defrauding the strong and energetic of what naturally belongs to them, and declares that temperance is not a virtue (why should a clear-sighted man choose to curb his own desires?), Socrates confidently develops an answering thesis: the supervision of the soul must be supposed comparable in its operation to the arts, which impose form and design (*eidōs, taxis*) and preserve the natural subordination of one part of a subject to another (*kosmos*). Human good does not consist in the ceaseless satisfaction of desires, irrespective of their quality (if it did, man would stand apart from the general world

order), and self-discipline is the basis of happiness. But the statesmen of Athens, the dramatists and musicians, the teachers and learners of rhetorical persuasion, have all alike failed to understand this and have flattered rather than guided the public.

In his use of the varied senses of *kosmos* (which, according to the context, means world or world order, moral discipline, or adornment). Socrates is here on Pythagorean ground; and ideas are already present which Plato expanded only in his later writings and his oral instruction.<sup>13</sup> The *Gorgias* passage is also an emphatic answer to the friends who had sought to draw Plato into Athenian politics.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning the journey itself, in Epistle VII Plato says, or is made to say, that he was then forty years old (324A) and that in Italy and Sicily he was appalled by the sensuous indulgence which he found taken for granted there. On crossing to Syracuse he made the acquaintance of Dion, the young brother-in-law of the tyrant [Dionysius the Elder](#), who listened attentively to his discourses and aroused his admiration by his intelligence and preference for a sober life. In the tyrant's entourage this was viewed as an affectation of singularity and led to Dion's becoming unpopular.<sup>15</sup>

If this evidence is set aside as suspect, the next best source is Cicero.<sup>16</sup> He says that Plato visited Egypt before proceeding to Italy; that he spent a considerable time with Archytas and with Timaeus of Locri; and that the object of the voyage was to gain acquaintance with Pythagorean studies and institutions. To this some reservations must be made. First, it can hardly be true—if Cicero means this that when he boarded the ship Plato was altogether ignorant of mathematics. In his own dialogues there is clear evidence that the sciences were to some extent taught to boys at Athens and that there was an opportunity of learning from specialists in mathematics and astronomy, no less than from those in music, meter, and grammar. About Pythagoreanism also Plato already had some information, judging from the *Gorgias* passage mentioned above; he could have obtained this (as Wilamowitz suggests) from the Thebans Simmias and Cebes, pupils of Socrates who are said to have met Philolaus.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, it does not seem likely that Timaeus of Locri was still alive at the time of Plato's journey. In *Timaeus* 20A he is described as a man of intellectual distinction who has already held high office, and this is at a time certainly previous to 415 B.C. (It is possible that at this time Plato met Philistion of Locri, and derived from him the interest in the physiology of the Sicilian Empedocles, which is visible in both *Meno* and *Phaedo*) Cicero's report may be wrong in some of its detail, but it seems true in spirit. Plato's purpose in visiting the West was to see for himself how the Pythagoreans conducted their science-based educational system, and he did at this time establish a connection with Archytas.

Plato returned to Athens, after two years' absence, in 388 B.C. (Ancient biographers related, with some circumstantial detail, that at Syracuse he had exasperated the tyrant [Dionysius the Elder](#) by open criticism of his rule and had been handed over as a prisoner to a Spartan envoy. But such insolence is hardly in character for Plato, and probably his voyage home was of a less sensational kind.) He might at this time have visited the Pythagoreans at Phlius, in the Peloponnesus. The setting of the *Phaedo* suggests personal acquaintance with their leader Echecrates, and Cicero confirms this.<sup>18</sup>

Nothing definite is recorded about Plato's personal life during the ensuing twenty-two years. But the Academy was founded, or gradually grew up, during this time, and he composed further dialogues in Socratic style. The *Meno* and *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic* must all be assigned to these years. In them he puts forward the distinctive account of knowledge which has taken shape in his mind; explains his purpose and method in education and shows the continuity of his aims with those of Socrates; and differentiates himself, where necessary, from the Italian Pythagoreans. It is natural to place the *Republic* at the end of this series, and to regard it as either a prospectus for a proposed school or as a statement to the Athenian public of what was already being carried out among them.

Aristotle gives a clear analysis of the factors which produced Plato's doctrine of Forms.<sup>19</sup> Plato was acquainted from youth with an Athenian named Cratylus, who declared with Heraclitus that there is no stable substance, or hold for human knowledge, in the sense world. Plato did not deny this then or later but, wishing to take over and continue the Socratic search for universals, in the sphere of morals, which do remain permanent, he necessarily separated the universals from sensible particulars. It was he who termed them Ideas and Forms. In his view particulars (that is, things and states of things, actions and qualities) derive reality from Forms by "participation" and when we name or speak of these particulars, we in effect name Forms.

In the dialogues Plato often starts from a contrast between knowledge and opinion. To live in a state of opinion is to accept assertions, either of fact or of principle, on authority or from mere habit. The opinion may be true and right; but since it is held without a rational ground, it may be driven from the mind by emotion and is less proof against forgetfulness than knowledge is. The holder of it may also be deceived in an unfamiliar instance. Based as it is on habit, an opinion cannot easily be transmitted to another; or, if the transmission takes place, this is not teaching. In terms of the theory of Forms, the holder of knowledge knows the Forms and can relate particular instances to them (although Plato did not successfully explain how this occurs), whereas the contented Holder of opinions moves about among half-real particulars.

In middle life, then, Plato had advanced from his Socratic beginnings toward beliefs, held with assurance, from which many practical consequences flowed. The chief elements were the knowledge-opinion contrast; the belief in a realm of immutable Forms, with which human minds can make intermittent contact and which on such occasions the minds recognize as "their own" or as akin to them;<sup>20</sup> given this, the soul, or its intellectual part, is seen to be likewise eternal; and the belief that the Forms, each of which infuses reality into corresponding particulars, in turn derive their existence, intelligibility, and truth from one supreme Form, the Good.

The advance from the plurality of Forms to their source is in consequence regarded as the ultimate stage in human study, *megiston mathēma*,<sup>21</sup> it is a step which will be taken by only a few, but for the welfare of mankind it is important that a few should take it. Within the dialogue it is described but cannot be accomplished. There are hints of a methodical derivation of the other Forms from the Good; but for the present the image, whereby the Good is shown to have the same relation to other objects of intellection as the sun has to other visible things, takes its place. In reading the *Republic* and later dialogues, one must therefore reckon with the possibility that in the school Plato amplified or corrected the exposition which he chose to commit to writing.

The Athenians thought it suitable that young men should exercise themselves in argument on abstract themes before turning to serious business, and were prepared to tolerate “philosophy” on these terms. But Plato, as has been said, speaks out against this practice and holds that it has brought philosophy into discredit. Indeed, according to him, the order of procedure should be reversed. Argument, or its theory, is the hardest branch of philosophy and should come later. Men and women to whom legislation and administration are ultimately to be entrusted should undergo discipline in the sciences (including reflection on their interrelation) before they embark, say, at the age of thirty, on dialectical treatment of matters which have to be grasped by the intellect without the help of images. Such a discipline will single out those who have capacity for dialectic. To them will fall the task of making good laws, if these are not found in existence, and of interpreting and applying them if they are. For this purpose knowledge must be reinforced by experience.<sup>22</sup> Lawless government is the common fault of despotism and democracy.

Plato holds that ignorance of mathematical truths which are in no way recondite, for example, the wrong belief that all magnitudes are copensurable, is a disgrace to human nature.<sup>23</sup> It is not, however, this that is emphasized in his educational plan in the *Republic*. He explains that it is characteristic of mathematical studies that they gently disengage the intellect from sensible appearances and turn it toward reality; no other discipline does this. They induce a state of mind (which Plato terms *dianoia*, discursive thought) clearer than “opinion” and naive trust in the senses but dimmer than knowledge and reason. In geometry, for instance, the learner is enabled or compelled, with the aid of figures, to fix his attention on intelligible objects. Also, mathematicians “lay down as hypotheses the odd and even, various figures, and the three kinds of angles and the like”<sup>24</sup> but leave them unexamined and go on to prove that the problem that gave rise to their investigation has been solved. In this respect mathematical procedure tends to divert the mind from reality and can provide only conditional truth. But such studies, pursued steadily and without continual talk of their practical use, are a good preparation for methodical treatment of such relations among Forms as cannot be visibly depicted.

Arithmetic and plane geometry will be the basis of an education which is to end in knowledge; the geometry of three-dimensional figures must also be studied. When, in the dialogue, Glaucon observes that this hardly yet exists as a science, Socrates says that there are two reasons for this: first, no state at present honors the study and encourages men to devote themselves to it; and second, a director is needed in order to coordinate the research.<sup>25</sup> Such a man will be hard to find; and at present even if he existed the researchers are too self-confident to defer to him. Even without these conditions, and even when the researchers do not succeed in explaining what they are striving to achieve, the intrinsic charm of the study of three-dimensional figures is carrying it forward. This is one of the passages in which speakers in Plato’s dialogues refer prophetically, but in veiled terms, to circumstances at the time of writing. It is somewhat enigmatic for us. The intention is perhaps to compliment Theaetetus, who had discovered constructions for inscribing in a sphere the regular octahedron and icosahedron. Either he or Plato himself is cast for the role of a director, and there is a plea for public support of the Academy so that research can continue.

There is a similar personal reference in the treatment of the sciences of astronomy and musical theory.<sup>26</sup> Socrates dissociates himself from the Pythagoreans while approving of their statement that the two sciences are closely akin. Their theory of harmony is restricted to a numerical account of audible concords; and the aim of their astronomy is to discover the proportion between month, year, and the period of revolution of the planets. Instead of this, heard harmonies should be studied as a special case of the harmonies between numbers; and the proportion between month, year, and so forth (which is doubtless not unvarying) as an application of some wider theory dealing with the spatial relations of any given number of bodies of any shape, moving at any regular speeds at any distances. The visible universe will be to the “true astronomer” what a beautifully contrived diagram might be to the geometer, that is, an aid to the science, not the object of contemplation. Here Plato is indicating that he has not simply established on Athenian soil a replica of the Pythagorean schools. Attachment to the sense world must be loosened and the sciences taught with emphasis on their affinity to one another; for it is the power of synopsis, the perception of common features, that is to be strengthened. Those few who excel in this are to be set apart and trained to pursue another method which treats hypotheses as provisional until they have been linked to the unconditionally real and so established.<sup>27</sup>

There is no question here, as some have thought, of a fusion of the existing special sciences. The ideal held out is probably this: The One is an aspect of the Good (this was common ground to Euclid of Megara and Plato); from the concept of unity, the number series can be made to emerge by deduction; and from the Good, by a process which makes more use of Socratic questioning, the system of moral and aesthetic concepts can likewise be evolved.<sup>28</sup>

Boys will have some introduction to all the sciences that have been mentioned. Compulsion is to be avoided in the training of the mind, especially since what is learnt under duress leaves no lasting impression. At the age of twenty when state-enforced physical exercise is to cease, those judged capable of further progress must begin to bring together the knowledge that they have hitherto acquired randomly and to consider in what way the sciences are akin to one another and to reality. Until they are

thirty this will be their occupation. After this there can follow five years of that dialectical exercise that Athenian custom regards as a fitting occupation for mere adolescents.<sup>29</sup>

The program here outlined is our safest guide to the actual institutions of the Academy. But it is an ideal that is sketched, and one need not insist that it was carried out in detail. For instance, Plato did not admit women, and it is highly improbable that he gave no philosophical instruction to those under thirty; it would doubtless occur to him that since he could not prevent them from obtaining such instruction, it would be better to make sure that they were well taught.

“Academy” was an area to the northeast of the city which had been laid out as a park, including a public gymnasium. According to Lysias, the Spartans encamped there during the troubled year 403 B.C. Plato may have copoenced teaching in the gymnasium itself; but he soon purchased an adjoining garden and erected buildings there, and from this moment he may be said to have instituted a school. Hitherto he could not exclude chance listeners. The buildings may have included lodgings for students or visitors, and Plato himself presumably lived in the neighborhood. Common meals had been a feature of Pythagorean life, and this precedent was followed. Legal recognition was secured by making the Academy a religious fraternity devoted to the Muses.

Plato nominated his nephew Speusippus to be his successor, but later the head seems to have been elected. Presumably the power of admission rested with the head, and those accepted contributed to the maintenance of the school according to their means. The story that the words “Let no man unversed in geometry enter” were inscribed over the door cannot be traced back further than [John Philoponus](#) (sixth century). In the first century B.C., “academic” teaching was being given in the gymnasium of Ptolemy near the agora of Athens.<sup>30</sup>

In the teaching, Plato will doubtless have been assisted from an early stage by Theaetetus, who, as the dialogue named after him shows, was a boy of exceptional promise in 399 B.C. He was an Athenian. The dialogue records his death from wounds received in battle at Corinth, complicated by illness, and was obviously written soon afterward (*ca.* 368–367 B.C.). Hence his collaboration with Plato may have lasted about fifteen years.

Somewhat later, [Eudoxus of Cnidus](#) resided occasionally at the Academy. He is known to have died at the age of fifty-three, and the dates for his life now usually accepted are *ca.* 400–*ca.* 347 B.C. in mathematics he was a pupil of Archytas, but it is not clear when this instruction was received. During a first visit to Athens at the age of twenty-three, he heard lectures from Plato. Later he established a school at Cyzicus in northwest [Asia Minor](#), one of those Greek cities which had been abandoned to Persian control under the Peace of Antalcidas in 387 B.C.; Eudoxus probably felt insecure there and was glad to maintain a connection with the Platonists.

Eudoxus was at Athens when Aristotle first arrived as a student in 367 B.C., and it is plain from several Aristotelian passages<sup>31</sup> that he deeply influenced his juniors and played an important part in the life of the school. In Plato’s *Philebus* there is probably some concealed allusion to him. Mathematics and astronomy were his main business, but he took part as a friendly outsider in philosophical debate arising from Plato’s writings. He was not one to pledge himself to accept philosophical dogmas, nor was this expected of him, and his work exhibits the close attention to phenomena which the Socrates of the *Republic* deprecates.

But Eudoxus recognized that philosophy has a legitimate role in criticizing the procedure of specialists. His explanation of the celestial movements in terms of homocentric spheres, rotating about a stationary spherical earth, was put forward in answer to a problem posed by Plato: “What are the uniform and ordered movements by the assumption of which the apparent movements of the planets can be accounted for?” Eudoxus did not abandon his own school and merge it with that of Plato; and Proclus’ statement that he “became a companion of Plato’s disciples” does not mean this, for we know that Aristotle later carried on the connection with Cyzicene mathematicians which Plato had established. Epistle XIII, ascribed to Plato, mentions Helicon as a pupil of Eudoxus and implies the presence of other Cyzicenes at Athens in the period 365–362 b.c.

If we consider Plato’s relation to Theaetetus and Eudoxus and also bring in the evidence of Aristotle, his personal role in the Academy begins to appear. He probably committed all the specialist instruction to them. He took note of their research and sometimes criticized their methods, speaking as a person with authority; he guided the juniors in that reflection about first principles and about the interrelation of sciences that in *Republic* VII is designated as suitable for them;<sup>32</sup> and he confided to some an ethico-mathematical philosophy in which two ultimate principles, from which Form-Numbers were derived, were found by analysis.

The last item is outside the scope of this article, and concerning the other two a few examples must suffice. Theaetetus added to previously known constructions of regular solid figures those for the octahedron and icosahedron, and gave a proof<sup>33</sup> that there can be no more than five regular solids. He also tried to classify incopoensurable relations, connecting them with the three kinds of means. Plato’s inspiration may be seen in this effort to systematize. Plato is credited by Proclus with beginning the study of conic sections, which his followers developed, and with either discovering or clearly formulating the method of analysis, which proved fruitful in geometry in the hands of Leodamas of Thasos.<sup>34</sup> According to Plutarch, Plato criticized Eudoxus, Archytas, and Menaechmus for trying to effect the duplication of the cube by mechanical means and so losing the benefit of geometry.<sup>35</sup> Aristotle says that Plato (in oral instruction) “used to object vigorously to the point, as a mathematical dogma, and on the other hand often posited his indivisible lines.”<sup>36</sup>

The view that the sciences contemplate objects situated halfway between Forms and sensibles and having some of the characteristics of both, which is not found in Plato's dialogues, was probably at home in the same discussion. Observation of the heavens went on, perhaps under the direction of Eudoxus or his companions. Aristotle says that he had seen an occultation of Mars by the moon (then at half-moon); this must have been in April or May 357 B.C., a calculation first made by Kepler.<sup>37</sup>

It was maintained by H. Usener in 1884 that the Academy was the first known institute for scientific research, a statement which initiated a debate not yet closed. It has been opposed from one point of view by those who compare the Academy to a modern school of [political science](#) (and perhaps jurisprudence) thoroughly practical in its orientation; and from another especially by Jaeger, who thinks that it was no part of Plato's intention to teach science in encyclopedic fashion and promote its general advance.<sup>38</sup> The Academy was not a place in which *all* science was studied for its own sake but one in which selected sciences were taught and their foundations examined as a mental discipline, the aim being practical wisdom and legislative skill, which in Plato's opinion are inseparable from contemplative philosophy.

Evidently the crux of this matter is whether empirical sciences, which had no place in the curriculum projected for the guardians in the *Republic*, were, in fact, pursued under Plato's auspices. Jaeger seems to be right in his skepticism about the apparent evidence of such activity. It may be added that proofs that Plato was personally interested in (for instance) medicine and physiology, which *Timaeus* affords, are not quite what is wanted. One might argue that he was indeed an empirical scientist manqué, pointing to his interest in the manufacturing arts in the *Statesman*, his marvelous sketch of the geology of Attica in the *Critias*, and his attention to legislative detail in the *Laws*. It was an imperfectly suppressed love of the concrete and visible, rather than any retreat from his avowed opinions, that led him to pose the problem concerning celestial phenomena which Eudoxus later solved. But it is a long step from these admissions to the pronouncement that the Academy became an institute of scientific research.

Plato's activity at Athens was interrupted by two more visits to Sicily. When Dionysius the Elder died in the spring of 367 B.C., two problems in particular demanded solution: what the future form of government Syracuse itself should be; and when and how several Greek cities, whose populations had been transferred elsewhere under Dionysius' policy, should be refounded. Plato's admirer Dion planned to make his nephew, [Dionysius the Younger](#), a constitutional monarch, and appealed for Plato's aid in educating him for his responsibility. His proposal was that Plato should come to Syracuse and take charge of a group of earnest students, which Dionysius might unobtrusively join.

Plato yielded to pressure and arrived in the spring of 366 b.c. But, according to Epistle VII, he found a situation of intrigue. Some Syracusans believed that Dion's aim was to occupy his nephew with interminable study while he himself wielded effective power. From another side there was pressure for the restoration of full democracy. A war with Carthage (or against the Lucanians) was in progress. Three months after Plato's arrival the young ruler charged Dion with attempting to negotiate with the Carthaginians and expelled him. Plato left the following year (365 b.c.), after obtaining what he took to be a promise that Dion would be recalled.

In 362 b.c. he once more left the Academy (appointing, it is said, Heraclides Ponticus as his deputy) and returned to Syracuse. There were reports that Dionysius was now genuinely interested in philosophy; but in consenting to go Plato was more influenced, according to Epistle VII, by a promise that a favorable settlement of Dion's affairs could be reached on condition that he return. Dion had spent his years of exile in Athens and had become a friend of Plato's nephew Speusippus.

Plato's mission ended in failure. Dion's agents were forbidden to send him the revenue from his estates; and Plato made his escape with some difficulty, returning home in 361 b.c. Dion thereupon took steps to effect his return to Syracuse by force, urging Plato to aid him and to punish Dionysius as a violator of hospitality. But Plato answered (still according to the Epistle) that he was too old, that after all Dionysius had spared his life, and that he wished to be available if necessary as a mediator. Other members of the Academy, however, joined the expedition. Dion succeeded in his enterprise but failed to reconcile the warring parties; and after a brief period of power he was murdered by the Athenian Callippus (354 b.c.). Epistles VII and VIII, addressed to Dion's partisans, belong to this time or were fabricated as belonging to it. They contain constructive advice which, in language and spirit, closely resembles *Laws* III. Plato died in 348/347 b.c., at the age of eighty.

Was Plato at all influenced in his later years by progress in the special sciences? It may be replied that later modifications in his general theory of knowledge seem to have been the product of his own reflection rather than of any remarkable discoveries and were not such as to affect his educational ideals. He did, however, absorb new scientific ideas and make use of them for his purposes as a moralist. This is seen in one way in the *Timaeus*, where the world is shown to be a product of beneficent rational design, and in another in the *Laws*, where theological consequences are drawn from the perfect regularity of the planetary movements.

In the *Timaeus*, Plato has not abandoned his theory of Forms, for Timaeus declares that the perpetually changing, visible cosmos can at best be an object of "right opinion." The view earlier attributed to Socrates in *Phaedo*—that the only satisfactory explanation of physical facts is a teleological one—is assumed from the start and carried out in detail. Timaeus opposes mechanistic views with a superior atomism, in which Theaetetus' construction of the mathematical solids plays a part. Sicilian influence is especially strong. From Empedocles—"system the doctor Philistion of Locri, with whom Plato was personally acquainted,"<sup>39</sup> developed a theory whereby the heart is the center of life and consciousness, and the veins and arteries carry pneuma along with blood. Timaeus adopts this physiology and the explanation of disease which went with it, except that in making the brain the organ of consciousness he follows Alcmaeon. (It appears then to have been the Academy, with its Sicilian

connections, which brought the knowledge of Empedoclean medicine to the mainland.) All this leads up to the conclusion that man can learn to regulate his life by study of the cosmos, which is a divine artifact but also an intelligent being.

The Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* says that he was no longer a young man when he became persuaded that each of the planets moves in a single path, and that we malign them when we call them “wanderers.” He evidently speaks for Plato, and the remark is a formal withdrawal of what was said in *Republic VII* of the erratic celestial movements; but in favor of what new system? Surely that of Eudoxus. This may not have lasted long, and was open to an objection that was soon seen, but it was the first scientific astronomy. From it Plato could, and did, argue that all movement stems from a soul (matter is inactive); perfectly regular movement stems from a wise and beneficent soul; and the rotation of the stars, sun, and planets is perfectly regular.

In these later developments Plato may appear not as a lover of science but as a biased user of it. But “an intense belief that a knowledge of mathematical relations would prove the key to unlock the mysteries of the relatedness within Nature was ever at the back of Plato’s cosmological speculations” (Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 194).<sup>40</sup>

## NOTES

1. Proclus in his copoentary on Euclid’s *Elements* gives a summary account of the development of geometry from the time of Thales. He claims that Plato brought about a great advance, and names some of those who worked with his encouragement in the Academy. Closely similar language is used in a fragmentary papyrus found at Herculaneum, “Academicorum philosophorum index Herculaneusis,” where Plato’s role is said to be that of a supervisor who propounded problems for investigation by mathematicians. Simplicius in his copoentary on Aristotle’s *De Caelo* informs us that Eudoxus’s astronomical system was a solution of a carefully formulated problem set by Plato. The common source of the first two reports is probably the history of mathematics by Eudemus of Rhodes, and Simplicius says that his statement is derived from Book 2 of Eudemus’ *History of Astronomy*. Greek texts are in K. Gaiser, “Testimonia Platonica” (Appendix to *Platons Ungeschriebene Lehre*), nos. 15–21, 460–479. An English translation of the latter part of the Proclus passage is in Heath, *A Manual of Greek Mathematics*, 184–185.
2. *Apology* 34a; *Republic II* , 368a.
3. *Memorabilia III*, 6.
4. For a family tree, see John burnet, *Greek Philosophy From Thales to Plato* (London, 1924), appendix; or C. Ritter, *Platon*, I, 13.
5. *Epistles VII*, 324–326.
6. *Apology* 34a.
7. *Ibid.*, 38b.
8. *Phaedo* 59b, c.
9. [Diogenes Laertius III](#) , 6, and [II](#) , 106, quoting Hermodorus, a pupil of Plato.
10. *Phaedo* 78a, 107b.
11. W. and M. Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford, 1962), ch. 3; B. Mates, *Stoic Logic* (Berkeley-[Los Angeles](#), 1961), intro.
12. Aelian, V, 16; [VII](#) 14; and Diogenes Laërtius, III, 8, where there is confusion between Plato and Socrates.
13. Robin, *Platon*, pp. 101–103.
14. Cornford, *Republic of Plato*, Intro., p. xvii.
15. *Epistles VII* , 326–327.
16. *De Republica I* , 10.
17. *Phaedo* 61d.

18. *De finibus* V , 29.87.
19. *Metaphysics*, 987a32.
20. *Phaedo* 75E, 76e.
21. *Republic* VI , 503–505.
22. *Republic* VI , 484c, d.
23. *Laws* VII , 819–820.
24. *Republic* VI , 510c.
25. *Ibid.*, VII , 528b.
26. *Ibid.*, 528e ff.
27. *Ibid.*, 533.
28. Cornford, who gives this exposition, relies upon *Parmenides* 142D ff. See his trans. of the *Republic*, p. 245, and his “Mathematics and Dialectic in the Republic VI-VII.”
29. *Republic* VII , 535–540.
30. See Cicero, *De finibus* V , 1, for an eloquent description of a walk to the gymnasium’s original site, now deserted.
31. Especially *Nicomachean Ethics* X, ch. 1.
32. *Republic* VII , 535–540.
33. Euclid XIII, 18A
34. See Cornford, “Mathematics and Dialectic in the *Republic* VI–VII ,” pp. 68–73.
35. *Quaestiones convivales* 718f.
36. *Metaphysics* A, 992a20; see Ross *ad. loc*
37. See Stocks’s note in oxford trans. of Aristotle, vol. II ; and Guthrie’s ed. of Aristotle’s *on the Heavens* (Loeb), p. 205.
38. Aristotle, p. 18 and elsewhere.
39. *Epistles* II, 314d.
40. That the system presented through Timaeus is formulated in antithesis to mechanist atomism—whether or not Plato knew of Democritus as its chief author—is clearly shown by Frank, *Platon u. die sogenannten Pythagoreer*, pp. 97–108. On the meaning of Timaeus 40b, c, concerning the earth’s rotation, see Cornford, *Plato’s Cosmology*, pp. 120–134. On Philistion, see Jaeger, *Diokles von Karystos*, pp. 7, 211. For the argument that laws 822a–e can refer only to the system of Eudoxus, and for Plato’s astronomy in general, see Burkert, *Weisheit und Wissenschaft*, pp. 302–311.

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## Plato

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### [WORKS BY PLATO](#)

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Plato, son of Ariston, a member of the Athenian nobility, was born in 427 B.C. and died at the age of eighty in 347 B.C. Perhaps the greatest thinker of all times, he was not only a philosopher but the founder of political theory (he was himself involved in practical politics) and of sociology; he was, moreover, a physicist and a cosmologist. His influence, direct as well as indirect, upon European (and thus American) thought is incalculable. Whether his influence was on the whole beneficial or not is a question which has recently become highly controversial. For his political philosophy is authoritarian and hostile to democratic ideas, as when he said, “The wise shall lead and rule, and the ignorant shall follow” (*Laws* 690b), just as his social theory is collectivistic and hostile to individualistic ideas: “You are created for the sake of the whole, and not the whole for the sake of you” (*Laws* 903c). He identified individualism with egoism and group egoism with altruism, overlooking the fact that people may be unselfish not only for the sake of “the whole” (the collective, the state) but also for the sake of *other individuals*.

