

PLATO

427 – 347 BCE

Known as the most influential figure in Western philosophy, Plato commented on a diverse range of subjects, including justice, knowledge, truth, the good, virtue and government. He also questioned the reality of the physical world, now known as “Platonism.” The discord between the material world and the spiritual was a recurring inquiry in all of his works, as Plato attempted to see through “appearances” in order to understand true reality and the nature the world.

As a matter of interest, he was born Aristocles but his wrestling coach nicknamed him Platon, meaning “broad” because of his wide shoulders. Plato was a student of Socrates, the teacher of Aristotle, and founder of the Academy in Athens, which operated as an institution of higher learning until 529 CE and was a model for later universities in the western world. He wrote twenty-seven dialogues in the form of entertaining and intellectual conversations between various citizens of Greece, mostly narrated by his mentor, Socrates, the primary protagonist, as Plato never spoke in his own voice. His literary style followed a logical sequence of deductive reasoning known as the “Socratic method,” using continually probing questions and answers to search for the truth. Until medieval times (beginning in the 5th century CE), most of Plato’s works were forgotten but were subsequently preserved by Muslim scholars in the 9th century CE who translated them from Greek into Arabic and Latin, sparking a resurgence of interest in him during the Renaissance (approximately the 14th – 17th centuries). Plato incorporated a multitude of notable philosophical and political themes in his work:

CREATION

Plato’s view of creation suggested that it originated out of disordered chaos by the providence of God, the creator, who put intelligence into man’s soul.

“The creation of this world is the combined work of necessity and mind. Mind, the ruling power, persuaded necessity to bring the greater part of created things to perfection, and thus and after this manner in the beginning, through necessity made subject to reason, this universe was created” (Plato, *Timaeus*, 48 a).

He believed that nothing began or changed without cause; therefore, the creation of the universe must have been by a force (“intelligence”) who took a world that formally existed in disarray and remodeled it in harmony, balanced proportion, and symmetry – allowing man to come into being as “a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence” (Ibid., 30 b).

AFTERLIFE / THE SOUL

Plato had mystical and otherworldly views about the eternal world beyond what we see. He submitted that we are “born with knowledge...before our mortal life” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 76 b, c) but it is forgotten because we are fooled by appearances in the visible world. By suggesting that we know things we have never experienced, he asserted that the human soul had a previous reality, possesses intelligence, is immortal and indestructible, and continues in existence after the death of the body – not unlike beliefs of the eastern philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism which advance the concept of reincarnation.

“If the soul exists before birth, and if when it proceeds toward life and is born it must be born from death...surely it must exist after death” (Ibid., 77 d).

As Plato conceived it, the soul has three different aspects: (1) the rational, logical soul that loves truth and wisdom; (2) the spirited soul, of competition, ambition and anger, that “carries his passion into action” (Plato, *Republic*, 586 c); and (3) the appetitive soul that desires sundry pleasures and physical satisfaction. Plato equated this tripartite nature of the soul to those different individuals who make up the state – private citizens who are lovers of learning, those abounding with emotion, and the lovers of money. Accordingly, if the soul maintains harmony among its several parts, governed by reason and intelligence, the individual will have a full life and become just.

THE STATE

In Plato’s division of the state, every citizen has his own specific duties “having and doing of one’s own and what belongs to oneself” (Ibid., 434 a). Consisting of three distinct classes of people, the ideal republic would include: (1) wise and efficient rulers who are philosophers, unselfish, and understanding of justice (whom Plato referred to as “guardians”); (2) soldiers who are courageous, virtuous, protect the state against foreign enemies and maintain peace (referred to as “auxiliaries”); and (3) everyone else, including ordinary trades people, artisans and farmers of moderate desires (referred to as “husbandmen”). He argued that only philosophers should be guardians of the state and hold political power, acting as its true savior, because they are the only true lovers of wisdom, “being wise and exercising forethought in behalf of the entire soul” (Ibid., 441 e). Plato’s ultimate goal for society was to have its inhabitants live

in gentle harmony with one another, pursuing knowledge that would lead to justice.

The role of women in Plato’s ideal state were equal to that of men, “as far as possible of like natures,” living in common houses, meeting at common meals where no one “will have anything specially his or her own” (Ibid., 458 d). Plato proposed that the nurturing of all citizens through education (particularly speech, diction, music, gymnastics and the love of truth for men and women alike) begin at an early age – to promote the “truly good and fair disposition of the character and the mind” (Ibid., 400 e).

“All these things, then, will have to be carefully considered by us; and if only those whom we introduce to this vast system of education and training are sound in the body and mind, justice herself will have nothing to say against us, and we shall be the saviors of the constitution and of the state” (Ibid., 536 b).

In the quest for unity and good will among city dwellers towards each other, Plato’s totalitarian view of a just society had the form of a communistic system: the ownership of private property “which was not open for all to enter at will” was prohibited; and, to avoid corruption, it was unlawful to handle money for fear of “polluting the divine.” In Plato’s imaginary and idyllic republic, “a State is disorganized when you have one half of the world triumphing and the other plunged into grief at the same events happening to the city” (Ibid., 462 b).

“Then these citizens, above all others, will have one and the same thing in common which they will name mine, and by virtue of this communion they will have pleasure and pain in common” (Ibid., 464 a).

