

PLATO

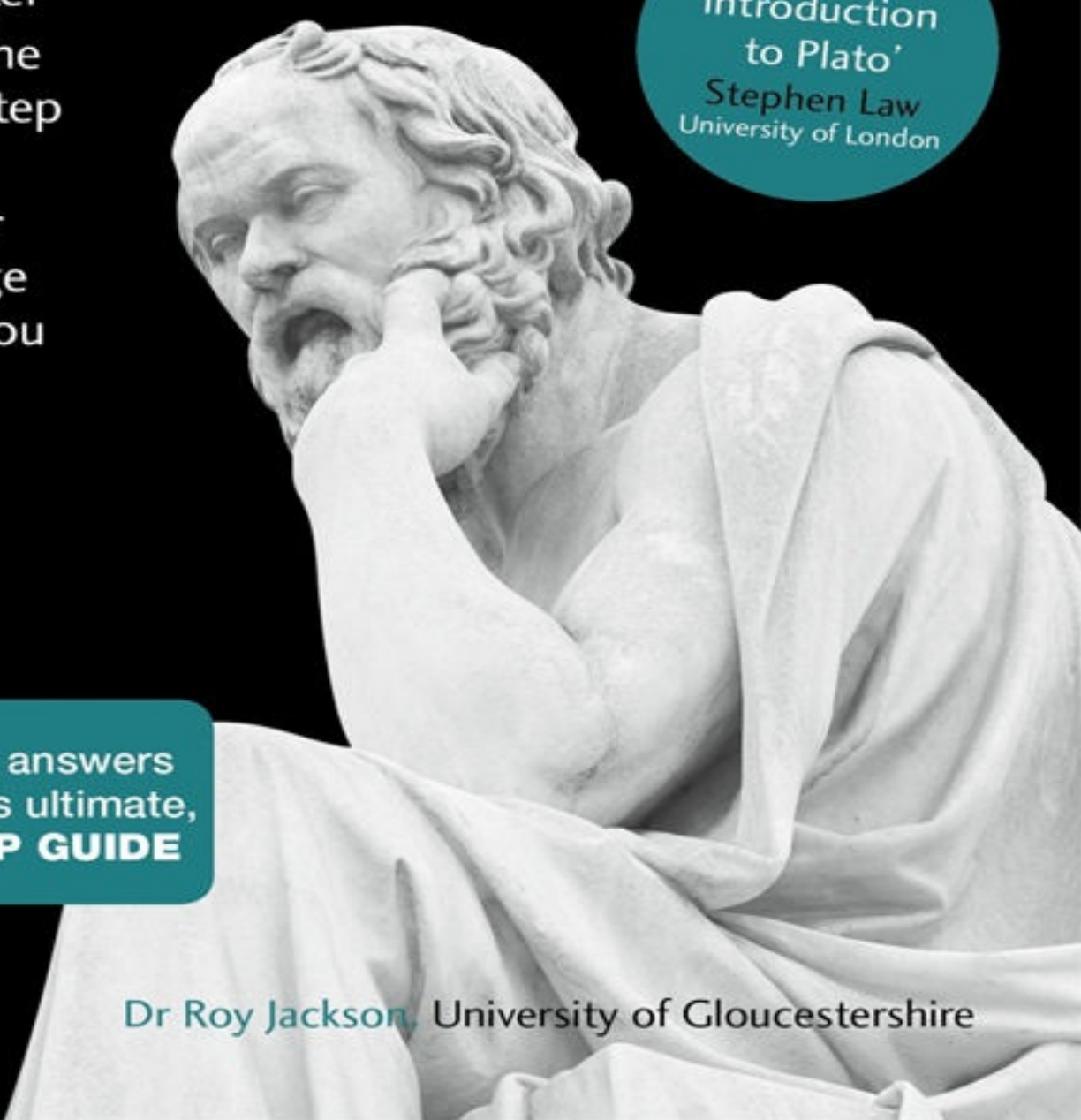
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PLATO

A complete introduction

Roy Jackson

To Annette; the Form of Beauty and the Good

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Praise for *Plato: a complete introduction*

“Remarkable in its scope, this book not only outlines all of Plato’s dialogues, but also traces his context in early Greek thought and his legacy. It does indeed provide a ‘complete introduction’ to this seminal thinker.

Clear and accessible, but really substantial in its coverage, Jackson’s style is ideal for a book at this level. It should appeal equally to students and to the general reader seeking to deepen his or her knowledge of Plato and thus of the starting point for so much Western thought and culture.”

Dr Mel Thompson, author of *Understand Philosophy* and *The Philosopher’s Beach Book*

“Roy Jackson writes in a wonderful, clear and accessible way, and has produced a first-rate introduction to Plato.”

Stephen Law, University of London, author of *The Philosophy Gym* and *The Great Philosophers*

About the Author

Welcome to *Plato – A complete introduction!*

My first encounter with Plato was his *Republic*. I was a first-year undergraduate at the time and, although there have been occasional frustrations and moments of despair, the love affair with Plato's works has remained fairly constant over the years.

I am currently Reader in Philosophy and Religion at the University of Gloucestershire in the UK. I have written books on Nietzsche, Plato, the Philosophy of Religion, and Islamic Philosophy. Previous to lecturing at university, I taught philosophy and religion in schools and sixth forms, and was an A-level chief examiner. I have written A-level texts and accessible articles for *Dialogue* and *The Philosophers' Magazine*, and give talks at schools and colleges.

Nothing gives me more satisfaction than teaching students about Plato, especially when this results in a greater understanding and appreciation of what Plato really says. This was also my main intention, and hope, in writing *Plato – A complete introduction*.

Reference convention

The system of reference used here is known as Stephanus pagination, named after Henricus Stephanus who published the complete works of Plato in 1578. He divided the works into numbers, with each number then divided into sections a, b, c, d and e. Since then this system has often been used to reference Plato, for example *Republic*, 331c. The advantage of this reference system is that, no matter what translation or edition you use, the Stephanus reference will be the same, even though the page number of that edition will be different.

How to use this book

This Complete Introduction from *Teach Yourself*® includes a number of special boxed features, which have been developed to help you understand the subject more quickly and remember it more effectively. Throughout the book, you will find these indicated by the following icons.



The book includes concise **quotes** from other key sources. These will be useful for helping you understand different viewpoints on the subject, and they are fully referenced so that you can include them in essays if you are unable to get your hands on the source.



The **case study** is a more in-depth introduction to a particular example. There is at least one in most chapters, and hopefully they will provide good material for essays and class discussions.



The **key terms** are highlighted throughout the book. If you only have half an hour to go before your exam, scanning through these would be a very good way of spending your time.



The **spotlight/nugget** boxes give you some additional information that will enliven your learning.



The **fact-check** questions at the end of each chapter are designed to help you ensure you have taken in the most important concepts from the chapter. If you find you are consistently getting several answers wrong, it may be worth trying to read more slowly, or taking notes as you go.



The **dig deeper** boxes give you ways to explore topics in greater depth than we are able to go to in this introductory level book.

The Presocratics and the beginning of philosophy

The historical figure that features most prominently in virtually all of Plato's writings is Socrates. However, before there was Socrates, there were other philosophers – collectively known as the **Presocratics** – who were not only the first to engage in philosophy as such, but also proved to be influential to the thought of Socrates and Plato. This chapter, therefore, takes a look at just some of these Presocratics and considers what philosophy is and how we distinguish it from Greek myth. Some of the concepts presented by these Presocratics are obscure and difficult to follow, so don't worry if you struggle a bit with this first chapter (you can, if you wish, safely move straight to [Chapter 2](#)) since you'll be joining the ranks of many philosophers who have likewise battled with these thinkers.

The birth of Western philosophy

If you were to look at a map of the eastern Mediterranean and were asked to point to the birthplace of Western philosophy, there is a strong possibility your finger would land in Greece and then, more specifically, Athens. This would certainly be a quite natural response for, after all, this is the birthplace of Socrates and Plato and, in fact, to some extent it is correct to say that philosophy did begin there in the sense that it was Greece where it developed into the structured school of thought that we know today. But no school of thought arrives to us fully formed as if from a vacuum. Before we had Socrates we had a group of thinkers now commonly referred to as the **Presocratics** – those that lived before and, in some cases, during the life of Socrates. When we look at these Presocratics our finger will dance over this map, while only momentarily resting on Greece. In fact, the first of these Presocratics, and the beginnings of ancient 'Greek' philosophy, would actually be in what is today Turkey. But, before we look at these early philosophers, it is worth considering what existed even *before* there was philosophy. To the time of myth.

