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## 5. Athens: Plato


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## 5. Athens: Plato

### Abstract

Plato (427-347 B. C.) was born to a distinguished Athenian family a few years after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. He came under the influence of Socrates, although he may not have been one of the philosopher's most intimate followers. After the death of his mentor, Plato left Athens in disgust, giving up any hope of ever entering the political career he had long desired. Upon returning to the city some years later, he founded the school known as the Academy (387 B. C.), to which he devoted the remaining years of his long life. Many students came here to pursue a wide range of interests that went beyond formal philosophy itself, including political science, natural science, and mathematics. The school continued after Plato's death as an influential educational institution, coming to an end only in A. D. 529 . In many ways the Academy can lay claim to being the world's first university. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Greek history, Greek civilization, Greek philosophers, city-state

### Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Ancient Philosophy | Classics | Cultural History | History

### Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

### Authors

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5. Plato (Dualists)*Form & Matter*

Plato (427-347 B. C.) was born to a distinguished Athenian family a few years after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. He came under the influence of Socrates, although he may not have been one of the philosopher's most intimate followers. After the death of his mentor, Plato left Athens in disgust, giving up any hope of ever entering the political career he had long desired. Upon returning to the city some years later, he founded the school known as the Academy (387 B. C.), to which he devoted the remaining years of his long life. Many students came here to pursue a wide range of interests that went beyond formal philosophy itself, including political science, natural science, and mathematics. The school continued after Plato's death as an influential educational institution, coming to an end only in A. D. 529. In many ways the Academy can lay claim to being the world's first university.

*Monists see the essence of the world in one single thing.*

Although Plato preferred personal contact with students as a method of teaching, he did a considerable amount of writing. Since almost all of his literary works are believed to have survived, it is possible to study him more thoroughly than any other Greek of his time. This is not as simple as it first appears. Plato wrote over a period of about fifty years and there is no unanimous agreement among scholars as to the order in which his works were completed. Over that length of time his thought certainly developed and matured, but we cannot be as certain of some of the aspects of that development as would be possible had he dated each of his writings.

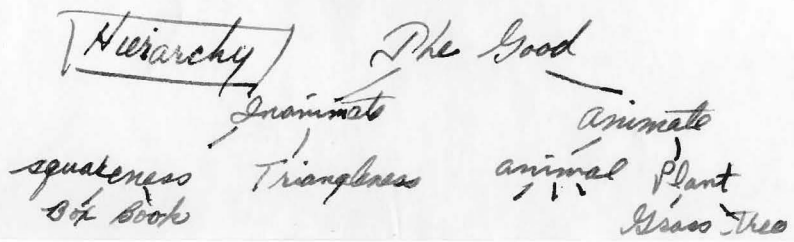
One way to approach Plato's thought is by observing that, like Socrates, he refused to choose either the democratic or the oligarchic party in Athens, but decided instead to pursue the path which Socrates had picked for himself. It may be said that Plato moved on two fronts, which while distinct were necessarily related. First, he believed that it was not enough to talk about human action apart from its relation to the whole of nature. In short, he wanted to establish the connection between ethics and scientific knowing. This illustrates Plato the philosopher at work. The second front along which Plato moved grew directly from the events which led to the execution of his teacher. He was convinced of the soundness of the beliefs of Socrates and accordingly looked for a better and more successful way to carry them out. It was for this reason that he returned to Athens and abandoned the market place for a school. Here we can see the teacher at work.

The approach of Plato to understanding the total universe was one of the pioneer adventures into epistemology. We draw triangles, he would say, and we see them on the sand or on the paper. We pass judgment on these triangles by reference to a perfect triangle which we have never seen or felt. We judge particular oak trees, both twisted and straight, in terms of their

conforming to a perfect oak which we have never seen with our eyes. We judge an act to be just when it conforms to a perfect justice which we have never experienced with our senses. We begin with knowledge gained from the senses -- from seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting -- but Plato would insist that our sensory experience alone proves nothing, that knowledge is incomplete until it can be complemented by something which is not sensory. This something he called form. It is only the judgment of our experience in terms of forms -- perfect triangles, trees, justice -- which gives us true, real knowledge, alongside which other knowledge is mere "opinion."

