

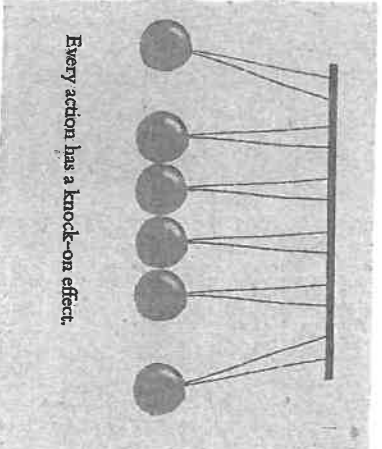
I had a tough childhood, all right? It's not my fault I turned out bad.

Aristotle • Boethius • Nietzsche • Socrates • Bentham

Some people get a bad start in life, don't they? No money, growing up in a rough neighbourhood where kids learn to fight and steal at an early age, a poor education and then no prospect of a decent job. If anything home life is worse: abuse, violence and broken relationships. No wonder you ended up in a life of petty crime and aggressive behaviour. But did it have to be like that? Couldn't you have chosen a different path in life, despite your background?

You seem to be playing a couple of games here, in explaining the reasons for your wrongdoing. First you're looking for sympathy, which is fair enough, given your tough background, and then you're playing the blame game, which is maybe a bit harder to justify. There's a difference between finding reasons and making excuses, and although you might be able to point to the causes of your behaviour, the argument that that exonerates you from responsibility is less convincing, isn't it?

Aristotle would say that everything that



Every action has a knock-on effect.

happens in the world happens for a reason, there is a cause for it. Now, he'd also explain that when he talks about causes, it doesn't mean simply that when one thing happens it causes another thing to happen, like pushing a domino over and causing the next one to topple, and then the next and so on. That's just one aspect of what he's getting at. Instead, he says that the cause of something is the answer to the question "Why?" What causes that thing to come about? And he'd suggest there are four different kinds of answer to that question.

Cause and effect

First there's what Aristotle would call the "material cause", what something is made of. In your case, your material cause would be that complex combination of organic substances that we call a human being; you are who you are because of what you are, a human being. The next is the "formal cause", the way that material is put together. It is the idea that goes behind what makes something what it is: in your case, the upbringing that

you have had. Then there is the "efficient cause", which is much more like the way most people use the word cause. This refers to the external cause of something; what makes things happen or behave in a certain way, such as the first domino causing the second to fall over. In your case, it could be that somebody knocking over your drink caused you to punch him on the nose. The last cause Aristotle appropriately calls the "final cause", which is more like the purpose something exists for. A chair's "final cause" is to be something you can sit on, for example. But for you the final cause is what drives you to do what you do, your motives or desires.

Bearing that in mind, Aristotle continues, remember that every action, everything that happens, is caused by something. And that could be sheer chance, or connected to the causes he described, such as nature, compulsion, habit, reasoning, anger or appetite. Whatever it is that causes it, though, it happens as a result of something else. But here we have a problem, because whatever caused it must itself have been caused by something, and we end up with an infinite chain of events, where each thing causes the next. It's inevitable. Whatever happens is determined by what happened before. So you're entitled to blame your childhood

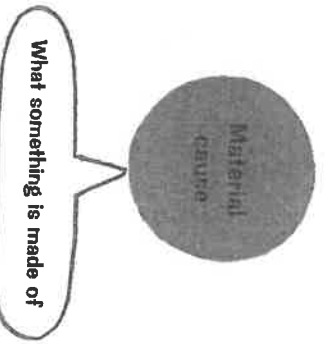
Basic philosophical question

Are we always responsible for our actions? Should wrongdoing be punished?

for your wrongdoing, and the ultimate responsibility lies with whatever caused the beginning of this infinite chain of events. The Big Bang? God?

