

## Plato

### The History Channel

The Athenian philosopher Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.) is one of the most important figures of the Ancient Greek world and the entire history of Western thought. In his written dialogues he conveyed and expanded on the ideas and techniques of his teacher Socrates.

The Academy he founded was by some accounts the world's first university and in it he trained his greatest student, the equally influential philosopher Aristotle. Plato's recurring fascination was the distinction between ideal forms and everyday experience, and how it played out both for individuals and for societies. In the "Republic," his most famous work, he envisioned a civilization governed not by lowly appetites but by the pure wisdom of a philosopher-king.

### Plato: Early Life and Education

Plato was born around 428 B.C., during the final years of the Golden Age of Pericles' Athens. He was of noble Athenian lineage on both sides. His father Ariston died when Plato was a child. His mother Perictione remarried the politician Pyrilampes. Plato grew up during the Peloponnesian War (431-404) and came of age around the time of Athens' final defeat by Sparta and the political chaos that followed. He was educated in philosophy, poetry and gymnastics by distinguished Athenian teachers including the philosopher Cratylus.

### Plato's Influences

The young Plato became a devoted follower of Socrates—indeed, he was one of the youths Socrates was condemned for allegedly corrupting. Plato's recollections of Socrates' lived-out philosophy and style of relentless questioning, the Socratic method, became the basis for his early dialogues. Plato's dialogues, along with "Apologia," his written account of the trial of Socrates, are viewed by historians as the most accurate available picture of the elder philosopher, who left no written works of his own.

Following Socrates' forced suicide, Plato spent 12 years traveling in southern Italy, Sicily and Egypt, studying with other philosophers including followers of the mystic mathematician Pythagoras including Theodorus of Cyrene (creator of the spiral of Theodorus or Pythagorean spiral), Archytas of Tarentum and Echecrates of Phlius. Plato's time among the Pythagoreans piqued his interest in mathematics.

Plato's Theory of Forms, stating that the physical world we know is but a shadow of the real one, was strongly influenced by Parmenides and Zeno of Elea. The two appear as characters in Plato's dialogue "The Parmenides."

Plato had a lifelong relationship with the ruling family of Syracuse, who would later seek his advice on reforming their city's politics.

### Platonic Academy

Around 387, the 40-year-old Plato returned to Athens and founded his philosophical school in the grove of the Greek hero Academus, just outside the city walls. In his open-air Academy he delivered lectures to students gathered from throughout the Greek world (nine-tenths of them from outside Athens).

Did you know? The section on music in Plato's "Republic" suggests that in an ideal society flutes would be banned in favor of the more dignified lyre, but on his deathbed Plato reportedly summoned a young girl to play her flute for him, tapping out the rhythm with his finger while he breathed his last.

Many of Plato's writings, especially the so-called later dialogues, seem to have originated in his teaching there. In establishing the Academy Plato moved beyond the precepts of Socrates, who never founded a school and questioned the very idea of a teacher's ability to impart knowledge.

Aristotle arrived from northern Greece to join the Academy at age 17, studying and teaching there for the last 20 years of Plato's life. Plato died in Athens, and was probably buried on the Academy grounds.

## Plato's Dialogues

With the exception of a set of letters of dubious provenance, all of Plato's surviving writings are in dialogue form, with the character of Socrates appearing in all but one of them. His 36 dialogues are generally ordered into early, middle and late, though their chronology is determined by style and content rather than specific dates.

The earliest of Plato's dialogues offer a deep exploration of Socrates' dialectic method of breaking down and analyzing ideas and presumptions. In the "Euthyphro," Socrates' endless questioning pushes a religious expert to realize that he has no understanding of what "piety" means. Such analyses pushed his students towards grappling with so-called Platonic forms—the ineffable perfect models (truth, beauty, what a chair should look like) by which people judge objects and experiences.

In the middle dialogues, Plato's individual ideas and beliefs, though never advocated outright, emerge from the Socratic form. The "Symposium" is a series of drinking-party speeches on the nature of love, in which Socrates says the best thing to do with romantic desire is to convert it into amicable truth-seeking (an idea termed "Platonic love" by later writers). In the "Meno," Socrates demonstrates that wisdom is less a matter of learning things than "recollecting" what the soul already knows, in the way that an untaught boy can be led to discover for himself a geometric proof.

The monumental "Republic" is a parallel exploration of the soul of a nation and of an individual. In both, Plato finds a three-part hierarchy between rulers, auxiliaries and citizens and between reason, emotion and desire. Just as reason should reign supreme in the individual, so should a wise ruler control a society.

Only those with wisdom (ideally a sort of "philosopher-king") are able to discern the true nature of things. The experiences of the lower tiers of the state and of the soul are—as Plato's famous analogy has it—related to true knowledge the way the shadows on the wall of a cave are related to, yet wholly different from, the forms that cast them.

Plato's late dialogues are barely dialogues at all but rather explorations of specific topics. The "Timeaus" explains a cosmology intertwined with geometry, in which perfected three-dimensional shapes—cubes, pyramids, icosahedrons—are the "Platonic solids" out of which the whole universe is made. In the "Laws," his final dialogue, Plato retreats from the pure theory of the "Republic," suggesting that experience and history as well as wisdom can inform the running of an ideal state.

## Plato: Legacy and Influence

The Academy flourished for nearly three centuries following Plato's death, but was destroyed in the sacking of Athens by the Roman general Sulla in 86 B.C. Though continually read in the Byzantine Empire and in the Islamic world, Plato was overshadowed by Aristotle in the Christian west.

It was only in the Renaissance that scholars like Petrarch led a revival of Plato's thought, in particular his explorations of logic and geometry. William Wordsworth, Percy Shelly and others in the 19th-century Romantic movement found philosophical solace in Plato's dialogues.