The time of myth

In order to understand what philosophy is, and who philosophers were, it helps to determine what philosophy is *not*. Before the birth of philosophy, the Ancient Greeks were by no means intellectually silent. Before philosophy, there was myth. We can all of us re-tell, at least in parts, a Greek myth or two as they

continue, quite rightly, to be part of the school curriculum. We have been brought up with the captivating stories of Helen of Troy, the Trojan Horse, the Minotaur, Icarus and Daedalus, King Midas and so on. The Greek word *mythos* can certainly be translated as ‘story’ and, for the modern reader, it is perhaps common to associate the word ‘myth’ as a work of fiction, as a good yarn and nothing more. But for the Ancient Greeks, the myths were an important channel in attempting to explain key questions such as why are we here? why is there anything rather than nothing? The myths teach us about what it means to be human and provide moral and political guidance.

Hesiod and Homer

Before the coming of the philosophers in the 8th and 7th centuries BC, Greek poets such as Hesiod and Homer attempted to explain mankind’s role in the known world by tracing the origins and actions of the gods.

The two epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are traditionally ascribed to a single author – Homer – yet it is more likely that, rather than one individual, it was a band of writers and singers who themselves drew upon an older tradition of centuries of songs about a long time ago, dealing with one military campaign at around the 13th century BC, or perhaps even longer ago than that, in which the pastoralist Greeks besieged and destroyed the non-Greek city of Troy in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). These epics with such heroes as Odysseus and Achilles are central to the Greeks’ sense of being Greek, as opposed to the *barbaroi* (those who spoke languages that seemed as meaningless to the Greeks as uttering ‘ba-ba’), despite the fact that the Greeks themselves had a keen interest in the neighbouring civilizations of Persia and Egypt and, to some extent, were jealous of their civilization and culture. They are wonderful works that help us to understand to this day the matters of who we are, about the transience of life and the fragility of love.

In his work *Theogony*, Hesiod sets out to answer the question of why things are as they are. *Theogony* is essentially a creation story, and it is concerned with the origins of the world (**cosmogony**) and of the gods (**theogony**) beginning with the primordial deities (the **protogenoi**): Chaos (goddess of air) first of all, followed in quick succession by Gaia (the Earth goddess), Tartarus (god of the Underworld) and then Eros (goddess of love).

While we might refer to Homer and Hesiod as ‘poets’, that word – as largely

understood today – does not quite sum up who these people were and what their writings represent to the Ancient Greek mind. Perhaps a better description would be something like ‘shaman’ or even ‘prophet’ – they who were inspired by those divine to utter their words, hence:



‘... and they [the Muses] breathed into me wondrous voice, so that I should celebrate things of the future and things that were aforesaid. And they told me to sing of the family of blessed ones who are for ever, and first and last always to sing of themselves.’

Hesiod, *Theogony*, 208

The Muses in the quote above were the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (goddess of memory), and they represented the sources of all knowledge, related orally for centuries in the ancient culture, that was contained in poetic lyrics and myths. For example, Calliope was the source of epic poetry, Clio of history and Urania of astronomy. Hesiod himself was apparently a poor shepherd (possibly he lived just north of Lesbos island, in what is today Turkey), guarding his sheep when the Muses ‘breathed into’ him knowledge in a way that seems familiar to the experience of religious prophets and mystics. Hesiod, therefore, is a *vehicle* for the Muses rather than the *source*.

It is this ‘illumination’ or ‘revelation’ that allowed Hesiod to tell the story of the coming into being of the Greek gods and the natural world, and Hesiod can be credited with referring to gods that were previously unknown.

At the beginning of *Theogony*, Hesiod says:



‘Tell me this from the beginning, Muses who dwell in Olympus, and say, what thing among them came first.’

First came Chaos [the Chasm]; and then broad-breasted Earth [Gaia]’

The Greek term *khaos* is sometimes translated into English as ‘chasm’, which is perhaps a better translation than ‘chaos’, as it is not necessarily a reference to disorder, but rather a formless or a void state that precedes the creation of the universe, or cosmos (Greek, *kosmos*). Essentially, that which precedes the existence of the universe is nothingness, the abyss, and it is from nothingness that Earth is formed – but this inevitably begs the question *how*? Philosophically speaking, this is problematic, for how can something come from nothing? Why is there ‘something’, and what existed before the ‘something’? To answer with ‘nothing’ seems intellectually unsatisfactory. ‘Nothing’ is an ‘illegal’ concept in the sense it cannot be conceived (just try thinking of ‘nothing’) and, by invoking the Muses, it looks like Hesiod is copping out here to the extent that he does not give an answer through observation or reason, but is ‘inspired’ by the Muses. An interesting epistemological question is whether ‘inspiration’ counts as knowledge at all, and many religious believers, mystics and, for that matter, philosophers would claim that it does give us a form of knowledge that cannot be provided through observation or reason, but why Hesiod is not regarded as a philosopher is because his explanation for the existence of the universe ultimately relies upon what the *gods* tell us.

The Materialists

As a youth, Socrates was attracted to the beliefs of the ‘physicalists’, or ‘materialists’, who tried to understand the universe in purely natural terms, rather than appealing to the gods. In questioning the beliefs of his time, Socrates was certainly not unique. What was different was the way he questioned them. Socrates would have encountered some of the greatest minds of his time, as well as being able to explore the beliefs of their predecessors. It was a time when the enlightened Greeks, with leisure on their hands, could wonder about the origins of the universe and our place within it. As a result, many began to question the traditional beliefs in the gods and goddesses, and the creation myths contained within such works as Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. In many respects, this was the beginning of science as we understand it today: the attempt to look for material – rather than spiritual – explanations for the universe.

The Milesians

Look at your map again, for we are still away from Greece. As we leave Hesiod behind, we nonetheless remain in what is today Turkey, and to a city called Miletus. Many of the Presocratics lived everywhere but Greece; for example, on the Ionian or Asia Minor coast, and others from the eastern coast of Italy and the island of Sicily. The geographical aspect is important in understanding why philosophy begins in these regions: because they were located at major trading routes that exposed the people to many foreign ideas, and this is especially true of the citizens of Miletus – the Milesians.

Although we may be in Turkey, we are nonetheless exploring the beginnings of Ancient Greek philosophy because Miletus was a Greek ‘city-state’, or *polis* as the Greeks called them.

The *polis*

To understand Plato and his works it helps to have some idea of the world in which he lived. The Athenian empire at that time consisted of a league of semi-autonomous city-states (*polis*) united by language and culture and formed as a defence against the threatening Persian empire. The *polis* spread across the Mediterranean Sea, getting as far west as Marseille.

The Greek word *Hellas* (‘Greeklom’) best sums up the strong sense of common identity, or the collective mind of a community, that recognized each other through a common language, religion and culture, irrespective of where they might be located geographically. Even today, the Greeks themselves refer to their nation as the Hellenic Republic, for it was the Romans who gave them the name *Graecia*. To be ‘Hellenic’ meant to have the same gods – the Olympians – to share a common language, and for each *polis* to have its own theatre large enough to form an *ekklesia* (the public assembly of citizens). The *gymnasia* (schools) shared a Hellenic curriculum, and every *polis* possessed a similar social system that revolved around the *symposium* (a forum where citizens would meet to drink and debate). It is sometimes said that the high streets of towns today look much like any other and, to some extent, the same could be said for the *polis*; for they each had distinctive Hellenic buildings in common, such as the marketplace (the *agora*), city walls, an aqueduct, bath houses and so on.