But Aristotle is not comfortable with the idea of infinity, and especially not with the idea that everything we do is determined by something that happened before. That way you could deny all responsibility for your actions. Instead, he would suggest, we humans have the luxury of being able to choose, so we can to some extent get away from being "caused" to do something, and can also consciously cause things to happen. There are some philosophers who would say that the last part of Aristotle's argument is a bit of cop-out, without much justification, just because he didn't like the idea of *causal determinism*, that everything is predetermined

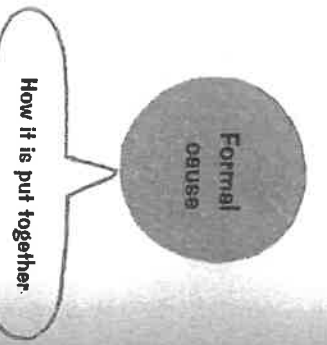
"Thus every action must be due to one or other of seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reasoning, anger or appetite"
 Aristotle



by prior events. And if you believe that, you have to accept that we are not in control of any of our actions.

Luckily, **Boethius** can offer us an answer that elaborates on Aristotle's rather weak claim that we can make choices. Part of the problem, especially in your particular case, **Boethius** would say, is that if our actions are predestined, then we have no responsibility for them and don't deserve to be punished if we do something wrong. What actually happens, he says, is that God (the first cause) pre-ordains everything that happens, but has also in His wisdom given us free will. That sounds impossible, but **Boethius** would explain that although it's all predestined, God knows what we're going to do. He can also foresee our freely chosen actions.

That's fine, if you believe in God, **Friedrich Nietzsche** would argue. But as there is no God, we are in control of



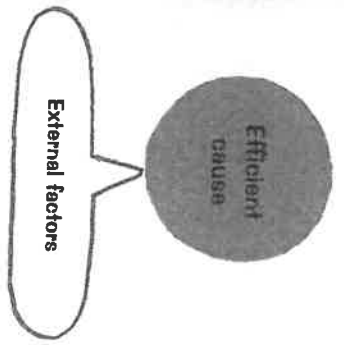
determining our own actions, and by choosing our behaviour can shape our own destinies. We should not let society, our background or our past determine who we are, or what we do. We have to overcome what our past has made us into, and decide for ourselves what we can be. We have to overcome our selves! And that, he would add, means not using your tough childhood as an excuse. Face the music, and then get on with making something of your life.

In any case, the law is not interested in the problem of predestination and free will. You might be able to plead for some reduction of your sentence for mitigating circumstances, but the law doesn't allow you to pass the blame on. And that means you will face some form of punishment. You've done the crime, so you do the time.

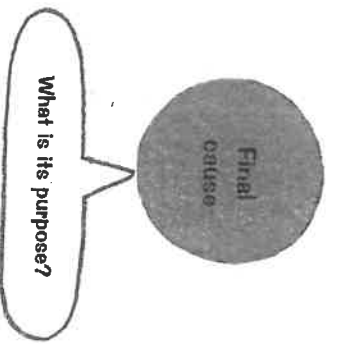
Whether that's the right thing to do is debatable, though, according to **Socrates**,

"One's virtue is all that one truly has, because it is not imperilled by the vicissitudes of fortune"

Boethius



He found himself on the wrong side of the law a few times, and came to the conclusion that committing a crime is punishment in itself, as it does damage to the soul. The only possible use for punishment is if the criminal gives himself up for punishment in order to cleanse his soul. What's more, **Socrates** suggests that the people doing the punishment are also damaging their souls, harming themselves more than the criminal. He'd find few backers for that argument, except among the criminal classes, you would think, but **Jeremy Bentham** broadly agrees. He would say that **Socrates** is right to suggest



as he does that punishment is an evil, but possibly a necessary one, in some cases. That's because there are different reasons for giving punishment – for example, as retribution, or as a deterrent both to the criminal against repeat offending and to others, or as a shock to bring a criminal to his senses. It may also be simply to remove an offender from society for the safety of the people. But instead of punishment, **Bentham** proposes, we should be aiming to lessen crime, and that involves some sort of reform and rehabilitation of the offender. In your case, that would mean learning to see the error of your ways.