Plato's deep interest in the problems of politics and of society seems to have had two roots. One was a family tradition of assuming political responsibilities. (His father claimed descent from Codrus, the last king of Athens, and his mother from Dropides, a kinsman of Solon.) The other was the terrifying experience of the political and social disintegration which affected not only Athens but the whole of the Greek world during the later years of the [Peloponnesian War](#) (the “Decelean war” of 419–404 b.c.). This period coincided with Plato's formative years and culminated for him in the trial and death of his friend and teacher Socrates in 399 b.c.

The [Peloponnesian War](#) (or wars; 431–404 b.c.) was not merely a war between the two most powerful city-states of Greece; it became, one might say, the first ideological war, and it involved some of the first large-scale ideological persecutions. The clash was between the ideologies of a tribalist and authoritarian (and perhaps even totalitarian) Sparta and the maritime trading empire of democratic Athens (the “[Delian League](#)”). It became the more terrible because some of the leading families of Athens and its democratic allies were traditionally antidemocratic and oligarchic, and sympathetic to Sparta. (Thus Aristotle mentioned in his *Politics*, 1310a, an oligarchic oath which even in his time was still in vogue, as he said; it consisted of the formula “I promise to be an enemy of the people, and to try my best to give them bad advice.”)

When the Spartan King Lysistratus captured Athens in 404, he instituted there an oligarchic puppet government, under Spartan protection, known as the Thirty Tyrants. The Thirty were led by two of Plato's maternal uncles, the highly gifted Critias and the much younger Charmides. During the eight months of their reign of terror, the Thirty killed scores of Athenian citizens—almost a greater number of Athenians than the Spartan armies had killed during the last ten years of the war (Meyer [1884–1902] 1953–1958, vol. 5, p. 34). But in 403, when Plato was 24 years old, Critias and the Spartan garrison were attacked and defeated by the returning democrats. Originally only 70 men, led by Thrasybulus and Anytus, the democrats established themselves first in the Piraeus, where Plato's uncles were killed in battle. For a time, their oligarchic followers continued the reign of terror in the city of Athens itself, but their forces were in a state of confusion and dissolution. Having proved themselves incapable of ruling, they were ultimately abandoned by their Spartan protectors, who concluded a treaty with the

democrats. The peace treaty re-established democracy in Athens. Thus the democratic form of government had proved its superior strength under the most severe trials, and even its enemies began after a few years to think it invincible.

As soon as the restored democracy had re-established normal legal conditions, a case was brought against Socrates for “corrupting the youth”; its meaning was clear enough: he was accused of having corrupted Alcibiades, Critias, and Charmides, who were thought responsible for the defeat of Athens and for the bloody regime of the Thirty. In his defense Socrates insisted that he had no sympathy with the policy of the Thirty and that he had risked his life defying their attempt to implicate him in one of their crimes. He also made it clear that he preferred death to being prevented from speaking his mind freely to the young. Found guilty, he became the first martyr for the right of free speech.

Such were the tumultuous times of Plato’s most important formative years. They led him in his time of maturity to pose his fundamental problem: Society, and the body politic, are sick. How can they be cured?

**Beginning of literary activity.** That the historical events described influenced Plato in the sense indicated is, of course, conjectural. Indeed, it should be stressed that almost everything about the evolution of Plato’s thought, the sequence of his works, and the events of his life is conjectural. Our sources, so far as they are consistent, seem to be largely interdependent. Thus, we cannot be certain that this story of Plato’s life is not a legend. What is probably the oldest source, the *Book of Plato’s Letters*, may well be an ancient forgery. Even the most informative “Seventh Letter,” which many scholars accept as genuine, is suspect. (Certain other works transmitted under Plato’s name are almost certainly forgeries.) Yet even though the “Seventh Letter” is probably a forgery, it appears to be very old, and the writer must surely have been well informed about the facts of Plato’s life to get his forgery accepted. For the temporal order of Plato’s works, we have now what appears to be very good evidence from the statistics of minor stylistic peculiarities (“stylometry”). This method (which in the main leads to groupings rather than to a definite sequence) may fail, however, in cases in which Plato revised or rewrote his books. (We seem to have some independent evidence for the revision, by Plato, of at least *one* of his works, the *Theaetetus*; see Popper [1945] 1963, vol. 1, addendum II.) These uncertainties should be kept in mind throughout this account.

Most of Plato’s literary work consists of “Socratic dialogues”—dialogues, that is, in which Socrates is the main speaker and the superior intellect. Socratic dialogues were composed by several other writers, notably Xenophon; yet most of Plato’s dialogues bear the stamp of supreme originality, and we may therefore conjecture that it was Plato who invented this literary form. If so, then the view expressed by some scholars that it was the tragic death of Socrates which turned Plato into an author—into a writer of Socratic dialogues, to commemorate (and defend) his friend and teacher—is not only attractive but also likely to be true. This view would also suggest that the *Apology of Socrates*—Plato’s report of Socrates’ defense and of his condemnation—was Plato’s first work. Admittedly, there is important evidence against this: the *Apology* is a masterpiece, and quite a number of the early dialogues are, in comparison, immature. On the other hand, it is not so very unusual that an author’s first work shows him at a peak which he is not soon to reach again; and in this particular case, the unique personality of Socrates and the immediate impression made by his defense in court (Plato made it quite clear that he was present) may be more than sufficient to explain how one of the greatest and most moving works of all literature could be the [first fruits](#) of a literary novice.

At any rate, until we have good evidence to the contrary, it seems reasonable to accept the *Apology* as a true portrait of the historical Socrates and as a faithful report of the proceedings (hundreds of eyewitnesses of these proceedings must have been alive when the *Apology* was first published). It is a marvelous portrait, and the first (or almost the first, in view of Xenophanes and Pericles and Euripides) and the greatest manifesto of what may be called “critical rationalism”—the characteristically Socratic view that we ought to be aware of how little we know, and that we can learn by means of those critical discussions to which *all* theories and beliefs ought to be made subject. Though this is hardly a view which could ever become a generally accepted one, its influence upon Western thought (and Western science) has been of decisive importance.

Socrates’ critical rationalism is not skeptical, nor does it take pride in reason or cleverness: he believes in truth and in human beings, of whose intrinsic fallibility *and* intrinsic goodness he is equally convinced. Moreover, he is loyal to the democratic laws of Athens, and he loathes the crimes of the Thirty: he is a democrat, though one who is not greatly impressed by the democratic party leaders; he is a man passionately interested in other men; he is ready to die for the right of free discussion but despises the art of flattering the people.

**Three periods of Platonic works.** It is here proposed to divide Plato’s work into three periods. The first, or Socratic, period develops Plato’s portrait of Socrates as a man, teacher, and lover of truth. Its dialogues (I mention only the *Crito*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Meno*) are opposed neither to democracy nor to the value of the individual.

In the second period, Plato’s attitude, imputed to the Socrates of his dialogues, is different: Plato now blames democratic Athens—nay, democracy itself, the rule of the many, of the mob—for having murdered Socrates. This mob rule threatens every just man, who is like “a man who has fallen among wild beasts, unwilling to share their misdeeds and unable to hold out singly against the savagery of all” (*Republic* 496c).

This shows that the social body is sick. Plato has found his problem: how to heal the sick body of society.

The problem itself involves a *theory*—the organic theory of the state and of society. (The origin of this most dubious and ever-influential theory is Oriental.)

Plato's new and very personal version of the organic theory of society is his analogy between the city-state and the soul of man: the city-state is the soul writ large, and the soul is a state in miniature. He thus originated the psychological theory of the state and also the political theory of the soul. The state is class-divided. Its structure is characterized by an unstable equilibrium between the ruling classes, consisting of the rulers and their helpers (or auxiliaries), and the ruled classes, the money-earning classes and the slaves. Similarly, the structure of the soul is characterized by an unstable equilibrium—indeed a schism—between its upper functions, reason and will, and its lower functions, the instincts or appetites. (It is interesting to note that Marx and Freud were unconscious Platonists. They also were anti-Platonists in accepting Plato's scheme and inverting it, Marx by demanding the emancipation of the workers, Freud by demanding the emancipation of the instincts or appetites.)

The challenge of his problem led Plato to an almost superhuman intellectual effort. He developed not only a diagnosis and a therapy but (especially in his third period) a whole cosmology on which he based his diagnosis, and a theory of knowledge on which he based his therapy.

His social diagnosis goes deep. He is not satisfied with blaming democracy, which for him is a symptom rather than the malady itself. For the malady is social revolution—the revolutionary change which has overcome society and which has led to the dissolution of the old patriarchal society in which everybody knew his place and was happy. Society is in a process of degeneration: change is evil; stability is divine.

The stages of political degeneration are seen by Plato in the history of the Greek city-states. They begin with a golden age of hereditary kingship—the rule of the one, the best, the wisest—and an organic *division of labor*: the wisest rule, the courageous help them to keep order and defend the state, and the people work (in a variety of occupations). From here we move through aristocracy (or timarchy), the rule of the few who are the best, to the rule of the many, democracy. In the *Republic*, democracy is shown to lead only too easily to a final state of decay: to the rule of the ruthless demagogue who makes himself the tyrant of the city.

What are the causes of political degeneration? According to the *Republic*, the main work of Plato's second period, it is the racial degeneration of the ruling class which undermines its fitness and its determination to rule. According to the *Laws*, the main work of his third period, the main cause of social change is culture clash, which is an unavoidable concomitant of the development of industry (such as the Athenian silver mines), of trade, of possessing a harbor and a fleet, and of founding colonies. All this shows astonishing insight, as does the remark that population pressure is one of the main causes of an unsettled society. (It seems not unlikely that Plato connected population increase, or increase in quantity, with racial degeneration, or decrease in quality: his view of the *few* who are good and the *many* who are bad may have suggested this to him (*Laws* 710d, 740d-741a, 838e).

So much for Plato's sociological diagnosis.

The therapy which Plato advocated—his political program—fits the diagnosis: *Arrest all social change!* Return (so far as this is possible) to the patriarchic state! Strengthen the stability and the power of the ruling class, its unity, and its will to rule! For Plato formulated the following diagnostic-sociological *law of revolution*: “Change in the constitution originates, without exception, in the ruling class itself, and only when this class becomes the seat of dissension,” or when its will to rule is sapped, or when it is defeated in war (*Republic* 545d, 465b). Thus, the proper education of the ruling class becomes a major instrument of politics; the degeneration of the ruling class must be prevented by eugenics; the unity of the ruling class must be strengthened by a radical communism (confined to the ruling class) that involves the common ownership of women and children: nobody may know who his actual parents are, and everybody must look upon all the members of the older generation of their class as their parents. (This startling communism is the only major point of Plato's program given up in the *Laws* as demanding too much, even though it is still declared to be ideally the best form of society.) Culture clash must be prevented, and it is said in the *Laws* that the city must therefore possess no harbor and no fleet, and that no citizen may possess means for traveling: the currency must be a token currency without intrinsic value (*Laws* 742a-c), though the government will possess a treasure of “general Hellenic currency.” Religion and rites are to be developed as important instruments for preventing change, and no variation in them may be tolerated. (This view, which anticipates the idea that religion is opium for the people, is the more remarkable for the absence of any churchlike organization in Greece.)

In his third period (especially in the *Laws*) Plato no longer used Socrates as his main speaker: it seems that he had become conscious that he had moved far away from Socrates' teaching. Plato developed the political ideas of his middle period further and gave them (especially in the *Statesman* and the *Timaeus*) a cosmological background: the deepest cause of racial degeneration and political decay is that we are living in a world period in which the world is moving away from its divine origin; every change makes it less like its original model—the divine Form, or Idea, in whose image it was created.

In this third period, Plato developed further his theory of knowledge. In his first period, it was an optimistic theory which made it possible for every man to learn (*Meno* 81b-d). In his second and third periods, only the highly trained philosopher can attain true knowledge—knowledge of the divine Forms or Ideas.

**Later life.** It is difficult to relate the works of Plato's second and third periods to his later life, whose most important events, according to tradition, were his journeys (one to Egypt and three to Syracuse), the foundation of the Academy, and the Academy's (and Plato's) participation in Syracusan high politics: his friend Dio invaded Syracuse, supported by other members of the Academy, and overthrew the Dionysian dynasty. Dio was murdered by Callipus, another member of the Academy, who in turn was murdered by the Pythagorean philosopher Leptines. (At least nine pupils of Plato's Academy made themselves tyrants of some city or other.)

Traces of these journeys, such as allusions to Egyptian institutions, and of some others of these events, may be discerned in Plato's work, but most of these interpretations, though interesting, are highly controversial.

The influence (for good or ill) of Plato's work is immeasurable. Western thought, one might say, has been either Platonic or anti-Platonic, but hardly ever non-Platonic.

Karl R. Popper

[See also [Constitutions and constitutionalism](#); [Elites](#); [Justice natural law](#); [Political theory](#); [Social contract](#); [State](#); [Utopianism](#), [article on utopias and utopianism](#); and the [biography of Aristotle](#).]

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## Plato (427?–347 B.C.E.)

Encyclopedia of Education  
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[Plato](#) (427?–347 b.c.e.) was a prominent Athenian philosopher who posed fundamental questions about education, human nature, and justice.

A student of the famous philosopher [Socrates](#), Plato left [Athens](#) upon his mentor's death in 399 b.c.e. After traveling to other parts of [Greece](#), Italy, and Sicily, Plato returned to Athens in 387 b.c.e. and founded a school of mathematics and philosophy called the Academy, which became the most prominent intellectual institution in all of ancient Greece. Plato authored a number of dialogues that often depicted Socrates engaging in the educational mode of dialectic. Like his mentor, Plato suspected that most people did not know what they claimed to know, and hence wondered why rigorous qualifications for rulers did not exist. Challenging the Sophists' claims that knowledge and truth were relative to the perspective of each individual, Plato developed an epistemology and metaphysics that suggested an absolute truth that could only be gleaned through rigorous self-examination and the development of reason—skills crucial for enlightened political leaders.

## The Ideal State

Plato's educational ideas derived in part from his conception of justice, both for individuals and for the ideal state. He viewed individuals as mutually dependent for their survival and well-being, and he proposed that justice in the ideal state was congruent with justice in the individual's soul.

Plato's ideal state was a republic with three categories of citizens: artisans, auxiliaries, and philosopher-kings, each of whom possessed distinct natures and capacities. Those proclivities, moreover, reflected a particular combination of elements within one's tripartite soul, composed of appetite, spirit, and reason. Artisans, for example, were dominated by their appetites or desires, and therefore destined to produce material goods. Auxiliaries, a class of guardians, were ruled by spirit in their souls and possessed the courage necessary to protect the state from invasion. Philosopher-kings, the leaders of the ideal state, had souls in which reason reigned over spirit and appetite, and as a result possessed the foresight and knowledge to rule wisely. In Plato's view, these rulers were not merely elite intellectuals, but moral leaders. In the just state, each class of citizen had a distinct duty to remain faithful to its determined nature and engage solely in its destined occupation. The proper management of one's soul would yield immediate happiness and well-being, and specific educational methods would cultivate this brand of spiritual and civic harmony.

## The Dialectical Method

Plato's educational priorities also reflected his distinct pedagogy. Challenging the Sophists—who prized rhetoric, believed in ethical and epistemological relativism, and claimed to teach "excellence"—Plato argued that training in "excellence" was meaningless without content and that knowledge was absolute, certain, and good. As a result, teachers assumed a high moral responsibility. Plato doubted whether a standard method of teaching existed for all subjects, and he argued that morally neutral education would corrupt most citizens. He preferred the dialectical method over the Sophists' rhetorical pedagogy. For Plato, the role of the teacher was not to fill an empty reservoir with specific skills, but to encourage the student to redirect his or her soul and to rearrange the priorities within it to allow reason to rule over the irrational elements of spirit and appetite.

In the *Meno*, Plato examined a paradox that challenged the dialectical method of education: if one knows nothing, then how will one come to recognize knowledge when he encounters it? In response, Plato's Socrates proposed a different idea. Through a geometry lesson with a slave boy, he attempted to demonstrate that all possessed some minimal knowledge that served as a window into one's eternal and omniscient soul. Through dialectic, the teacher could refute the student's false opinions until the student pursued a true opinion that survived the rigors of critical examination. Unacquainted with the storehouse of knowledge

in one's soul, a person needed to learn how to access or "recollect" it. Plato distanced himself further from the Sophists by distinguishing knowledge (eternal and certain) from opinion (unreliable and ephemeral).

Plato developed this idea more fully in the *Republic*, declaring knowledge superior to opinion in both an epistemological and ontological sense. Opinion reflected a misapprehension of reality, while knowledge belonged to an essential or "intelligible" realm. In particular, Plato proposed a linear hierarchy of knowledge starting with the "visible" realms of imagination and then belief, and moving to the "intelligible" realms of reason, and ultimately, knowledge. In his celebrated cave metaphor, Plato's Socrates depicted chained prisoners, who presumed shadows of representations cast by artificial light to be real. The first step of education, then, was to turn one's soul away from this artificial world of shadows and toward the representations of objects and ideas themselves—leading one to the realm of belief. The objects of belief, however, were still empirical, and thus, ephemeral, relative, and unreliable. Beyond the cave lay the intelligible realm of reason and knowledge. Plato asserted that ideas did not possess any physical qualities, and to ascend beyond the world of tangible objects and ideas, one needed to develop the power of abstract thinking through the use of postulates to draw conclusions about the universal essence or "form" of an object or idea. Mathematics constituted a particularly useful tool for the development of reason, as it relied heavily on logic and abstract thought. The ultimate stage of awareness for Plato was knowledge of the "form of the good"—a transcendence of all postulates and assumptions through abstract reasoning that yielded a certain and comprehensive understanding of all things.

## Educational Programs

Plato also made clear that not all citizens of the ideal state possessed the same capacity to realize the "form of the good." As a result, he proposed distinct educational programs for future artisans, auxiliaries, and philosopher-kings. Plato favored mathematics as a precise and abstract model for the development of thought in the future rulers of the just state. Knowledge, however, could only be attained through the use of dialectic to shed all assumptions and to glean the first principle of all, the "form of the good." After many years of mathematical and dialectical study, followed by fifteen years of public service, the best of this group would have come to understand the "form of the good" and have become philosopher-kings. Cognizant of the interrelationship of all things and confident of the reasons behind them, the intellectually and morally elite would be equipped to rule the just state in an enlightened manner.

## The Cultivation of Morals

In addition, Plato advocated the removal of all infants from their natural families to receive a proper aesthetic education—literary, musical, and physical—for the development of character in the soul and the cultivation of morals necessary for sustaining the just state. Suspecting that most writers and musicians did not know the subjects they depicted—that they cast mere shadows of representations of real objects, ideas, and people—Plato feared that artistic works could endanger the health of the just state. Consequently, he wanted to hold artists and potential leaders accountable for the consequences of their creations and policies. This is why Plato advocated the censorship of all forms of art that did not accurately depict the good in behavior. Art, as a powerful medium that threatened the harmony of the soul, was best suited for philosophers who had developed the capacity to know and could resist its dangerous and irrational allures. Exposure to the right kinds of stories and music, although not sufficient to make a citizen beautiful and good, would contribute to the proper development of the elements within one's soul. For Plato, aesthetics and morality were inextricable; the value of a work of art hinged on its propensity to lead to moral development and behavior.

## A Less-Ideal State

In the *Laws*, Plato considered the possibility that not only the majority, but all citizens could be incapable of reaching the "form of the good." He thus envisioned a second-best state with rulers ignorant of the "form of the good" but capable of thought. Such a society had absolute and unyielding rulers who eradicated any idea or thing that questioned their authority. Acting as if they possessed wisdom, such leaders established laws that reflected their opinions and their imperfect conception of the good.

## Modern Scholarship

Contemporary advocates of popular democracy have criticized Plato's republican scheme as elitist and tyrannical in prizing order over individual liberty. Indeed, Plato believed that individuals could not stand alone, and as most would never reach internal harmony or virtue, the majority needed to be told how to conduct its life by those who possessed that knowledge. Incapable of understanding the reasons behind the laws, most citizens needed merely to obey them.

Some scholars have also questioned Plato's treatment of women in his just state. For instance, Jane Roland Martin has argued that although he did not differentiate education or societal roles on the basis of sex, Plato was not committed to gender equality. Despite his abolition of the family, gender distinctions would have likely persisted, as Plato did not seek to ensure the equal portrayal of men and women in literature. According to this view, Plato's female guardians-in-training warranted a



distinct education from men to help mitigate the cultural, symbolic, and epistemological assumptions of female subordination. Identical education, then, did not necessarily constitute equal education, a point that holds significant implications for contemporary assumptions about the effects of coeducation.

These criticisms illustrate the longevity of Plato's educational, metaphysical, and ethical ideas. In addition, other scholars have eschewed the tendency to evaluate the modern implications of Plato's specific educational doctrines, and instead have highlighted his assumption that education could address fundamental social problems. They view Plato's method of inquiry—critical self-examination through the dialectical interplay of teacher and student—as his primary contribution to educational thought. Indeed, perhaps education itself embodied the highest virtue of Plato's just state.

*See also:* Philosophy of Education.

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## Plato

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In his written dialogues, Plato developed accounts of knowledge, reality, humanity, society, goodness, [God](#), and beauty. Usually, when people speak of Platonism, they are referring to his theory of Forms, accompanied by a doctrine of the immortality of the soul and values that transcend power, prestige, and pleasure. Western thought has developed either by following and adapting his accounts or by reacting to them, either directly or indirectly through, most notably, [Aristotle](#), Plotinus, Philo, and Augustine. The theory of Forms established the most basic concept of science as it came to be practiced in [Europe](#), namely, that science aims to discover objective principles, in other words, "Forms." Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul and values that transcend the material world have reinforced and shaped systematic thinking within [Judaism](#), [Christianity](#), and [Islam](#).

## Life and times

Plato (428–347 b.c.e.) was born in [Athens](#) to a rich and politically powerful family. Instead of taking his place in the ruling class, he became a philosopher. He founded the Academy and invented a new form of literature, the dramatic dialogue. His dialogues, featuring the philosopher [Socrates](#) (469–399 b.c.e.), have profoundly shaped history, in a way comparable to the writings of Paul about Jesus.

Plato chose philosophy because he fell under the spell of Socrates as a young man while witnessing the horrors of political life in his time and city. At the time of Plato's birth, Athens, a city-state in [Greece](#), was the world's first democracy, inventing such wonders as trial by jury, as well as some of the greatest sculpture, architecture, and drama of any age. But during this time of extraordinary human achievement, the wisest man of all, as confirmed by a religious oracle, was one who professed to have no wisdom at all: Socrates. Socrates would closely question people who professed to know politics, religion, or any deep wisdom about life, and he would show that their pretenses to wisdom were false. Socrates would also use his chains of questions to lead anyone who would speak with him to agree human excellence was exclusively a matter of wisdom, and that the search for wisdom was the best way to spend one's life.

Plato was fascinated by Socrates and joined other young men in spending time in his company. At the same time Plato observed how demagogues led Athens to prolong its [Peloponnesian War](#) (431–404 b.c.e.) against [Sparta](#), a war that ended in utter defeat for Athens. The Spartans installed an antidemocratic government that included members of Plato's family. This government ruled murderously, but briefly, until a citizens' armed rebellion restored the democracy, although Athens's empire and military preeminence were gone forever. Under this same democracy, just a couple of years later (399 b.c.e.), a religiously conservative prosecutor brought Socrates to trial on charges of atheism, heresy, and corrupting the young. The jury found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death. It is no wonder that Plato became disillusioned with a life aimed at political rule, and decided instead to devote his life to developing Socrates's ideas.

Plato spent his time in private conversations with friends about Socrates' ideas, honoring his memory by continuing to seek wisdom. Some of these friends were Pythagoreans. [Pythagoras](#) lived about a hundred years before Plato in Greek colonies in the south of Italy. According to reports, Pythagoras had supernatural powers and formed a religious school of followers. He believed that human souls are reincarnated in animal and human bodies. Pythagoras also was aware of the mathematical structure of musical harmony and believed that numbers provide the explanation of all the order in the universe. Plato traveled to southern Italy a couple of times in his life, at least in part because of his interest in Pythagoras. In his written dialogues, Plato developed Pythagorean as well as Socratic ideas. Plato also followed Pythagoras in forming a school, which became known as the Academy.

## Work

Next to nothing is known of the way the Academy was run, but a great deal is known about Plato's writings, since all of his dialogues have survived. The dialogues present at least three different theoretical systems, probably from Plato's early, middle, and late periods, though any such dating is speculative and controversial. The early dialogues focus on ethical issues, and

usually end with the speakers admitting their ignorance. For example, in the *Laches* the question is "What is courage?" in the *Euthyphro* "What is reverence?" in the *Charmides* "What is moderation?" in the *Lysis* "What is a friend?" and in the *Protagoras* "How are the virtues alike?" Though the arguments are inconclusive, they give an account of virtue as purely a matter of intellect, which is contrary to the widespread belief, then and now, that virtue requires proper desires or a good will in addition to technical know-how.

The middle and late dialogues end with the speakers reaching positive conclusions that are not limited to ethics. In the middle dialogues, such as the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*, Plato uses arguments to prove, as well as myths and metaphors to embellish, an account of the soul as having three parts: reason, which aims at truth; emotion, which seeks social values such as prestige; and desire, which aims at material satisfaction. This soul is immortal and destined to enjoy the beauty of divine objects that are not seen with the senses but understood, in much the way one understands mathematics with the intellect. It is the nature of these souls to be constantly reincarnated into various human and animal bodies. The process of reincarnation disorients the soul and makes it believe that sense objects are the only realities. Proper reflection on human crafts and sciences, as reflected in the use of language, enables human souls to recognize ultimate reality. The crucial turning point comes when one realizes that all well-made or beautiful or good objects share the same qualities or structure or *Form*. For example, it is not by sensory perception of particular beds that an expert carpenter or engineer designs and builds a bed, but by an intellectual recognition of what function beds are meant to perform. When the soul recognizes the reality of the Forms, and turns away from the senses towards such intellectual, math-like reasoning, it begins its path towards salvation. The soul achieves salvation by recognizing that the realm of Forms, not the material world, is true reality, so that one's desires for bodily and social goods cease to attach the soul to the material world, with the result that, at death, the soul is not drawn back into another body but ascends to the realm of the gods, if only for a limited time.

In the *Timaeus*, perhaps his most influential contribution to the dialogue between science and religion, Plato extends this account to general cosmology, explaining the design in the visible world by referring to a divine craftsman who fashioned the whole (by referring to Formal reality, of course) and insured its proper function by making it a living thing with a soul. Plato begins the tradition of *perfect-being theology*, which argues that God must be perfect, hence good, unchanging, eternal, and so on. In the later dialogues, beginning with the *Parmenides*, Plato raises problems with his theory of Forms, leading him not to abandon it but to abandon his middle period confidence that the Forms are simple enough that human minds can unmistakably know them without possibility of error.

