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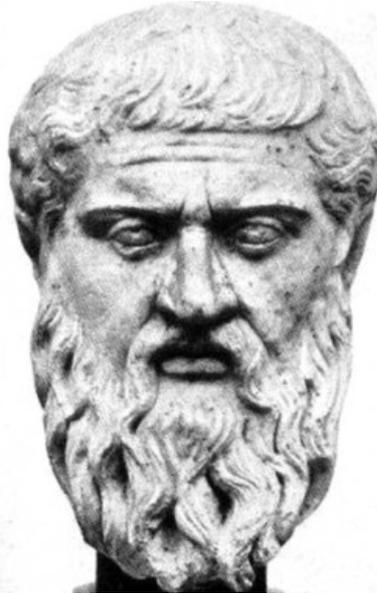
September 2010

## From the Annals of the World History

### Plato

**428/427 BC - 348/347 BC**

**Plato** was a Classical Greek philosopher, mathematician, writer of philosophical dialogues, and founder of the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in the Western world. Along with his mentor, Socrates, and his student, Aristotle, Plato helped to lay the foundations of Western philosophy and science. Plato was originally a student of Socrates, and was as much influenced by his thinking as by his apparently unjust execution. Plato's sophistication as a writer is evident in his Socratic dialogues; thirty-six dialogues and thirteen letters have been ascribed to him. Plato's writings have been published in several fashions; this has led to several conventions regarding the naming and referencing of Plato's texts. Plato's dialogues have been used to teach a range of subjects, including philosophy, logic, rhetoric and mathematics.



### Early life

#### Birth and family

The definite place and time of Plato's birth are not known, but what is certain is that he belonged to an aristocratic and influential family. Based on ancient sources, most modern scholars believe that he was born in Athens or Aegina between 429 and 423 BC. His father was Ariston. According to a disputed tradition, reported by Diogenes Laertius, Ariston traced his descent from the king of Athens, Codrus, and the king of Messenia, Melanthus. Plato's mother was Perictione, whose family boasted of a relationship with the famous Athenian lawmaker and lyric poet Solon. Perictione was sister of Charmides and niece of Critias, both prominent figures of the Thirty Tyrants, the brief oligarchic regime, which followed on the collapse of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War (404-403 BC). Besides Plato himself, Ariston and Perictione had three other children; these were two sons, Adeimantus and Glaucon, and a daughter Potone, the mother of Speusippus (the nephew and successor of Plato as head of his philosophical Academy).

### Name

According to Diogenes Laërtius, the philosopher was named Aristocles after his grandfather, but his wrestling coach, Ariston of Argos, dubbed him "Platon", meaning "broad," on account of his robust figure. According to the sources mentioned by Diogenes (all dating from the Alexandrian period), Plato derived his name from the breadth (platytês) of his eloquence, or else because he was very wide (platýs) across the forehead. In the 21st century some scholars disputed Diogenes, and argued that the legend about his name being Aristocles originated in the Hellenistic age.

### Education

Apuleius informs us that Speusippus praised Plato's quickness of mind and modesty as a boy, and the "first fruits of his youth infused with hard work and love of study". Plato must have been instructed in grammar, music, and gymnastics by the most distinguished teachers of his time. Dicaearchus went so far as to say that Plato wrestled at the Isthmian games. Plato had also attended courses of philosophy; before meeting Socrates, he first became acquainted with Cratylus (a disciple of Heraclitus, a prominent pre-Socratic Greek philosopher) and the Heraclitean doctrines.