Making a decision

If you want to blame your bad behaviour on your upbringing, **Aristotle** would give you some support, but wouldn't completely let you off the hook. You might think, like **Boethius**, that all your actions are pre-determined (but even he says you still have free will), or agree with **Nietzsche** that you should overcome your past. Whether you should be punished is another matter – it's likely that you go along with **Socrates** and **Bentham** in thinking punishment is not necessarily the solution to wrongdoing.

My friend's partner is cheating on her – should I tell her?

Kant • Bentham

You really are facing a dilemma here. Your friend is blissfully unaware of her partner's philandering, and you don't know whether to shatter her illusions. Of course, you'd feel terrible about telling her an outright lie, but it's just as uncomfortable for you to keep something from her. Somehow you feel a duty to be honest with her, but you know the pain that will cause, and you can't be sure how she'll react. It seems you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't – and whatever you decide, you want her to know that you did it with the best of intentions.

Looking for guidance on this from the philosophers takes us into some very deep waters, to the fundamental questions of how we judge what is morally right or wrong. So don't expect any easy answers.

You've probably been brought up, like most people, to believe that lying is wrong, plain and simple. You should always tell the

truth. It couldn't be clearer than that, could it? This is the view known in philosophy as *deontology*, that there are moral rules that are absolute, and we have a duty to follow them. If you break the rule, your action is morally wrong. The best-known advocate of this approach to morality was **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804), who summed the idea up in

what he called the “categorical imperative”: act only in accordance with a maxim that you can at the same time will to become a universal law. Which means that if you think something, lying for example, is generally wrong, then it is always wrong, without exception, no matter what.

This black and white approach seems pretty straightforward, but aren't there perhaps some grey areas too? If your friend asks you outright if her partner is cheating, you have a moral duty to tell her the truth. But if she doesn't...you're not actually lying, but not actually telling the truth either. Or maybe the moral law is that it's wrong to hide the truth, or that you should always tell everybody everything. What, even things that are completely irrelevant to them?

Truth and consequences

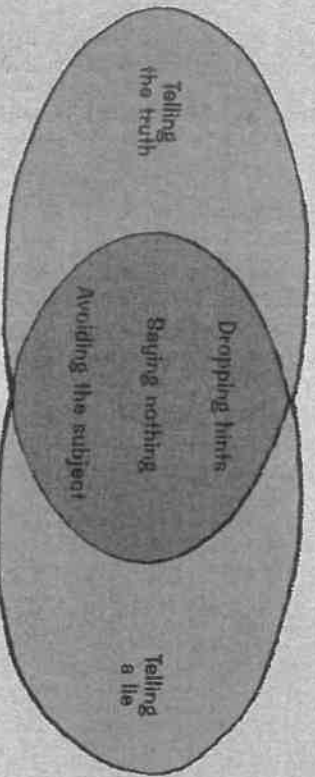
Following moral rules is not necessarily the simple solution to this dilemma that it seems, so you might want to consider a completely different approach, *consequentialism*, which judges the moral rightness or wrongness of an action by its outcomes. It's the basis of much of moral philosophy since the Renaissance, in contrast to the especially religious “commandments” of what is right or wrong. Particularly relevant to the

Basic philosophical question
Do we have a moral duty to always tell the truth, or is it sometimes morally justifiable to leave it unsaid, conceal it, or even tell a lie?

problem of to tell or not to tell is **Jeremy Bentham's** (1748–1832) idea of assessing the “utility” of an action, weighing up the amount of happiness or harm it creates. In your case, you would consider all the possible outcomes of telling your friend, or not telling her, and base your decision on how much good or harm it will cause, both immediately and in the long term. You might then decide to withhold the information, or even tell a “white lie”, to protect her, and still feel justified in tearing up the moral rulebook; or, rather than see her live a lie, to be the bearer of hurtful tidings, but ultimately in her best interests.

And here, you'll start to see that we're thinking not just about outcomes, but also about your own intentions and motives

Are there degrees of honesty?