## Influence

Plato's influence on science and religion is probably greater than any other single person's. He lived at a time when there was no sharp distinction between the methods of religion and of science, and he was early enough in the history of western civilization to cast his shadow over the development of western science and religion. His influence on science is largely through Aristotle, who accepted with modifications Plato's view that the world can be explained in terms of form and matter and teleology, that is, the function objects are designed to perform. These categories dominated, and perhaps stifled, scientific thinking until the scientific revolution of the 1600s, when mathematical advances allowed scientists to try to explain the laws of nature in purely mechanistic terms (of particles pushing and pulling particles). Even in that revolution, Plato's influence continued. For instance, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) used Plato's method of writing dialogues in the great debate between Ptolemaic and Copernican world systems to challenge the weight of religious authority by appeal to the light of reason.

Plato's influence on religion is even more profound. Philo (c. 20 b.c.e.–c. 50 c.e.) attempted to explain Jewish religion in Platonist terms and set a model that would be followed by [Christians](#). In the three centuries after the death of Jesus, Christians had to choose between different interpretations of their faith as found in their sacred writings. As they worked to establish a biblical canon and creeds, they found themselves engaging in discussions shaped by Plato's and Aristotle's metaphysical and theological ideas. Some of these early writers, such as Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225), deplored any attempt to produce a platonic Christianity. Others, such as [Origen](#) (c. 185–c. 254), used platonic reasoning to defend the faith in a manner that would be followed by Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who in turn influenced all later Christian theology. Christian apologists appealed to platonic arguments to show that God exists and is perfectly good, that God designed the world, and that human beings have immortal souls. Then they supplemented these arguments with revelations from scripture. While critics of Christianity's Hellenization continue to this day, orthodox Christianity remains in the mold of perfect-being theology, and apologists continue to use platonic arguments.

*See also* Aristotle; Augustine; Christianity; Galileo Galilei; Idealism; Judaism; Soul; Teleology

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## Plato

**The Greek philosopher Plato (428-347 B.C.) founded the Academy, one of the great philosophical schools of antiquity. His thought had enormous impact on the development of Western philosophy.**

Plato was born in Athens, the son of Ariston and Perictione, both of Athenian aristocratic ancestry. He lived his whole life in Athens although he traveled to Sicily and southern Italy on several occasions, and one story says he traveled to Egypt. Little is known of his early years, but he was given the finest education Athens had to offer the scions of its noble families, and he devoted his considerable talents to politics and the writing of tragedy and other forms of poetry. His acquaintance with Socrates altered the course of his life. The compelling power which Socrates's methods and arguments had over the minds of the youth of Athens gripped Plato as firmly as it did so many others, and he became a close associate of Socrates.

The end of the [Peloponnesian War](#) (404 B.C.) left Plato in an irreconcilable position. His uncle, Critias, was the leader of the Thirty Tyrants who were installed in power by the victorious Spartans. One means of perpetuating themselves in power was to implicate as many Athenians as possible in their atrocious acts. Thus Socrates, as we learn in Plato's *Apology*, was ordered to arrest a man and bring him to Athens from Salamis for execution. When the great teacher refused, his life was in jeopardy, and he was probably saved only by the overthrow of the Thirty and the reestablishment of the democracy.

Plato was repelled by the aims and methods of the Thirty and welcomed the restoration of the democracy, but his mistrust of the whimsical demos was deepened some 4 years later when Socrates was tried on trumped up charges and sentenced to death. Plato was present at the trial, as we learn in the *Apology*, but was not present when the hemlock was administered to his master, although he describes the scene in vivid and touching detail in the *Phaedo*. He then turned in disgust from contemporary Athenian politics and never took an active part in government, although through friends he did try to influence the course of political life in the Sicilian city of Syracuse.

Plato and several of his friends withdrew from Athens for a short time after Socrates's death and remained with Euclides in Megara. His productive years were punctuated by three voyages to Sicily, and his literary output, all of which has survived, may conveniently be discussed within the framework of those voyages.

The first trip, to southern Italy and Syracuse, took place in 388-387 B.C., when Plato made the acquaintance of Archytas of Tarentum, the Pythagorean, and Dion of Syracuse and his infamous brother-in-law, Dionysius I, ruler of that city. Dionysius was then at the height of his power and prestige in Sicily for having freed the Greeks there from the threat of Carthaginian overlordship. Plato became better friends with Dion, however, and Dionysius's rather callous treatment of his Athenian guest may be ascribed to the jealousy which that close friendship aroused. On Plato's return journey to Athens, Dionysius's crew deposited him on the island of Aegina, which at that time was engaged in a minor war with Athens, and Plato might have been sold as a prisoner of war had he not been ransomed by Anniceris of Cyrene, one of his many admirers.

## His Dialogues

On his return to Athens, Plato began to teach in the Gymnasium Academe and soon afterward acquired property nearby and founded his famous Academy, which survived until the philosophical schools were closed by the Christian emperor Justinian in the early 6th century A.D. At the center of the Academy stood a shrine to the Muses, and at least one modern scholar suggests that the Academy may have been a type of religious brotherhood. Plato had begun to write the dialogues, which came to be the hallmark of his philosophical exposition, some years before the founding of the Academy. To this early period, before the first trip to Sicily, belong the *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Lysis*, *Protagoras*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Hippias Major*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Gorgias*. Socrates is the main character in these dialogues, and various abstractions are discussed and defined. The *Laches* deals with courage, *Charmides* with *sophrosyne* (common sense), *Euthyphro* with piety, *Lysis* with friendship, *Protagoras* with the teaching of arete (virtue), and so on. The *Apology* and *Crito* stand somewhat apart from the other works of this group in that they deal with historical events, Socrates's trial and the period between his conviction and execution. The unifying element in all of these works is the figure of Socrates and his rather negative function in revealing the fallacies in the conventional treatment of the topics discussed.

Plato's own great contributions begin to appear in the second group of writings, which date from the period between his first and second voyages to Sicily. To this second group belong the *Meno*, *Cratylus*, *Euthydemus*, *Menexenus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theaetetus*. Development of ideas in the earlier dialogues is discernible in these works. The *Meno* carries on the question of the teachability of virtue first dealt with in *Protagoras* and introduces the doctrine of *anamnesis* (recollection), which plays an important role in Plato's view of the human's ability to learn the truth. Since the soul is immortal and has at an earlier stage contemplated the Forms, or Ideas, which are the eternal and changeless truths of the universe, humans do not learn, but remember.

The impetus for learning or remembering the truth is revealed in the *Symposium*, where the ascent from corporeal reality to eternal and incorporeal truth is described. The scene is a dinner party at the house of the tragic poet Agathon, and each guest contributes a short speech on the god Eros. Socrates, however, cuts through the Sophistic arguments of his friends and praises Eros not as a separate and independent god but as an intermediary between gods and men. It is Eros who causes men to seek beauty, although for a time the unenlightened lover may think that what he is really seeking is the corporeal body of his beloved. Ultimately, however, one progresses from love of the body to love of the beauty which the body represents, and so forth, until one realizes that the ultimate goal sought is contemplation of beauty itself and of the Forms. The Forms are the true

reality and impart their essence in some way to ephemeral, corporeal objects, and man may come to know this true reality through rigorous discipline of mind and body, and Plato went so far as to draw up a rough outline for a utopian state in his *Republic*.

## The *Republic*

Socrates is again the main character in the *Republic*, although this work is less a dialogue than a long discussion by Socrates of justice and what it means to the individual and the city-state. The great utopian state is described only as an analogue to the soul in order to understand better how the soul might achieve the kind of balance and harmony necessary for the rational element to control it. Just as there are three elements to the soul, the rational, the less rational, and the impulsive irrational, so there are three classes in the state, the rulers, the guardians, and the workers. The rulers are not a hereditary clan or self-perpetuating [upper class](#) but are made up of those who have emerged from the population as a whole as the most gifted intellectually. The guardians serve society by keeping order and by handling the practical matters of government, including fighting wars, while the workers perform the labor necessary to keep the whole running smoothly. Thus the most rational elements of the city-state guide it and see that all in it are given an education commensurate with their abilities.

The wisdom, courage, and moderation cultivated by the rulers, guardians, and workers ideally produce the justice in society which those virtues produce in the individual soul when they are cultivated by the three elements of that soul. Only when the three work in harmony, with intelligence clearly in control, does the individual or state achieve the happiness and fulfillment of which it is capable. The *Republic* ends with the great myth of Er, in which the wanderings of the soul through births and rebirths are recounted. One may be freed from the cycle after a time through lives of greater and greater spiritual and intellectual purity.

Plato's second trip to Syracuse took place in 367 B.C. after the death of Dionysius I, but his and Dion's efforts to influence the development of Dionysius II along the lines laid down in the *Republic* for the philosopher-king did not succeed, and he returned to Athens.

## Last Works

Plato's final group of works, written after 367, consists of the *Sophist*, the *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and the *Laws*. The *Sophist*, takes up the metaphysical question of being and not-being, while the *Statesman* concludes that the best type of city-state would be the one in which the expert is given absolute authority with no hindrance to his rule from laws or constitution. The *Timaeus* discusses the rationality inherent in the universe which confirms Plato's scheme, while the *Laws*, Plato's last work, once again takes up the question of the best framework in which society might function for the betterment of its citizens. Here great stress is laid on an almost mystical approach to the great truth of the rational universe.

Plato's third and final voyage to Syracuse was made some time before 357 B.C., and he was no more successful in his attempts to influence the young Dionysius than he had been earlier. Dion fared no better and was exiled by the young tyrant, and Plato was held in semicaptivity before being released. Plato's *Seventh Letter*, the only one in the collection of 13 considered accurate, perhaps even from the hand of Plato himself, recounts his role in the events surrounding the death of Dion, who in 357 B.C. entered Syracuse and overthrew Dionysius. It is of more interest, however, for Plato's statement that the deepest truths may not be communicated.

Plato died in 347 B.C., the founder of an important philosophical school, which existed for almost 1,000 years, and the most brilliant of Socrates's many pupils and followers. His system attracted many followers in the centuries after his death and resurfaced as Neoplatonism, the great rival of early Christianity.

## Further Reading

A readable translation of the Platonic corpus may be found in the edition by [Benjamin Jowett](#), *The Dialogues of Plato* (1953), which contains analyses. Special treatments may be found in J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy* (1914); A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (1927); and Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said* (1933). □

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## Plato (427-348 B.C.E.)

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Plato was born into an aristocratic Greek family in the fifth century b.c.e. Like all youngsters of his status, he initially intended to go into politics. In his twenties, he came into the circle of [Socrates](#), who was to be the lasting influence on his thought. After the execution of Socrates on accusations of the corruption of youth, Plato abandoned direct involvement in politics and turned to writing and education. All his works are in the form of dialogues, in most of which the main speaker is Socrates (469-399 b.c.e.). In 385b.c.e. he founded the Academy in [Athens](#), the first known institution of research and higher learning in the Greek world, which he headed until the end of his life. Plato deals with childhood in the context of education. He discusses early education mainly in the *Republic*, written about 385 b.c.e., and in the *Laws*, his last work, on which he was still at work at the end of his life.

### The State as an Educational Entity

Plato saw the state primarily as an educational entity. In the *Republic* he discusses the principles of a state that is based on knowledge and reason, personified in the philosopher, and not on mere opinion or desire for power. This state is a strict meritocracy, where the citizen body is divided into the functions (commonly but erroneously called "classes") of producers, auxiliaries (in charge of internal and external security), and philosophers, the last two jointly referred to as "guardians." This book is not so much a blueprint for a future state as a standard by which all states are to be measured. The *Republic* is concerned with the education of the guardians, but in the *Laws*, where Plato draws up an actual system of laws for a state conforming as much as possible to that standard, the same education is provided to all citizens, according to their abilities.

Plato devotes much attention to the education of the child as a future citizen. As such, he believes that the child belongs to the state and its education is the responsibility of the state (*Republic*, bk. 2, 376.) Education must be compulsory for all. State funds should pay for gymnasiums and for instructors, officials, and superintendents in charge of education, both cultural and physical (*Laws*, bk. 7, 764, 804, 813).

Plato is not concerned with training children for a trade but rather with giving them an education in virtue, which is to produce "a keen desire to become a perfect citizen who knows how to rule and be ruled" in turn (*Laws*, bk. 1, 643). Reason is man's true nature, but it has to be nurtured from childhood by irrational means. Education is thus the correct channeling of pains and pleasures (*Laws*, bk. 2, 653), aiming at establishing "a nature in which goodness of character has been well and truly established" so as to breed a familiarity with reason (*Republic*, bk. 3, 398, 401).

**Prenatal and infant care** . Plato recommends that the care of the soul and body of the child begin even before birth, with walks prescribed for the pregnant woman. The first five years of life see more growth than the next twenty, necessitating frequent and appropriately graduated exercise. Children should be kept well wrapped up for the first two years of life, but they should be taken to the country or on visits. They should be carried until they are old enough to stand on their own feet, which should happen by the age of three, to prevent subjecting their young limbs to too much pressure. The main importance of

movement, however, lies in its influence on the early development of a well-balanced soul (*Laws*, bk. 7, 758-759), and the cultivation of the body is mainly for the soul's sake (*Republic*, bk. 3, 411).

**Storytelling and literature** . Storytelling is the main tool for the formation of character in Plato's view, and begins at an earlier age than physical training. Stories should provide models for children to imitate, and as ideas taken in at an early age become indelibly fixed, the creation of fables and legends for children, true or fictional, is to be strictly supervised. Mothers and nurses are not to scare young children with stories of lamentations, monsters, and the horrors of hell, to avoid making cowards of them. That some such stories are enjoyed as good poetry is all the more reason for keeping them away from children (or even grown men) who should be trained to be free and unafraid of death (*Republic*, bk. 2, 377-383).

**Play** . Plato believes that a child's character will be formed while he or she plays. One should resort to discipline, but not such as to humiliate the child. There should be neither a single-minded pursuit of pleasure nor an absolute avoidance of pain—not for children and not for expectant mothers (*Laws*, bk. 7, 792). Luxury makes a child bad-tempered and irritable; unduly savage repression drives children into subserviency and puts them at odds with the world. Children and adults should not imitate base characters when playing or acting, for fear of forming a habit that will become second nature (*Republic*, bk. 3, 395).

Teachers must provide children with miniature tools of the different trades, so that they can use the children's games to channel their pleasures and desires toward the activities they will engage in when they are adults (*Laws*, bk. 1, 643). Children are to be brought together for games. The sexes are to be separated at the age of six, but girls too should attend lessons in riding, archery, and all other subjects, like boys. Similarly, both boys and girls should engage in dancing (for developing grace) and wrestling (for developing strength and endurance). Plato attached much importance to children's games: "No one in the state has really grasped that children's games affect legislation so crucially as to determine whether the laws that are passed will survive or not." Change, he maintained, except in something evil, is extremely dangerous, even in such a seemingly inconsequential matter as children's games (*Laws*, bk. 7, 795-797).

**Physical education** . "Physical training may take two or three years, during which nothing else can be done; for weariness and sleep are unfavorable to study. At the same time, these exercises will provide not the least important test of character" (*Republic*, bk. 7, 537). Children who are sturdy enough should go to war as spectators, if one can contrive that they shall do so in safety, so that they can learn, by watching, what they will have to do themselves when they grow up (*Republic*, bk. 5, 466; bk. 7, 537). Girls should be trained in the same way and learn horseback riding, athletics, and fighting in armor, if only to ensure that if it ever proves necessary the women will be able to defend the children and the rest of the population left behind (*Laws*, bk. 7, 804-805, 813).

**Reading and writing, music, arithmetic** . In Plato's educational system, a child, beginning at the age of ten, will spend three years on reading, writing, and the poets, and another three learning the lyre, and will study elementary mathematics up to the age of seventeen or eighteen, all with as little compulsion as possible, in order to learn "enough to fight a war and run a house and administer a state" (*Republic*, bk. 7, 535-541). Neither child nor father are to be allowed to extend or curtail that period, either out of enthusiasm or distaste. Children must work on their letters until they are able to read and write, but any whose natural abilities have not developed sufficiently by the end of the prescribed time to make them into quick or polished performers should not be pressed (*Laws*, bk. 7, 810). The child's lessons should take the form of play, and this will also show what they are naturally fit for. Enforced exercise does no harm to the body, but enforced learning will not stay in the mind (*Laws*, bk. 7, 536).

## Family Control

In the *Republic* Plato abolishes the family for the guardians, to avoid nepotism and amassing of private wealth (*Republic*, bk. 5, 464). Wives and children are to be held in common by all, and no parent is to know his own child nor any child his parents—"provided it can be done" (*Republic*, bk. 5, 457). In the *Laws* Plato allows family raising for all citizens, with restrictions on child rearing and inheritance (*Laws*, bk. 5, sec.729). Each family is to have only one heir, to avoid subdivision of the agrarian lots into small parcels. In cases where there is more than one child, the head of the family should marry off the females and the males he must present for adoption to those citizens who have no children of their own—"priority given to personal preferences as far as possible." If too many children are being born, measures should be taken to check the increase in population; and in the opposite case, a high birth-rate can be encouraged and stimulated (*Laws*, bk. 5, 740).

Plato stands at the fountainhead of Western philosophy. He established its themes and posed its problems. Plato's views on education have greatly influenced educational thought to this day and have become the basis of many educational policies. Such diverse thinkers as Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, [John Dewey](#), [John Stuart Mill](#), Nietzsche, and many others owe much to Plato's direct influence. His view of philosophy as an educational activity and of education as the development of reason, the responsibility of which lies squarely with the state, is still a living educational challenge.

See also: [Ancient Greece](#) and Rome; Aristotle.

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## Plato 427–347 BCE

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Plato was born in [Athens](#) in 427 bce just as the [Peloponnesian War](#) between Athens and [Sparta](#) was beginning. His mother was related to one of the oligarchs who ruled Athens after the Spartan victory in 404 bce, and his father died when Plato was very young. The most important shaping influence in Plato's early life, however, was the philosopher [Socrates](#) (469–399 bce). Plato was among the young men of Athens who regularly engaged Socrates in dialogue and who took the Socratic challenge to “know thyself” very seriously. Plato, then twenty-eight, was present at the trial of Socrates, an event that clearly made a deep and lasting impression on Plato and which is reflected in all of his work. Socrates is widely regarded as the hero of the Platonic dialogues, a literary form that Plato preferred for most of his works. Following Socrates' death, Plato traveled throughout Italy, Sicily, and parts of northern Africa before returning to Athens, where he founded the Academy in about 387 bce. Among Plato's pupils there, for twenty years, was [Aristotle](#) (384–322 bce). Late in life, Plato traveled to Syracuse to educate and inspire a new young king, Dionysius II, though the attempt ended in failure. Plato died in Athens in 347 bce at the age of eighty-one.

Among the more famous of Plato's dialogues are the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Euthyphro*, on the trial and death of Socrates; the *Gorgias*, which explores the way of life of the *sophist*; the *Symposium*, which focuses on love and beauty; the *Phaedrus*, on rhetoric; and the *Timaeus*, a study of cosmology. Other dialogues of note that are still widely read and studied today are the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Phaedo*, *Thaetetus*, and the *Sophist*. All of these deal in various ways with Plato's famous theory of *forms*,

according to which aspects of the physical world, because subject to decay and death, are inferior to eternal forms such as the true, the good, and the beautiful. But Plato's most famous dialogues, and those that continue to shape international discussion and research in the social sciences, in some measure at least, particularly in [political science](#), are the *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws*.

The *Republic* is considered one of the great works of world literature. It is often referred to as an example of utopian literature, which sketches an ideal *polis*, or citystate. Such a view distorts, however, what Plato clearly intended as an exploration of what human beings mean when they appeal to justice and to good rule or government. Similarly, the *Republic* is frequently summarized as an appeal for the rule of philosopher kings. This too obscures, at a minimum, Plato's belief in gender equality among *philosopher rulers*, not necessarily *kings*. Like any classic work, it is difficult to condense and summarize Plato's *Republic*. But there are key aspects that may be sketched along the following lines. At the center of Plato's political theory is a concept of the *cardinal virtues*. These virtues are moderation, or temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. Following a procedure according to which the state (city-state) is the human person "writ large," Plato examines the cardinal virtues both with respect to the individual person and with respect to the larger city-state. Ultimately, a just society for Plato is a society of just persons. And individuals are just according to their capacity with respect to each of the cardinal virtues. Another important concept in the *Republic* is the *three waves*, which refer to perennial issues in all societies at all times. These waves represent the issues of gender, property relations, and who should rule. In the dialogue, Socrates argues on behalf of gender equality; for a community of goods and spouses for the guardians of the *polis*, a group further divided according to warriors (*auxiliaries*) and rulers (*philosopher rulers*); and for the rule of philosophers. A full measure of justice is possible for Plato only when philosophers become rulers or rulers become philosophers.

Perhaps the most famous passages in the *Republic* are those that present the allegories of the *divided line*, from Book VI, and the *cave*, from Book VII. According to the divided line, human consciousness develops well or poorly according to a progression from imagination, to belief, to understanding, to reason based on consciousness of the good. This same progression is illustrated in the famous cave allegory, where we must *imagine* human beings chained and facing a cave wall, see them *believe* in the images projected on that wall from a fire behind their backs, *understand* that there might be more to reality than what such images suggest to the cave dwellers, and have the courage and capacity, unlike most of those in the cave, to turn around, see the drama to our backs, and theirs, and make our way out of the cave to a transcendent reality that, for Plato, must ultimately inform human *reason*. These allegories come toward the end of the *Republic* and summarize and condense what is explored through dialogue in the previous five books (chapters). Toward the end of the dialogue, Plato presents his thoughts on *declining forms* and *ensorship*. According to the first, regime forms decay over time, such as from *aristocracy* (rule of the virtuous), to *timocracy* (rule of those who love honors), to *oligarchy* (rule of the wealthy), to *democracy* (rule of those who love freedom), to *tyranny* (rule of the lustful despot). The final book, Book X, explores the role of the artist in society, among other topics, and the need for some form of censorship.

The *Statesman* and the *Laws* represent significant departures from Plato's views and style of presentation in the *Republic*. In the *Statesman*, for example, an outsider from Elea takes the place of Socrates as the primary spokesperson and the dialogue form is all but abandoned. More significantly, Plato emphasizes a rule of law, or legal codes, as preferable to the rule of philosophers. This shift of emphasis in the *Statesman* puts Plato more in the tradition of constitutional democracy, with its emphasis on well-constructed constitutions and institutions, characteristic of modern and postmodern approaches to the science of politics. Yet, in the *Laws*, among Plato's last works, which otherwise places a similar emphasis on the need for good laws, one encounters a *nocturnal council* that would be the final authority in the city-state. Many critics point to this dimension of Plato's work to support the idea that Plato was ultimately something of a totalitarian.

The twentieth-century philosopher [Alfred North Whitehead](#) (1861–1947) once famously observed that the European philosophical tradition could be characterized as but a "series of footnotes to Plato." Though his influence is not as great in the modern social sciences, there is continuing debate, especially among theorists within the discipline of [political science](#), regarding Plato's insights on the role of intellectuals in society; the role of government in promoting excellence, or virtue; the educative function of the state; gender relations; property relations; the role of religion in the state, if any; and the perennial question regarding who should rule and why. And these are but a few of the modern issues regarding which Plato's works continue to inspire creative approaches. Some modern scholars, most famously [Karl Popper](#) (1902–1994), see in Plato's political theory the seeds of modern tyranny and closed societies. Others, such as John H. Hallowell (1913–1991), Eric Voegelin (1901–1985), and James M. Rhodes, see a more balanced and humane approach to the study and practice of politics. Because of his depth of insight and his creative approach to the perennial issues of human beings in their social and political dimensions beyond temporal and cultural considerations, Plato and his legacy will continue to be debated among scholars in all of the modern social sciences into the distant future.

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## **Plato**

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**Born: c. 427 b.c.e.**

**[Athens, Greece](#)**

**Died: c. 347 b.c.e.**

**[Athens, Greece](#)**

*Greek philosopher*

The Greek philosopher Plato founded the Academy in Athens, one of the great philosophical schools of antiquity (ancient times). His thought had enormous impact on the development of Western (having to do with American and European thought) philosophy.

### ***Early life***

Plato was born in Athens, Greece, the son of Ariston and Perictione, both of Athenian noble backgrounds. He lived his whole life in Athens, although he traveled to Sicily and southern Italy on several occasions. One story says he traveled to [Egypt](#). Little is known of his early years, but he was given the finest education Athens had to offer noble families, and he devoted his considerable talents to politics and the writing of tragedy (works that end with death and sadness) and other forms of poetry. His acquaintance with [Socrates](#) (c. 469–c. 399 b.c.e.) altered the course of his life. The power that Socrates's methods and arguments had over the minds of the youth of Athens gripped Plato as firmly as it did many others, and he became a close associate of Socrates.

The end of the [Peloponnesian War](#) (431–04 b.c.e.), which caused the destruction of Athens by the Spartans, left Plato in a terrible position. His uncle, Critias (c. 480–403 b.c.e.), was the leader of the Thirty Tyrants (a group of ruthless Athenian rulers) who were installed in power by the victorious Spartans. One means of holding onto power was to connect as many Athenians as possible with terrible acts committed during the war. Thus Socrates, as we learn in Plato's *Apology*, was ordered to arrest a man and bring him to Athens from Salamis for execution (to be put to death). When the great teacher refused, his life was threatened, and he was probably saved only by the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants and the reestablishment of the democracy (a system of government in which government officials are elected by the people).

## *Death of Socrates*

Plato welcomed the restoration of the democracy, but his mistrust was deepened some four years later when Socrates was tried on false charges and sentenced to death. Plato was present at the trial, as we learn in the *Apology*, but was not present when the hemlock (poison) was given to his master, although he describes the scene in clear and touching detail in the *Phaedo*. He then turned in disgust from Athenian politics and never took an active part in government, although through friends he did try to influence the course of political life in the Sicilian city of Syracuse.

Plato and several of his friends withdrew from Athens for a short time after Socrates's death and remained with Euclides (c. 450–373 b.c.e.) in Megara. His productive years were highlighted by three voyages to Sicily, and his writings, all of which have survived.

The first trip, to southern Italy and Syracuse, took place in 388 and 387 b.c.e., when Plato met Dionysius I (c. 430–367 b.c.e.). Dionysius was then at the height of his power in Sicily for having freed the Greeks there from the threat of Carthaginian rule. Plato became better friends with the philosopher Dion (c. 408–353 b.c.e.), however, and Dionysius grew jealous and began to treat Plato harshly.

## *His dialogues*

When Plato returned to Athens, he began to teach in the Gymnasium Academe and soon afterward acquired property nearby and founded his famous Academy, which survived until the early sixth century c.e. At the center of the Academy stood a shrine to the Muses (gods of the arts), and at least one modern scholar suggests that the Academy may have been a type of religious brotherhood.