Questions concerning politics, education, ethics, justice and the pursuit of knowledge were all intertwined as one and the same inquiry – leading to “the good.”

WISDOM / KNOWLEDGE

Plato, speaking through the character of Socrates, proposed that knowledge was already possessed and we merely recollect previously understood knowledge of things he referred to as “Forms.” He stated that, “the Form is the idea of good...the cause of all that is right and beautiful” (Ibid., 517 b, c). Forms (or “idea of good”) are the eternal, immutable truths in the universe that are not learned – but remembered. The belief that life is timeless is one of Plato’s most everlasting contributions to the history of deep, contemplative thought. In his theory, all things are “poor imitations” of previously known knowledge and education reminds the soul of what is right. Addressing his disciple Simmias, Socrates offered the argument that knowledge is obtained before birth:

“Suppose that when you see something you say to yourself, This thing which I can see has a tendency to be like something else, but it falls short and cannot be really like it, only a poor imitation. Don’t you agree with me that anyone who receives that impression must in fact have previous knowledge of that thing which he says that the other resembles, but inadequately?” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 74 e).

Therefore, knowledge of anything requires recognition of the Forms, giving unity and the higher good to all things. In Plato’s pursuit of wisdom, the reality of life that allows man to go beyond the appearance of things is only gained through the rigorous discipline of thought.

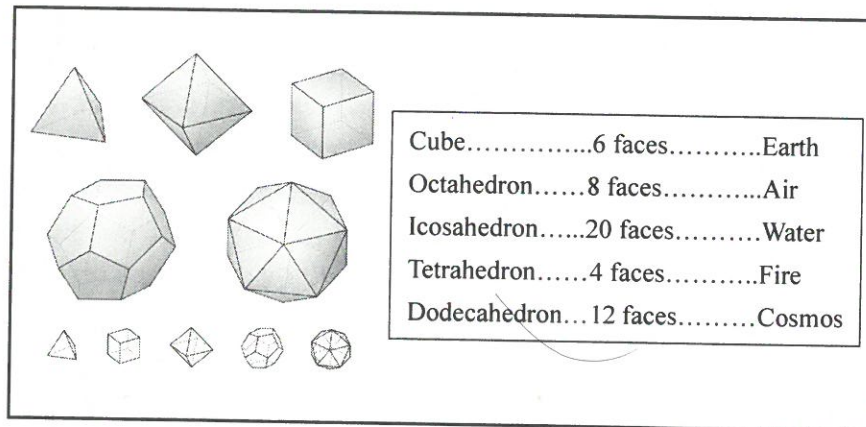
REALITY and ILLUSION

Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave, found in the *Republic*, depicts a group of prisoners dwelling in a dark subterranean den from childhood, chained and forced to gaze at the back wall (suggesting that this is the life that man has known). A fire blazes above and behind them at the outside entrance. Unable to turn their heads, they only see the projected shadows cast on the wall of the cave of passing puppeteers carrying figurines between the fire and the prisoners. The prisoners assume that the shadows of the objects are real. Freed from his chains, a prisoner among them makes his way up and into the light to seek wisdom, the higher good, and the way to knowledge. Offering a metaphor for the resistance to philosophical investigation, Plato describes how the prisoner is initially pained and blinded by the dazzling light – until he slowly adjusts and finally focuses on the Sun itself to “see its true nature, not by reflections...in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place” (Plato, *Republic*, 516 b). Thus, Plato is reminding us that what we see is an illusion (i.e. the shadows on the cave wall), mistaking appearances for reality. If we only see with our eyes, we are blind.

FIVE PLATONIC SOLIDS

In the province of geometry there are only five regular polyhedrons (Greek for “many faces”), defined by the fact that all of their corners (vertexes) meet the same number of faces and all angles are the same (congruent). Although Euclid stated that these five regular solids are shapes of the fundamental components of the universe (*Elements*, Book 13), it was Plato, fascinated by their symmetry and beauty, who considered them to be “the probable truth of nature” that “God used in the delineation of the universe” (Plato, *Timaeus*). He assigned four of these solids to each of the classical elements of Earth, Air, Water and Fire in the belief that all physical bodies

were composed of planes and triangles. Plato credited the fifth solid, dodecahedron, to God's use "for embroidering the constellations on the whole heaven" (Ibid.). His glorious cosmic vision gave relevance to the field of geometry, stimulating its development and lending credibility to Kepler's model of planetary motion nearly two thousand years later.



Generally considered Plato's last work, *Timaeus* culminated with his metaphysical thoughts exploring the nature of our existence in a universe divinely created:

"And so now we may say that our account of the universe has reached its conclusion. This world of ours has received and teems with living things, mortal and immortal. A visible living thing containing visible things, and a perceptible God, the image of the intelligible Living Thing. Its grandness, goodness, beauty, and perfection are unexcelled. Our one universe, indeed, the only one of its kind, has come to be" (Plato, *Timaeus*, 92 c).

PRINCIPLE WORKS (Listed In Probable Chronological Order)

Apology
Charmides
Crito
Euthyphro
Ion
Laches
Hippias Major
Hippias Minor
Lysis
Menexenus
Protagoras
Euthydemus
Gorgias
Meno
Cratylus
Parmenides
Phaedo
Phaedrus
Republic
Symposium
Theaetetus
Critias
Laws
Philebus
Sophist
Statesman
Timaeus