“The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”

From the oath or affirmation of a witness in court to give sworn testimony

"I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law"

Immanuel Kant

for what you do. This is part of the area of philosophy known as *virtue ethics*, which, like consequentialism, considers morality on a case-by-case basis, but, instead of concentrating on individual actions, examines the "virtue" of the person taking them. So, rather than saying that it is morally right or wrong to do something, we look at the reasons for making that decision, whether the person making the decision is acting in their own interests or those of others, for instance, and this is dependent on their own inner sense of morality. So, if you do something because you honestly believe it is the right thing to do in the circumstances, you are acting morally, even if you tell a lie, and even if it all goes horribly wrong. The mere fact that you agonize over what to do, whatever you eventually decide, is a mark of your personal morality.

Making a decision

You may think, like Kant, that you have a duty to be honest with your friend, even if it is painful. But then, are you being entirely honest if you just avoid telling her? Bentham urges you to look at the likely consequences of telling her, or not telling her. Perhaps she would prefer to know what's going on.

Who was Plato?

As one of the founding fathers of philosophy and best known of the thinkers of Ancient Greece, Plato has had a massive impact on the history of Western thought. He lived from around 427–347 BC, spending most of his time in Athens.

WHY IS PLATO'S WORK SO IMPORTANT?

Plato was very creative and a great innovator. However, no one works in a vacuum and there were a number of outstanding philosophers before him who influenced his work. As none of their writings exist, it indeed they wrote anything at all, little is known about these shadowy figures. Nonetheless, from references in other works, it is apparent that the term 'philosophy', for most of them, covered a broad and varied school of thought. What they generally all have in common is a concern with matters of **cosmology** (from the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning something like 'good order'). The ancient Greek philosophers were intent on finding a unifying principle of the cosmos, an order for the apparent chaos of the world they occupied.

Although also concerned with matters relating to cosmology, Plato and his teacher Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) are very different from the so-called 'pre-Socratic' philosophers before them because of their more rigorous and rational method of enquiry. What they did was to invent the method and terminology of philosophizing that is still used today. By introducing analysis, cogent argument and a rational approach to thought Plato especially laid the foundations for all philosophers who came after him. This is why the British philosopher Alfred North

KEYWORDS

Philosophy, broadly, the pursuit of knowledge, although - starting with Plato especially - it developed into a more rigorous and precise discipline.

Cosmology, study of the universe as whole; its origins, make-up and so on.

Whitehead (1861–1947) famously said that the history of philosophy is but 'a series of footnotes to Plato.'

Rather than being pre-occupied with grand theories of the universe Plato's main concern initially was with **moral philosophy**; with how we ought to live our lives. However, although this was his main inspiration, as he matured his writings covered many of the branches of philosophy, including **political philosophy**, education, **aesthetics**, **metaphysics**, and **epistemology**. Plato was also something of a poet, and his writings are regarded as not only monumental works of philosophy, but great literature. Plato is the earliest philosopher whose writings have survived and so they provide an important insight into the culture and beliefs of the complex and cosmopolitan society of Athens as it existed two-and-a-half thousand years ago.

KEYWORDS

Moral philosophy, also known as ethics. The study of issues such as if there is such a thing as good or bad and how we can determine this.

Political philosophy, the study of political systems and the asking of questions such as 'Why should we obey rulers?'

Aesthetics, or the philosophy of art - concerned with such questions as 'What is beauty?'

Metaphysics, concerned with the nature of ultimate 'reality'.

Epistemology, also known as the Theory of Knowledge, and so concerned with where our knowledge comes from and whether it is 'true' or not.

Plato founded the Academy in Athens and this institution has often been described as the first European university. Here people studied works of philosophy, mathematics, politics and the sciences for nearly a thousand years. A great deal of religious thought in Europe was intermingled with Plato's philosophy, for example, in the writings of the Christian theologian St. Augustine (AD 354–430) and in medieval Islamic thought where it was translated and preserved in Arabic. Plato's works were later re-translated into Latin and Greek as it emerged as a force during the Renaissance. In the nineteenth century, Plato's work was a basis for Victorian values in Britain. His controversial political and educational views have played an important part in more recent debate. It is certainly true to say that no student of philosophy can afford to ignore Plato and his work.