In terms of their politics, however, they could differ greatly: some were ruled by a single individual, a *tyrannos*, while others were considered to be democracies: to be ruled (*kratos*) by the people (*demos*). If we are looking for reasons why philosophy developed where and when it did, perhaps the existence of democracy (for Athens was, for some time, a democratic *polis*) could be put forward as one possible explanation since it forced its citizens to take responsibility for their community and to tackle such philosophical questions as: what is the best community to live in? and what does it mean to be human within it?

Philosophy, in order to thrive, also needs wealth and the luxury that comes with this, allowing the people to engage in philosophical speculation; a poor and hungry nation has little inclination or time for philosophizing. At the time of these Presocratics, Miletus was one such wealthy *polis*, engaging in trade with other nations and consequently being confronted by foreign beliefs that resulted in the fertilization of new ideas. Three Milesians in particular – Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes – formulated a new set of questions: they rejected the supernatural, religious explanation for the universe in favour of a more naturalistic, scientific approach.

What these Presocratics thought in detail will most likely remain a mystery. Our sources are poor. Consider what little we know about what medieval thinkers thought, and then double this for the Ancient Greeks, and triple that for the Presocratics! What we do have are scraps, called **fragments**, but even these are most likely to be the work of later authors, or copies of books made by later authors rather than originals and so, if we are lucky, they may have been copied word for word, but there is no guarantee of that. Most of what we know about these Presocratics are from works written by a later thinker telling us what an earlier thinker thought, and these paraphrased reports are called **testimonies** or **doxographies**. One of our richest sources for information here is Aristotle (384–322 BC), but we must be wary for he perhaps tried to fit the Presocratics into his own intellectual framework, rather than being entirely objective.

Thales

Given such paucity of source material it is not surprising that in the case of our very first Presocratic and, thus, the first philosopher of the western world, almost nothing about him can be said with any certainty. Born in Miletus, it is believed

that Thales successfully predicted the eclipse of the sun, which has allowed astronomers to place him as living during the eclipse that occurred in that region in 585 BC. Accounts date Thales as born in about 625 BC, and dying around 545 BC. None of his writings, if indeed he wrote at all, have survived, and so our knowledge of his views depends entirely on later reports. There are, for example, a number of stories about him from the historian Herodotus (c. 484–425 BC), who was writing a hundred years later.



One Thales story

According to one story about Thales, after he had travelled the known world in his quest for knowledge, he returned to Miletus and his mother encouraged him to settle down and take a wife, but Thales was reluctant in this regard. When she was asked why he wouldn't marry, he would answer: 'It's not yet time.' This did not stop people asking him, until later in life he would reply with: 'It's too late.'

According to Aristotle, Thales was the first natural philosopher; the first to give a *logos* to nature. The Greek word *logos* can be variously translated as 'speech', 'word', 'discourse', 'account' etc., and so what Aristotle means here is that Thales attempted to provide an account, a rational explanation, of nature.



'...most of the early students of philosophy thought that first principles in the form of matter, and only these, are the sources of all things; for that of which all things consist, the antecedent from which they have sprung, and into which they are finally resolved (in so far as being underlies them and is changed with their changes), this they say is the element and first principle of things. As to the quantity and form of this first principle, there is a difference of opinion; but Thales, the founder of this sort of philosophy, says that it is water...'

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, i. 3; 983 b 6

The quote above is an example of a doxography, in this case from Aristotle's work *Metaphysics*. While a bit of a mouthful, if we were to unpack it there are a few key terms and phrases here that can tell us a lot about the philosophical quest.

One word used in the quote above is 'principle', and the idea of there being a *first* principle. The Greek word here is *arche*, which can also be variously translated as 'ruler', 'source', 'origin', 'beginning' and so on – hence such English words as 'archaic' and 'archaeology'. Thales, like so many of the philosophers to come after him, including Plato, believed that underneath the many things of which the universe consists, there is one ultimate thing: an

ultimate building block – a foundation – from which all things derive. This idea is known as the **law of parsimony** or the **rule of simplicity**. Methodologically, parsimony serves us well in scientific investigations at least: for example, people from a variety of ages, races, gender, social background, *etc.* can all contract the same illness, so science looks for underlying causes and can help us to choose between competing theories. Here, philosophers (and scientists) can extrapolate further in postulating some one basic stuff for which all else can be explained.


The Presocratics were as much scientists as they were philosophers, for they looked to nature and attempted to find naturalistic explanations for why things are as they are, and do what they do. Thales, typically of the philosophers, does not see his *arche* as a god or gods. For the Greeks there was no separation between the material and the spiritual. The gods lived among us, usually invisible, so investigating the inner workings of nature that governs mortals and gods was not considered offensive to the gods but, unlike Hesiod, the philosophers did not look to the gods as an explanation for the world. For Hesiod, his *arche* is chaos, nothingness, what is unintelligible: there is no explanation and our understanding of the world is essentially unreachable, for it is only for the gods to know. What Thales does, and what philosophers do, is place the responsibility for an explanation in the hands of human beings and human reason. In the case of Thales, he uses **empirical method**: he uses sense-experience in order to get information about the world (*see also* [Chapter 4](#)).

Now, Thales' explanation was wrong of course: read that quote by Aristotle again, and what does Thales' *arche* consist of? Water! Water is the antecedent from which all things have sprung and into which they are finally resolved. It is the first principle of things. Thales presents us with a vision of the universe as a continuous process of Being and Becoming that is so central to our understanding of Plato's philosophy, too. 'Being' is that which endures, while 'Becoming' is the process of coming into being and going out of being. When you open your eyes and look around you what you see is only 'becoming'; things constantly in a process of change, of movement, of ageing, of transforming. In many cases this may be so slow to our eyes that it is not noticeable – a rock does not appear to us to be in a process of change – but in the grand scale of things and over millions of years, even solid rock is being worn down.



Another Thales story

Plato, in his dialogue *Theaetetus* (174a), gives us a picture of Thales that is typical of an absent-minded thinker with his head in the clouds. One day, while looking up at the stars, Thales fell into a well. He was teased by his slave-girl who said that ‘he was so eager to know what was going on in heaven that he could not see what was before his feet’. Plato states that this is typical of all philosophers who, although ‘searching into the essence of man’ are nonetheless ‘wholly unacquainted with his next-door neighbour’.



The ontological superiority of ‘Being’

Given that all we see with our senses suggest only ‘becoming’, the notion that there is something that does not change seems un-empirical. Yet Thales’ appeal to water does make empirical sense to some extent, as Aristotle himself noted. When you look at water through your senses, you note the following:

- It is ‘plastic’ in that it can move rapidly between various states (liquid, solid, gas).
- Steam seems very different from ice, which explains why things appear very different. Water at least has the ability to take on different forms.
- Virtually all living things require water for life, and human beings are composed largely of water! Therefore something common to all living things is water.

Therefore what Thales is doing here is observing how water operates in nature and then extrapolating from that to conclude that water is the underlying substance for all things. His conclusion is inevitably **inductive**, as scientific method is, and we now know this to be a wrong conclusion, but it must be stressed that so much of science today is inductive and has conclusions that inevitably take leaps from the observable to the speculative. The ‘Big Bang’ is still a theory because no one observed the ‘Big Bang’. The best science can do is to observe with the senses and to make what is considered the best explanation possible, given the current evidence, but it may prove to be wrong in the sense that it may be overridden by a newer theory in the future.

I recall one well-respected scientist once telling me that most of what scientists

do even today is basically ‘wrong’ or will, in time, be proven to be so, and I suspect most of the great scientists of today would be quite embarrassed by their own doctoral thesis, which they produced so proudly in their youth. But, to some extent, science isn't really about ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and is more about ‘good induction’: looking at the world as it is currently perceived and deriving the best explanation and the most coherent conclusions from it. Knowledge in this sense is not static, but is forever changing which, as we shall see, was of great concern for Plato.

One might conclude that there is only ‘becoming’, and we will consider that below, but the philosophical implications for the non-existence of ‘Being’ are frightening to consider. There is an ‘ontological superiority’ to be had from ‘Being’. **Ontology** is the philosophical study of the nature of being, and ‘Being’ – in the sense of something that is unchanging and the origin of all things – is considered *superior* because it is unchanging. Consider what the central goal of philosophy is: to search for truth. However, if all things are in a process of change, then how can we pin ‘truth’ on anything at all? Truth implies that something is always the case, regardless of time or place but, for that, we need ‘Being’. This idea, such a central concern for Plato, will be considered later.