We can illustrate this by referring to the famous statue of the discus thrower. After we look at it from all angles and compare it with other similar statues, we are led to the judgment that this particular piece of sculpture is just right. Why? Because this is the most adequate representation of what a discus thrower ought to be. How do we know this? To answer this question, we turn to the sculptor himself. We can assume that he saw many discus throwers in action and that he compared their physiques and the various techniques they used. When he came to carving out the statue, he used everything that he had seen in arriving at the proportions of what he thought was the ideal or perfect discus thrower. To change these proportions would be to destroy the balance, the harmony which makes the statue just right. To change them would be to go beyond the limits set by the ideal and to carve something that was not ideal. For this reason the sculptor in actually producing the statue paid little attention to the details of his subject's face. He was not trying to represent any particular discus thrower he might have seen in action. He was trying to represent a type, an ideal type, a form. It would not have occurred to Plato's sculptor that he could have produced his best statue any other way.

What, if anything, is the relationship between the ideal tree, and ideal justice? If there is none, then there is no intelligible picture of the whole universe possible. If ethical and scientific forms are separate and unrelated, then we are left with a divided and hence unintelligible world. There will be one set of ideals in one and another set in the other. Plato thought that a relationship between forms did exist and that the relationship was hierarchical. For example, the triangle is incorporated into the design of the chair which accomodates the human body in which is housed the human mind, or reason. This example illustrates the ascending order in the hierarchy, at the top of which Plato placed the form of the Good. When we say that a thing is good and relate it to the Good, we have said the last or final thing that can be said about it. Our knowledge is complete. The Good depends on nothing. Everything -- including triangles, trees, and acts -- depends on it. For the Good to be dependent on anything else would be to Plato a return to polytheism or an acceptance of the relativism of the Sophists.





Where do the forms, including the form of the Good, exist? If they exist outside the natural world, then for Plato they are unattainable by human reason and therefore useless in undergirding our knowledge. If they are not related to particular things, then it is not possible for us to have knowledge. Plato was less than clear in defining this relationship. He explained that particular things "participated in" the forms, a choice of words which left a wide-open argument for later philosophers. Finally, if the forms do not exist apart from particular things, then we are incapable of arriving at any comparative judgments or of classifying things. [Each particular thing becomes a class in itself. To perform the function Plato saw for them, therefore, the forms must meet three tests. First, they must be susceptible to human reason. Second, they must be related to particular things. Third, they must be beyond particular things. Plato apparently believed that if the world of sensory experience would ever collapse (an eventuality he expected never would happen), it would not affect the forms at all. But, if the forms were to be destroyed, then the world of sensory experience would collapse.]

How did the forms get to be related to the particular things? This is a question apart from the question of how they are related, and it raises again the problem of motion and change in the universe. For Plato there were two kinds of things: inanimate and animate. There were also two kinds of motion: continuing and self-starting. This distinction between the inanimate and animate arose from the presence of an anima in those things which we call alive. Perhaps the least unsatisfactory translation of the word anima is soul. Plato attributed all motion in the universe to souls, the only things which could move themselves. They were finally responsible for all motion we would call mechanical. These souls were created in a hierarchical order by what Plato called the Demiurge, which alone for him could be called anything like God in the Christian sense and which lacked many of the attributes of the Christian God. The creation of the universe for Plato resembled the work of a modern building contractor. Like the contractor, the Demiurge had created neither the forms nor the matter, but had simply imposed the already existing forms (the highest of which is the Good) on the already existing matter.

One of the recurring questions in Western thought seeks to establish the connection between body and soul. Plato tried to answer this question. If we remember his emphasis on the forms, on the importance of knowing, and on the soul, we should not be surprised at his calling man an embodied soul. [While he did call the body the prison house of the soul, this did not mean that he was denying it any importance whatsoever. Rather, the body was the indispensable material stuff for the soul's terrestrial existence. It was to be disciplined so that it would assist and not hinder the soul's climb to the Good. Plato reasoned that the soul of an individual is divine and, being divine, immortal. After death it is released from the body and continues in existence. It should be evident that Plato's

discussion of body and soul made his philosophy more congenial than any other to early Christianity.]

Such knowledge as Plato is offering here cannot be proved by the methods thus far introduced. If all knowledge is in terms of the Good and our knowledge of the Good cannot be in terms of anything higher, then there must be some further development of our knowing. If knowledge is never true until it is complete or total, there must be this further development to enable us to complete our knowledge with some comprehension of what Plato calls first things and last things. [For Plato to introduce knowledge such as what is called faith would be for him to divide knowledge against itself] to introduce an irrational element, to return to primitive Greek polytheism. This further development of knowing is for him an extension of human reason to the highest pitch to which it can be brought. It was this which made it possible for Plato to combine all of the elements of human knowing to make an intelligible world picture. When he reached the point at which he asked how the world began or how society originated he said: "I will tell you a likely tale." These tales we call myths. As seen here, a myth is an artistic creation which seeks to embody all knowledge by selecting the most significant parts of it, weaving them into an aesthetic whole checked by scientific knowing. The myth is meant to be taken seriously but not literally. Perhaps the most famous of Plato's myths is contained in the story of the cave, in which he attempts to round out and complete the Socratic vision of the Good. It is instructive to note just how far Plato had come from Greek polytheism when he reached this point.