Plato had begun to write the dialogues (writings in the form of conversation), which came to be the basis of his philosophical (having to do with the search for knowledge and truth) teachings, some years before the founding of the Academy. To this early period Plato wrote the *Laches* which deals with courage, *Charmides* with common sense, *Euthyphro* with piety (religious dedication), *Lysis* with friendship, *Protagoras* with the teaching of virtues, or goodness, and many others. The *Apology* and *Crito* stand somewhat apart from the other works of this group in that they deal with historical events, Socrates's trial and the period between his conviction and execution.

Plato's own great contributions begin to appear in the second group of writings, which date from the period between his first and second voyages to Sicily. The *Meno* carries on the question of the teachability of virtue first dealt with in *Protagoras* and introduces the teaching of *anamnesis* (recollection), which plays an important role in Plato's view of the human's ability to learn the truth.

## *The Republic*

Socrates is again the main character in the *Republic*, although this work is less a dialogue than a long discussion by Socrates of justice and what it means to the individual and the city-state (independent states). Just as there are three elements to the soul, the rational, the less rational, and the impulsive irrational, so there are three classes in the state, the rulers, the guardians, and the workers. The rulers are not a family of rulers but are made up of those who have emerged from the population as a whole as the most gifted intellectually. The guardians serve society by keeping order and by handling the practical matters of government, including fighting wars, while the workers perform the labor necessary to keep the whole running smoothly. Thus the most rational elements of the city-state guide it and see that all in it are given an education equal to their abilities.

Only when the three work in harmony, with intelligence clearly in control, does the individual or state achieve the happiness and fulfillment of which it is capable. The *Republic* ends with the great myth of Er, in which the wanderings of the soul through births and rebirths are retold. One may be freed from the cycle after a time through lives of greater and greater spiritual and intellectual purity.

## *Last years*

Plato's third and final voyage to Syracuse was made some time before 357 b.c.e., and he tried for the second time to influence the young Dionysius II. Plato was unsuccessful and was held in semicaptivity before being released. Plato's *Seventh Letter*, the only one in the collection of thirteen considered accurate, perhaps even from the hand of Plato himself, recounts his role in the events surrounding the death of Dion, who in 357 b.c.e. entered Syracuse and overthrew Dionysius. It is of more interest, however, for Plato's statement that the deepest truths may not be communicated.

Plato died in 347 b.c.e. the founder of an important philosophical school, which existed for almost one thousand years, and the most brilliant of Socrates's many pupils and followers. His system attracted many followers in the centuries after his death and resurfaced as Neoplatonism, the great rival of early [Christianity](#).

## *For More Information*

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## Plato

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(*b.* Athens, *c.* 427 BCE.; *d.* Athens, 348/347 BCE)

*physics, cosmology, mathematical education; organization of research.* For the original article on Plato see *DSB*, vol. 11.

One task (although emphatically not the only one) of the *DSB* original entry was to help the reader judge Plato's contribution to scientific thought, with a concentration on the mathematical sciences and their strategic role in the philosophical curriculum. In this context, the account of the physical world that Plato offers in the *Timaeus* is relegated to a subordinate role. This postscript focuses on this account and its contribution to the development of scientific thought.

Plato describes the account of the physical world in the *Timaeus* as an *eikōs muthos* or an *eikōs logos*—that is to say, a likely account, a likely story, or even a myth. What exactly Plato means by this description is open to more than one interpretation. On all interpretations, however, there are distinctively human limitations to what can be said on the topic of the creation of the universe, the nature of the physical world, and the place of humans within it. In other words, one can improve on the account offered in the *Timaeus*, but one's account will always remain at best likely. Clearly the limitations that Plato has in mind are not contingent upon historical facts that can eventually be overcome; rather, they have to do with human

nature as well as the nature of the object to be studied, the physical world. Once these limits are acknowledged, the reader is encouraged to engage in the study of the world around us and to produce the best possible account of it.

It is important to situate the *Timaeus* in the context of the ancient debate on the possibility of the study of nature. In antiquity, there was a philosophical tradition that regarded this study as a vain curiosity, if not a distraction from the care of the soul and the ethical life. In the *Memorabilia*, for example, Xenophon offers a powerful portrait of Socrates as a champion of this position. This attitude toward the study of nature is often found in the Socratic tradition. In this tradition, the reorientation of philosophy toward ethics is coupled with the emphasis on the limits of human knowledge. This emphasis can be found also in the *Timaeus*. In this case, however, it does not entail hostility to, or even a rejection of, the empirical sciences. On the contrary, this dialogue offers an account of the physical world, including an account of time, space, matter, and the four elements, as well as human physiology and pathology.

It is mildly surprising to find cosmology and medicine offered as parts of one and the same account. This can be explained by reflecting on the theoretical framework that Plato chose for this account. Plato borrowed this framework from an earlier tradition of writing about the nature of things (the *peri physeōs* tradition of the sixth and fifth century BCE). In this tradition, the study of the nature of humanity was an essential part of the study of the physical world. Moreover, this study had a narrative character. It did not simply state and explain why the physical world is the way it is; it narrated how the physical world in its present order came into existence. By choosing the narrative method, Plato placed himself in continuity with a tradition going back, ultimately, to early Greek philosophy. This does not necessarily mean that the cosmogonic account offered in the *Timaeus* has to be taken literally. It is significant that, from very early on, this account was subject to literal as well as non-literal interpretations. On all interpretations, however, the physical world was regarded as the product of a divine craftsman. The task of this divine craftsman was to introduce order into what lacked it. The creation of the physical world was regarded as the result of imposing order on a preexisting matter on the basis of an intelligible model.

The *Timaeus* can be usefully regarded as Plato's attempt to reconcile the early investigation of nature with the practical reorientation of philosophy urged by Socrates. But this requires prior clarity about a crucial feature of ancient thought that is no longer shared. The physical world as Plato conceived it is not a value-free world. On the contrary, values are for him part of the furniture of the physical world. The task of the scientist is to attain an understanding of the perfection and goodness of the natural world on the crucial assumption that one can objectively make value judgments about the physical world. In this context, the study of the physical world can provide objective grounds for the view that reason rules over necessity. In light of this conviction, dismissing the study of nature would make it difficult, if not even impossible, to achieve the Socratic goal of caring about the soul.

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## **Plato**

The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed.

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Plato (plā'tō), 427?–347 BC, Greek philosopher. Plato's teachings have been among the most influential in the history of Western civilization.

### **Life**

After pursuing the liberal studies of his day, he became in 407 BC a pupil and friend of Socrates. From about 388 BC he lived for a time at the court of [Dionysius the Elder](#), tyrant of Syracuse. On his return to Athens, Plato founded a school, the [Academy](#), where he taught mathematics and philosophy until his death. His teaching was interrupted by two more visits to Syracuse (367 and 361 BC), which he made in the vain hope of seeing his political ideals realized in Sicily.

### **Works and Philosophy**

Plato was a superb writer, and his works are part of the world's great literature. His extant work is in the form of dialogues and epistles. Some of the dialogues and many of the epistles attributed to him are known to be spurious, while others are doubtful.

In the various dialogues he touched upon almost every problem that has occupied subsequent philosophers. The dialogues are divided into three groups according to the probable order of composition.

## Early Works

The earliest group of dialogues, called Socratic, include chiefly the *Apology*, which presents the defense of Socrates; the *Meno*, which asks whether virtue can be taught; and the *Gorgias*, which concerns the absolute nature of right and wrong. These early dialogues present Socrates in conversations that illustrate his main ideas—the unity of virtue and knowledge and of virtue and happiness. Each dialogue treats a particular problem without necessarily resolving the issues raised.

## Philosophical Themes and Mature Works

Plato was always concerned with the fundamental philosophical problem of working out a theory of the art of living and knowing. Like Socrates, Plato began convinced of the ultimately harmonious structure of the universe, but he went further than his mentor in trying to construct a comprehensive philosophical scheme. His goal was to show the rational relationship between the soul, the state, and the cosmos. This is the general theme of the great dialogues of his middle years: the *Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Philebus*. In the *Republic* he shows how the operation of justice within the individual can best be understood through the analogy of the operation of justice within the state, which Plato proceeds to set out in his conception of the ideal state. However, justice cannot be understood fully unless seen in relation to the Idea of the Good, which is the supreme principle of order and truth.

It is in these dialogues that the famous Platonic Ideas (see [realism](#)) are discussed. Plato argued for the independent reality of Ideas as the only guarantee of ethical standards and of objective scientific knowledge. In the *Republic* and the *Phaedo* he postulates his theory of Forms. Ideas or Forms are the immutable archetypes of all temporal phenomena, and only these Ideas are completely real; the physical world possesses only relative reality. The Forms assure order and intelligence in a world that is in a state of constant flux. They provide the pattern from which the world of sense derives its meaning.

The supreme Idea is the Idea of the Good, whose function and place in the world of Ideas is analogous to that of the sun in the physical world. Plato saw his task as that of leading men to a vision of the Forms and to some sense of the highest good. The principal path is suggested in the famous metaphor of the cave in the *Republic*, in which man in his uninstructed state is chained in a world of shadows. However, man can move up toward the sun, or highest good, through the study of what Plato calls dialectic. The supreme science, dialectic, is a method of inquiry that proceeds by a constant questioning of assumptions and by explaining a particular idea in terms of a more general one until the ultimate ground of explanation is reached.

The *Republic*, the first Utopia in literature, asserts that the philosopher is the only one capable of ruling the just state, since through his study of dialectic he understands the harmony of all parts of the universe in their relation to the Idea of the Good. Each social class happily performs the function for which it is suited; the philosopher rules, the warrior fights, and the worker enjoys the fruits of his labor. In the *Symposium*, perhaps the most poetic of the dialogues, the path to the highest good is described as the ascent by true lovers to eternal beauty, and in the *Phaedo* the path is viewed as the pilgrimage of the philosopher through death to the world of eternal truth.

## Late Works

Many of the late dialogues are devoted to technical philosophic issues. The most important of these are the *Theaetetus*; the *Parmenides*, which deals with the relation between the one and the many; and the *Sophist*, which discusses the nature of nonbeing. Plato's longest work, the *Laws*, written during his middle and late periods, discusses in practical terms the nature of the state.

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## Plato

Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying  
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The poet [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) once remarked, "Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato" (Emerson 1996, p. 21). No less adulation came from the philosopher [Alfred North Whitehead](#), who claimed that Western philosophy was a "series of footnotes to Plato," (Whitehead 1929, p. 63). These kinds of acclamations give one a sense of the major importance of the thinker originally named Aristocles, who came to be called Plato because of his robust figure. Born into one of the most distinguished families in [Athens](#), Plato (428–348 b.c.e.) seemed destined for a career in politics. This changed mainly because of the influence of his great mentor [Socrates](#) (470–399 b.c.e.), who was falsely accused of impiety and corrupting the youth and executed by the state. Becoming distrustful of politics, Plato decided to carry on the philosophical traditions of his mentor. He founded the Academy, considered the first university in Western civilization, and wrote the *Dialogues*, which continue the eternal questions raised by Socrates.

Plato was especially interested in his mentor's pursuit of real, eternal truths (Justice, Beauty, Goodness), which Plato believed had an existence beyond the mere physical world of flux and change. Accordingly, Plato developed a dualism: There is the physical and changing world (to which the body belongs), and the permanent and immaterial world (to which the mind or soul belongs). The body is then seen as the prisoner and temporary residence of the soul, which has existed before its imprisonment and which will exist again after its release from the body at death. In this way, says Plato, the true philosopher is "always pursuing death and dying" (Emerson 1996, p. 21).

The *Dialogues* offer a variety of arguments for the immortality of the soul. In the *Republic*, Plato argues that the soul cannot be destroyed by any inherent evil or by anything external to it. In his *Phaedrus* he reasons that the soul is its own "selfmoving principle" and is therefore uncreated, eternal, and indestructible. And in the *Phaedo* a series of arguments are offered based on the cyclical nature of life and death; knowledge the soul could only have gained in a pre-existence; the incorporeal or spiritual nature of the soul; and the view that the soul is the essence and principle of life itself.

The argument regarding the nature of the soul is perhaps the one that gets discussed by scholars most often. If the soul is incorporeal, it is simple or uncomposed (not made up of parts). But death is the decay and corruption of a thing into its elementary parts (decomposition). The soul, therefore, cannot die since an uncomposed entity cannot be decomposed. The logic of this argument is compelling; however, it depends entirely on its key premise: that the soul is spiritual, not corporeal. This is a major point of contention for many, including Plato's greatest student—Aristotle (384–322 b.c.e.). Though he firmly believed in the immortality of the soul, Plato never considered his arguments to be conclusive proofs and recognized the need for further discussion and consideration, saying that one can only "arrive at the truth of the matter, in so far as it is possible for the human mind to attain it" (Hamilton and Cairns 1961, p. 107).

*See also:* Philosophy, Western; Plotinus; Socrates

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## Plato (ca. 428 B.C.–348 B.C.)

The Renaissance

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Ancient Greek philosopher who influenced European philosophy and science through the [Middle Ages](#) and the [Renaissance](#). Born in [Athens](#), he was the son of a noble family and was given a good education. As a young man he came under the influence of [Socrates](#), a renowned philosopher and debater. Plato experienced firsthand the turmoil of politics in his native city and, after the execution of his friend Socrates on a charge of corrupting the youth of Athens, spent time voyaging to Sicily, then the home of several Greek colonies. When he returned to Athens he founded a school known as the Academy. He began writing dialogues, accounts of debates and conversations among the teachers and philosophers of Athens, with Socrates given an important role. Plato's major work, however, is *The Republic*, an account of an ideal society in which the virtuous and talented hold leadership and all classes cultivate the virtues of wisdom, courage, and moderation.

Plato's school in Athens survived until the seventh century a.d., and Platonic philosophy remained a dominant strain of thought in the Mediterranean world. While the [Roman Empire](#) was at its height, Neoplatonism emerged in the Greek city of Alexandria, founded by several prominent scholars and commentators and based on Plato's metaphysical ideas. Although the philosophy and science of [Aristotle](#) dominated the [Middle Ages](#), Plato's writings were also well respected, and in the fifteenth century Platonism was revived in the scholarly investigations of [Marsilio Ficino](#) and other Renaissance students of the classical world. Plato's belief in the immortality of the soul, and the ideal “Platonic” love that existed on a spiritual and not physical plane, attracted Renaissance philosophers and poets who were seeking new ideas complementary to the accepted doctrines of [Christianity](#). Platonism also took an important place in the writings of [Giovanni Pico della Mirandola](#), who attempted a synthesis of many different philosophical and religious traditions, including Platonism, Christianity, and the kabbalah system

of [Judaism](#). *The Republic* inspired the writing of *Utopia*, an account of an ideal society written by [Sir Thomas More](#). Plato's concept of the universe also made a contribution to the works of Renaissance astronomers such as [Johannes Kepler](#).

See Also: classical literature; Ficino, Marsilio; Neoplatonism; Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni

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## Plato

The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable

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**Plato** (c.429–c.347 bc), Greek philosopher. A disciple of [Socrates](#) and the teacher of [Aristotle](#), he founded the Academy in [Athens](#). An integral part of his thought is the theory of ‘ideas’ or ‘forms’, in which abstract entities or *universals* are contrasted with their objects or *particulars* in the material world. His philosophical writings are presented in the form of dialogues, with Socrates as the principal speaker; they include the *Symposium* and the *Timaeus*. Plato's political theories appear in the *Republic*, in which he explored the nature and structure of a just society.

*Platonism* is the philosophy of Plato or his followers; any of various revivals of Platonic doctrines or related ideas, especially [Neoplatonism](#) and Cambridge Platonism (a 17th-century attempt to reconcile [Christianity](#) with humanism and science). Platonic love love which is intimate and affectionate but not sexual. The term is recorded in English from the mid 17th century; the equivalent Latin term *amor platonicus* was used synonymously with *amor socraticus* by Ficinus (the Florentine [Marsilio Ficino](#), 1433–99), president of Cosmo de' [Medici](#)'s Accademia Platonica, to denote the kind of interest in young men with which Socrates was credited.

Platonic solid one of five regular solids (i.e., having all sides and all angles equal), a tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, or icosahedron. Formerly also called *Platonic body*.

Platonic year a cycle, imagined by some ancient astronomers, in which the heavenly bodies were supposed to go through all their possible movements and return to their original relative positions, after which, according to some, all history would repeat itself (sometimes identified with the period of [precession of the equinoxes](#), about 25,800 years). Also called *great year*.

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## Plato

World Encyclopedia

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**Plato** (c.427–c.347 bc) Ancient Greek philosopher and writer who formulated an ethical and metaphysical system based upon philosophical [idealism](#). From c.407 bc, he was a disciple of [Socrates](#), from whom he may have derived many of his ideas about ethics. Following the trial and execution of [Socrates](#) in 399 bc, Plato withdrew to Megara, after which he is believed to have travelled extensively in [Egypt](#), Italy and Sicily. He visited Syracuse in Sicily three times, in about 388, 367, and 361–360 bc, during the reigns of the tyrants Dionysius I and II. Plato sought to educate Dionysius II as a philosopher-king and to set up an ideal political system under him, but the venture failed. Meanwhile, in [Athens](#), Plato set up his famous [Academy](#) (c.387 bc). In the Academy he taught several young people, including [Aristotle](#). In addition to being a philosopher of great influence, Plato wrote in the form of dialogues, in which Socrates genially interrogates another person, demolishing their arguments. All of Plato's 36 works survive. His most famous dialogues include Gorgias (on rhetoric as an art of flattery), Phaedo (on death and the immortality of the soul) and the Symposium (a discussion on the nature of love). Plato's greatest work was the Republic, an extended dialogue on justice, in which he outlined his view of the ideal state.

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# Plato

Oxford Dictionary of Rhymes

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**Plato** •bateau, chateau, gateau, gelato, mulatto, plateau •de facto, ipso facto •alto •canto, Esperanto, manteau, panto, portmanteau •antipasto, impasto - •agitato, Ambato, castrato, esparto, innamorato, legato, moderato, obbligato (*US* obligato), ostinato, pizzicato, rubato, staccato, tomato, vibrato, Waikato •contralto •allegretto, amaretto, amoretto, [Canaletto](#), cornetto, falsetto, ghetto, larghetto, libretto, Loreto, Orvieto, [Soweto](#), stiletto, [Tintoretto](#), vaporetto, zucchetto •perfecto, recto •cento, cinquecento, divertimento, lento, memento, pimiento, portamento, [Risorgimento](#), [Sacramento](#), Sorrento, Trento •manifesto, pesto, presto •concerto •Cato, Plato, potato •Benito, bonito, burrito, coquito, graffito, Hirohito, incognito, Ito, magneto, Miskito, mosquito, [Quito](#), Tito, veto •ditto • in flagrante delicto • mistletoe •pinto, [Shinto](#) •tiptoe •Callisto, fritto misto •cogito • Felixstowe • Sillitoe

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# PLATO

The Oxford Dictionary of Abbreviations

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**PLATO** (or **Plato**) (ˈplɛɪtəʊ) Computing programmed logic for automatic teaching operation

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## Plato

New Catholic Encyclopedia  
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One of the greatest of Greek philosophers; he incalculably influenced the nature and orientation of subsequent

thought. Plato was born in Athens (428 or 427 b.c.), of aristocratic parents, during the [Peloponnesian War](#). Originally, he was called Aristocles, and only later was given the name Plato (πλάτων, meaning broad), a sobriquet for which various reasons have been offered: his wide forehead, his robust physique, the breadth of his knowledge. He was both athlete and poet, excelling in the Isthmian games at Corinth and composing dramatic and lyric verse. The most decisive influence in Plato's commitment to philosophy and in his intellectual formation was the life-and-death devotion of Socrates to truth.

After the demise of Socrates in 399, Plato withdrew temporarily from the political tumult of Athens and found refuge with the philosopher Euclid at Megara. Between 390 and 388 he traveled extensively in Greece, Egypt, and Italy to acquaint himself with the principal schools of that time and to broaden his culture. About 387 he returned to Athens and founded his famous school, the Academy. Through this institution, Plato intended not only to promote philosophy and science but also to affect politics vicariously. His supervision of the Academy was interrupted on two occasions (367 and 361), when he journeyed to Sicily with the hope of making Dionysius II a philosopher-king and his city Syracuse an ideal state; both attempts, however, failed (*Epist.* 7). Henceforth, Plato remained at Athens, devoting all his powers of thought to philosophizing, teaching, and writing at the Academy, until his death at the age of 80. Already under way was the war that would bring Greece under the domination of Philip of Macedonia.

**Works and Chronology.** The authenticity of the writings in the Platonic corpus has been a matter of dispute since antiquity. The genuineness of four dialogues is still in question: *Hippias Maior*, *Menexenus*, *Alcibiades I*, and *Epinomis*; the first two are probably genuine, but the others are most likely spurious. Modern scholars generally agree that 24 dialogues and at least two epistles are definitely the work of Plato; they have also established the order of composition of these works. The chronology of Plato's writings represents the gradual evolution of his philosophy through four stages.

*Initial Socratic Period (399–388).* The dialogues of Plato's youthful philosophical life, before the foundation of the Academy, re-create and vindicate the spirit and mission of Socrates. In these dialogues of inquiry, there is a systematic pursuit of the one Form or Idea common to similar moral phenomena in order to arrive at the definition of a particular politicoethical virtue, e.g., courage. This group of writings is notably anti-Sophist in inspiration. In a manner characteristic of Socrates's confession of ignorance, most of these dialogues end without reaching any definite conclusion, thus emphasizing the need of seeking further

enlightenment. This period includes the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Ion*, *Protagoras*, *Charmides*, and *Lysis* — all distinctly ethical dialogues.

*Transitional Period (387–380)*. As his intellectual and literary powers advanced, Plato found his way to a personal explanation of vexing contemporary problems. In addition to intensifying his polemics against the sophists, he undertook the building of the Socratic concept into a metaphysical theory of Forms. Whereas the earlier dialogues are limited in their scope to one facet of virtue, the works of this transitional and formational period manifest a broadening and deepening of Plato's speculation concerning the greater questions of wisdom and the good life. Here are found the *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Euthydemus*, *Hippias Minor*, *Hippias Major*, *Cratylus*, and *Menexenus*. These represent the inchoative constructive stage of the Platonic mind and the beginnings of a systematic philosophy.

*Mature Period (380–361)*. At the height of his genius, Plato fully evolved his ontological theory of Forms and expressed the ramifications of this doctrine in epistemology, psychology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. In dialogues of criticism and application, he subjected his speculative teachings to new facts and difficulties arising from other points of view. This period of maturity embraces the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*. Of all the dialogues, the *Republic*, Plato's teaching of the ideal state, appears as the full development of his constructive powers.

*Final Period (361–348 or 347)*. In the last period of his activity, Plato's dramatic power declined, but his critical acumen advanced. A lifetime of reflective experience, the appearance of different problems, social and political changes—all these impressed on Plato the need for further investigation and for a reconsideration of his philosophy. With brilliant intellectual apperception, he critically elaborated his metaphysics and epistemology, modified his politicoethical concepts, made greater use of logic, and discovered new interest in the mystery of the cosmos. Written in the final period of his life were the *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Laws*, and *Epistles 7 and 8*. The continual development of Plato's thought through these periods indicates that he never achieved a completely rounded-off system; it is an unfinished symphony of philosophy.

**Platonic Method.** The Platonic method, in general, consists in an intellectual and moral conversion from particular, concrete sense phenomena to universal, abstract Forms. Motivated by Eros, an inborn love of good, man can purge himself of bodily desires and rise to a knowledge of true being (*Phaedo* 65–68). This conversion is accomplished in three different, but complementary ways, according to the object under consideration. First, on the occasion of experienced sensible things, the mind can formulate a hypothesis and logically deduce from it true conclusions. The mathematician, for example, proceeds from a hypothesis such as a triangle to a knowledge of the essence of this object. Second, moral truths are treated by way of myth, the exposition of a concept or event in poetic imagery. The eschatological myths in the *Gorgias* (523–527), *Phaedo* (107–114), and *Republic* (613–621) present the soul as immortal, free within the limits set by necessity, and responsible, under God's government, throughout all its transmigrations. Third, the supreme means in the soul's ascent to the highest principles is dialectic, which "by the light of reason only, and without any assistance of sense" (*Rep.* 532A), advances "from Forms, through Forms, and in Forms she ends" (*Rep.* 511C). The dialectic method is masterfully dramatized by the give-and-take conversation of the dialogues, the major part often and very appropriately being taken by Plato's dynamic spokesman, Socrates.

**Teachings.** Plato's primary intuition is Form, the rest of his philosophy being a function of this central constant. With the influx of other insights, Plato critically explicated the implications of Form and developed what scholars generally recognize as a dynamic, dichotomous dualism, pervading four dominant aspects of reality—the epistemological, the metaphysical, the psychological, and the politicoethical.

*Epistemological Dualism.* In his famous Allegory of the Cave and Simile of the Line (*Rep.* 509E–511, 514–517), Plato distinguished between universal knowledge and particular opinion. Since sense perception, on the one hand, concerns only continually changing, relative, shadowy images, it admits at most fallible opinion. True scientific knowledge, on the other hand, is oriented toward the stable, absolute, and universal properties of cognition realizable only in intellection (*Crat.* 440B, C). In this clear distinction between sensation and understanding, Plato exposed the Protagorean error of confusing the former with genuine knowledge and refuted the relativism of the Sophists. Socrates's quest for truth, then, was defended and justified by Plato's epistemology.

*Metaphysical Dualism.* Corresponding to the two kinds of cognition, Plato also distinguished two radically different entities: the object of understanding is absolute reality; that of sense perception is relative phenomena. Universal concepts have an objective reference to transcendent Forms (*Phaedo* 102B)—unalterable, universal, intelligible realities. Since reality is rational only so far as it is unchanging, then immutable, suprasensible Forms alone, e.g., Justice itself, are fully real and fully intelligible (*Phaedo* 65C, D, 100C, E; *Symp.* 210B, D). In this realm of true reality, there is a hierarchy of beings culminating in the Form of Forms, the Good—the paramount principle of intelligibility, unity, and order. According to Aristotle (*Meta.* 987b 14–988a 15), Plato taught later a mathematical dualism in which the One is conceived as the supreme principle of limit and the indeterminate great-and-small as the cause of plurality. This doctrine of ultimate principles does not imply, however, that Plato ever dropped the theory of the Ideas. The identification of the One and the Good, confirmed both by Aristotle and Aristoxenus, must be accepted as well founded.

The lesser pole of Plato's ontological dualism is the empirical object of perception—relative phenomena. Because fluctuating phenomena are neither truly real nor fully knowable, the cosmologist cannot attain an exact and altogether self-consistent explanation of the physical world, but must be satisfied with a probable account (*Tim.* 29D). Yet the reality present in

phenomena Plato discerned in terms of a rational order and uniformity, pointing to something fully real and implying its dominating presence. Sensible things are relatively real and intelligible only so far as they participate in absolutely real and intelligible Forms. For instance, a flower "can be beautiful only in so far as it partakes of absolute beauty" (*Phaedo* 100C). The unparticipating is the ultimate *raison d'être* of the participating. Participation or imitation, therefore, is the bridge by which Plato spanned the Parmenidean realm of being, unity, and permanence, and the Heraclitean realm of becoming and plurality.