Anaximander and Anaximenes

In the same way that Plato is the successor to Socrates, it was possible that Anaximander (c. 610–540 BC) was Thales’ pupil (and maybe even a relation), and hence continued to carry the torch of early philosophy. Like Thales, Anaximander liked to investigate natural phenomena, including eclipses and meteorological events, as well as zoology and cosmology. It is said that he was the first Greek to construct a map of the land and sea and he is also credited with inventing the sundial!

Also, like Thales, this successor looked for an *arche*, for an explanation for everything, but he differs in one very important respect: for Anaximander the basic stuff of the universe cannot possibly be something we can observe, such as water. He postulated something more basic than the elements, because the elements are problematic: water is certainly malleable, but it is hard to conceive of it as forming fire! Also, water is too identifiable and ordinary and, therefore, too much like other things to be something ‘other than’ other things. Contingent (dependent for its existence on other things), everyday things are definite,

visible, definable, have boundaries, and so on, but surely Being must be something other and different from the world of contingent things, something boundless, indefinable, with no properties (size, shape, etc.). A definite thing, by definition, is limited, and so the *arche* cannot be a definite thing. Instead, the *arche* for Anaximander is *apeiron*. As Aristotle in his work *Physics* points out:



‘But it is not possible that infinite matter is one and simple; either, as some say, that it is something different from the elements, from which they are generated, or that it is absolutely one. For there are some who make the infinite of this character, but they do not consider it to be air or water, in order that other things may not be blotted out by the infinite; for these are mutually antagonistic to one another, inasmuch as air is cold, water is moist, and fire hot; if one of these were infinite, the rest would be at once blotted out; but now they say that the infinite is something different from these things, namely, that from which they come.’

Aristotle, *Physics*, iii. 5; 204 b 22

Apeiron, then, is something different from all other things. It lacks any intrinsic features and so could be translated as ‘boundless’, ‘indefinite’ or ‘eternal’. Importantly, what Anaximander is demonstrating here is that Being, by its very nature, defies definition and this is something that Plato, too, was aware of when, through the character of Socrates, he was pressed to define what he meant by the Forms (see [Chapter 4](#)) and could only respond by using analogy. It also makes Anaximander more like Plato in that we are moving further away from what the senses reveal to us and relying upon our ability to reason in order to postulate something beyond our senses.

Finally, a mention of the third of our three Milesians, for if Anaximander was sitting in the front of the class while Thales lectured on water, a younger Anaximenes was sitting a little further back, taking it all in so as to come up with his own theory. Anaximenes (c. 585–c. 528 BC) does agree with Anaximander that the *arche*, the ‘Being’, must be different from the things of the everyday world, the ‘Becoming’, but he found Anaximander’s notion of Being as ‘indefinite’ as unintelligible as saying it is ‘chaos’, for nothing can be said or conceived if, by definition, it is boundless. This, Anaximenes realized, is

problematic for philosophers, given their task is to know. His solution, therefore, may seem something of a backwards step to Thales, for he replaces the Being of water with air. He did this because air, to some extent, gives us a synthesis of Thales and Anaximander, for air is determinate and empirically detectable, while also being less determinate and detectable than water. Hence we have another important early philosophical question here: is Being definite and 'thing-like' or is it an indefinite 'nothing'?



Two philosophical extremes

The Milesians give us a picture of the cosmos as a world of Being and Becoming, two separate ‘worlds’ that are nonetheless interrelated. The multiplicity, variety and change of the sensible world is derived from one source, which can be discovered, either through empirical observation (Thales and Anaximenes) or through abstract theorizing (Anaximander). In other words, it is the task of the philosopher to penetrate Being itself – the world as it really is, without recourse to gods or spirits of any kind. It raises interesting philosophical questions such as how can something that is unchanging (Being) have changing things (Becoming) that derive from it, given that this would change the nature of Being? Or how can something that is motionless ‘move’ the Earth by creating it? Or how can something that is timeless act in time? Such questions will be familiar to students of philosophy of religion for, in the monotheistic traditions, Being becomes God.

One possible option of resolving these questions is simply to get rid of Being altogether (although religion cannot so readily get rid of God!), and this is what Heraclitus (c. 535–475 BC) did. Heraclitus was also from the Ionian coast – Ephesus – which is some 40 miles from Miletus. He was nicknamed ‘the Obscure’ for perhaps obvious reasons, as Socrates himself states when attempting to read his work *On Nature*: ‘The part I understand is excellent, and so, I dare say, is the part I do not understand; but it needs a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it.’ However, his key point is to argue that there are not two ‘worlds’ of Being and Becoming; there is only Becoming. His most famous quote is: ‘Into the same rivers we step in and we don’t step in, we are and we are not.’ What he is saying here is that though we may give a river a name, it is never the same river from one moment to the next and, more than that, we are not the same person from one moment to the next. All is becoming, in a state of constant change. Material objects, which seem at first sight to be static, are actually in a state of flux. An iron bell is subject to rust, a cliff erodes, a tree grows, a man ages. The philosophical implications for this view are immense, especially in terms of identity and morality. If nothing remains stable then, again, nothing is ‘true’ in any universal sense. The things that really matter, ourselves, our families, our values, our political views, and so on, are constantly changing, which makes it difficult to ‘grasp’ anything.

However, we also have another extreme philosophical position: there is no Becoming at all, there is only Being. This was proposed by Parmenides (c. 6th century BC). We won’t go into this complex argument here, but suffice to say this is a fascinating example of the use of reason to argue beyond what our senses seem to tell us, for Parmenides is saying that, although your senses may tell you that things are changing, you are getting older, objects and people are moving around you, and so on, this is in fact an illusion. If nothing else, Parmenides deserves to be given credit for taking this enormous leap from experience.

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Key terms

Apeiron: Really indefinable, but could be translated as ‘boundless’, ‘indefinite’ or ‘eternal’.

Arche: A Greek term that can variously be translated as ‘ruler’, ‘source’, ‘origin’, ‘beginning’.

Doxography: In this case, an account by a historian or philosopher of the thoughts of the Presocratics.

Empirical method: A way of understanding our world by using our senses.

Fragment: A term used to describe the remains of original writings of the Presocratics.

Induction: Induction is to consider a number of pieces of evidence and to reach a conclusion based upon this evidence. The conclusion may ultimately be wrong, but is considered the most likely given the evidence available.

Logos: The Greek word can be variously translated as ‘speech’, ‘word’, ‘discourse’, ‘account’ etc., but, more broadly, is a term used to apply to the animating principle for the cosmos.

Materialist: Also known as physicalists. Those believing that the world is made up of nothing but matter and that it is possible, therefore, to reduce all things to the basic fundamentals of matter.

Ontology: The philosophical study of ‘Being’ in the sense of what it means for something to have existence.

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

Polis: Greek for ‘city-state’.

Presocratics: A collective term for those philosophers who lived before the time (or at the same time) of Socrates.





Dig deeper

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The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) is an excellent website, especially for material on the presocratics (but also good on Plato and Aristotle): <http://plato.stanford.edu/>

The Hanover Historical Texts Project is also a good website for providing fragments with commentary of the works of the Presocratics: <http://history.hanover.edu/project.php>





Fact check

- 1 Who were the 'Presocratics'?
 - a Disciples of Socratics
 - b Philosophers who, chronologically, came before Socrates
 - c Ancient Egyptian thinkers
 - d Writers of Greek myth
- 2 Which one of the following is the name of an epic poem attributed to Homer?
 - a *Iliad*
 - b *Enterprise*
 - c *Achilles*
 - d *Theogony*
- 3 Which one of the following is attributed to Hesiod?
 - a *Theology*
 - b *Philosophy*
 - c *Theogony*
 - d *Odyssey*
- 4 Who, philosophically, are the 'materialists'?
 - a People who like to collect physical things
 - b Rich philosophers
 - c Philosophers who attempt to look for a material, rather than a spiritual, explanation of the universe
 - d Philosophers who like to make lists of physical things in the world
- 5 What is the *polis*?
 - a An Ancient Greek police force
 - b The Greek word for a city-state
 - c The Greek word for 'Greece'
 - d The study of politics
- 6 Which of the following is a definition of an account by a historian or philosopher of the Presocratics
 - a Doxography
 - b Biography
 - c Hagiography
 - d Autobiography
- 7 What, for Thales, is the fundamental element from which all things derive?
 - a Fire
 - b Water
 - c Air
 - d Wind

8 What, for Anaximenes, is the fundamental element from which all things derive?

- a** Fire
- b** Water
- c** Air
- d** Wind

9 What is meant by the term *apeiron*?

- a** The 'boundless' or 'indefinite'
- b** Chaos
- c** The gods
- d** The Greek city-state

10 What is the study of ontology?

- a** Ancient Greek monuments
- b** Presocratic texts
- c** Origin of words
- d** Philosophical study of 'Being'



Who was Socrates?