After this, I said, imagine the enlightenment or ignorance of our nature in a figure: Behold! human beings living in a sort of underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all across the den; they have been here from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them; for the chains are arranged in such a manner as to prevent them from turning round their heads. At a distance above and behind them the light of a fire is blazing, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have before them, over which they show the puppets.

I see, he said.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying vessels, which appear over the wall; also figures of men and animals, made of wood and stone and various materials; and some of the passengers, as you would expect, are talking, and some of them are silent?

That is a strange image, he said, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to talk with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy that the voice which they heard was that of a passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

There can be no question, I said, that the truth would be to them just nothing but the shadows of the images.

That is certain.

And now look again, and see how they are released and cured of their folly. At first, when any one of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to go up and turn his neck round and walk and look at the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then imagine some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now he is approaching real being and has a truer sight and vision of more real things, -- what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, -- will he not be in a difficulty? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer.

And if he is compelled to look at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the object of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

True, he said.

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast and forced into the presence of the sun himself, do you not think that he will be pained and irritated, and when he approaches the light he will have his eyes dazzled, and will not be able to see any of the realities which are now affirmed to be the truth?

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will require to get accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; next he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars; and he will see the sky and the stars by night, better than the sun, or the light of the sun, by day?

Certainly.



And at last he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him as he is in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate his nature.

Certainly.

And after this he will reason that the sun is he who gives the seasons and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Clearly, he said, he would come to the other first and to this afterwards.

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Certainly, he would.

And if they were in the habit of conferring honors on those who were quickest to observe and remember and foretell which of the shadows went before, and which followed after, and which were together, do you think that he would care for such honors and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer, --

"Better to be a poor man, and have a poor master," and endure anything, rather than to think and live after their manner? ✓

Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than live after their manner.

Imagine once more, I said, that such an one coming suddenly out of the sun were to be replaced in his old situation, is he not certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

Very true, he said.

And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who have never moved out of the den, during the time that his sight is weak, and before his eyes are steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable), would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he comes without his eyes; and that there was no use in even thinking of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender in the act, and they would put him to death. ✓

No question, he said.

This allegory, I said, you may now append to the previous argument; the prison is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, the ascent and vision of the things above you may truly regard as the upward progress of the soul into the intellectual world; that is my poor belief, to which, at your desire, I have given expression. Whether I am right or not God only knows; but, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and the

*all of this is within nature. know this forms by reason.*



lord of light in this world, and the source of truth and reason in the other: this is the first great cause which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must behold.]

I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you. \*

*A country should change when it is needed.*

A second front along which Plato moved was made necessary by his conviction that there must be a better way to carry out the vision of Socrates in the society of the polis. He undertook to explore this way in the Republic, the longest of his works, written about 380 B. C., when he was just past middle life.

*Utopia - ideal situation (nowhere)*

The Republic opens with an ethical question: What is justice? Plato suggests that justice is to be found most clearly, not in the individual person, but "writ large" in the polis. He is convinced that justice for the latter will, at one and the same time, be justice for the individual too.

[Rejecting the idea that it is something to be defined as each person sees it, Plato pictured a hierarchical social order and found justice in a harmony among the necessary classes in society, each with its own function to perform and each with its own standard or virtue for that function. First, there were the producers, the artisans and merchants who provided the necessities and luxuries of everyday life. Their standard was temperance, which involved not only the control of appetite, but also contentment with their place in society. The producers were essential to society, Plato thought, but taken alone they would constitute little more than a "city of pigs." Second, there were the warriors, whose function it was to defend the state against its enemies and whose standard was courage. Third, there were the guardians, whose function was to provide the state with leadership and whose standard was wisdom. There is justice, both for individuals and for the polis, when all three of these classes are contributing their best efforts and are being rewarded accordingly.]

*Enochson*

*organic  
each part  
has its own  
function*

Plato explains the appearance of these three classes in society by resorting to one of his myths, put into the mouth of Socrates:

...I really know not how to look you in the face, or in what words to utter the audacious fiction, which I propose to communicate gradually, first to the rulers, then to the soldiers, and lastly to the people. They are to be informed that their youth was a dream, and the education and training which they received from us an appearance only; in reality during all that time they were in process of

\* The Republic, in The Dialogues of Plato . . . , trans. B. Jowett (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, And Co., 1874), II, 341-344.

formation and nourishment in the womb of the earth, where they themselves and their arms and appurtenances were manufactured; and when they were completed, the earth, their mother, sent them up; and, their country being their mother and also their nurse, they are therefore bound to advise for her good, and to defend her against attacks, and her citizens they are to regard as children of the earth and their own brothers.