*Psychology.* Between the realm of Forms and the purely sensible world there are mathematical objects, existing on an intermediate level (Aristotle, *Meta.* 987b 14–18). There is also Soul: the world-soul, celestial souls, and human souls. Souls share in both realms: in the ideal world insofar as they are immortal and closely related to the intelligible, and in the sensible world insofar as they are living and moving. The starting point in Plato's reasoning to the existence of a world-soul is the orderly motion and harmony in the empirical world. Since the motionless exemplary Forms by themselves cannot explain their exemplification in things, Plato found it necessary to posit the existence of a superlatively intelligent agent—the Demiurge. This preeminent intelligence is called God and Father of the world. As the Creator of Soul he must be ranked on the level of intelligible Being, which, in Plato's hierarchy, is placed directly under the One or the Good. The Divine Craftsman introduced harmony and symmetry into the primitive chaos of disorderly motion by fashioning the world according to the eternal exemplars (*Soph.* 265C–266C). Modeling the world after the Ideal Living Creature (*Tim.* 30B, C), the Demiurge formed the cosmic body by conferring geometrical patterns on the primary qualities in the indefinite space-receptacle—earth, water, air, fire—after having first formed the cosmic soul for its function of animating, ruling, and unifying the vast bodily sphere. Together with the world-soul, the Demiurge created the stars and planets with their souls, and next the souls of men. Then, at his request, the "created gods" (i.e., the star-souls) created bodies for the human souls.

Man is composed of soul and body, the former being akin to Forms and the latter to corporeal phenomena. The soul exercises two basic functions: as self-moving, it is the source of life; and as consciousness, it is the principle of intellectual and moral operations. From a fine analysis of the inner conflicting tendencies in man, Plato concluded to three diverse principles in the human soul: (1) the appetitive part, unruly and amenable to the siren of pleasure; (2) the spirited, noble and prompt to honor and courage; (3) the rational, the "god within man," able to contemplate Forms, and as charioteer, to check and direct the impulses of the instinctive and spirited steeds for the good of man (*Rep.* 436–441; *Phaedrus* 246–247). Thus the human soul is tripartite.

Nevertheless, Plato's dualism passes sharply and deeply through his notion of the human soul. The irrational parts, like the body, are mortal, whereas the rational principle is immortal. The immortality of the rational soul is maintained in four main arguments: (1) Opposites generate opposites; as the living die, so the dead return to life (*Phaedo* 70–72). (2) As self-moving, the soul necessarily lives and survives death (*Phaedrus* 245C, E). (3) The soul is akin to the Forms that it contemplates; it is simple and imperishable (*Phaedo* 79D, E). (4) The soul, living in virtue of its essential participation in the Form, Life, can never share in the contradictory Form, Death; a dead soul is an impossibility (*Phaedo* 95–106; *Rep.* 608–611). In the cognitional dualism between reason and Forms, Plato linked the knower and the knowable by his theory of anamnesis, or reminiscence. The repeated experience of changing, relative, particular, sensible images is the occasion of the soul's recalling the stable, absolute, universal, intelligible Forms it once contemplated in a preexisting state, but that have been forgotten since its ingress into the body. Knowledge is basically recollection (*Meno* 82, 86; *Phaedrus* 246, 248).

*Politicoethical Dualism.* The speculative dualism of Plato finds its practical application and extension in his contrast between ideal values and phenomenal values. Platonic ethics is objectively oriented toward ideal values, primarily the Form, Good, as its supreme ontological goal. The ethos of man's life is to care for his soul (*Apol.* 29; *Phaedo* 114D, E), gradually liberating it from the bonds of the body that, like Prometheus unbound, it may freely wing its way to an ever-clearer vision of the Good and True and Beautiful—man's foremost subjective happiness. The essential means by which man participates in formal values is virtue. Virtue is knowledge, and consequently, teachable (*Meno* 87B–89C); with knowledge of good, "no man voluntarily pursues evil" (*Prot.* 358C). The virtues are many in one, different expressions of wisdom in diverse fields of activity. Wisdom is the rational charioteer of the soul, courage the rein of the spirited steed, and temperance the rein of the appetitive steed, while justice is their proper functioning, right order, and cooperation for the good of the whole soul (*Rep.* 428–441). Plato admitted a phenomenal value to relative goods, e.g., innocent pleasure and moderate emotions. Hence, Plato's ethics is tensely dualistic, inasmuch as it attempts a delicate and harmonious balance between man's irrational attraction to relative goods and his rational proclivity to absolute Good.

Plato's political theory unfolds in the *Republic*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*, as inseparably related to his ethics. The disorders and injustices of actual empirical city-states can be rectified only by reforming and reorganizing them after the archetypal City-State. The organization of the ideal State parallels the threefold structure of the human soul: (1) The lowest class, the numerous workers who provide the economic necessities, are marked by a desire for things of the senses and so are in particular need of temperance. (2) Higher in hierarchy are the guardians—their membership including also qualified women—who valiantly defend the state against hostilities within and without, and faithfully enforce the decisions handed down by the rulers. The ideal State requires that all their property, wives, and children be possessed in common, lest these auxiliaries be impeded in their singular purpose of serving the common interest of the state. Rulers, however, must exercise strict eugenic supervision of marriages for the good of the social organism. (3) The political counterpart of human reason is the superior class of rulers, the elite in knowledge, bravery, and patriotism, who wisely govern in the light of ideal values. When each individual performs his due function, and the lower classes are properly subordinated to the prudent ruler, justice prevails. The unshakeable basis of the just state is absolute Justice.



The most important institution in the transmission of culture and the maintenance of virtue is education. The state has the primary authority to educate its citizenry, even under compulsion. Education has two branches: gymnastics for the body; art, science, philosophy, and religion for the soul. Since art is an imitation of an imitation of true reality, and a creation inspired by the Muses but originating also from irrational forces in the artist, it must be conscientiously superintended by the magistrates of the state. The ideal State is open only to beautiful art—the representation of the true and good and enjoyable. Love of artistic beauty can lead the soul to the vision of Beauty itself.

Various historical states more or less approximate the ideal State. Measuring up least to the Form is tyranny, the lawless rule of a strong man whose reason is a slave to brutish passion and whose subjects are his slaves. Closer to the ideal is democracy, government by the unqualified masses without fixed standards, devotees of freedom and equality to the point of anarchy; weak and inefficient, it is the worst of all lawful governments and the best of all lawless ones. More perfect is oligarchy, rule of the affluent few for their own profit. Superior to plutocracy, or government by the wealthy, is timocracy, government by a militaristic minority who, though prizing honor and valor, are wanting in rational purpose. The ideal State is philosophical, a true polity in which one or more philosopher-kings, enlightened by abiding norms of reason, are the real statesmen piloting the ship of state on the right course of civilization for the good of all classes.

**Conclusion.** Plato was among the noblest embodiments of the ideal philosopher and his *Dialogues* contain one of the finest philosophies ever envisioned by the human mind. His all-pervading dualism is tense with inner opposition and difficulties; yet the poles of his thought are unified in a grand Olympian synthesis under his fundamental Zeus-like insight—Form. His Academy survived from 387 b.c. to a.d. 529—an enviable longevity. Even more important, his philosophy has persisted for more than 2,300 years, profoundly influencing such luminaries as Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Alfred North Whitehead, and prodigiously advancing the life and thought of Western culture.

*See Also:* platonism; neoplatonism; Cambridge Platonists.

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## Plato

Encyclopedia of Religion  
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**PLATO** . Plato (c. 428–348 bce), a Greek philosopher and founder of the Athenian Academy, was an Athenian citizen of high birth who grew up during the [Peloponnesian War](#) (431–404 bce). He was a member of the circle of young men who surrounded the charismatic Socrates (469–399 bce). After Socrates died, Plato withdrew from public life. He traveled to southern Italy and Sicily, where he not only met the tyrant Dionysius I and began a lifelong involvement with Dion of Syracuse, but also came in contact with the Pythagorean school that flourished in southern Italy. Soon after his return to Athens (c. 387 bce) Plato began meeting with colleagues and pupils at his home near the grove of Academus outside the walls of Athens. The rest of his life—apart from two ill-starred visits to Syracuse at the behest of Dion—was devoted to teaching and inquiry in this community, where, in dialogue between teacher and pupils, the mathematical disciplines were pursued for the sake of their contribution to an understanding of the foundations of moral and political life (see *Republic* 526d–532c). Plato used the dialogue form in writing, not only to portray Socrates himself (in the so-called early dialogues, such as *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, and *Laches* ), but also to present the outlines of his own growing and changing thought. In the great dialogues of the middle period—*Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus* —Plato develops the basic themes of his philosophical vision. In the late dialogues, he pursues a variety of insights and difficulties concerning the nature of knowledge and of being (*Theaetetus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*), produces a treatise on the structures of the visible cosmos (*Timaeus*), and offers reconsidered accounts of the best constitution for a city-state (*Statesman*, *Laws*).

## Plato's Doctrine

The main feature that characterizes traditional Greek religion before Plato is the distinction between gods and human beings, or immortals and mortals. Inspired by minority religious beliefs, Plato reacted against this presupposition and assigned to human beings the goal of assimilating themselves to god. This radical reversal, to which the Platonic tradition was to lay claim throughout antiquity, was based on a twofold opposition: first, between intelligible realities and sensible things, which participate in the intelligible; and secondly, between soul and body. Soul accounts for the spontaneous movement of a living body, yet it can separate itself from its original body in order to transfer itself into another one.

Plato maintained the existence of "Forms" (*eide* ) in order to explain how this world, where everything is in constant change, presents enough permanence and stability for human beings to be able to know it, act upon it, and talk about it. In the belief that such stability and permanence were not to be found in the sensible world, Plato therefore postulated the existence of a reality of another kind that would fulfill these requirements and explain why, within that which never stops changing, there is something that does not change. In the *Phaedo* (79b), Socrates admits "that there exist two species of beings: on the one hand, the visible species, and on the other the invisible species." In fact, these two species of beings are separate. Nevertheless, the separation between the "intelligible" and the "sensible" cannot be complete, simply because the existence of the "Forms" must contribute a solution to the paradoxes that "sensible" particulars never cease generating. "Sensible" realities receive their names from "intelligible" realities. Above all, "sensible" can be truly known only through the intermediary of the "intelligible."

Sensible things are bodies, which, as is explained in the *Timaeus*, are made up of the four elements—fire, air, water, and earth—and of them alone. Because the body (*soma* ) has come into being, no body is indestructible in itself (*Timaeus* 28a3). Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between the bodies that receive their motion from outside and those that move spontaneously because they are endowed with a soul (*psyche* ) that can be directed by a higher faculty: the intellect (*nous* ). The intellect enables the perception of the intelligible realities in which sensible things participate.

The soul is defined as the self-moving principle of all motion, physical as well as psychic (*Laws* X, 896e–897a). The immediate consequence of this definition is as follows: we must attribute immortality (*Phaedrus* 245a–d) to the soul as a whole, which, by definition, can have no beginning or end. Particular souls, and namely those of mortal beings (those of human beings, which can transfer into other human bodies and even into the bodies of animals), are, as shall be seen, subject to cycles of ten thousand years, at the end of which they lose the features that characterize them. In the course of the following cycle, they acquire new characteristics.

# What Plato Understands by "God" (*Theos*)

If we wish to speak of religion in Plato, we must first ask ourselves what Plato understands by "god" (*theos*), that is, by "immortal." When, in the *Phaedrus* (246c–d), he tries to describe what a god is, Plato shows himself to be very prudent. He begins by situating his discourse not on the level of *logos*, which is based on argued knowledge that makes a claim to truth, but on that of *mythos*, or a story that remains likely; and he concludes by an appeal for benevolence on the part of the divinity, which takes the form of a prayer. There is, however, a definition that will not vary: a god is an immortal living being.

It follows that since the intelligible realities (including the Good) are defined as intelligible forms, they cannot be considered as gods. Since they are incorporeal, these intelligible forms cannot have a body, and since they are immutable, they can neither be nor have a soul, which, by definition, is a motion that moves itself. In addition, Plato never qualifies an intelligible form—even the highest one, that of the Good—as a god (*theos*), although it may happen that the intelligible is qualified as "divine" (*theion*) as it is in the *Phaedo* (81a3, 83e1, 84a1), the *Republic* (VI 500e3, VII 517d5, X 611e2), the *Statesman* (269d6), the *Theaetetus* (176e4), the *Parmenides* (134e4), and the *Philebus* (22c6, 62a8). Here, the adjective has a hyperbolic value, which implies opposition with regard to "human" (*anthropinon*). *Theion* designates what is perfect in its kind as a function of its relation with that which bestows this perfection: the intelligible, which is therefore also *theion*. The intelligible brings the god its nourishment and its very divinity (*Phaedrus* 247d). Thus, to imitate the god, who is wise (he is a *sophos*), human beings must seek to become wise themselves (*philosophoi*) and to tend toward that wisdom that is conferred by the contemplation of the intelligible.

For Plato, a living being is one endowed with a body and a soul. Among living beings, however, some are mortal and others are not. Since the soul is by definition immortal (*Phaedrus* 245a–d), a living being can therefore be declared to be "mortal" only as a function of its body. Those living beings whose body can be destroyed are mortal, and as a consequence the soul can separate itself from the body it moves (see *Timaeus* 85e). This is the case for mankind and all the beings that inhabit the air, the earth, and the waters (see *Timaeus* 90e–92c). However, there are living beings whose soul and body are united forever because their body cannot be destroyed. The body of these living bodies is not in itself indestructible, for, according to an axiom of Greek thought, all that is born is liable to perish (see *Timaeus* 28a and 38b). It is the goodness of he who has fabricated them that ensures that they will not be destroyed (*Timaeus* 41a–c).

In addition to being endowed with an indissoluble body, the gods possess a soul, whose higher faculty—intellect (*nous*)—is constantly active and seizes its object (that is, intelligible reality) immediately and without obstacles. Once his soul is incarnated, the human being can accede to the intelligible only through the intermediary of his senses, at the end of the complex process to which Plato gives the name of reminiscence (*anamnesis*), which enables the soul to remember the intelligible realities it contemplated when it was separated from all earthly bodies. Ultimately, it is the quality of this contemplation that makes a god a god. In brief, for Plato a god is a living being endowed with a body that is indestructible, not in itself but through the will of the demiurge, and with a soul that possesses a perfect intellect.

As compounds of a body and a soul, the gods form part of an extremely vast hierarchical structure. They are situated at the summit, together with the demons (see *Symposium* 202d), the most famous of whom is Eros. Then come human beings, men and women; then the animals that live in the air, on earth, and in the water, in which human beings may come to be incarnated by virtue of the quality of their intellectual activity; at the very bottom, we must range the plants (*Timaeus* 76e–77a). Two criteria enable the gods to be isolated from all the rest of living beings: their indestructibility and the quality of their intellect. This being the case, let us draw up an inventory of the beings that may be qualified as "gods."

## Beings That May Qualify as "Gods"

First, there is the universe, whose constitution is described in the *Timaeus*. The body of the world, which is unique, has the appearance of a vast sphere, bereft of organs and of members. This sphere includes within itself the totality of elements so that nothing can come to attack it from outside, and it is therefore exempt from illness and death. What is more, the demiurge, because of his goodness, does not wish the universe to be subject to corruption. Within this body he placed a soul, which is situated between the sensible and the intelligible and is endowed with a mathematical structure. In fact, its structure is twofold: motor, since it moves bodies as a whole, including the celestial bodies; and cognitive, insofar as it is Providence. The motion that animates the world is as simple as possible: that of a sphere rotating around its axis, from west to east, on the spot. This physical motion is associated in turn with a twofold cognitive faculty, which seems to deal with the intelligible and the sensible; this is a necessary condition if one admits that the world soul must rule over the universe. The world soul, associated with an indestructible body that it dominates, is in addition endowed with an intellect that is perfect and whose activity is incessant. How, then, can we avoid concluding that the universe is a blessed god (*Laws* VII 821a)?

The celestial bodies (made up of fire) and the earth (made up, above all, of earth) are qualified as "divine" because they meet the criteria stated above. They are indeed immortal living beings that consist of a body that cannot be destroyed, and of their own soul, endowed with an intellect. A hierarchy is established between the celestial bodies, associated with their motion, to which the passage mentioned bears witness. The fixed stars proceed from east to west in a perfectly uniform way, for the motion of their soul does not give rise to any interference. The soul governing the wandering stars introduces anomalies in the

motion of their trajectories. The earth, for its part, remains at rest at the center of the universe simply because in it conflicting types of motion cancel each other out.

The traditional gods are mentioned in an enigmatic passage: "Thus, when all the gods, both those whose circular motions we observe, and those who show themselves only when they so wish, the begetter of this universe spoke to them" (*Timaeus* 41a). These are also living immortal beings, endowed with a soul and a body, although it is hard to know what the body of the traditional gods is made of. We can suppose it is fire, since we find in the *Timaeus* a passage where the different species of living beings are associated with an element: the gods with fire, the birds with air, the living beings that walk or crawl with earth, and fish with water (*Timaeus* 39e–40a). One might think that the association of the divinity with fire holds only for celestial bodies, but it is, it seems, permissible to extrapolate to the traditional gods for two reasons: (1) in the next paragraphs the celestial bodies are mentioned first (*Timaeus* 40a–d), then the traditional gods (*Timaeus* 40d–e); and (2) the demiurge then addresses the totality of these gods (*Timaeus* 41a–c).

The soul of the traditional gods is in every point similar in structure to that of human beings (see *Phaedrus* 246a–d); this is why the gods can be subject to aggressiveness and experience feelings and passions. Unlike that of human beings, the soul of the gods is always good because their soul is permanently guided by their intellect, which perfectly contemplates the intelligible (*Phaedrus* 247c–e). In this magnificent passage, we find a constant mixture between tradition and novelty, myth and philosophy, where myth is the object of a transposition. The gods, whom the poets describe as leading a life of banquets on Olympus, where they feed on special food, nectar and ambrosia, are described in the *Phaedrus* as nourishing their soul with the intelligible. We should also note their peculiar language, which is more correct than that of men, probably because of the quality of their contemplation.

This contemplation enables assimilation to the god: "Such is the life of the gods. Let us move on to the other souls. That which is the best, because it follows the god and seeks to resemble it ..." (*Phaedrus* 247e–249a). This is the sense in which we must understand that the intelligible forms are qualified as "divine." However, the motion that animates the traditional gods is less uniform than that which animates the celestial bodies. In the central myth of the *Phaedrus*, they rise and fall, although many of the verbs that describe these movements feature the idea of circularity.

There remains the most controversial case: the *demiourgos* of the *Timaeus*, to whom we must assimilate the *phutourgos* of the *Republic*. He who fashions the universe in the *Timaeus* is explicitly qualified as a "god": "Thus, in conformity with an explanation which is merely probable, we must say that this world (*cosmos*), which is a living being provided with a soul that is endowed with an intellect, was truly engendered as a result of the reflective decision of a god" (*Timaeus* 30b–c). This god is, however, described as a worker who thinks, has feelings, speaks, and acts. At *Timaeus* 29e30b it becomes clear that the demiurge is a god endowed with an intellect: he "reasons" and "reflects"; he "takes things into consideration" and he "foresees," and he is author of acts of "will." His responsibility is engaged; he "speaks"; and when he contemplates his works, he "rejoices." In addition, the description of his activity is scarcely compatible with the absence of a body. Besides being qualified as a "father," the personage who causes the universe to appear is qualified as "demiurge," "maker," wax-modeller, and carpenter, and he is a builder whose most important function is assembling. Moreover, if one considers the verbs that metaphorically describe his action, one realizes that the demiurge carries out several activities that are typical of some [arts and crafts](#).

However, nowhere is it said that the demiurge has a soul and a body simply because it is he who fashioned soul and body in their totality. This is probably the reason some commentators have maintained that the demiurge cannot be separated from the soul, of which he must, one way or another, be like the intellect. Yet it seems very difficult to accept this position, for this would amount to pulling up the ladder one has just used. In summary, Plato describes the demiurge, even if only metaphorically, as a god endowed with a body and a soul.

At the summit of the divine Platonic hierarchy, then, we find the demiurge, who fashions the other gods. He is thus considered as the god who always is, and he is in a paradoxical situation with regard to the soul and the body he is supposed to fashion. Then we find the universe, which comes into being as a result of the demiurge's action; this god takes on the appearance of the most perfect form in that he rotates on the spot. Then there come the fixed stars and the planets, whose body is also spherical: but the fixed stars take on a circular motion that is perfectly regular if we compare it to that of the planets, which feature certain irregularities. The status of the earth is also problematic; bereft of motion, it rests at the center of the universe and presents an imperfectly spherical form. The traditional gods, for their part, are subject to motions that are not only circular but also linear, for they can rise and descend in the heavens.

In brief, whether one looks at traditional mythology, at Plato, at Aristotle, at the Stoics or the Epicureans, the gods are always considered as living immortal beings, endowed with an indestructible body and a soul that possesses an intellect. The idea that there may be gods who do not possess either a soul or a body is, it seems, contemporary with the efforts made by the Middle Platonists to ensure the preeminence of the first god. In this divinity, they saw both the Demiurge of the *Timaeus*, and the Good of the *Republic*, which they considered as an intellect in actuality, whose intelligible forms were the thoughts. In addition, it bears the mark of the definitive assimilation carried out by Plotinus between the Intellect and the Intelligible that all the later Neoplatonists were to follow. Even in this context, however, there remained an important place for the lower gods, endowed with a soul and a body. The same holds true for the Neoplatonists.

Since the gods possess a soul whose highest faculty, the intellect (*nous*), is constantly active, and this intellect grasps its object, the Forms (*eide*), immediately and without obstacles, they are necessarily good (*agathoi*), since evil is equivalent to ignorance; hence the saying that "No one commits evil willingly." One can understand, then, why Plato condemns the poets who describe the gods indulging in unjust or indecent acts. Since every god is good, it follows that none can be responsible for any evil (*Republic* X 617e). Thus, in the myth of the *Statesman*, as in Book X of the *Laws*, the possibility of divinities opposing one another is rejected. This amounts to a condemnation of dualism.

## Mortal Living Beings

Beneath the gods in the hierarchy are souls that possess an intellect like the gods but are liable to be attached to a body that, unlike that of the gods, is destructible. These inferior souls are subject to temporality; their existence is marked by cycles of ten thousand years, imposed by destiny, which involve a system of retribution based on reincarnation.

In order to account for the soul's relations with an indestructible body, Plato, beginning with the *Republic*, distinguishes three powers within the soul, the first of which is in itself immortal, whereas the two others enjoy immortality only as long as the body over which they reign is indestructible. The immortal power of soul—that is, the intellect (*nous*)—contemplates the intelligible realities, of which sensible things are mere images. By its means, human beings are akin to a god, or rather to a *daimon*. The other two powers are: (1) the spirit (*thumos*) that enables mortal living beings to defend themselves, and (2) the desire (*epithumia*) that enables them to remain alive and reproduce. Whereas the intellect can be said to be immortal, these two powers are declared to be mortal because they are associated with functions that enable the survival of the sensible body to which the soul is attached, albeit only for a lifetime.

When applied to mortal living beings, and in particular to human beings, the psychic tripartition just mentioned is associated with one that is corporeal and even social. In the *Timaeus*, Plato associates each power of soul with a place in the body. The lowest or desiring power, which ensures the functions of survival (by provoking the desire for food) and of reproduction (by provoking sexual desire), is situated under the diaphragm, in the area of the liver. Above the diaphragm, in the area of the heart, is the spirited power, which enables human beings to remain alive by ensuring defensive functions, both within and without. This second power enables a mediation between the desiring power and reason, situated in the head, which is responsible for all the processes of knowledge that can be expressed in speech. In human beings, only reason is immortal, for the spirited power and the desiring power are restricted to ensuring the functions that enable destructible bodies to maintain themselves in good working order for a specific time. When this body is destroyed, the spirited power and the desiring power associated with it can only disappear, and this is why they are qualified as "mortal" (*Timaeus* 69d).

This psychic tripartition, associated with a corporeal one, is in addition related to a functional tripartition in a social context. At the end of Book II of the *Republic*, Plato proposes an organization in which individuals are distributed in *functional* groups in accordance with this hierarchy, based on the predominance in the human individual of one of three powers: intellect (*nous*), spirit (*thumos*), or desire (*epithumia*). The most numerous group, responsible for ensuring the production of food and of wealth, is made up of farmers and craftsmen. This group is protected by guardians, or warriors, responsible for ensuring the maintenance of order, both within and outside the city. Insofar as they can possess neither property nor money, the guardians are completely separated from the producers, who, in exchange for the protection they receive from the guardians, must feed them and ensure their upkeep. From these functional groups, a very small number of individuals are chosen, those who are intended for higher education and the government of the city.

Soul, as an incorporeal whole, is immortal; yet one individual soul can be attached to a particular body, which is, for its part, subject to destruction. However, the soul is recycled every ten thousand years; in this way, Plato's thought on soul is not so different from Asian (particularly Hindu) doctrines on reincarnation. We now turn to consider the soul's wanderings.

During the first millennium (*Phaedrus* 245d–248c), the soul is separated from all destructible bodies, whereas during the following nine millennia (*Phaedrus* 248c–e), it passes from body to body as a function of the moral value of its previous existence, which is determined by the quality of its intellectual activity. This intellectual activity is a reminiscence (*anamnesis*), or memory, of the soul's contemplation of intelligible realities when it was separated from all terrestrial bodies. At the end of this first millennium, all souls that are worthy of being associated with a sensible body inhabit the body of a man—that is, a male, even though the sexual organs are still missing; and this association remains valid for the following millennium. A man who loves knowledge or beauty and who has chosen an upright life for three consecutive millennia will be able to escape from the cycle of reincarnations and rise back up to the heavens. The others will voyage from one body to another, beginning with the third millennium (*Timaeus* 90e–92c). The first category of bodies in which these imperfect souls may be incarnated is that of women: whoever displays cowardice enters into the body of a woman, since virility is associated with war in ancient Greece. Only in the course of this millennium does the distinction of the sexes appear, thus allowing sexual reproduction. Then come incarnations in various kinds of what we call "animals," although there is no specific term in ancient Greek to designate this category of living beings. They are classified as a function of the elements (beginning with the air, since fire is reserved for the gods), in a vertical order. At the top, birds fly through the air. Then come the living beings that inhabit the surface of the earth; these are the quadrupeds, insects, and reptiles. Finally, there are the aquatic animals: fish, shellfish, and others, which are the most stupid.

In fact, Plato describes a psychic *continuum* in which one finds a hierarchical order of gods, demons, human beings, and the animals that live in the air, on the earth, and in the water—and even, as shall be seen, plants. Intellectual activity, conceived as the intuition of intelligible forms, constitutes the criterion that enables a distinction to be made between all these souls. Gods and demons contemplate the intelligible forms directly, and, as it were, incessantly. Human beings share this privilege only during a certain period of their existence, when their souls are separated from all bodies. Once human souls have been incarnated, their contemplation of the intelligible forms is mediate, since it must pass through the intermediary of the senses; above all, it is more or less uncertain. By contrast, animals use their intellect less and less as one goes down the scale of beings.