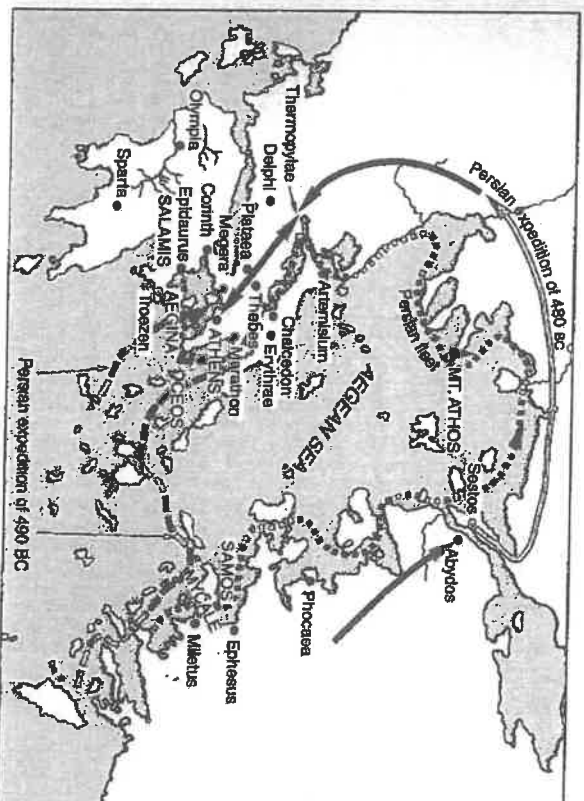
PLATO'S WORLD

Plato was born around 427 BC, probably in Athens or the nearby island of Aegina. He was given the name Aristocles, but was called Plato which means 'broad' or 'flat', a possible reference to his broad shoulders (he used to wrestle). He was born into a wealthy political family. His father, Ariston, was descended from the last king of Athens, and his mother was descended from the great Athenian law-maker Solon.

To understand Plato and his philosophy it helps to have some idea of the world in which he lived. Greece at that time was not one united country, but a collection of semi-autonomous 'city-states' (in Greek, *polis*) that were united by language and culture, as well as a defence against powerful external enemies, notably Persia. During Plato's long life he witnessed the decline and fall of this Greek federation. It was an age of war and political upheaval, yet it was also a period of great cultural

KEYWORD

Polis, a Greek word for 'city-state'.



activity, Athens, especially, was an exciting and sophisticated place. The famous Parthenon, a temple dedicated to Athena, was built in the mid-fifth century BC, and Plato would also have been able to see some of the greatest Greek tragedies performed in the squares and theatres of the city. Yet Plato's philosophy, his belief in order and suspicion of democracy, was also moulded by the political climate of the recent past:

* Between the eighth and sixth centuries BC, Athens and Sparta became the two dominant cities of Greece. Each of these city-states united their weaker neighbours into a league under their dominance. Sparta, a state Plato admired for its order and discipline, was highly militarized and ruled by force and oppression. Whereas Sparta established its league largely through conquest, Athens unified mostly through mutual and peaceful agreement.

* In the early part of the sixth century BC, a limited form of democracy replaced hereditary Athenian kingship. This was the start of the greatest period of Athenian history economically and culturally. The Athenians also succeeded in defeating an invading Persian fleet, despite seemingly overwhelming odds. As a result, Athens became the most influential state in Greece and the voluntary Delian League was formed with Athens at its head. However, as Athenian power grew it became more tyrannical towards other states in the league.

* During the fifth century BC, under the leadership of Pericles, Athens entered its golden age. The Parthenon was built during this time; a time of tragedians such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The constitution was reformed to make it more democratic. During the latter half of the century, however, Athens was constantly at war with Sparta. Most likely Plato would have fought against the Spartans in the cavalry.

* In 405 BC Athens was defeated by Sparta and the victors established an oligarchy over the city known as the Thirty Tyrants. Two of these 'Tyrants' were close relatives of Plato. This reign, however, lasted for only a year or so before democracy and independence were restored, but Athens was now in decline, as was the whole of Greece. Its northern neighbour, Macedonia, began its expansion, which would eventually lead to Macedonian supremacy under Alexander the Great from 336 BC.