In the previous chapter we looked at the Presocratics, those who, in most cases, came before Socrates and who started the ball rolling in terms of philosophy as a distinct discipline. A much more rigorous approach to philosophy, however, usually begins historically with Socrates himself, as perceived through the writings of Plato. Plato was hugely influenced by his teacher Socrates, and it is not possible to appreciate Plato's teachings without first considering those of his mentor.

Socrates the man

Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) was born when Athens was at its peak. It was the greatest power in the Mediterranean, a major trading centre, one of the world's earliest democracies (to call it the world's first democracy, as some books do, is probably being somewhat Eurocentric) and the centre of a mighty naval empire. Its ruler of the time, Pericles (c. 495–429 BC), embodied all of Athens' achievements: a self-made man and a hero who had defeated the mighty Persians. Gathering the finest sculptors and craftsmen from around the Greek world, Pericles invested in a massive reconstruction programme that included the building of the Parthenon. This remarkable temple was completed in only 15 years. In the main auditorium stood a 40-foot-high statue of the goddess Athena, made of gold and ivory and studded with precious jewels. The Parthenon, which can be visited today, became the spiritual heart of the city and a symbol of the power of Athens.

Yet at the death of Socrates, the city of Athens was ruined by war, its people had lost everything, Pericles had died from the ravages of a plague that had killed a third of the city's population, and what was supposedly an enlightened city was responsible for the execution of its greatest mind, Socrates himself. How could such a thing have occurred?

We know so little about the real Socrates, other than he really was a historical figure and that he was executed in 399 BC. Socrates did not, so far as we know, write down anything himself, and so we must rely upon other sources, especially Plato. However, Plato is not our only source. Xenophon (430–354 BC) was a historian and a student of Socrates and he also wrote in the same form as Plato, that of Socratic dialogues. These include *Memoirs of Socrates*, in which Socrates is portrayed in a somewhat comic way at a *symposium*, and *Apology*, which is an account of the defence speech that Socrates gave at his trial. Xenophon,

however, is not as poetic as Plato, nor is he as well-versed in philosophy, and what he gives us is a picture of a wise man, but somewhat difficult to distinguish from other wise men. It is something of a pedestrian view, as a man more conventional and ascetic who happily dishes out advice about exercise and diet, or finance and family relationships, but fails to portray any degree of the philosophical subtleties of the Socrates portrayed by Plato. Xenophon does tell us that Socrates was married to a strong-willed wife called Xanthippe, and that he had three sons named Lamprocles, Sophroniscus and Menexenus.



Socrates' wife

One follower of Socrates, called Antisthenes, asked him why did he put up with such an argumentative and resistant wife, to which Socrates responded: 'If I can put up with her, I shall find it easy to get along with any other human being.'

.....

Xenophon's Socrates comes across as pleasant enough, with a high degree of common sense, and always willing to give advice on the importance of children honouring their parents and not overeating, but this is hardly an inspiring figure that legends are made of. For this we must look to Plato, who can perhaps be accused of going too far the other way: of transforming Socrates into a new and higher ideal of what humans can become but, consequently, divorcing the true man from the superhuman ideal. The truth is we do not know if Socrates was even a philosopher at all, and it is largely due to Plato who creates Socrates the philosopher. The extent to which we are given a true picture is such a debatable one.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) once wrote a series of talks called *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980), and here, inspired by a card reproduction of a medieval depiction of Plato standing behind Socrates (a drawing by Matthew Paris, 1217–59), he imagines Plato hovering over Socrates' shoulder and dictating his philosophy to Socrates rather than the other way around. The point is well taken, for to what extent is the mouthpiece of Socrates the philosophy of Socrates, or that of Plato?

What we do get from Plato's Socrates is someone much more interesting, contentious, philosophically intense, and entertaining; certainly much more the kind of person you would like to share a drink with in a *symposium* than Xenophon's somewhat boring and sensible version.

The teachings of Socrates As the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) said of the time of Plato and Socrates in Ancient Greece: ‘It was possible in that age, as in few others, to be both intelligent and happy, and happy through intelligence.’ (Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 2nd ed. London, 1961, p. 77) Though perhaps an over-romanticized vision, it nonetheless has an element of truth. Philosophers, scientists, physicians, mathematicians, astronomers, artists and architects all flocked to Athens to network and discuss their theories with their peers. If the Hellenic League were the United Nations of its day, Athens was its New York.

Athens, during its renaissance, was enjoying a time of relative peace and prosperity, when many Athenians, bathed in self-confidence, were garbed in expensive robes and enjoyed luxurious food and wine. However, there was one man who would wander the streets of the Athens marketplace, known as the *Agora*, in his bare feet and dressed in unkempt and dirty garments. This man, known as Socrates, was considered the ugliest man in the city, for his head was

too big, his nose misshapen, and his eyes bulged. In every sense, he seemed the very opposite of the fine classical lines of Greece. In itself this tells us much, for his followers were not concerned with superficial looks, but what lay behind: the beauty of his mind.

Plato's early dialogues deal with subjects that were of interest to Socrates. Although it is difficult to know where Socrates' philosophy ends and Plato's begins it is nonetheless helpful to place the combined thought of these two great thinkers into three main categories: • **Rejection of traditional beliefs.** Socrates was always prepared to throw out coveted traditions and beliefs if he believed them to be wrong, and he encouraged his followers to do likewise.

- **Concern for ethical issues.** Socrates was mostly concerned with morality and the belief that there can be universal definitions for such terms as 'goodness'.
- **Conversation as a practical method to acquire knowledge.** People learned from Socrates through conversation. Conversation was a means – a logical process – by which definitions are attained and truths acquired.

As we do not know whether this really is what Socrates believed, future references in this book to Socrates (of which there are very many) have to be understood in the light of Plato's Socrates.

In Plato's work, *Apology*, it is recorded that Socrates experienced a 'conversion'. Socrates' friend Chaerephon had visited the famous Delphic Oracle to ask its priestess whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. The priestess replied that there was none wiser. Socrates took this to mean that the truly wise man is one who recognizes that he is really ignorant. Socrates adopted this as his own philosophy based on the pronouncement of the Delphic Oracle – 'Know thyself'. Socrates was a great believer in the power of human reason to learn absolute truths. To discover the truth is to know what it means to live the good life and to live it virtuously.

In one of Plato's other works, *Meno*, the character of Meno asks Socrates the following question: 'Can you tell me, Socrates, whether goodness is a thing that is taught; or is it neither taught nor learned in practice, but comes to men by nature, or in some other way?' In this one question we have the very essence of what was both Plato's and Socrates' concern: what is the right way to live? For 'goodness' can be variously translated as 'virtue', 'excellence' and so on, and is from the Greek *arete*. And so, what does it mean to be 'good', and how can we

know this ‘good’ and teach this to our children? This is as much a concern today as it was in Plato’s time; and we can see how it encompasses not only moral philosophy, but also politics, education and the question as to where our knowledge comes from.