### Later life

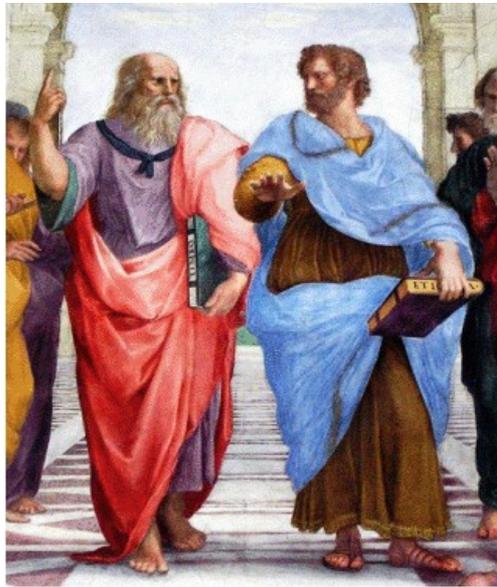
Plato may have traveled in Italy, Sicily, Egypt and Cyrene. Said to have returned to Athens at the age of forty, Plato founded one of the earliest known organized schools in Western Civilization on a plot of land in the Grove of Hecademus or Academus. The Academy was "a large enclosure of ground that was once the property of a citizen at Athens named Academus... some, however, say that it received its name from an ancient hero", and it operated until AD 529, when it was closed by Justinian I of Byzantium, who saw it as a threat to the propagation of Christianity. Many intellectuals were schooled in the Academy, the most prominent one being Aristotle.

Throughout his later life, Plato became entangled with the politics of Syracuse. According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato initially visited Syracuse while it was under the rule of Dionysus. During this first trip Dionysus's brother-in-law, Dion of Syracuse, became one of Plato's disciples, but the tyrant himself turned against Plato. Plato was sold into slavery and almost faced death in Cyrene, a city at war with Athens, before an admirer bought Plato's freedom and sent him home. After Dionysius's death, according to Plato's Seventh Letter, Dion requested Plato return to Syracuse to tutor Dionysius II and guide him to become a philosopher king. Dionysius II seemed to accept Plato's teachings, but he became suspicious of Dion, his uncle. Dionysus expelled Dion and kept Plato against his will. Eventually Plato left Syracuse. Dion would return to overthrow Dionysus and ruled Syracuse for a short time before being usurped by Calippus, a fellow disciple of Plato.

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## Plato and Socrates



The precise relationship between Plato and Socrates remains an area of contention among scholars. Plato makes it clear, especially in his *Apology of Socrates*, that he was Socrates' most devoted young follower. In that dialogue, Socrates is presented as mentioning Plato by name as one of those youths close enough to him to have been corrupted, if he were in fact guilty of corrupting the youth, and questioning why their fathers and brothers did not step forward to testify against him if he was indeed guilty of such a crime.

### Philosophy

#### Recurrent themes

Plato often discusses the father-son relationship and the "question" of whether a father's interest in his sons has much to do with how well his sons turn out. A boy in ancient Athens was socially located by his family identity, and Plato often refers to his characters in terms of their paternal and fraternal relationships. Socrates was not a family man, and saw himself as the son of his mother, who was apparently a midwife. A divine fatalist, Socrates mocks men who spent exorbitant fees on tutors and trainers for their sons, and repeatedly ventures the idea that good character is a gift from the gods. Crito reminds Socrates that orphans are at the mercy of chance, but Socrates is unconcerned.

In several dialogues, Socrates floats the idea that Knowledge is a matter of recollection, and not of learning, observation, or study. He maintains this view somewhat at his own expense, because in many dialogues, Socrates complains of his forgetfulness. Socrates is often found arguing that knowledge is not empirical, and that it comes from divine insight.

In many middle period dialogues, such as the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* Plato advocates a belief in the immortality of the soul, and several dialogues end with long speeches imagining the afterlife. More than one dialogue contrasts knowledge and opinion, perception and reality, nature and custom, and body and soul. Several dialogues tackle questions about art: Socrates says that poetry is inspired by the muses, and is not rational. In *Ion*, Socrates gives no hint of the disapproval of Homer that he expresses in the *Republic*. The dialogue *Ion* suggests that Homer's *Iliad* functioned in the ancient Greek world as the Bible does today in the modern Christian world: as divinely inspired literature that can provide moral guidance, if only it can be properly interpreted.

On politics and art, religion and science, justice and medicine, virtue and vice, crime and punishment, pleasure and pain, rhetoric and rhapsody, human nature and sexuality, love and wisdom, Socrates and his company of disputants had something to say.