KEYWORD
Oligarchy, the rule by the few, also known as a plutocracy. Rule is established depending upon how much wealth you possess.

SOCRATES

During his lifetime, Plato witnessed the decline of Athens and experienced the moral uncertainty that resulted. Plato was born into a wealthy and politically powerful Athenian family, and he was encouraged to enter politics himself, but his experience of unscrupulous politicians and the constant strife amongst various political groupings soon disillusioned him. However, Plato had a deep concern for the welfare of Athens and its citizens and so it was philosophy he looked to as a way of voicing these concerns. At around the age of 20, Plato encountered a remarkable man: Socrates.

Little is really known about Socrates and yet his name stands out amongst the ranks of great intellectuals. He was born in the region of 470 BC and spent his life in virtual poverty. The lack of money was of his own choosing, being more concerned with living the 'examined life' as he called it. The concerns of Socrates were mostly ethical, determining what is the best life and the best society to live in. He survived through the generosity of friends and disciples, Plato being one of them.

Plato wrote in the form of a dialogue in which various characters discuss philosophical issues, and it is through these dialogues that Socrates has become a familiar name to us. Socrates would always be the main character who would interrogate people in a form that has

become known as the **Socratic Method**, or what Socrates himself described as the method of the 'midwife'. Socrates always said that he knew nothing, only the skill of hauling out knowledge from others, and so he believed that truth was innate and could be extracted rather like a midwife extracts a baby from its mother.

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates engages in conversation on topics dear to the hearts of many Greeks: piety, courage, justice, and beauty amongst other things. If someone said that he or she were pious, Socrates would retort with, 'What do you mean by piety?' and, forced to provide a definition, it would be demonstrated that such a concept was based on weak assumptions and uncertainties, forcing the individual to modify his or her view. It was a process of **dialectic** by which the aim is to achieve a more accurate definition. The intention was to show that we cannot be confident in our knowledge and, in fact, much of what we believe has no rational or logical basis. Further, Socrates believed that the closer we can get to the correct definitions, then the closer we will be to the truth.

He was deliberately provocative. It was for this reason Socrates jokingly referred to himself as a gadfly; biting away at his victims. As a result of this he made many enemies and, in 399 BC, he was placed on trial for 'corrupting the youth' with his ideals. He was condemned to death and refused to escape or adopt the traditional method of proposing another form of punishment such as exile (which probably would have been accepted). He preferred to die with dignity and remain a good citizen of the State that he so dearly loved. In choosing his method of death he drank a cup of hemlock and died within half an hour.

PLATO THE PHILOSOPHER

The death of Socrates had a profound impact upon Plato. Undoubtedly, the fact that his friend and teacher was condemned by

KEYWORDS

Socratic Method, A term used to describe Socrates' conversational technique of using dialectic.

Dialectic, A method of attempting to get to the nature of truth by questioning concepts. The Socratic Method is a form of dialectic.

democrats was one reason Plato distrusted democracy and, as he saw it, the rule of the mob. He was determined to keep the spirit of Socrates alive by engaging in philosophy in the Socratic tradition.

However, Plato's own safety was compromised by his close friendship with Socrates. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Plato decided to leave Athens and undertake a 12-year exploration of the known world. His travels included Egypt where he was impressed by the theocratic system, the rule by an educated priestly class. It is even speculated that Plato reached the banks of the River Ganges but, despite certain similarities between his own philosophy and eastern religions, it is an unlikely hypothesis. What is more credible, however, is his encounter, in Italy, with the **Pythagoreans**; a community founded upon the principles of Pythagoras (c. 582 – c. 500 BC). In around 530 BC, Pythagoras settled in a Greek colony in southern Italy called Crotona where he established and led a tight-knit community of like-minded people. Pythagoras's teachings survived and spread over Greece and southern Italy. These communities were well ordered and strict in terms of diet, dress and moral codes.