Within the psychic scale mentioned above, one notes two discontinuities: (1) a discontinuity between the souls of gods and of demons (which never fall into a body subject to destruction) and the souls of human beings and animals (which inhabit destructible bodies with diverse appearances); and (2) a discontinuity between the souls of human beings and animals (which are endowed with a rational power) and the souls of plants (which are reduced to the desiring power).

Let us consider one by one the consequences of these two discontinuities.

1. In this hierarchical system, only souls endowed with an intellect are subject to a retributive system, which makes them rise or fall on the scale of souls, incarnated according to the quality of their intellectual activity. Gods and demons are above this class, and plants are beneath it. Gods and plants thus always remain at their level, at the highest or the lowest extremity.
2. As a result, human beings, who are situated at the uppermost limit of the class of incarnate souls, must have as their goal assimilation to the gods and the demons by seeking contemplation of the intelligible forms. Hence the theme of the assimilation to the divinity by the philosopher, who tends toward the knowledge, that is, the contemplation of the intelligible forms, or true reality.
3. The hierarchy of human beings and animals, which is a function of the exercise of intellectual activity, is materialized by the body. The body, in which the soul is situated, illustrates the quality of that soul's intellectual activity; in short, the body is a "state of the soul."
4. Like human beings, whether men or women, the soul of animals is endowed with a rational power, and this is true even if animals are what they are because they make little or no use of their intellect. In any case, nothing prevents an animal, whatever it may be, from climbing back up the scale to become a human being.

It follows that changing the destiny of an animal may imply eating the soul of a former human being. How, in this case, can the survival of human beings, who need to feed themselves, be ensured without turning them into "anthropophagi"? By giving them as food a kind of living being that is not endowed with intellect—namely, vegetables. After mentioning the four types of living beings that populate the universe—the gods associated with fire; demons; human beings; and the birds, the animals, and the aquatic beasts—Timaeus rapidly mentions the origin of vegetables, which he associates with the third, or desiring power of soul. However, this call for vegetarianism enters into conflict with the traditional sacrifice (*thusia*) of the city, which implies slaughtering victims and consuming their flesh. Scarcely mentioned in the *Republic*, this kind of sacrifice seems to play an important role in the city of the *Laws*. Does Plato accept this contradiction, or does he give a wider meaning to *thusia*? It is impossible to say.

## Transmigration of the Soul

Scholars usually consider that the transmigration of the soul was a dogma among the Orphics and the Pythagoreans and that Plato made it his own. The stakes here are important, insofar as the transmigration of the soul is the basis of the doctrine of reminiscence, which itself implies the notion of a separate intelligible form that can be contemplated by the soul even when separated from the body.

However, none of the testimonies advanced to prove that the Pythagoreans preached the doctrine of transmigration is decisive: whether it is that of Diogenes Laertios, who claims to cite verses by Xenophanes that he attributes to Pythagoras (Diogenes Laertios VIII 36 = Diels-Kranz 21B7); of Aristotle (*De anima* I 3, 407b20 = Diels-Kranz 59 B39; cf. also II 2, 414a22) on the soul's entry into the body; of Dicaearchus on the dogmas that Pythagoras was the first to introduce into Greece (Dicaearchus, fr. 33 Wehrli = Porphyry, *Vita Pythagorica* 19); or of Herodotus (IV 95–96), who affirms that the Greeks living in the region of the [Black Sea](#) attributed to Pythagoras the practices for obtaining immortality current among the Getae (*Getai athanatizontes*). There is every reason to believe that modern and contemporary historians of religions, following in the path of the Neopythagoreans, often project Plato's doctrine of the soul on the teachings of Pythagoras, about which, objectively, we know nothing.

In addition, no ancient testimony attributes explicitly the doctrine of transmigration to Orphism. All that is explicitly attributed to Orphism is the doctrine of the soul's preexistence (a preexistence that is not necessarily individual), and that of retribution in the next world. On this point as well, the testimonies of Plato (*Cratylus* 400b–c; *Phaedo* 62b; *Republic* II 364e–365a; *Laws* IX 870d–e) and that of Aristotle (*De anima* I5, 410b27) are insufficient to inspire persuasion.

The only way to affirm that Orphism maintains the transmigration of the soul would be to think that the priests and priestesses Plato mentions in the *Meno* (81a–e) are Orphic, or to slant in this direction the testimony of Herodotus (II 123), who refers the doctrine of transmigration to the Egyptians. It is presumptuous to supply names that Herodotus will not even reveal and say that the people in question are Orphics. In addition, the passage from the *Meno* (81b–c) in which are cited a few verses traditionally attributed to Pindar (fr. 133 Bergk = 126 Bowra) does indeed evoke the doctrine of transmigration but refers it to priests and priestesses intent on being able to account for the functions they fulfill; his goal is to make not only Pindar but also poets the spokesmen for this doctrine. The interpretation of this passage, where the names of Orpheus or of the Orphics never appear, remains debatable.

In the face of so many confusions and uncertainties, the only valid hypothesis at the present time is as follows: Pindar, Empedocles, Herodotus, and Plato were aware of the existence of religious movements that maintained the doctrine of transmigration. These movements seem to have had an influence on Pythagoreanism and on Orphism. In this perspective, the question of which group—Orphics or Pythagoreans—influenced the other is meaningless. Pythagoreanism and Orphism, like Plato, accepted and rejected some of the prohibitions and doctrinal points of these religious movements, which it is impossible to identify.

From this perspective, all human beings and animals that inhabit air, earth, and water constitute a vast system of symbols—symbols from the point of view of appearances, but also from the viewpoint of behavior, which justifies the recourse to a number of comparisons, images, and metaphors in which animals play a role. In the *Timaeus* these symbols refer to different types of soul, whose moral quality is ultimately determined by their contemplation of the intelligible, according to a number of details that may seem ironic or ridiculous but that can be interpreted only in this sense: birds are naive astronomers, who think that sight is the ultimate source of knowledge; quadrupeds need four feet in order to support their skull, which has been elongated by the deformations of the revolutions of the circles of its rational power. Stupid terrestrial animals crawl; fish are even more stupid, and the worst ignorance is that of shellfish.

## Plato and Traditional Religion

Plato thus agrees with traditional mythology, particularly when he maintains that the gods have a body. However, even on this point he differs from his contemporaries. He can endure neither the idea that the gods have a corporeal aspect or a behavior that renders them akin to human beings (since the gods can only be good) nor the idea that the gods may change in corporeal appearance or in opinion. The violent criticisms that constitute Books II and III of the *Republic*, and the denunciation of the poets in Book X, are clear proof of this. Only a mythology fabricated by poets under the control of those who know—that is, the philosophers—is permitted. Myths of this kind can be used, together with a kind of rhetoric, as means of persuasion in the preambles to the laws for dissuading in advance those who might be thinking of breaking a law, as is explained by the Athenian Stranger in Book IV of the *Laws*.

A similar position can be observed in Book X of the *Laws*, where the goal is to demonstrate to young atheists that: (1) the gods exist, (2) they are interested in the fate of human beings, and (3) they are insensitive to all attempts to influence their judgment. This last point has the consequence of rendering traditional religion obsolete. In this context there can no longer be any question of making prayers or offering sacrifices in an attempt to sway any particular god. The only goal of the cult is to glorify the gods, with a view to assimilating oneself to them by one's contemplation.

In summary, although he takes up many ideas concerning the gods in ancient Greece, Plato appears as a revolutionary when he assigns to human beings the goal of assimilating themselves to god, seeks to submit the myths that narrate the deeds and exploits of the gods to the control of the philosopher, and attributes to cultic acts and ceremonies the original finality of the mere glorification of the gods.

## See Also

[Dualism](#); [Ficino, Marsilio](#); Gnosticism, article on Gnosticism from Its Origins to the [Middle Ages](#); [Hermetism](#); [Neoplatonism](#); [Platonism](#); [Soul, article on Greek and Hellenistic Concepts](#).

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# Plato

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BORN: 427 *bce*, Athens, Greece

DIED: 347 *bce*, Athens, Greece

NATIONALITY: *Greek*

GENRE: *Nonfiction*

## MAJOR WORKS:

*Republic* (c. 360 *bce*)

*Phaedrus* (c. 370 *bce*)

*Symposium* (385 *bce*)

*Euthyphro* (399 *bce*)

*Apology* (c. 399 *bce*)

## Overview

Plato stands at the center of philosophical thought in the ancient world. He was the first person to approach philosophical issues systematically, but it was the genius with which he treated those issues that made his thought so influential. Virtually every philosopher in antiquity who lived after Plato offered a response to what he had written. Moreover, Plato's influence was hardly limited to the ancient world. His thought was studied throughout the [Middle Ages](#) and the Renaissance and continues to be crucial to an understanding of philosophical issues. Although the accuracy of his doctrines has always been

the subject of vigorous debate, no one can deny Plato's pervasive influence on the history of Western philosophy.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Life** Plato was born in Athens, the son of Ariston and Perictione, both of Athenian aristocratic ancestry. He lived at a time when ancient Greece was considered the most powerful empire in the known world; the Greek Empire consisted of many city-states, such as Athens and Sparta. Athens was one of the most important regions of ancient Greece, functioning as a center of both political power and cultural advancement. Plato lived his whole life in Athens but did travel to Sicily and southern Italy on several occasions, and one story says he traveled to Egypt. Little is known of his early years, but he was given the finest education Athens had to offer its noble families.

**The Influence of Socrates** Plato's acquaintance with Socrates altered the course of his life. The compelling power that Socrates' methods and arguments had over the minds of the youth of Athens gripped Plato as firmly as it did so many others, and he became a close associate of Socrates.

The end of the [Peloponnesian War](#) (404 bce), which resulted in Athens being taken over by Sparta and its allies, left Plato in a difficult position. His uncle Critias was the leader of the Thirty Tyrants, a group that had been appointed to power by the victorious Spartans. One way of manifesting their power was to indict as many Athenians as possible for treason. As documented in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates was ordered to arrest a man and take him from Salamis to Athens for execution. When the great teacher refused, his life was in jeopardy, and he was probably saved only by the overthrow of the Thirty and the reestablishment of democracy. Plato had been repelled by the purpose and methods of the Thirty and welcomed the restoration of democracy to Athens.

Four years later, when Socrates was tried and sentenced to death, Plato was present at the trial, as evidenced by the *Apology*. Although Plato was not present when the hemlock (a fatal poison) was administered to his master, he describes the scene in vivid and touching detail in the *Phaedo*. Disgusted by what had transpired, Plato turned away from contemporary Athenian politics and never took an active part in government, although he did, through friends, try to influence the course of politics in the Sicilian city of Syracuse.

**Journeys** Plato and several of his friends left Athens after Socrates' death and sojourned with Euclides in Megara. Highly productive during this time, Plato wrote *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Gorgias*. Socrates is the main character in all of these dialogues, and various abstractions are discussed, including courage, piety, and friendship. The *Apology* and *Crito* stand apart from other works of Plato's in that they deal with historical events: Socrates' trial and the period between his conviction and execution.

During his first trip to southern Italy and Syracuse in 388–387 bce, Plato made the acquaintance of Dion of Syracuse and his infamous brother-in-law, Dionysius I, ruler of Syracuse. Dionysius was at the height of his power and prestige in Sicily for having freed the Greeks there from the threat of Carthaginian rule. Plato became better friends with Dion, however, and Dionysius, it appears, was jealous of the relationship between Plato and Dion. On Plato's return journey to Athens, Dionysius's crew deposited him on the island of Aegina, which at that time was engaged in a minor war with Athens. Plato would most likely have been sold as a prisoner of war had he not been ransomed by Anniceris of Cyrene, one of his many admirers.

**Return to Athens** After his return to Athens, Plato began to teach in the Gymnasium Academe and soon acquired property nearby. There he founded his famous Academy, which survived until philosophical schools were closed by the Christian emperor Justinian in the early sixth century ce. At the center of the Academy stood a shrine to the Muses, and at least one modern scholar suggests that the Academy may have been a type of religious brotherhood.

**The Republic** Socrates is again the main character in Plato's *Republic*, although this work is less a dialogue than a long discussion by Socrates of justice and what it means to the individual and the city-state. The great utopian state is described only as an analogy for the soul in order for men to understand better how the soul might achieve the kind of balance and harmony necessary for the rational element to control it. Just as there are three elements to the soul—the rational, the less rational, and the impulsive irrational—so are there three classes in the state: the rulers, the guardians, and the workers. No matter what their class, all citizens receive an education appropriate to their abilities. The rulers are not a hereditary clan or wealthy [upper class](#), but are those who have emerged from the population as a whole as the most intellectually gifted. The guardians serve society by keeping order and by handling the practical matters of government, including fighting wars, while the workers perform the labor necessary to keep the state running smoothly.

The wisdom, courage, and moderation cultivated by the rulers, guardians, and workers ideally produce justice in society. Only when the three work in harmony, with intelligence and wisdom clearly in control, does the individual or state achieve the happiness and fulfillment of which it is capable. The *Republic* ends with the great myth of Er, in which the wanderings of the soul through births and rebirths are recounted. According to Plato, one may be freed from the cycle after a time through lives of greater and greater spiritual and intellectual purity.

**Death** Plato's second trip to Syracuse took place in 367 bce after the death of Dionysius I, but Plato and Dion's efforts to influence the development of Dionysius II along the lines laid down in the *Republic* did not succeed, and Plato returned to Athens. Plato's third and final voyage to Syracuse was made some time before 357 bce, and he was no more successful in his attempts to influence the young Dionysius than he had been earlier. Dion fared no better and was exiled by the young tyrant, while Plato was held in semi-captivity. Plato's "Seventh Letter", the only one in the collection of thirteen letters considered authentic—perhaps even from the hand of Plato himself—recounts his role in the events surrounding the death of Dion, who returned to Syracuse and overthrew Dionysius in 357 bce. The "Seventh Letter" is of even more interest because of Plato's statement that the deepest truths may not be communicated.

Although the date is not exactly known, Apollodorus's *Chronology* (late second century bce) recorded Plato's death as 347 bce at the age of eighty-one. When Plato died, he was succeeded at the head of the Academy, not by Aristotle, who had been a student and then a teacher at the Academy for about twenty years, but by his nephew, Speusippus. As noted above, the Academy continued for centuries after Plato's death.

## Works in Literary Context

Plato was a student of philosophy, and his literary output reflects this role. His works fuse the arguments of Heraclitus, Socrates, and the Pythagoreans (those who followed the mathematician Pythagoras). Whatever other influences have been claimed, there can be little doubt that it was Socrates who had the most profound impact on Plato.

**Socrates** Plato chooses Socrates as the main character in most of his works, a clear reflection of Plato's reverence for the man he regarded as his true master. In the “Seventh Letter,” Plato deemed Socrates “the most just man alive” during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants in Athens. Diogenes reports that the interest was mutual: he tells the story of Socrates' dream of a swan sitting on his knees, which all at once sprouted feathers and flew away after crying out a loud, sweet call. The next day, Plato was introduced to Socrates as a pupil, and Socrates believed the young man was the swan in his dream.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Plato's famous contemporaries include:

**Socrates** (470–399 bce): In addition to being Plato's mentor, Socrates is widely considered the father of Western philosophy.

**Aristotle** (384–322 bce): Aristotle was Plato's favorite student, and for many centuries after Aristotle's death, Aristotle's legacy was so great that he was known simply as The Philosopher.

**Aristophanes** (456–c. 386 bce): Aristophanes was an Athenian comic dramatist who wrote *Lysistrata*, a play about government by women.

**Alexander of Macedonia** (also known as [Alexander the Great](#)) (356–323 bce): Alexander was a Macedonian king who, in his brief thirty-three-year life, vastly increased the size of his kingdom and built a lasting reputation as a conqueror.

**Democritus** (460–370 bce): Although little is known about Democritus, his most important theory was that all matter is composed of what he called “atoms.”

**Dionysius I** (432–367 bce): This ruler conquered a number of cities and states, including Syracuse, which he turned into a Greek colony.

It is the relationship that Plato had with Socrates, in fact, that has been memorialized in Plato's dialogues, his largest contribution to literature. In form, these dialogues are merely representations of conversations held between two or more people. In content, they demonstrate and record the philosophies Socrates taught his pupils. Indeed, Plato's dialogues have been staples of education ever since their rediscovery in the late medieval period. However, the objectivity of Plato's representation of Socrates' character and philosophy has come into question through the years.

Diogenes reports in his *Lives* that there was a rivalry or animosity between Plato and several fellow philosophers and literary figures, especially other “Socratics,” including Xenophon, Antisthenes, Aristippus, and Aeschines. It is certain that each of these men also wrote “Socratic dialogues,” though only those of Xenophon and Plato exist in complete form. It is important to note that the Socratic dialogues written by others deviate significantly from Plato's in their philosophies and their portraits of Socrates.

**Legacy** The Academy continued for centuries after Plato's death, though its members deviated from Platonic teachings in several striking ways. Within a century (c. 276 bce) the school had become a center for the philosophy of the Skeptics under Archesilaus. Revivals of some versions of Platonism were undertaken both at the Academy itself under Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 87 bce) and elsewhere; for example, “Middle Platonism” developed at the same time in Athens and Alexandria (which included Plutarch). So-called Neoplatonism began with Plotinus in Rome and continued until Justinian closed the pagan schools in 529 ce. In many ways, Neoplatonism continued to provide a significant source of ideas for later medieval thinkers.

Plato's influence, though transformed and reshaped by the Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists, can be found later in the conceptions of temporal order and eternity in Augustine and Boethius, and in other ideas among the medieval rationalists, especially Anselm. The Platonic conception of knowledge as derived from and secured by innate and infallible cognitive capacities—which make contact with a truth or reality that is independent of the human senses—continued after the Enlightenment in the philosophies of what have come to be known as the Continental Rationalists, most notably René Descartes, Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza, and [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#). It echoes even later in the transcendentalism of [Immanuel Kant](#), the British idealist [Francis Herbert Bradley](#), and, later still, in the American transcendentalists, most notably [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#).

## Works in Critical Context

In considering the work of Plato, it is first important to note that Socrates, his illustrious teacher, wrote no text in which he outlined his teachings. Consequently, what scholars know about Socrates can be gleaned only from those who wrote about his

work. This fact, along with Plato's repeated use of Socrates as his main character, has led to several seemingly irresolvable scholarly disputes. Does the character Socrates actually speak for Plato himself, who articulates his own thoughts through Socrates? Or does Plato seek only to represent the philosophy of Socrates by recounting the conversations of Socrates? Plato's student Aristotle often wrote as if he believed that the Socrates whom Plato employs is expressing Plato's own philosophy. Never a speaking character in his own dialogues, Plato speaks for himself only in the “Letters”, and the authenticity of these is disputed. It has been argued, in fact, that readers should never assume that Plato is presenting dogmatic pronouncements; instead, he is using the dialogue form simply to offer arguments for consideration. This issue is an important one for scholars because Socrates is largely considered the father of philosophy as we know it.

***What Is Plato, What Is Socrates?*** Although a decisive resolution of the many debates about Plato's relationship with Socrates is not likely to be achieved, certain points of view seem well enough supported to be agreed upon by scholars in general. Perhaps the most important point concerns the dating of the dialogues. Partly because of the strategies used for dating the pieces, some separation of the Platonic and Socratic philosophies has been made on the supposition that Plato became more the master of his own philosophical thinking and less influenced by Socrates as he matured.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

While Plato's *Republic* covers a number of topics, the text outlines an idealized manifestation of both an individual and the surrounding government. As such, it reads as a manual or guidebook. Other artists have taken on the task of delineating the proper structure of government and the individuals who run it. Here are a few of the results:

*The Prince* (1532), a treatise by Niccolò Machiavelli. This work describes the role of a country's leader, based on Machiavelli's belief that a country must be stable above all else, even if a leader must behave ruthlessly to achieve that stability.

*Utopia* (1516), a treatise by Thomas More. The word utopia means “no-place,” and so underscores the impractical nature of the fictional island culture More describes.

*The Leviathan* (1651), a treatise by [Thomas Hobbes](#). This text describes Hobbes's “[social contract](#) theory”—the mutual obligation of individuals to help other individuals and how these obligations become the foundations of societies.

Several approaches to ordering the dialogues chronologically have been attempted. In antiquity, the orderings were thematic at best and included many works whose authenticity is now disputed or unanimously rejected. Historical evidence for ordering the works chronologically is relatively slight. Aristotle, Diogenes, and Olympiodorus of Alexandria all report that the *Laws* was written after the *Republic*. Beyond this, scholars must speculate about the chronology of the dialogues based on the slight evidence contained within each of Plato's works.

Despite the lack of direct evidence, modern scholars have found sufficient differences in the philosophies articulated in the dialogues to group them into different periods: early—those works written prior to Plato's first trip to Sicily in 387; middle—the dialogues from about 387 bce to 380 bce, considered to be early transitional; and late—transitional dialogues beginning about 360 bce to 355 bce. In his influential study *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Gregory Vlastos finds ten significant differences between the Socrates in the dialogues of the early period and the Socrates in the dialogues of the middle period. Arguments of this sort have generally found favor among scholars who are inclined to find the differences in Plato's characterizations significant in terms of his movement away from the philosophical methods and preoccupations of the historical Socrates, which these scholars assume to have been represented more or less accurately in Plato's earlier works. Still, each of these differences between the Socrates of the early and middle dialogues will no doubt continue to be hotly debated. Interestingly, the division of the dialogues into groups on the basis of their contents has more recently received support from what is known as stylometry—the careful measure of certain stylistic features of the writings themselves.

While the early, middle, and late groupings are accepted by many scholars, serious debate continues about the exact placement of each dialogue within these groups and even about the merits of the different methods employed to group them at all. Furthermore, a great many other dialogues and some thirteen letters have also been attributed to Plato over the years, but none of these other writings has been regarded by a consensus as authentic. Many were presumed to be so in antiquity and have only relatively recently been removed from the canon. These disputed works are known as the *dubia*. Still other dialogues, called the *spuria*, were attributed to Plato but suspected to be fraudulent even in antiquity.

The majority view among scholars on this issue is that the early Platonic dialogues contain a certain highly coherent set of philosophical positions, so it makes sense to think of this philosophy on its own terms, distinct from the philosophy found in the middle-period dialogues. Scholars often call the philosophy in the early dialogues “Socratic philosophy” and the philosophy of the middle dialogues “Platonic philosophy.” This strategy partly permits an easy shorthand for the distinction between the two philosophies and partly reflects an acknowledgment that the philosophy of Plato's early dialogues is the most interesting and plausible candidate for the philosophy of the historical Socrates. Indeed, if the philosophy of Plato's Socrates is not the philosophy of the historically real Socrates, then the philosophy of the historical Socrates must be associated with the views attributed to him by other Socratic authors, whose work seems ordinary compared with that of Plato, or the philosophy of the historical Socrates must be considered lost. Any serious philosophical interest in Socrates, then, is to be found in the philosophy of Plato's Socrates in the early dialogues.

**Continued Critical Use of Plato's Dialogues** Despite the continued debate about the nature of Plato's writings, they continue to be read in philosophy, justice, and history courses alike because the works pose philosophical problems and questions that remain intricate enough to challenge those who think critically about serious issues. Plato's Socrates asks many of what are considered the quintessential questions of philosophy. He asks them in ways that are readily understood, and Plato has him ask those questions in dramatic settings that make them even more compelling. In short, whether Plato has accurately represented the historical Socrates or not, the dialogues as a starting point for further conversations about important and unresolved issues of justice, piety, science, mathematics, and politics ensure Plato's continued relevance as a leader of philosophical and intellectual awareness.

## Responses to Literature

1. Read book seven of Plato's *Republic*. This portion of the *Republic* contains the “Allegory of the Cave,” which describes the necessity of seeing the world in a new way, of opening one's mind up to the truth that hides behind the illusions of this world. Describe your feelings in response to this text. Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the world when you conclude the “Allegory”? Do you believe that the world is a kind of illusion that hides other, more profound truths? Why or why not?
2. Research the word *utopia*. What do you think an ideal world would be like? Describe some of this ideal world's key features—for instance, what would this world's art, government, and religion be like? Describe the fashion and sports of this world.
3. Plato's dialogues are famous for their representations of the so-called Socratic method: Socrates's unique style of argument—his way of asking his “opponent” many questions, cleverly establishing definitions of terms, and then guiding his opponent into making his points for him. Choose a controversial issue and write your own Socratic dialogue, in the style of Plato, in which one character plays the Socrates role and argues his point by asking questions of the other.

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## Plato

World Eras  
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**Circa 428-348 or 347 b.c.e.**

### Philosopher

#### [Sources](#)

**Influence.** Plato is a member of the great trio of ancient Greek intellectuals—the other two being Socrates and Aristotle—who established the philosophical foundations of Western culture. Almost every ancient philosopher who came after him wrote in response to Plato's theories. In fact, scholars studied his logical, epistemological, and metaphysical writings throughout the [Middle Ages](#) and the Renaissance.

**Aristocles.** Plato was born in Athens, the son of Ariston and Perictione. He was originally called Aristocles, after his grandfather, but was given the nickname “Plato” (after the Greek word *flatatus*, meaning broad, apparently in reference to either his physique, broad forehead, or intellect). He studied under Socrates until the philosopher's death in 399 b.c.e. and then began a series of travels that led him to Megara, Egypt, Cyrene, Sicily, and Magna Graecia (the Greek seaport colonies of southern Italy). Returning to Athens in 387, Plato founded his school of philosophy known as the Academy, where one of his most famous students was Aristotle.

**Works.** The extant works of Plato are in the form of dialogues in which his mentor, Socrates, takes a leading role. His greatest dialogue, *Republic*, the first book of which was written sometime before 387 b.c.e., describes the construction of an ideal state. *Apology* was also written prior to 387 b.c.e. and purports to be Socrates' speech at his trial. Three other important works were composed sometime between 380 and 360 b.c.e.: *Symposium* (a study on ideal love); *Phaedrus* (a critique of the prevailing conception of rhetoric); and *Phaedo* (a discourse on immortality of the soul and Socrates' last conversation before death). One of Plato's famous late dialogues is *Timaeus* (circa 355-347 b.c.e.), which contains his theory of the universe and the story of Atlantis.

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## Plato

Science and Its Times: Understanding the Social Significance of Scientific Discovery  
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**c. 428-c. 348 b.c.**

One of the most influential of ancient Greek philosophers and a student of Socrates. He Founded the Academy, a school of higher education that lasted nearly 1,000 years. Aristotle studied there for nearly 20 years. Plato wrote many texts, most notably the *Republic*, wherein the ideal society is described as one led by philosopher-kings, and democracy is rejected as a valid form of government. He argued that reality is divided into a world of senses, of which we only can have incomplete knowledge, and a world of ideas, of which we can have true and complete knowledge. For example, every circle we see contains some imperfection—in other words, it is only an approximation of an ideal circle. We know what a circle is by comprehending the idea, or "form," of the circle.

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## Plato

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**427-348? b.c.**

### **Greek Philosopher**

Although Plato himself did not contribute substantial works directly to science and mathematics, his philosophy and methods of education heavily influenced developments in these fields for many centuries. Many of his ideas were taken from earlier Greek philosophers, especially Socrates (470-399 b.c.). However, Plato was the first to produce a large body of writing that covered the major aspects of philosophy discussed today.