### Metaphysics

"Platonism" is a term coined by scholars to refer to the intellectual consequences of denying, as Socrates often does, the reality of the material world. In several dialogues, most notably the *Republic*, Socrates inverts the common man's intuition about what is knowable and what is real. While most people take the objects of their senses to be real if anything is, Socrates is contemptuous of people who think that something has to be graspable in the hands to be real. In the *Theaetetus*, he says such people are "eu a-mousoi", an expression that means literally, "happily without the muses". In other words, such people live without the divine inspiration that gives him, and people like him, access to higher insights about reality.

Socrates's idea that reality is unavailable to those who use their senses is what puts him at odds with the common man, and with common sense. Socrates says that he who sees with his eyes is blind, and this idea is most famously captured in his allegory of the cave, and more explicitly in his description of the divided line. The allegory of the cave is a paradoxical analogy wherein Socrates argues that the invisible world is the most intelligible ("noeton") and that the visible world ("(h)oraton") is the least knowable, and the most obscure.

Socrates says in the *Republic* that people who take the sun-lit world of the senses to be good and real are living pitifully in a den of evil and ignorance. Socrates admits that few climb out of the den, or cave of ignorance, and those who do, not only have a terrible struggle to attain the heights, but when they go back down for a visit or to help other people up, they find themselves objects of scorn and ridicule. According to Socrates, physical objects and physical events are "shadows" of their ideal or perfect forms, and exist only to the extent that they instantiate the perfect versions of themselves. Just as shadows are temporary, inconsequential epiphenomena produced by physical objects, physical objects are themselves fleeting phenomena caused by more substantial causes, the ideals of which they are mere instances. Socrates

claims that the enlightened men of society must be forced from their divine contemplations and compelled to run the city according to their lofty insights. Thus is born the idea of the "philosopher-king", the wise person who accepts the power thrust upon him by the people who are wise enough to choose a good master. This is the main thesis of Socrates in the Republic, that the most wisdom the masses can muster is the wise choice of a ruler.

The word metaphysics derives from the fact that Aristotle's musings about divine reality came after ("meta") his lecture notes on his treatise on nature ("physics"). The term is in fact applied to Aristotle's own teacher, and Plato's "metaphysics" is understood as Socrates' division of reality into the warring and irreconcilable domains of the material and the spiritual. The theory has been of incalculable influence in the history of Western philosophy and religion.

### Epistemology

Many have interpreted Plato as stating that knowledge is justified true belief, an influential view that informed future developments in modern analytic epistemology. This interpretation is based on a reading of the Theaetetus wherein Plato argues that belief is to be distinguished from knowledge on account of justification. Many years later, Edmund Gettier famously demonstrated the problems of the justified true belief account of knowledge. This interpretation, however, imports modern analytic and empiricist categories onto Plato himself and is better read on its own terms than as Plato's view.

Really, in the Sophist, Statesman, Republic, and the Parmenides Plato himself associates knowledge with the apprehension of unchanging Forms and their relationships to one another (which he calls "expertise" in Dialectic). More explicitly, Plato himself argues in the Timaeus that knowledge is always proportionate to the realm from which it is gained. In other words, if one derives one's account of something experientially, because the world of sense is in flux, the views therein attained will be mere opinions. And opinions are characterized by a lack of necessity and stability. On the other hand, if one derives one's account of something by way of the non-sensible forms, because these forms are unchanging, so too is the account derived from them. It is only in this sense that Plato uses the term "knowledge".

### The State

Plato's philosophical views had many societal implications, especially on the idea of an ideal state or government. There is some discrepancy between his early and later views. Some of the most famous doctrines are contained in the **Republic** during his middle period, as well as in the Laws and the Statesman. However, because Plato wrote dialogues, it is assumed that Socrates is often speaking for Plato. This assumption may not be true in all cases.

Plato, through the words of Socrates, asserts that societies have a tripartite class structure corresponding to the appetite/spirit/reason structure of the individual soul. The appetite/ spirit/ reason stand for different parts of the body. The body parts symbolize the castes of society.