The Pythagoreans believed in the immortality of the soul and in Reincarnation as well as a belief that nature was subject to a mathematical order. The name of Pythagoras is, of course, associated with the mathematical theorem that equates the square of the sides of a right-angled triangle to the square of its hypotenuse – the nightmare of many a schoolchild!

However, the theorem was most likely developed later on by his followers. Nonetheless, the importance of mathematics and the belief that 'all is number' had a profound effect on Plato. For Pythagoras, numbers held the key to understanding the universe. Everything could be explained in terms of number, which existed in an abstract and

KEYWORDS

Pythagoreans, communities that followed the teachings of Pythagoras, which included a belief in the immortality of the soul, reincarnation and the importance of mathematics in determining reality.

Reincarnation, the belief that, after the death of the body, the soul transfers to another body.

harmonious realm beyond the flux of the everyday world. It was the Pythagoreans who discovered the link between number and musical harmony and envisioned the movement of the planets as the 'music of the spheres'.

Plato, too, believed there is a timeless unchanging order to the universe and that there is an underlying 'form' to the world that can, through reason and mathematics, be perceived. It is said that above the door to his Academy was written, 'Let no one unacquainted with geometry enter here.' What developed was Plato's famous *Theory of the Forms*, the very 'essence' of the universe that provides the key to knowledge.

KEYWORD

Theory of the Forms, Plato's theory that the universe has an underlying order consisting of 'Forms' or 'ideas' which could be ascertained through the power of human intellect.

Plato also travelled to Syracuse in Sicily, the most powerful city-state west of the Greek mainland. The ruler of Syracuse, Dionysius, seemed keen to discuss philosophy with Plato, but it turned out that Dionysius was an impatient and intractable individual and expelled Plato from his land after a series of arguments. However, during his time in Syracuse, Plato had a long and turbulent relationship with the ruler's brother-in-law, Dion, for whom he wrote poetry and described him as the lover who drove him mad with desire.

At the wiser age of 40 Plato returned to Athens and bought a plot of land in the Grove of Academe, named after a mythical hero called Academus. Here Plato established a school of intellectuals modelled on the Pythagorean model. When Plato was about 60, Dionysius died and was succeeded by his son, and Dion's nephew, Dionysius II. Dion persuaded the reluctant Plato to return to Syracuse to teach the new ruler to be a 'Philosopher King' in the mould of Plato's own political views. However, like his father before him, the new ruler proved a reluctant and impatient philosopher and, once again, Plato fled back to Athens, preferring to stay out of politics from then on.

Plato, who never married, died at the age of 80 and was buried in the Academy. The Academy itself continued to thrive producing such notable alumni as the philosopher Aristotle (384–22 BC) and developing important schools in, for example, mathematical science and astronomy. The Academy was closed down by the Roman Emperor Justinian in AD 529. This is roughly the time that saw the birth of the Dark Ages.

PLATO'S WORKS

Plato's works can be divided into three periods: early, middle and late.

* The early period was concerned mostly with moral issues and was heavily influenced by Socrates. Although it cannot be said for sure, it is quite possible that much of this work is really the philosophy of Socrates and does not contain much originality from Plato himself. Nonetheless, these are great literary pieces, especially the *Apology*, *The Crita*, *Euthyphra*, the *Laches*, the *Charmides*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Gorgias*.

* When we enter the middle period, the character of Socrates expresses a greater concern with such issues as politics and metaphysics, which demonstrates more Plato's philosophy; although still using Socrates as his mouthpiece. The middle period, then, was Plato at his peak, producing important works such as the *Meno*, the *Phaedra*, the *Symposium* and, best known of all, the *Republic*. The *Republic* is a rich book in which all aspects of philosophy are connected together in a grand scheme for the kind of state Plato wished for. A state ruled by the wisest and best: the 'Philosopher Kings'. These rulers would be the wisest because, through training in the sciences especially, they would have learnt how to gain access to truth itself: the Forms. It is not just a book on political philosophy, but provides views on education and a theory of human nature based upon his belief in the eternal soul.