I cannot wonder, he said, at your feeling ashamed of uttering the lie.

Nay, I replied, there is more yet; I have not told you all. Citizens, we shall say to them in our tale, you are brothers, yet God has framed you differently. Some of you have the power of command, and these he has composed of gold, wherefore also they have the greatest honor; others of silver, to be auxiliaries; others again who are to be husbandmen and craftsmen he has made of brass and iron;... Such is the tale; is there any possibility of making our citizens believe in it? \*

Plato credited each individual with some capacity for the virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice; but he believed that these capacities were unequally distributed among men. Plato reasoned that since men are very different in ability, they need each other. This need is met by the state, whose very existence therefore rests upon a division of labor, upon each person's doing what he is best qualified to do. Since there will be justice only if the best use is made of the abilities of every individual, the most important function of government is education, a subject to which Plato devotes a large part of the Republic.

Plato was most <sup>Spartan (communist)</sup> concerned with the education of the guardians, since they were the ones who were expected to know the good and use their knowledge to order the whole of society in a rational manner. The education of this class was to begin with the very young and continue until they reached the age of thirty-five. Plato believed that inequality in the distribution of wealth is one of the chief disrupting influences in society, because it leads to class jealousies and disunity. Since in the Republic all obstacles were to be removed which might hinder the guardians in selfless devotion to wisdom and justice, they were to have no private property. They were to live, sleep, and eat together. Similarly, since family life can breed jealousy and disunity, it too was denied the guardians. This would permit better mating of men and women and more thorough education of children. Also, it would free for the benefit of the state the capacities of guardian women as well as guardian men.

\* Ibid., II, 239-240.

At the head of the guardian class Plato placed a philosopher-king. The very name suggests that in doing this he was trying to bring together in this individual the climax both of power and of good, in a way he believed neither Athenian democracy nor Spartan aristocracy had ever succeeded in doing. The philosopher-king is the culmination of Plato's basic convictions: the good state is the one governed by men who know the Good; only a few men are gifted sufficiently to proceed very far into the world of forms to detect the Good; and, since no man does evil knowingly, a philosopher-king can be trusted to do for men far better than they can do for themselves. Plato expressed these convictions and also the difficulty in getting men to accept them as follows:

...Until, then, philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who follow either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never cease from ill -- no, nor the human race, as I believe -- and then only will this our State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day: this was what I wanted but was afraid to say, ...for to see that there is no other way either of private or public happiness is indeed a hard thing. \*

In this brief account of the Republic it is assumed, for the sake of presentation, that Plato was trying seriously to describe the perfect state, without ruling out the possibility that, in his mind, many of the minute details which he introduced were subject to discussion and change. In later life, Plato himself wrote two books in which he returned to the subject of government and considered a number of such changes. In the Laws, which was written in his old age and which he may never have considered finished, his approach was in terms of what political system was possible in the fourth century Greek world. He had attempted, unsuccessfully it turned out, to assist in reforming the government of Syracuse, in Sicily; and one of the purposes of the Laws may have been to provide a model by which his students might guide themselves if called upon to act as political advisers. Plato makes clear that he is concerned here, not with "the best thing in the world," only with the "second best" -- with what is possible. But even in the Laws, the basic presuppositions remain.

It should be understood that scholars are not in agreement in their interpretation of the purposes of the Republic and hence in their opinion of how we should understand it. It is possible to argue, for example, that we should take the Republic literally because it is the actual blueprint for a perfect state. It

\* Ibid., II, 301.

*China*  
*scholar*  
*merchant*  
*soldier*  
*ranked*  
*people*



is possible to believe that Plato's main concern was to discuss the nature and ramifications of justice and that the detailed social regulations which he introduced are decidedly secondary, if not unimportant. It is also possible to contend that Plato was actually poking fun at some of the institutions of his own day.

Whatever may have been the motives of its author, the Republic has had a long and influential history. It has inspired a large body of utopian literature, of which Thomas More's famous book is but one example. It has often appealed to people who are interested in deducing social institutions from abstract principles. And finally, it has sometimes lent its weight to authoritarian experiments in government which are grounded upon the assumption that the lives of individuals need to be strictly regulated in the interests of the state.

*Plato believed the universe was created.*