- Productive, which represents the abdomen. (Workers) - the labourers, carpenters, plumbers, masons, merchants, farmers, ranchers, etc. These correspond to the "appetite" part of the soul.
- Protective, which represents the chest. (Warriors or Guardians) - those who are adventurous, strong and brave; in the armed forces. These correspond to the "spirit" part of the soul.
- Governing, which represents the head. (Rulers or Philosopher Kings) - those who are intelligent, rational, self-controlled, in love with wisdom, well suited to make decisions for the community. These correspond to the "reason" part of the soul and are very few.

According to this model, the principles of Athenian democracy (as it existed in his day) are rejected as only a few are fit to rule. Instead of rhetoric and persuasion, Plato says reason and wisdom should govern. As Plato puts it:

**"Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophise, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, ... nor, I think, will the human race."**

----Republic

Plato describes these "philosopher kings" as "those who love the sight of truth" and supports the idea with the analogy of a captain and his ship or a doctor and his medicine. According to him, sailing and health are not things that everyone is qualified to practice by nature. A large part of the Republic then addresses how the educational system should be set up to produce these philosopher kings. Wherein it concerns states and rulers, Plato has made interesting arguments. For instance he asks which is better-a bad democracy or a country reigned by a tyrant. He argues that it is better to be ruled by a bad tyrant, than be a bad democracy (since here all the people are now responsible for such actions, rather than one individual committing many bad deeds.) This is emphasized within the Republic as Plato describes the event of mutiny onboard a ship. Plato suggests the ships crew to be in line with the democratic rule of many and the captain, although inhibited through ailments, the tyrant. Plato's description of this event is parallel to that of democracy within the state and the inherent problems that arise.

According to Plato, a state made up of different kinds of souls will, overall, decline from an aristocracy (rule by the best) to a timocracy (rule by the honorable), then to an oligarchy (rule by the few), then to a democracy (rule by the people), and finally to tyranny (rule by one person, rule by a tyrant).

### Platonic Scholarship

Plato's thought is often compared with that of his most famous student, Aristotle, whose reputation during the Western Middle Ages so completely eclipsed that of Plato that the Scholastic philosophers referred to Aristotle as "the Philosopher". However, in the Byzantine Empire, the study of Plato continued. The Medieval scholastic philosophers did not have access to the works of Plato, nor the knowledge of Greek needed to read them. Plato's original writings were essentially lost to Western civilization until they were brought from Constantinople in the century of its fall, by George Gemistos Plethon. It is believed that Plethon passed a copy of the Dialogues to Cosimo de' Medici when in 1438 the Council of Ferrara, called to unify the Greek

and Latin Churches, was adjourned to Florence, where Plethon then lectured on the relation and differences of Plato and Aristotle, and fired Cosimo with his enthusiasm. Medieval scholars knew of Plato only through translations into Latin from the translations into Arabic by Persian and Arab scholars. These scholars not only translated the texts of the ancients, but expanded them by writing extensive commentaries and interpretations on Plato's and Aristotle's works.

Only in the Renaissance, with the general resurgence of interest in classical civilization, did knowledge of Plato's philosophy become widespread again in the West. Many of the greatest early modern scientists and artists who broke with Scholasticism and fostered the flowering of the Renaissance, with the support of the Plato-inspired Lorenzo de Medici, saw Plato's philosophy as the basis for progress in the arts and sciences. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Plato's reputation was restored, and at least on par with Aristotle's.

Notable Western philosophers have continued to draw upon Plato's work since that time. Plato's influence has been especially strong in mathematics and the sciences. He helped to distinguish between pure and applied mathematics by widening the gap between "arithmetic", now called Number Theory and "logistic", now called arithmetic. He regarded logistic as appropriate for business men and men of war who "must learn the art of numbers or he will not know how to array his troops," while arithmetic was appropriate for philosophers "because he has to arise out of the sea of change and lay hold of true being."



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