Plato was born into an upper-class family in Athens at a time when the power of his home city was in decline. He fought in the [Peloponnesian War](#) (409-404 b.c.) against Sparta, and came to respect the Spartan system of rigid government and strict social rules which appeared to give them the power to defeat Athens. Plato seemed destined for a political career, but the corrupt politics of the age and the treatment given to his teacher Socrates led Plato to pursue philosophy instead. Socrates had been found guilty of corrupting Athenian youth and questioning the gods, for which crimes he was condemned to death. Disillusioned, Plato traveled to Egypt, Sicily, and Italy, where he learnt mathematics from the Pythagoreans, aristocratic fraternities whose main achievements lay in the fields of music, geometry, and astronomy. He returned to Athens around 387 b.c. and founded the Academy, a place of higher learning designed to instill in the elite youth of Athens the moral values Plato believed would make them better leaders.

Plato wanted to develop in philosophical subjects the certainty he found in mathematics. He hoped that the whole of science could be deduced from a few basic assumed truths, or axioms. With the ideas of Socrates as a starting point, Plato used the method of written dialogues to pursue answers to questions such as "What is courage?" and "What is justice?" Plato tried to explain the relationship between abstract ideas and their representations in the real world. For example, a line is a length with no width, but any line drawn will always have width. Plato imagined a realm of abstract ideas where the perfect, eternal, forms of all things existed. He used the analogy of being chained to the back of a cave, facing the wall, when all you can see of the objects in the cave are the shadows the objects make on the wall. Plato believed that the world was like a shadow of the perfect realm, which would contain items such as the perfect circle and the perfect dodecahedron (geometrical figure with 12 faces), but also the perfect dog, horse, man, and the perfect courage and justice.

Plato's ideas suffered from the reinterpretations of later writers. For example, Plotinus (a.d. 204?-270) altered the central ideas of Plato's ideas to suit his own beliefs, creating a new philosophy later called Neoplatonism. Plato's pupil Aristotle (384-322 b.c.) was to have a greater impact on science than his teacher. Aristotle's work survived the alteration caused by copying, translation, and reinterpretation better than Plato's. Arab thinkers, medieval scholars, and theologians had ready access to Aristotle and found his ideas fitted their own biases, or could be modified to do so. Plato's works were rediscovered during the Renaissance in Europe, when Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas influenced many thinkers such as [Johannes Kepler](#) (1571-1630), Isaac Newton (1642-1727), and others. In the seventeenth century, so many scholars of [Cambridge University](#) were so influenced by Plato's ideas that they became known as the [Cambridge Platonists](#).



Plato wrote about art, music, poetry, drama, dance, architecture, ethics, metaphysics, the ideal form of government, and the nature of reality. He lived to be about 80, and the Academy he founded in Athens continued until a.d. 529. Plato contributed little to what we would call scientific subjects, but his ideas on education and what constituted knowledge inspired his followers to explore the world in new ways. His stress on mathematics and philosophy, and his insistence on defining terms rather than trusting intuition, influenced many later thinkers.

## DAVID TULLOCH

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### Socrates' Disciple.

Plato (429–347 b.c.e.) was not yet thirty years old when Socrates was put to death in 399 b.c.e., and though the date of their first meeting is unknown, Socrates must already have been a middle-aged man when the two first became acquainted. The meeting of the two changed Plato's life. He belonged to a distinguished Athenian family, and he was educated in music and gymnastics like other youths of his class. According to one tradition, he was a budding poet in his youth and had already written some tragedies, but he burned them all after he met Socrates. In the *Seventh Letter*, which he wrote in his old age, he reflected on the hopes of his youth. He planned to enter public life, and had an opportunity to do so in the immediate aftermath of the [Peloponnesian War](#) when a cadre of reformers overthrew the democratic constitution and took control. They were led by thirty men with absolute powers, some of them Plato's relatives—the leader of the "Thirty," Critias, was his mother's cousin—and they invited him to join them. Plato was at first favorably impressed: he was young, and imagined that these reformers would establish a just state, but instead, they rapidly earned the title of the "Thirty Tyrants" by which they are known in the history books, and Plato soon realized that the democratic constitution which they had overthrown had been a very precious thing. One action in particular appalled him: the "Thirty Tyrants" tried to implicate Socrates in their crimes, but he refused and risked his life by doing so. When the "Thirty Tyrants" were overthrown, the restored democracy acted with restraint—Plato gave it credit for that—but "certain powerful persons" brought Socrates to trial on a charge of impiety. He was found guilty and put to death, and in the aftermath, many of Socrates' acquaintances, Plato among them, feared reprisals and fled from Athens to Euclides in neighboring Megara. Plato did not stay there long. He served in the Athenian army in 395 and 394 b.c.e. and the rest of the time he spent traveling and writing. Giving dates to Plato's dialogues is no easy task, but it is generally agreed that his early dialogues belong to this period.

## Plato's Trip to Sicily.

It was probably in 388 b.c.e. that he visited southern Italy first, and then Sicily. In southern Italy he met the Pythagorean philosopher Archytas who had been elected ruler of Tarentum, modern Taranto. Thanks to Archytas, there was a revival of Pythagoreanism in southern Italy, and he made a deep impression on Plato. The two men became friends. From southern Italy Plato went to Syracuse in Sicily where [Dionysius the Elder](#) was at the height of his power. Dionysius had enjoyed a brilliant career; at the age of 25, he had been elected general of Syracuse with full authority at a time when Carthage seemed on the verge of conquering the whole island, and he had driven back the Carthaginians and made Syracuse one of the leading cities in the Greek world. Yet by the time Plato reached Syracuse, the brilliant young savior of Greek Sicily had become a tyrant, and Plato's portrayal of the typical tyrant found in his *Republic* owes a great deal to his experience with Dionysius. Dionysius had Plato removed by ship and put ashore on the island of Aegina that was at war with Athens at the time, and Plato might have been sold as a prisoner of war except that a friend from Cyrene ransomed him. During Plato's sojourn in Syracuse, he met Dionysius' brother-in-law, Dion, and was deeply impressed by him. In Dion, Plato recognized a man of similar ideals, and he believed he could be a potential ruler of an ideal state.

## The Founding of the Academy.

Upon Plato's return to Athens, he founded his school known as the "Academy" because it occupied a park a half an hour's walk outside the Dipylon, one of the city gates which was sacred to the guardian spirit Academus. There, under the sacred olive trees, Plato rented a gymnasium in which he started to teach, but he soon bought a parcel of land nearby which was given the name "Academy." Little is known about the actual teaching in the Academy, but there seems to have been a regular curriculum for the students who enrolled, and mathematics was an important part of it. One anecdote held that over the Academy's main gate was a sign that read: "No one shall enter who knows no geometry." The Academy was a magnet for the intelligentsia of Greece, among them pioneers in mathematics, the most important of whom was [Eudoxus of Cnidus](#) who arrived in 367 b.c.e. at the age of 23 and stayed to attend Plato's lectures. Aristotle arrived at the Academy at the age of seventeen and remained there for twenty years. It should always be remembered that the dialogues of Plato do not give us the full picture of Plato's thought. Some aspects he transmitted orally and never committed to writing, and among these subjects were his last words on the so-called "Theory of Forms." Thanks to the witness of Aristotle, we know that before he died, Plato lectured on one important aspect of Creation: how the ideal Forms were originally generated by the "One," which was a divine entity, or, put simply, God. He never committed this to writing, for he did not completely trust writing as a satisfactory mode of communication.

## Plato Returns to Sicily.

In 367 b.c.e., the tyrant of Syracuse, [Dionysius the Elder](#), died and was succeeded by his son, Dionysius II. His father had allowed him no experience in politics, but he was a talented young man, eager to learn, and it seemed to his uncle Dion that here was an opportunity to apply Plato's political ideas to Syracuse. He wrote Plato, inviting him urgently to come, and in 366 b.c.e. Plato arrived to a gratifying welcome. The atmosphere soon changed, however, as court intrigues aroused Dionysius' suspicions of Dion, and he sent him into exile. He did not allow Plato to leave until 365 b.c.e. and then only after a promise from Plato to return. Four years later, he did return, urged by Dion, who hoped that Plato could persuade Dionysius to recall him, but this time things turned out worse than before, and Plato got permission to leave Syracuse only thanks to the intervention of his friend Archytas of Tarentum. Dion now prepared for war. In 357 b.c.e., he captured Syracuse, forced Dionysius out and ruled for four years himself. Well-meaning though he was, he was tactless and authoritarian, and in 354, he was assassinated by a former supporter. Dion's friends now appealed to Plato again, and Plato replied with two letters, the *Seventh* and *Eighth* in a collection of thirteen that are attributed to Plato. These two are thought to be genuine, though suspicion hangs over the other eleven. Plato died at the age of 81, some seven years after Dion.

## Plato's Writings.

All Plato's works (apart from the letters) are written as dialogues where he himself does not appear. The one possible exception is his last work, the *Laws*, where one of the interlocutors is an anonymous Athenian, who is almost certainly Plato himself. The result is that there is an elusive quality to Plato's thought, as if he was attempting to establish a mode of thinking as much as a systematic philosophy, and that is particularly true of his early dialogues. During his time as Socrates' disciple, he focused on issues of virtue and morality, and the importance of education and training, which interested Socrates himself in his last years. That seems clear from the dialogues that Plato produced in the aftermath of Socrates' death, which was the catalyst that prompted him to write. Then, having recovered from the immediate shock of Socrates' execution, Plato began to turn his attention to questions of law and government, writing his most famous text, the *Republic*, in response to his distaste for the sort of governments that he saw in contemporary Greece. He also wrote on metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics during his study of philosophy, but it was the nature of the just society, governed according to the principles of philosophy, that continued to occupy him. His last work, left unfinished at his death in 347 b.c.e., was the *Laws* in which the topic returns to that of the *Republic*: the constitution of a truly just state.

## The Early Period.

The exact order in which Plato wrote his works is not known, and assigning dates is impossible, but the dialogues can be divided into three periods: early, middle, and late. The early writings deal mainly with the teachings of Socrates in the form of dialogues. The "dialogue" seems to have been a literary form that Plato invented, borrowing it from the theater, and he used it effectively to demolish preconceived notions. One of Socrates' main concerns is *arete*, the word that is always translated as "virtue," even though there is no word in English that is an exact translation: *arete* means "courage" and "excellence" quite as much as "moral virtue." The main doctrine that Socrates puts forward in almost all of the early dialogues is that this virtue is knowledge, and thus it can be taught. He does not say what knowledge is, but he does assert that no one willingly does wrong, and hence wrongdoing is a mark of ignorance. In a typical dialogue of this early period, Socrates poses a question in the form, "What is 'X'?" For instance, what is justice? When he is offered various examples of justice, he replies that he does not want examples, he wants to know what justice is, in and of itself. Since such questions typically cannot be answered in a satisfactory way the dialogues tend to conclude on a negative note. It is not until the dialogues of Plato's middle period—where Socrates becomes a mouthpiece for Plato's own thought—that an attempt is made to provide positive doctrine.

## The Dialogues of the Middle Period.

The dialogues of the middle period include works like the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and Plato's greatest work, the *Republic*, which describes a utopia ruled by right principles. In these works Plato's philosophy began to provide definite answers to the philosophical questions his master had pessimistically concluded were unanswerable. It is in these dialogues of Plato's middle period that the "Theory of Forms" is elaborated, most explicitly in the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*. In textbooks, the "Theory of Forms" is sometimes called the "Theory of Ideas" which is misleading, for the "Ideas" are not ideas in the modern sense; rather the word simply transliterates the Greek *idea* which means "form." Plato argued that these "Forms" are not mere intellectual concepts; they have an existence of their own. They are changeless and divine and among them, the form of the "Good" has a unique status. They exist separate from the things of the visible world that are imperfect copies of them, and knowledge of the "Forms" is therefore true knowledge and not mere opinion, which is fallible and changeable and easily influenced by persuasion. Thus true knowledge can exist. This is Plato's answer to Protagoras' dictum, "Man is the measure of all things," which taught that all things are relative. At the same time, his logic led him to the conclusion that the "Forms" are true reality; what we see in the visible world about us is only the appearance of reality.

## The Flaws in the "Theory of Forms."

There were many bright students at the Academy, and they must have made Plato aware that his "Theory of Forms" was anything but watertight. The dialogue titled the *Parmenides* tests the theory. We cannot assign a date to it, but it is a later work, written some years after the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, and it is a remarkable example of self-criticism. Plato imagines his half-brother Antiphon recalling a conversation that the young Socrates had once had with Parmenides and his follower Zeno. Plato pictures Parmenides, the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy, as an old man when this imaginary conversation took place, but his logic was as ruthless as ever. Socrates expounds the theory that there are ideal "Forms" of justice, beauty, and goodness, which belonged to the realm of true existence, though he is not prepared to assert that there are "Forms" of mud and dirt; he cannot say that absolutely everything has a "Form." Yet he defends the core of his theory: great things are great because they partake of the Form of Greatness, and beautiful things partake of the Form of Beauty, and so on. Parmenides objects. Does the beautiful object that we see partake of *all* the Form of Beauty or just part of it? If it partakes of only part of it, then the "Form" must be divisible, and if all of it, then the "Form" must be in many places at once. How does the object we see partake of a Form? If a beautiful object partakes of the Form of Beauty, then the object and the Form are similar and we must posit another Form that embraces the beautiful object and the Form of Beauty. Socrates suggests that the Forms are only thoughts or concepts, but Parmenides replies that concepts must be of something. There can be no concepts of nothing. Yet we cannot know the Forms, which are absolute, for our knowledge is not absolute, and if God's knowledge is absolute, then He cannot know us. The *Parmenides* concludes on an unsatisfactory note. Socrates does not abandon his "Theory of Forms" but Parmenides tells him that he needs more training in philosophy. Parmenides' objections are not always cogent, but the dialogue bearing his name seems to show that Plato knew what the weaknesses were in his hypothesis. For Plato, the Forms were timeless entities, which—since they are timeless—cannot have been created. At the Creation, God could create the world of appearances, but he could not create the timeless Forms, for they already existed. Both Plato and Parmenides could agree that the world that we see about us is the world of appearances, not reality. Yet it is fair to ask why, if an appearance really does appear, it is not part of reality? For if appearances do *not really* appear, why bother about them? As Aristotle was to realize, Plato's distinction

## PLATO'S Theory of Forms

## The Dilemma of Knowledge

The "Theory of Forms" (in Greek *ideai*—hence the Theory of Forms is sometimes referred to as the "Theory of Ideas") was Plato's attempt to understand how knowledge exists. Heraclitus had claimed that the world was constantly changing. Everything is impermanent and hence it is impossible to know anything, since all things change even while one thinks about them. Parmenides had given another explanation: he taught that *what is* must be eternal and changeless and only *what is* can be known. The conclusion of both schools of thought was that the evidence of the senses was not reliable. Yet Plato's intuition told him that knowledge was possible. Socrates had been sure of it, for the world without the possibility of knowledge made only nonsense. The "Theory of Forms" was a way out of this dilemma and whether it was a conception of Socrates or one which Plato himself conceived, we cannot know. In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue which Plato sets in the prison where Socrates was awaiting death, Socrates, in his final hours before he drank the hemlock, discoursed on the immortality of the soul, and he refers to the "Theory of Forms" as an hypothesis with which his disciples were familiar. However the *Phaedo* was written long after Socrates' death, and probably Plato was attributing a theory of his own to his master.

## Knowledge of the Forms

How does one recognize that a chair is a chair, even though many kinds of chairs exist? It is because the chairs which we see all partake of the ideal form of a chair which our souls recognize. How can we recognize Goodness? It is because an ideal form of "Goodness" exists which our souls recognize. These ideal forms are not mere conceptions. Plato would argue that they really did exist in an invisible world, the world from which the soul came and where it will return after it leaves the body at death. A soul knew the ideal chair before it was imprisoned in the body, and when a person sees a chair, he remembers the ideal form of the chair, and knows the chair in the visible world because it comprehends that it partakes of the form in the invisible world. Thus knowledge is a process of recollection.

## The Forms as Causes

In the *Phaedo*, Plato explains that what makes an object beautiful is because of the presence in it, or the association with it of absolute Beauty—the form of Beauty that exists in the invisible world. Therefore it is the form of Beauty that makes things in the visible world beautiful, and therefore the Forms are the causes of existence. They make objects be what they are. Aristotle was to object that even if we assume that Forms exist, things which partake of these Forms cannot come into being unless there is something to impart motion. In fact, Aristotle could not accept Plato's view that Forms existed outside of the visible world. For him, form and the visible object that partook of the form could not be separated from each other. All substances consist of two parts, matter and form, Aristotle insisted. You cannot chop up a bronze statue into two parts, its bronze and its shape.

between the Forms—which are real—and appearances—which are not—was a stumbling block.

## The Republic.

Plato wrote three dialogues on ideal constitutions: the *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws*, his last work which he left unrevised. It is the *Republic* which is justly considered his greatest work, though its influence on the world of politics has not been entirely wholesome. The *Republic* has helped to form the intellectual background for many non-democratic governments, both communist and fascist. To understand Plato's notions of government, it is important to consider the actual types of government that a Greek such as Plato encountered in his contemporary world. Plato lists them in the eighth book of the *Republic*: Timarchy, Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny. Timarchy (*timokrateia*) was a state where the ruling principle was love of honor. Plato used the example of Sparta, which had a constitution unique on mainland Greece. Plato admired the Spartan constitution, though he recognized some of its faults. The Spartan elite—the so-called "Spartiates"—were a military aristocracy who lived off a peasant population. Known as "helots," these serfs worked the land for their Spartiate masters, giving them half their produce. They were kept in subjection by brutal methods; Sparta had a [secret police](#) to root out any disaffection, and each year the Spartan magistrates formally declared war on the helots so that killing one of them was not murder but an act of war. The Spartiates themselves were a military caste that trained from early youth to excel in warfare. The Spartans were courageous and disciplined, and Plato admired them for it. Yet he also considered them to be slow-witted, greedy, and brutal to the underclasses. The word "oligarchy" comes from the Greek words *oligoi* (few) and *arche* (rule), meaning to rule by a minority. In archaic Greece the minority had been aristocrats—that is, men of good family—but in Plato's time, the minority that controlled oligarchic governments was the wealthy. Plato distrusted the profit-motive and the influence of private wealth in politics. Plato used Athens as an example of a democratic government. Athens in Plato's day may have had as many as 300,000 residents, including men, women, slaves, and resident aliens who had little hope of acquiring citizenship, but the right to vote was restricted to male citizens. Sovereign power was vested in an assembly which was required to meet at least ten times a year, though meetings were often more frequent. At these assemblies any male citizen who attended could vote, but only a small minority did since attendance was difficult for citizens living in country villages. Plato had little respect for the system. The salient feature of democracy was liberty; individuals could do or say what they pleased, which gave society an attractive variety, but ultimately this freedom worked against social cohesion. When social cohesion failed, society disintegrated into class warfare between the rich and the poor. Finally there was tyranny, which was the personal rule of a dictator. A tyrant needed a private army for self-protection and had to eliminate all possible rivals. A tyrant, Plato argued, was essentially a criminal.

# The Solution of the Republic.

Having found fatal flaws in each of the existing governmental systems, Plato proposed his ideal constitution. According to Plato's system of government, the lawgiver whose task it was to establish this utopia set up three groups or classes. The first class, composed of "Guardians," was in charge of ruling and would have to be carefully educated and pass exacting tests before being accepted as Guardians. Once this class was selected by the lawgiver, it perpetuated itself by heredity, though occasionally an unsatisfactory son of a Guardian would have to be degraded. The next class was the "Auxiliaries" who carried out the duties of the military, police, and executive offices under orders from the Guardians. The third class was composed of the craftsmen, traders, and the like. Plato believed that men fitted to be shoemakers or carpenters should stick to their own trades and leave the ruling positions to those who had been specially trained for the task. To ensure that the Guardians carried out the lawgiver's intentions, they had to be carefully fitted for their duties by education in cultural pursuits and physical training. Plato recommended that the poems of Homer and Hesiod be banned due to the fact that their portrayal of the gods was often not edifying. He also believed that their writings made their readers fear death, which could undermine the Guardians' ability to die a fearless death in battle. Plato believed strongly in the power of the written word to influence behavior, and so suggested that the young should not read stories where the wicked are happy, or good men unhappy; he felt the poets to be too subversive, and recommended that they be banished. The other arts were not free of Plato's censorship either, however, as he outlawed any music that was too sorrowful or too joyous. Other recommendations for an ideal state included a balanced economic state in which the Guardians would be neither rich nor poor. They would live in simple houses on simple food, as if in an army camp, and they would hold their property in common. Plato argued that girls and boys should have the same education, and advocated complete equality of the sexes. Plato's advocacy of a strong state is most apparent in his structure of marriage and the family. He believed that marriages should be arranged for the good of the State by lot, although the rulers would actually manipulate the lots in such a way as to ensure that the best sires beget the most children. [The State](#) would then remove the children from their parents at birth and, if healthy, they would be reared by the State so that no one could know the identities of his or her biological parents. Plato believed that this system would foster a community in which children regarded all their elders as their fathers and mothers. To make it all work, Plato was not averse to the state propagating certain falsehoods—"Noble Lies," as Plato called them—of which the most important was that God created three species of men: the men of gold, fitted to be Guardians; the men of silver, fit to be soldiers; and the common man of bronze and iron, fit for manual toil. Thus the bulwark of Plato's utopia was a lethal mixture of religious propaganda and [political science](#), but in Plato's view, the result would be "justice," for everyone would have his proper slot in the political structure, and be satisfied with it.

## Plato's Last Words on the Ideal State.

Plato returned twice to the question of ideal government. In the *Statesman*, he repeated the view that government is a job for experts. He believed that the best government is rule by an expert, like the ideal lawgiver who laid out the constitution in his *Republic*, but if no such expert could be found, then a law-abiding monarchy was the best alternative. In his last work, the *Laws*, Plato once again considered the question of what sort of government would rule a city best. It is a remarkably detailed work which shows that Plato's thought had evolved a good deal since he produced the *Republic*. For one thing, he placed much higher value now on the rule of law. He believed that complete obedience to the laws solves the problems of political strife. Another change is evident in that philosophy had been a vitally necessary ingredient in the *Republic*, but in the *Laws* philosophy yields pride of place to religion. Plato went so far as to suggest that atheists in the ideal state of the *Laws* should be converted or killed. This seems to represent a remarkable change of heart in Plato's old age.

## THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN PLATO'S IDEAL STATE

**introduction:** In Plato's last work, *The Laws*, left unrevised at his death, Plato imagined three elderly gentlemen, a Cretan named Cleinias, a Spartan named Megillus, and an Athenian stranger—in effect, Plato himself—discussing the foundation of a new city on Crete. They turn to a practical discussion of what the laws and constitution of this new city should be. The Athenian eventually brings up the place of women. In Athens, women had no voice in government and no role in public life. The situation was somewhat different in Sparta and Crete, though nowhere was anything approaching equality of the sexes found. Plato's remarks, quoted below, are less than flattering to women, but they show recognition that women make up half of humanity and cannot be ignored and left outside the laws in an ideal society. It was a beginning, and in the Hellenistic period, beginning a couple generations after Plato's death, we find women taking a more active role in public life. The context of the excerpt below is this: the three gentlemen have decided that their new city shall have communal meals for male citizens, as was the case in Sparta, but the Athenian has an additional point to make about the position of women.

The blessings that a state enjoys are in direct proportion to the degree of law and order to be found in it, and the effects of good regulations in some fields are usually vitiated to the extent that things are controlled either incompetently or not at all in others. The point is relevant to the subject at hand. Thanks to some providential necessity, Cleinias and Megillus, you have a splendid and—as I was saying—astonishing institution: communal meals for men. But it is entirely wrong of you to have omitted from your legal code any provision for your women, so that the practice of communal meals for them has never got underway. On the contrary, half the human race, the female sex, the half which in any case is inclined to be secretive and crafty, because of its weakness—has been left to its own devices because of the misguided indulgence of the legislator. Because you neglected this sex, you gradually lost control of a great many things which would be in a far better state today if they had been regulated

by law. You see, leaving women to do what they like is not just to lose *half* the battle (as it may seem); a woman's natural potential for virtue is inferior to a man's, so she's proportionately a greater danger, perhaps even twice as great.

**source:** Plato, *The Laws*. Trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1988): 262–263.

## The Immortality of the Soul.

In the *Apology*, which is Plato's earliest dialogue, he muses on what happens after death. Plato determines that it will either be a dreamless sleep from which there is no awakening, or the soul will migrate to another place where one can meet with the great men of the past, such as Orpheus and Hesiod and Homer. Death is not to be feared. In the *Phaedo*, Plato imagines Socrates speaking to his friends on the last day of his life, and explaining what happens at death. The soul separates from the body that has prevented it from acquiring true knowledge due to the body's constant interruptions and distractions from man's quest for Truth. Once the soul is free of the body, it can gain direct knowledge of all that is pure and uncontaminated, that is, the Truth. Thus like a man who chooses to follow a wife or children whom he loves into the next world in the hope of seeing them there, the true philosopher will gladly make the journey into the next world to discover Truth. The final book of the *Republic* ends with a vision of life after death: the so-called "Myth of Er." According to the myth, Er was apparently killed in battle, but ten days later, while he was on the funeral pyre, he revived and told an amazing tale. His soul had left his body and gone on a long journey. It had seen the righteous separated from the unrighteous who were condemned to punishment. The souls of the righteous then drew lots for the lives that they would live in their next life, and having made their choices, they traversed the desert plain of Amnesia and camped in the evening on the banks of Lethe, the stream of Forgetfulness. All were required to drink its water, and those who were imprudent drank too much and forgot everything. Er, however, was not allowed to drink, and his soul rejoined his body still remembering what it had seen. The *Phaedo* shows the soul anxious to leave behind the encumbering body to attain the Truth, and the "Myth of Er" tells how it must transmigrate from one life to another before it can attain the Truth. Taken together, they present a picture of the immortal soul seeking to escape from the world of appearances, represented by the body, and reach the realm of real Goodness and Truth.

## Plato's Universe.

The *Timaeus*, one of Plato's last dialogues, was also one of his most influential during the medieval period, partly because the first 53 chapters were available in a Latin translation during the European "[Dark Ages](#)" and partly because it presents theology rather than philosophy and thus conformed to the mindset of the medieval world. Plato's construction of the universe rests on his basic premise that there are two orders of reality: that of true existence or "Being," inhabited by the "Forms"; and that of apparent reality, the world of "Becoming," the created world inhabited by the transient things perceived by our senses. The *Timaeus* describes how the world of "Becoming" came into existence, through the character of Timaeus, a Pythagorean philosopher from southern Italy. In the dialogue, Timaeus describes the creation of the world as being similar to the creation of a model by a craftsman. Just as the craftsman works with a model, so the Creator, who is a divine craftsman, created the world of "Becoming" using as his models the Forms that belong to the world of "Being." His material was composed of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—though later in the dialogue we learn that the Creator had found his material as a confused mass in the so-called "Receptacle of Being" and reduced it to form the geometrical shapes of the four elements. The universe itself was a geometrical construction: the planets move in rings around the earth. This concept of planetary movement proved influential to men of science centuries later. In the second century c.e. Claudius Ptolemaeus of Alexandria, better known as Ptolemy, refined the system using trigonometry. Then in the sixteenth century c.e., Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) showed that the earth moved around the sun, but he retained the circles of the planets that Plato described. Then Johann Kepler (1571–1630) showed that the planets moved in ellipses, and [Sir Isaac Newton](#) (1642–1727) showed that they were not regular ellipses, and Plato's concept of a universe constructed according to the principles of geometry perished at last. The *Timaeus* survives as an interesting monument in the history of science but nothing more.