Concern for ethical issues At the time of Socrates, Greek mathematics was making great strides, and Socrates was influenced especially by Pythagoras (see [Chapter 3](#)) to the extent that a cosmology is presented of an ordered cosmos governed by universal laws. However, while we should recognize the important contribution the Presocratics made to the philosophical tradition, Plato’s Socrates comes across as opposed to these materialist thinkers, which he saw as a threat to the political and moral order of Athenian society. This is because materialism sees the universe as a largely ‘valueless’ place, which lacks any purpose or moral weight, other than mathematical principles. One example of this is the

Presocratic philosopher Democritus (c. 480–370 BC), who saw the universe as consisting of *atomos* (Greek for ‘undivided’ or ‘indivisible’), which are tiny, invisible particles (hence the English word ‘atom’). These tiny particles are different shapes, some are triangle shaped, some hexagonal, etc., and they have ‘hooks’, allowing them to connect with other atoms that causes them to form into the objects we see in the world. However, as the quote from Democritus below states, that is all that there is. For example, one set of atoms forms to constitute, say, honey, and another set of atoms forms a person’s taste buds. When these two connect, there is an experience of ‘sweetness’, but there is no such thing as ‘sweetness’ itself, only the interaction between atoms. However, that means that some other creatures’ taste buds

may experience the honey as bitter, and so this is what Democritus means ‘by convention’.



‘By convention sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour. But, in reality, atoms and void.’

Democritus

The implications in terms of knowledge and morality are immense, for it suggests that the universe is nothing more than connected atoms, lacking any purpose or reality other than the atoms themselves. All things become relative to the person (or any other creature) that is encountering the world of objects; for one creature a flower may be yellow, while for another it is monochrome. In terms of ethics, nothing can be said to be inherently good or bad, for ‘atoms’ are not ‘good atoms’ or ‘bad atoms’, and so what may seem like a morally good action for one person, may not be so for another, for it is merely a matter of ‘taste’. The concern for Socrates was such a vision of the universe can lead to a corrosive scepticism and to **sophistry**.



Democritus

Legend says that when Democritus was very old he deliberately blinded himself by staring at the rays of the sun that were reflected from a silver shield. The reasons given for this are either that he did not want anything to impair his inner vision of his soul, as he was nearing death, or it was also suggested it was because it was too distressing to see beautiful women with the knowledge he was too old to make love to them.

The Sophists

Whereas Socrates believed in absolute standards, there was a group of itinerant teachers who thought the opposite: the **Sophists**. One of the greatest Sophists of all, Protagoras (c. 490–420 BC) famously declared that ‘Man is the measure of all things’. By that he meant that it was mankind that established what is right or wrong, not the gods or the existence of a morality independent of man. Again, we can see parallels with the world we live in today: with the decline in institutional religion and the increase in the view that there is no one ‘truth’. This raises the question of how we can teach moral standards when there are no ‘standards’, only what is relative. This is what is meant by **moral relativism**, and it was this especially that both Socrates and Plato found abhorrent.

To understand what ‘goodness’ meant for the Ancient Greeks it helps to look at how the children were educated at that time. In the golden age of Athens, the sons of the aristocrats – for they were the only ones who received any kind of decent education – were brought up to imitate the virtues of the gods and heroes contained in the works of, for example, Homer and Hesiod (see [Chapter 1](#)). ‘Virtue’, for most ancient Greeks, did not mean the same thing as it does for the Western Europeans of today. For the Greeks, virtue included such attributes as courage, ambition, the acquisition of wealth, glory and acting for the good of the *polis*.

The Sophists, however, were more concerned with teaching people to be ‘clever’ rather than the training of character. For example, today both Hitler and Napoleon might be considered ‘clever’ politicians, yet neither would be considered ‘virtuous’ in our modern sense of the term, although we might be more prepared to see Napoleon as having more ‘character’ and ‘nobility’ than

Hitler. However, for the Sophist, what mattered was the acquisition of power, not the kind of morally good person you are. Many of Athens' great heroes were leaders who would certainly not pass the test of being 'good' by our modern standards; Pericles being a typical example of this. However, Pericles was also seen as possessing the qualities admired and praised in the Greek myths, such as courage and nobility and a genuine concern for the interests of the state.

For the Sophists, the laws of one society are no 'truer' than any other. Morality was a matter of the conventions of the society you live in. Later Sophists were more concerned with a desire to make money and winning arguments by whatever means. Socrates considered them to be nothing more than illusionists who could make people clever speakers but without possessing virtue or selflessness. During Socrates' later years, the politicians in power practised the arts of sophistry, reflecting the general decline in moral standards in Athens at that time, but the ability to speak and to be able to argue for your side was crucial in Athenian society to the extent that your livelihood, and your life, could depend upon it. In democratic Athens, major decisions were made through debate, and reputations and positions of authority could be made or broken. A man's property and very life could be decided upon in a court, depending upon not what evidence was supplied but on the defendant's choice of advocate and their ability to persuade the court of his innocence.

The Socratic method

The dialogue style of writing is particularly associated with Plato's work because it is in many ways unlike the writings of previous philosophers, which were usually either long treatises using technical language and the impersonal third-person or so poetic, ambiguous and abstract as to be difficult to comprehend the actual meaning. Having said that, Plato's writings were also influenced by his predecessors, and there are similarities with them. Plato as a young man wanted to be a poet, and so we need to see his philosophical works as a blend of his enthusiasm for poetry, for the power of the word, with his philosophical quest for knowledge. Plato's writings are works of drama as much as they are works of philosophy, and they are carefully crafted, with no 'fluff' or accidents. One approach to studying the works of Plato is to break down and analyse the logic contained within them, and this is very typical of the philosophical method known as **analytic philosophy**, but there is a danger that such analytic reductionism by necessity fails to see the whole; the importance of

the drama, of the myth, the story, the irony, the ambiguity, the characters, that makes up the work. Plato uses dramatic techniques to draw the reader in, to invite you to speculate and reflect. Some of Plato's works are more drama-driven than others, and if you wish to consider Plato at his literary best you could do no worse than starting with *Phaedrus* or *Symposium*.

The leading character in his dialogues is usually Socrates and so they are often referred to as Socratic dialogues. Characters are created within a scene and engage in spontaneous conversation – not unlike a playwright would present his work. It is not surprising that Plato's works are also considered great pieces of literature. Why did Plato adopt this form? In a way it was a tribute to his mentor, for Socrates always believed that knowledge came through conversation. Remember, he himself never wrote anything down, preferring the cut and thrust of lively discourse. For Plato to recreate the character of Socrates it made sense to present his words as a dialogue. In none of Plato's works will you find soliloquy, the speaking of one's thoughts to oneself, which you find in, for example, Shakespeare. By using the dialogue form, Plato himself is acknowledging the soundness of the Socratic method; the use of *dialectic*, to talk and to listen to get to the truth.

In terms of how the dialogue is structured, Plato commonly uses the following approach. As an example taken from *Euthyphro*: • **He begins with a simple question in which nothing is presumed.** For example, in *Euthyphro*, Socrates, in his usual modest fashion, asks to be the 'pupil' of the much younger and somewhat naive Euthyphro. Socrates begins by asking: 'Then tell me, how do you define piety and impiety?'

- **The question is then examined and definitions given.** Euthyphro would go on to define what piety and impiety are: 'What is agreeable to the gods is pious, and what is disagreeable to them impious.'
- **Assumptions are questioned.** Here Socrates would then leap in and raise the further question as to whether we can assume that what the gods do is always right and also that the gods themselves seem in disagreement with this.
- **Conventional views are dismissed or redefined.** Euthyphro, for example, adapts his definition: 'I should say that piety is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is impiety.'

Now Socrates, having forced Euthyphro to redefine what he meant by impiety,

could well sit back and leave things at that, but, like the ‘gadfly’ that he is, he pushes on. Reading the dialogue you can sense Euthyphro’s growing unease and frustration as he is compelled to yet redefine again until, eventually, the original view of impiety bears no resemblance to the new definition. In the meantime, the conversation will have meandered along through all kinds of objections that could be either relevant or irrelevant to the original topic.

Like the characters in a novel, each has his role to play. The characters were often taken from real life, but Plato would embellish them to bring out sharp contrasts; making them more bullish, arrogant, complacent, impatient, careless, assertive, aggressive, *etc.* than they actually were. This was necessary for dramatic effect, although it can result in making Socrates seem rather unreal at times – just a bit too ‘good’ to be believable. But every story must have its hero!

