

From
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Who was Plato?

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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.

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.

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, if 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

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.

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.

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.

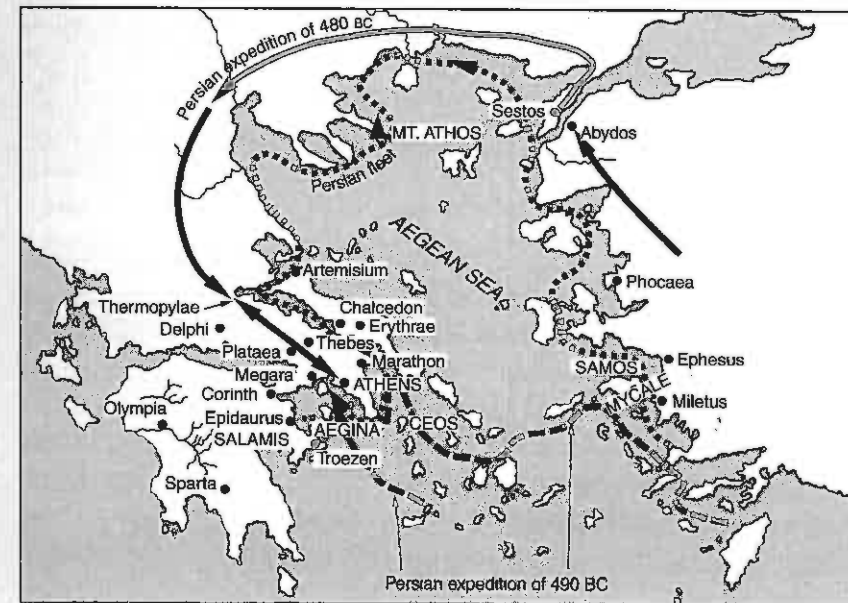
PLATO'S WORLD

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 Crito*, *Euthyphro*, 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 *Phaedo*, 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.