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## Plato

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427 b.c.e.–347 b.c.e.

*Philosopher*

### Distinguished Family.

Plato, one of Greece's most famous philosophers, was born in Athens in 427 b.c.e. to an old distinguished family. His father, Ariston, was a conservative man of property and established family lineage, and his mother, Perictione, counted among her ancestors Solon, the Athenian statesman who reformed the government in 594 b.c.e. and gave it what conservatives called the "ancestral constitution" of Athens. Plato himself claimed in two of his dialogues that the tale of Atlantis, a lost continent submerged beneath the sea, was passed down to his family from Solon, who learned it in Egypt. Ariston passed away while Plato was still a child, and his mother married a close friend of Pericles, Athens' powerful statesman. Thus, Plato had close connections to the powerful elite of Athens even as a young child.

### Disciple of Socrates.

Despite his political connections, Plato's most influential relationship was no doubt the one he shared with the philosopher Socrates. Plato must have been quite young when he met Socrates and it was the turning point of his life. Engrossed by Socrates' relentless pursuit of ethical questions, Plato became Socrates' most famous disciple, and it is through Plato's writings that most of the modern knowledge about Socrates is derived. Not everyone was so enamored of Socrates, however; the philosopher's penchant for confronting the citizens of Athens with their own foolishness had earned him many enemies, and the hostility he aroused contributed to his condemnation and death penalty on charges of impiety and corrupting the young in 399 b.c.e. For Plato, Socrates' condemnation resulted in his disillusionment with politics as he saw them practiced in the Greek world. He became convinced that the only cure for bad government lay in philosophy, and there could be no good government until true philosophers gained political power, or politicians become true philosophers. He himself explained how he came to this conclusion in his personal testament expressed in the *Seventh Letter*, which he wrote in his old age, and this belief permeates his most famous work, the *Republic*, as well as his last work, the *Laws*, left unrevised at his death in 347 b.c.e.

## Plato's Travels.

Plato traveled widely for about a decade after Socrates' death. He visited southern Italy in the year 388 b.c.e. where he encountered the Pythagoreans; at Tarentum a Pythagorean philosopher and distinguished mathematician, Archytas, had been elected governor and provided an example of a philosopher in power. Plato's fascination with mathematics owed something to Archytas' influence. From Italy, he went to the court of the tyrant Dionysius I in Sicily, and got to know Dionysius' brother-in-law, who was excited by Plato's political ideas. But Plato offended Dionysius somehow and returned to Athens. There he set up the Academy about 386 b.c.e. where he taught for the rest of his life, except for two brief periods (in 367 b.c.e. and again in 361 b.c.e.) when he returned to Sicily to train Dionysius I's successor, Dionysius II.

## Plato's Academy.

The aim of the Academy was to train statesmen. Many members of the Academy took an active part in the political life of the Greek states. The Academy was not the first such institution in Athens, but it does have a claim as the first university in Europe. When the Roman general Sulla sacked Athens in 88 b.c.e., the Academy was a casualty, and there is no evidence of activity in the Academy in the centuries that followed. Individual Platonists, however, held classes in their houses and Athens retained a reputation as a center of philosophy. In the fifth century c.e., however, the Academy was refounded as a center for Neoplatonism, which mixed mysticism with Platonic philosophy, and this Neoplatonic Academy claimed direct descent from Plato's Academy, a claim that was clearly bogus. Yet it became paganism's last intellectual stronghold, and in 529 b.c.e., the emperor Justinian closed it down as part of his campaign against the remnants of paganism.

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## Plato

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Plato (428–347 b.c.e.), born in Athens, was a philosopher and founder of a school, the Academy. He was a student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle. Apart from a few letters, Plato's writing consists entirely of dialogues. These philosophical dramas display a mastery of composition, character, and action that rank him among the best of ancient poets. The range of philosophical problems treated in the dialogues and the quality of the treatment make this one of the most important bodies of work in the history of Western philosophy.

The chief character in most of the dialogues is Socrates, Plato himself never speaking. This raises two questions: First, to what extent does the Platonic Socrates correspond to the historical Socrates? And second, because Plato is silent, how can scholars determine what his views were? The standard answer is that Socrates or his occasional stand-in is always the mouthpiece of Plato, but that only the earlier dialogues present the authentic Socrates. There is no strong evidence for either conclusion. In this entry, the Socrates referred to is the character as he appears in Plato's dialogues.

## Socrates in the Early Dialogues

Plato's early dialogues present the reader with the Socrates who *brought philosophy down from the heavens*. Pre-Socratic philosophers had been largely preoccupied with the study of the heavens and the earth, and especially with the phenomena of change and generation. Socrates apparently turned away from natural science to investigate the moral and political opinions of his fellow citizens. His habit of questioning them eventually resulted in his indictment, trial, and execution by the city of Athens. Plato uses this background both to mount a political defense of Socrates and to explain the kind of wisdom Socrates laid claim to.

In the *Apology*, the presentation of his defense, Socrates explains himself. According to the Oracle at Delphi, no one was wiser than Socrates. This astounded Socrates, for his philosophical investigations had convinced him that he knew nothing at all. He decided to test the oracle by interrogating those who were reputed to be wise. The politicians, he discovered, neither knew nor produced anything of value. The poets composed beautiful works, but could not explain how they did so or what their compositions meant. The artisans by contrast both produced useful things and understood what they were doing. Because of this, however, they supposed themselves wise about beauty, justice, and virtue, when in fact they were ignorant of such things. Socrates concluded that he was indeed wise in this one thing: He alone knew the full extent of his own ignorance.

But how can this meager knowledge, which Socrates calls *human wisdom*, be of any use? First, Socratic questioning can teach fellow citizens humility by showing them that they do not know what they think they know. What do they think they know? They know that power and wealth are the most valuable things. By undermining *these* opinions, Socrates was in effect urging Athenians to care about their own souls more than their property and the city's virtue more than its power. Small wonder they killed him for it.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates encounters a young man who is prosecuting his own father, an act that amounts to a radical assault on Greek familial morality. Euthyphro's boldness turns out to be supported by a hubristic confidence in his own understanding of piety. Socrates' relentless questioning demolishes that confidence, with the apparent result that Euthyphro drops his suit. So even if the only knowledge that is available is knowledge of one's own ignorance, philosophy can still be useful to the city by encouraging political moderation.

The utility of Socratic questioning is not limited to undermining bad arguments. The *Crito* provides a more positive account. In the absence of knowledge, one is left with opinions; Socrates, however, draws a distinction between the opinions of the many and those of the expert. If someone wants medical advice, that person does not put the matter to a vote but consults a doctor. If

Socrates wants to know whether to accept his sentence or escape from jail, he will not be swayed by popular opinion but will turn to the expert in moral and political matters, presumably himself.

An opinion is never more than a guess; but an art or expertise consists of a set of educated guesses, informed by a long practice of questioning the evidence and alternatives. Expertise differs from philosophy insofar as it does not aim at comprehensive knowledge of the whole of things. In a theoretical sense the expert does not necessarily know anything, but in practical matters knows what he or she is talking about and so can be relied upon. If Plato's early dialogues were all there were to go on, one would conclude that Socrates was a political scientist and ethicist, and that these were the limits of Plato's ambitions.

This picture is substantially modified in later dialogues. Whereas in the *Apology* Socrates strenuously denies that he has anything to do with the physical sciences, in the *Phaedo* he confesses that, as a young man, he had a wonderful enthusiasm for physics, cosmology, and biology. But he came to believe that the reductionism of Greek science blinded its practitioners to the true nature of the phenomena they studied. Anaxagoras, for example, would explain the fact that Socrates is in jail by the position of his bones and muscles while ignoring the most important cause: the fact that the philosopher had concluded that he was obligated to accept his sentence. Without that last reason, Socrates exclaims, those bones and muscles would be long gone from their prison.

This approach, applied to nature, obviously anthropomorphizes it. Socrates supposes that to explain the moon or the stars one must explain why it is best for them to be as they are. Perhaps the expert can get by with good guesswork, but real knowledge requires a consonance between human understanding and the world it seeks to understand. The mind looks for motives and justifications, and seeks answers in general ideas such as beauty and the good. What would have to be true of the world for such knowledge to be possible?

## The Theory of Ideas

Socrates' most famous innovation was his theory of ideas. According to this principle the ideas by which human beings conceive of ordinary things are more real than the things themselves. Thus bigness is more real than a big tree, and unity and multiplicity more real than one person or the parts into which that person may be divided. Visible, tangible things are conceptually messy: relatively large and small; many and one at the same time; young and beautiful then, yet old and ugly now. But the idea of beauty is never ugly nor does the idea of one ever admit of division. That alone is real that simply is what it is, without contradiction, everywhere, and always.

Consider what happens when one approaches a mature oak tree from a distance. At first the tree appears so small that a person can cover it with one hand. Up close it is so large that it fills the horizon. But the tree cannot be both larger *and* smaller than an individual, nor does it really change as one approaches it. It is not what the eyes see but what the mind apprehends that is real. In the case of ordinary things, the true object is invisible, and what is visible is less than true.

Now compare the painting of a table with the fabrication of a table. The artist fashions an image of an image, at least twice removed from reality and bereft of dimension and substance. The artisan produces an actual table. He does so because he looks beyond any particular object to the idea or set of ideas that constitute the universal table. Just as images of a tree draw their reality from some object that is always, somehow, behind them, so human apprehension of various objects as one kind of thing—a tree or a table—draws on objects that are yet more universal and more real. It is in fact the ideas that generate reality, rather than vice versa.

Socrates' theory solves an impressive range of problems. It explains how human beings are able to perceive unities behind the otherwise chaotic manifold of sense impressions. It is also the basis of a theory of knowledge. Opinions are nothing more than temporal/spatial perspectives on things, and are therefore more or less unreliable. Knowledge is a grasp of ideas that never changes, for which reason it cannot fail.

This theory of knowledge in turn explains Socrates' moral perfection. How is it possible that Socrates alone seems never to succumb to temptation? Most people are guided by opinions about justice, and so are subject to changes in perspective. When one is owed money, justice means always paying debts. When one's luck changes, justice requires the forgiveness of debts. The philosopher by contrast is guided by the idea of justice. He is therefore perfectly steadfast in all circumstances. Even when confronted with his own imminent execution, Socrates says and does the same things in the same calm manner as he did before.

## Political Philosophy

The theory of ideas is also the basis of Socrates' moral and political philosophy in the *Republic*. In that dialogue Socrates describes an ideal form of government consisting of three distinct classes. Philosophers rule, supported by a class of warriors called guardians. Both in turn are supported by a class of producers. The mores of the guardian class are shockingly radical. They practice a communism not only of property but of sex and reproduction, with no individual knowing who his or her own children are. Moreover women receive the same military training as men. In addition to these unprecedented social arrangements, the guardians' exposure to poetry, music, and religious teaching is tightly censored by the rulers.

The primary object of all these innovations is to prevent faction. The philosophers can rule because they alone are guided by the ideas of justice, moderation, and the good, and hence are incorruptible. A philosopher will never choose what is really bad because it looked good at the time. Because the guardians are not philosophers, their opinions about what is honorable and just must be scrupulously regulated by the ruling class, and private interest must be suppressed.

Socrates' ideal republic has been scathingly rebuked as both fantastic and totalitarian. But these criticisms forget the context. Its sole purpose is to provide a model of justice in the human soul. Like the republic, the individual soul is composed of distinct parts. If not, how could someone desire drink or revenge and at the same time want to resist such desires? In the well-ordered soul, intelligence governs the passions and the passions in turn discipline the appetites. When each part of the soul confines itself to its proper work, justice exists. By contrast, when passions or appetites take command of a person, injustice prevails.

The moral argument in the *Republic* seems to depend on the theory of ideas; however, in the *Gorgias* Socrates is able to derive much the same ethics from even the most jaundiced of moral opinions. Socrates' most frequent and persistent opponents in the dialogues were the sophists and orators. These men claimed to possess an art of persuasion whereby they could move an assembly or a jury to any conclusion someone might desire. Acquire that technology, either by learning it at a fee or by hiring one of its practitioners, and all the powers of state are at one's disposal. Even better, one may do whatever one desires without fear of prosecution. The young orator Polus knows exactly what the payoff is, the power to murder with impunity.

Socrates argues that sophism and oratory are not arts at all, but examples of flattery. An art, or *technē*, must be informed by some more or less correct notion of what is good for body or soul. Thus the arts of gymnastics and medicine aim to perfect the body and repair it, respectively, whereas the arts of politics and justice do the same for the soul. But just as cosmetics and gourmet cooking deliver what looks good, even if the person wearing the makeup or the food used to prepare the meal is in fact unhealthy, so sophism and oratory cater to vanity while doing harm rather than good.

The sophists held that the ends at which all human actions aim are unproblematic. Everyone wants the same things: wealth, reputation, beautiful lovers, and, occasionally, revenge. If one could rule other human beings, one could obtain an unlimited supply of these things and so be perfectly happy. Socrates argues that these ends are in fact problematic and may as easily bring ruin as happiness. No power is any good unless people know how to use it to get what is good for them; and that is not ruling over others but ruling oneself.

## Platonism and Technology

Socrates' presentation of wisdom as expertise seems perfectly compatible with the development of technology. But the presentation was so overwhelmed by his theory of forms that it is almost invisible in the history of Platonism. There are good reasons to suppose that Socrates would have been at best indifferent to technological progress. He himself was so moderate in his appetites that he could live comfortably in *ten thousand-fold poverty*. In the *Republic* he suggests that the only city that is really natural is the city of sows, where human beings live very simple lives without any need for the arts and sciences.

The theory of forms provides powerful existential consolation, as the perfection of ideas is always available to the trained mind without need to modify the tangible world. During the Renaissance, Aristotle, whose philosophy was more oriented to practice, was popular whenever events seemed to be going well. When foreigners invaded and governments collapsed, scholars turned back to reading Plato. A philosophy of consolation does little to encourage political or technological innovation.

KENNETH C. BLANCHARD JR.

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## Plato

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**BORN:** c. 427 bce • Athens, Greece

**DIED:** 347 bce • Athens, Greece

*Greek philosopher; writer; teacher*

Plato was one of the most influential philosophers of the Western world. A philosopher is someone who studies logic, ethics (moral values), and other subjects for greater wisdom and experience. Along with his teacher, Socrates (469–399 bce), and his student, **Aristotle** (384–322 bce; see entry), Plato pioneered the classical philosophy of ancient Greece. He was the first to write about the legend of the mythical lost continent of Atlantis. He formulated the well-known concept of platonic love, or love that is spiritual rather than physical. In such works as *The Republic*, he wrote about a wide range of subjects, including ethics, politics, psychology (the study of the mind and behavior), and morality (a system of right conduct). Modern readers continue to explore his works for their understanding of epistemology, the branch of philosophy that explores how people gain knowledge and arrive at the truth, and metaphysics, which examines reality that exists beyond the senses.

"Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings ... until political power and philosophy entirely coincide ... cities will have no rest from evils ... nor I think will the human race."

## Brith

Historians are uncertain about the exact dates of Plato's life. The traditional date for his birth is 428 or 427 bce, and for his death, 348 or 347 bce. The cause of this uncertainty is the lack of reliable written records. Much of what is known about Plato comes from his own works, including his books and some letters. These works are not autobiographical, however, meaning that they do not contain information about his own life, so historians can only pick up hints and suggestions from them.

One source that historians use for information about the lives of ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato, is a ten-volume work called *Lives of the Philosophers*. This work was written by [Diogenes Laertius](#), a historian who lived in the third century bce. Diogenes copied his information from many different sources. He particularly enjoyed recording gossip and scandalous or amusing stories about the philosophers whose biographies he wrote. Modern historians do not source, although they trust him somewhat on matters of simple fact.

Diogenes, quoting other sources, wrote that Plato was born in the same year that Pericles, an Athenian statesman, died, which was 429 bce, and that he lived to the age of eighty-four. Diogenes also said, however, that Plato was twenty-eight when Socrates was put to death in 399 bce, which would put his birth date at 427 bce. These details show how difficult it can be for modern historians to create a clear and accurate biographical record for people who lived in ancient times.

## Platonic Love

In modern-day times, even those who know little or nothing about Plato are likely to be familiar with the expression "platonic love" or "platonic relationship." When two people, generally members of the opposite sex, say that they have a platonic relationship, they mean that they are friends and are not involved romantically. Plato, however, never used the term. It was coined in the fifteenth century in reference to the relationship between Socrates and one of his male students. Originally it referred to homosexual love, or the physical love between two people of the same sex. The concept of platonic love is taken from Plato's book *Symposium*. In this book Plato outlines the concept of love as an ideal of good. This love, then, leads to virtue and goodness. By putting aside romantic passion for another individual, a person is able to contemplate universal and ideal love.

## Early life

Plato was born in Athens to a wealthy family. His father, according to Diogenes, was named Ariston, and was descended from a line of early kings of Athens. His mother, Perictione, likewise came from a notable line, which included the sixth-century bce legislator Solon. Family tradition held that they were descended from the sea god Poseidon. Plato had two older brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, and a sister, Potone. Ariston died when Plato was a young child, and Perictione married her uncle, Pyrilampes. The couple had a son, ntiphon.

At birth Plato's name was Aristocles, the name of his grandfather. He apparently acquired the nickname Plato later in life. Plato comes from the Greek word *platos* and means "broad." It is thought that his wrestling teacher, or possibly his fellow students, may have given him the name because of his strong build, which enabled him to win the regional wrestling championship. Other theories are that he was given the name because of the wide range of his thought or even because he had a broad forehead.

Plato's family was politically active and closely involved with many of the most important events of the day. These years were exciting ones in the city-state of Athens, which was at the height of its power around the time of Plato's birth. (During this period Greece was a collection of smaller kingdoms called city-states, each organized around a major city.) Twice during the century, the Greeks, led by Athens, had defeated the feared Persian Empire under King Darius the Great (c. 550–486 bce) and his successor, Xerxes (c. 520–485 bce). Many of the islands and coastal cities in and around the [Aegean Sea](#) looked to Athens for protection.

The city-states of ancient Greece had a history of rivalry and armed conflict. Sparta was Athens's chief rival. Although Athens ruled the sea with its naval power, Sparta had an army that outnumbered that of Athens two to one. While the Athenians favored democracy, or rule by majority, as their form of government, the Spartans were an oligarchy, which placed power in the hands of a small number of men. The Spartans were warlike, whereas Athens was more concerned with culture and encouraged the growth of art, architecture, education, and philosophy. War broke out between the two very different powers in 431 bce, just a few years before Plato was born. This war is known as the Peloponnesian War.

The war ended in defeat for Athens in 405 bce. In the disorder following this loss the Athenian empire fell into a state of decline and its democratic institutions came under attack. One of Plato's uncles, Char-mides, was a member of a group called the Thirty Tyrants, of which Charmides's uncle, Critias, was the leader. This group overthrew the democratic government in

404 bce and ruled as an oligarchy, although their control lasted for just eight months. Plato's stepfather, Pyrilampes, was a leader of the democratic faction of Athens, which defeated the Tyrants and restored democratic rule to the city-state.

## Finds philosophy

In response to these events and to the rapid changes they produced in Athenian society, Plato's mother and stepfather tried to persuade him to enter politics. For a time it looked as though Plato would agree to this and become a statesman and legislator. But in about 409 bce, Plato and his brothers met the philosopher Socrates. Plato rejected a political career and, with the encouragement of Socrates, became a passionate student of philosophy. Plato was especially inspired by two of Socrates's most famous statements: "Know thyself" and "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Socrates never authored any published works or founded a school or an organized philosophical movement. He wandered about the city, stopping people on the street and engaging them in philosophical dialogue. Then, through questions and answers, he would challenge their ideas, especially with regards to ethics and morality, and expose the errors in their positions.

The Thirty Tyrants tried to involve Socrates when they seized power in Athens, but he refused to assist them. Due to their efforts, however, Socrates gained a reputation for being an opponent of democracy. After the democratic government of Athens was restored, he was tried and executed in 399 bce on a number of charges, including corrupting the youth, atheism (not believing in any god or gods), introducing new gods, and engaging in strange religious practices. Plato watched these events closely. As an admirer of Socrates, he became increasingly displeased with the state of Athenian politics. That displeasure reached its climax with Socrates's death. Plato recorded the events surrounding the trial and death of his teacher in his book *Apologia*.

Since he was a student of Socrates, Plato feared he might be put to death as well. Additionally, he knew that he could not serve the state that had executed his teacher. He left Athens and for the next twelve years traveled widely, visiting such places as Cyrene (a city on the north coast of Africa), Italy, Sicily, and Egypt. In Egypt he came across the water clock, an invention he later brought back to Greece. In Italy he became familiar with the works of the mathematician Pythagoras (569–475 bce). His growing interest in mathematics sparked a fascination with science. During his travels he sought out philosophers, priests,

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and prophets (divine messengers) to learn all that he could about religion, morality, ethics, science, and philosophy.

During this period Plato wrote his earliest books, including *Apologia*, *The Crito*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Hippias Minor and Major*, *Gorgias*, *Ion*, and *Protagoras*. These books were in the form of dialogues, the method of teaching that Socrates used with his students to encourage them to search out truth for themselves through questions and answers. Socrates himself would become a leading character in all of Plato's books except one, his last, entitled *Laws*. Other philosophers also wrote their books in dialogue form, with Socrates playing a principle role. In the early twenty-first century many teachers still use the Socratic method of questions and answers in the classroom.

At one point Plato lived in Syracuse on the island of Sicily, where he became a tutor to Dion (409–354 bce), the brother-in-law of the island's king, Dionysius I (c. 430–c. 367 bce). Legend holds that at some point Plato offended Dion, who then made arrangements to have Plato sold into slavery. Most historians regard this story as doubtful, for Plato and Dion had very similar personalities and became good friends.

## The Academy

In 387 bce, at age forty, Plato ended his travels and returned to Athens. Just outside the city he founded a school called the Academy. This school was named after the sacred site on which it was located. The site, in turn, was named after a legendary Greek hero, Academus (sometimes spelled Heca-demus). More than two thousand years later the word "academy" continues to be used in the name of some schools, and it became the source of the word "academic," the name given to those who studied at the site. Plato delivered lectures, and his students studied philosophy, mathematics, astronomy (the study of the stars and planets), political theory, and science, all with to the goal of creating a class of philosopher-kings to rule the state. During this period Plato wrote a number of important books, including *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Meno*, *Euthydemus*, *Menexenus*, *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, and much of his most important and widely read work, *The Republic*. The Academy, in effect the first university in Europe, operated for nearly a thousand years until it was shut down by the Roman emperor Justinian in 529 ce.

## Later life

When he was in his sixties, Plato's quiet life at the Academy was interrupted. In Sicily, Dionysius I died and his teenage son, Dionysius II (c. 384–344 bce), became king. At this point Dion urged the young king to invite Plato to Sicily, where he could help the ruler become a philosopher-king as modeled in *The Republic*. Because he had become disappointed with Athenian

politics and was disgusted with the city's rulers, Plato had written in this work that politics could be saved only if "either true and genuine philosophers attain political power or the rulers of states by some dispensation [indulgence] of providence [preparation] become genuine philosophers." Despite being busy with teaching and the administration of the Academy, Plato agreed and made the trip. After he arrived, however, Dionysius II, who saw Dion as a rival, ordered Dion into exile for treason. Exile is the enforced removal from one's native country. Plato, because of his association with Dion, was held in Sicily under house arrest, although officially he was a "guest" of the king.

Plato was eventually released and returned to Athens, where he and Dion were reunited and remained from 365 to 361 bce. During this time Plato refused an invitation from Dionysius II to return to Syracuse, in Sicily. A year later Dionysius sent a ship with one of Plato's close friends, Archedemus, on board. Archedemus urged Plato to accept the king's invitation. Dion agreed with the plan, so once more Plato departed for Syracuse. His goal was to resolve the rivalry between Dion and Dionysius. Again, he was held there effectively against his will and was released only after his friends spoke on his behalf with the king. Dion, by this time, had lost patience with Dionysius. He assembled an army of mercenary soldiers, or soldiers for hire, and invaded Sicily. He gained control of the island in 357 bce, but was killed three years later.

Plato remained at the Academy for another thirteen years, until he died quietly in his sleep in 348 (or 347) bce. During this period he wrote the last of his books, including *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, and, uncompleted at the time of his death, *Laws*. Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, entered the Academy during these later years. Diogenes claimed that Plato was buried at the Academy, but archaeologists (people who study the remains of human civilizations) have not been able to discover his grave site.

## The Republic

While many students of philosophy admire Plato's dialogues, especially his later works, *The Republic* remains the most well known. It is difficult to date Plato's works, but he probably wrote the first of the ten books, or sections, of *The Republic* some time between the death of Socrates and his first trip to Sicily. He then wrote the remaining nine books between 380 and 360 bce.

*The Republic* explores such topics as justice, the ideal city, the nature of heroism, poetry, money and private property, the wisdom and methods of philosophers, war, tyranny (absolute rule), and happiness. Book VII of the work is generally the most read. This book contains the "Allegory of the Cave." An allegory is a representation of abstract ideas by characters, figures, or events in story form. In this allegory, Plato described his theory of "Forms," which says that the world humans know through their senses is only an imitation of a pure, unchanging world of ideal Forms. As a philosopher might put it, a chair that can be seen and touched is only an imperfect imitation of an ideal Form, "chairness," that cannot be duplicated on Earth. A better example might be the idea of a straight line. Plato would say that ideally, there is such a thing as a line that is perfectly, absolutely straight. In the physical world, however, it is impossible to achieve this ideal; every line, no matter how precisely drawn, will deviate from an ideal of "straightness." The same holds true for any worldly phenomenon. There is an absolute "honesty," for example, that humans can never achieve. These absolutes are called Forms.

In the "Allegory of the Cave," Plato writes that people are like men who have been imprisoned in a cave since childhood. They cannot see out of the cave. Behind them is a fire, and between the fire and the men is a walkway, where objects can be carried. The fire casts a shadow of the objects on the wall of the cave that the men face. Plato's conclusion is that men lacking education would come to believe that the shadows they see are the real thing. They would believe that any voices they hear behind them are sounds made by the objects going past. Plato claimed a man allowed to leave the cave would be similar to a man who has received education and enlightenment about the real nature of the world.

## For More Information

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## Plato

Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians  
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**Plato** , great Greek philosopher; b. probably in Athens, C.428 B.C.; d. there, 347/348 B.C. In his *Timaeus* he formulated a system of music in which he likened the movements of music to those of the soul, whose development may therefore be influenced by the art of music.

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—Nicolas Slonimsky/Laura Kuhn/Dennis McIntire

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