Perhaps the best way to see the Platonic dialogues is as if it is a philosophy class, with, in most cases, Socrates as the most skilled in philosophy. However, the skilled philosopher does not – or, at least, should not – simply stand up and lecture while everyone else sits back, somewhat passively. Philosophy classes should be, very much, what in modern terms is referred to as ‘active learning’: all partake in doing philosophy and this is inevitably an intellectual struggle and hard work. The problem Socrates does have, on occasion – and this is something that philosophy teachers today can relate to – is that some participants are lazy, some aggressive, some simply refuse to listen, and some want to be told the answers rather than think for themselves. The Ancient Greeks were no different from human beings today in terms of their temperament.

Socrates believed in the importance of conversation as a method to determine the truth of things. Through a careful process, involving defining terms, questioning those definitions, and then moving to a further definition, Socrates believed we could eventually reach a clear and unalterable definition for such things as ‘goodness’. This ties in with his belief that there actually can be one true understanding of goodness, unlike the Sophists who argued that ‘goodness’ is merely a relative term depending on the time and place. This may well not be achieved in a particular dialogue, but at least the interlocutors have struggled to get somewhere rather than simply sitting back and remaining unreflective.

It could be argued that being taught the skill of persuasion, of getting on in life, of ‘how to win friends and influence people’ can, indeed, be a very useful skill to possess. This was true enough and the reason Socrates was usually associated with the Sophists is because he himself used the same techniques. However, an

important difference is that Socrates said that his aim was to determine the truth of things, whereas many of the Sophists were not concerned with 'truth', or even believed that there was such a thing as truth: only persuasion. It was this ability in particular that worried Plato and Socrates: a Sophist could claim to persuade a sick man that he could heal him better than any doctor, but this does not make the Sophist's medical skills actually better than a doctor's, and nor would it benefit the patient to be treated by the Sophist, who lacks any medical knowledge, rather than the doctor.

Being 'clever' could be used for good purposes, but it could also be used for bad purposes. You might consider a modern parallel with the 'spin doctors' in politics today whose primary purpose is to manipulate the perception of politicians and their policies so as to make them palatable to the public. A 'clever' Sophist could persuade the sick man to be healed by him, but this does not make him a good doctor either in the moral or technical sense. For both Socrates and Plato, the concern was to produce good people. Therefore, a good ruler should be someone who was both virtuous and technically skilled to rule in the same way a doctor is both morally concerned to make his patients well and technically skilled to do so.

And so, for Socrates as well as Plato, it was important to educate people in the truth. Inevitably this raises the question of what is truth. Right at the beginning of *Meno*, Socrates says he does not know whether goodness can be taught without first determining what goodness is. This is a sensible enough remark to make: you should understand what something is before you set out to teach it. Therefore, if we are to teach what is right to our young we must know for sure what is right. Here, to 'know' something is to be aware of the truth of something, and so differs from what we may call 'opinion'.

The scapegoat



'I hope that there is something in store for the dead, and, as has been said of old, something better for the good than for the wicked.'

During Socrates' latter years, the city of Athens was in decline. Its defeat by Sparta in 405 BC had been a massive blow to its confidence. The loss and subsequent ravaging of the land led the people of Athens to question what had gone wrong. Why had such a mighty power fallen? In seeking a scapegoat, the masses – led on, no doubt, by the politicians themselves who followed the prejudices and passions of the masses to gain support – blamed Socrates. He was deliberately provocative. It was for this reason Socrates jokingly referred to himself as a gadfly, biting away at his victims. However, this also resulted in making him many enemies. Athens, seeking security, returned to its old traditions, and saw in Socrates the man who most publicly questioned the belief in gods and the old ways, as well as 'corrupting the youth' with his ideas.

When he was arrested Socrates could, like the Sophists, have gained the sympathy of the public through persuasion if he had wished, but he remained stubborn and resolute to the end. He neither sought sympathy nor forgiveness, for he believed he had done nothing wrong except to seek out the truth. He was condemned to death and he refused to escape or adopt the traditional method of proposing another form of punishment, such as exile (which probably would have been accepted), preferring 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. After his death, Socrates, in time, did become a new kind of Greek hero replacing the more militaristic figures such as Pericles. Socrates represented the person of conviction who follows the dictates of intellectual conscience and it was this legacy that Plato promulgated.



'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget.'

Socrates' dying words in *Phaedo* by Plato



Socrates' Last Words

Plato, in his dialogue *Phaedo*, describes Socrates' last moments in his cell. Surrounded by a group of his

followers (though Plato himself was not present) the cup of hemlock was handed to him by the tearful jailer: 'Quite calmly and with no sign of distaste, he drained the cup in one breath.' His followers broke down in tears while Socrates was the one who comforted them as the poison worked its way through his body. It was in these final moments that Socrates addressed one of his followers: 'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget.' Crito replied that it would be done and, when he asked if there was anything else, there was no reply; Socrates was dead. The meaning of these last words has resulted in a lot of ink in scholarly articles, for it seems somewhat mundane from such a great thinker; surely, many argue, there must be a deeper meaning? Asclepius, the god of healing, was a relatively new (for Athens) but very popular divinity. No doubt this god's popularity was due to the recent high levels of death and suffering from the Peloponnesian Wars against Sparta and its allies. Perhaps, as Asclepius was able to raise people from the dead, Socrates also hoped for more life, although this seems odd given his welcoming of death in his speech to his followers. Or perhaps as he suffocates from the hemlock, he calls out to the god of healing to ease his pain. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (*see Case Study in Chapter 12*), in his work *The Gay Science*, argues that Socrates is giving thanks to the god of health for ridding him of the disease of life, but, again, this seems at odds with Socrates' attitude towards life, which is far more positive than that! There are so many other explanations, all of which have equal weight, for we can never know the real reason. It may be simple piety on Socrates' part, or a last stab at irony. In many ways, these final words represent the ambiguity that is Socrates himself: sometimes portrayed as a philosophical riddler and logician, while other times modest, down-to-earth and plain-spoken.

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Key terms

Analytic philosophy: A method of doing philosophy that was particularly associated with English-speaking countries in the 20th century by which philosophical problems are examined through analysis of the terms in which they are expressed.

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

Moral relativism: Relativism means that all things relate to a particular time and place. Moral relativism, therefore, is the belief that morality has no universal and absolute standards, but is relative to a time, place or person.

Sophist/sophistry: A Sophist was, among other things, a relativist. Sophists were teachers who believed that there is no such thing as true knowledge. What is 'true' is what society believes or is persuaded to believe.





Dig deeper

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Fact check

- 1 Which one of the following wrote about Socrates?
 - a Xenophon
 - b Xanthippe
 - c Xanax
 - d Xanadu
- 2 Which Ancient Greek city is Socrates from?
 - a Rome
 - b Athens
 - c Sparta
 - d Metropolis
- 3 What was the view of the Presocratic philosopher Democritus?
 - a That the universe was created by the gods
 - b That the universe is made of atoms and nothing else
 - c That the universe consists of Platonic Forms
 - d That the universe is just one of many universes
- 4 Which one of the following describes the Sophists?
 - a Citizens of a Greek city state that fought against Athens
 - b Believers in an absolute moral standard
 - c Believers in moral relativism
 - d Wise men who sat on sofas
- 5 Which following insect was used to describe Socrates?
 - a A butterfly
 - b A greenfly
 - c A housefly
 - d A gadfly
- 6 How did Socrates die?
 - a Died of old age while in exile
 - b Died laughing
 - c Died choking on wine
 - d Died by taking poison
- 7 Which one of the following best describes the Socratic method?
 - a The use of dialectic
 - b Writing books
 - c Meditating silently
 - d Library research
- 8 In which century was Socrates born?
 - a Third century BC
 - b Fourth century BC
 - c Fifth century BC
 - d Sixth century BC
- 9 What was the motto that Socrates adopted that was based on the pronouncements of the Delphic Oracle?
 - a Know no one
 - b Know others
 - c Know thyself
 - d Know all there is to know
- 10 Who said 'Man is the measure of all things'?
 - a Socrates
 - b Aristotle

c Pythagoras

d Protagoras



Who was Plato?



‘Reading Plato should be easy; understanding Plato can be difficult.’

Robin Waterfield, *Republic*

As one of the founding fathers of philosophy, and the 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. Curiously there are many biographies of Socrates, for whom we know so little, yet you will struggle to find works on the life of Plato, for whom we know more. Why this is the case is perhaps due to Socrates as something of a tragic figure, of a man who died for what he believed in. Yet we would know considerably less about Socrates if it were not for Plato who immortalized him in his dialogues.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Plato is not the only source for Socrates’ philosophy, but this is a book about Plato’s philosophy rather than that of Socrates, although we will struggle to differentiate the two in terms of who said what. Rightly or wrongly, Plato has become synonymous with Socrates, much to the annoyance perhaps of other writers of Socratic dialogues.



Antisthenes

After the death of Socrates, a number of his followers began to write down their master's philosophy. One of these was Antisthenes (c. 445–c. 365 BC) who, unlike Plato, was present at Socrates' death. The ascetic Antisthenes was known as someone who balked at pleasure, declaring: 'I would rather go mad than have fun.' To annoy Plato, Antisthenes wrote a satirical dialogue called *Satho*, which, though it rhymes with 'Plato', is actually Greek for 'prick'!

WHY IS PLATO'S WORK SO IMPORTANT?



'The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.'

A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 39, Free Press, 1979

Plato was very creative and a great innovator. However, no one works in a vacuum and, as we have seen, there were many philosophers before him and Socrates who influenced Plato's thought. Although we know so very little about these shadowy figures of the past, 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 quest to find a unifying principle, an *arche*, 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 are very different from the Presocratic 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. The Socrates we know today is ultimately Plato's creation, and the Platonic dialogues are not just works of philosophy, but novelistic in their development of characters. The main protagonist, Socrates, is deliberately used by Plato to engage in his own (and to some extent Socrates') thought experiments and in his mission to establish philosophy as a discipline. This is best expressed in his greatest work: *Republic*.

While nothing is certain, we can be fairly confident in stating that it is Plato, not Socrates, who introduced to the world the analysis, cogent argument and a rational approach to thought that laid the foundations for all philosophers who came after him. This is why the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) famously said that European philosophy is but ‘a series of footnotes to Plato’. (See [Chapter 11](#) for a Case Study on Whitehead.) According to the philosopher (and Plato’s pupil) Aristotle (384–322 BC), Socrates did not come up with the famous Theory of the Forms (see [Chapter 4](#)) that is so central to Plato’s philosophy (although Aristotle is not always the most reliable narrator either). While remaining inevitably speculative, a picture emerges of Plato’s Socrates as much more abstract, doctrinal and theoretical and less personable than Socrates actually was, which is why we should see Plato’s works as to some extent works of fiction when it comes to his characterization. It may well be that in Plato’s early years (reflected in some of his writings) his main concern initially, like that of Socrates, 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 as well. Plato is the earliest philosopher whose own writings have survived to such an extent, 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 and re-emerged as a force during the Renaissance. In the 19th century, Plato’s work was a basis for Victorian values in Britain. His controversial political and educational views have also 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 works.


Plato’s world



Sparta

Also known as Lacedaemon, this Greek city-state was located on the banks of the Eurotas River in the region of Laconia. In fact, the word 'laconic' derives from the name of this region because the Athenians said the Spartans always spoke in a precise way. People have been fascinated by Sparta because of its unique social system. It was a disciplined military state with a strict hierarchical structure. Its classes were divided into **Spartiates** (free men born in Sparta), **Mothakes** (free men not originally from Sparta but raised as Spartans), **Perioikoi** (literally 'dweller around'; free men but not citizens of Sparta) and **helots** (slaves).

According to the Greek historian Herodotus, in the 5th century BC there were seven helots for each Spartan, so it was important that such a massive, potentially rebellious, population was kept under control. One way of doing this was through an annual event, called the **Crypteia**, whereby the Spartan leaders (**ephors**) would declare temporary war on the helots, allowing the Spartan citizens to kill helots without any repercussions. This was a properly organized affair: each autumn a group of young Spartan men who had completed their educational and military training were chosen to practise their skills and were sent out at night with knives to kill helots that they encountered, especially those helots who were considered troublesome. That way the population was controlled and potential troublemakers were disposed of. Hence the name **Crypteia**, which means 'secret' or 'hidden', since the chosen Spartans (**cryptes**) would also need to spy on the helots and engage in stealth in order to determine who were suitable targets. It was this training that made Sparta a state to be feared. In 480 BC it famously made a last stand against a massive Persian army at the Battle of Thermopylae. Though defeated, a small number of Spartans – 300 being the usual number given – inflicted much higher casualties on the Persians. It was this event that was depicted in the 2006 film *300*.



To understand Plato and his work it helps to have some idea of the world in which he lived. The Athenian empire at that time consisted of a league of semi-autonomous 'city-states' (or *polis*, see [Chapter 1](#)) united by language and culture and formed as a defence against the threatening Persian empire. 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 activity. Athens, especially, was an exciting and cosmopolitan place. The famous Parthenon, a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, was built in the mid-5th 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 8th and 6th 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 a supporter of aristocracy. Whereas Sparta established its league largely

through conquest, Athens unified mostly (although not always) through mutual and peaceful agreement.

- In the early part of the 6th 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 Delian League, which at first was voluntary, was formed with Athens at its head. However, as Athenian power grew it became more tyrannical towards other states in the league.
- During the 5th century BC, under the leadership of Pericles (c. 495–429 BC), Athens entered its Golden Age: the Parthenon was built during this time; tragedians such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides reached their zenith; and the constitution was reformed to make Athens more democratic. During the latter half of the century, however, Athens was constantly at war with Sparta. Most likely Plato would have fought in the cavalry against the Spartans.
- From 431–404 BC the Athenian Empire was engaged in the Peloponnesian War with Sparta (as head of the Peloponnesian League). In 404 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 in 336 BC.



Women in Athens

In Athens in the 5th century BC, women were considered as objects of disgust and fear. Aristotle argued that during menstruation a mere glance from a female could infect the air around her. The lawmaker Solon declared that any woman found walking the streets should be considered a prostitute.

Plato: a life 'Plato' is, quite possibly, a nickname from the word *platon*, meaning something like 'broad' or 'breadth'.

Sources say that Plato was something of a gymnast, especially in wrestling, and he was nicknamed 'Plato' because of his broad shoulders, although it has also been suggested that he was so named due to the breadth of his knowledge. Regardless, he adopted the name as his own, although his actual name was possibly Aristocles, named after his grandfather (although even this name is disputed). Plato was a wealthy and well-connected man who, though absent for Socrates' actual death, did

witness the trial. It was the trial and subsequent execution of Socrates that led Plato to write his philosophy, quite possibly having written nothing philosophical until after the death of Socrates, with the possible exception of the dialogue *Lysis* which discusses friendship. Plato would have been in his late twenties when Socrates was executed and would have been close friends with him for probably the whole of his adult life.

Plato, befitting a member of the aristocracy, would have had the finest education Athens could offer in terms of philosophy, grammar, music and gymnastics. His father was Ariston (died c. 424 BC), who legend states was descended from Codrus, the ancient and semi-mythical king of Athens of the 11th century BC. Plato's mother was Perictione (c. 5th century BC). Ariston died when Plato was a young boy and his mother then married her uncle Pyrilampes, who was a statesman and friend of Pericles (see above). Plato had two older brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus – both of whom feature in *Republic* and other dialogues – and an older sister, Potone. Plato's half-brother Antiphon makes an appearance in the dialogue *Parmenides* in which Antiphon states he has given up philosophy so he can spend more time on his horses! Incidentally, Plato also had an aunt called Charmides, which is the title of another dialogue written by him; he obviously had no reticence in including his family in his works and perhaps, together with the setting of the dialogues during the life of Socrates, the works represent for Plato a much happier time.

Plato's ancestry can be traced to the great Athenian statesman and poet Solon (c.

638–c. 558 BC). Like so many of these early Greeks we know very little of Solon, although legend credits him with laying the foundations for democracy in Athens. One account states that he was selected to be ruler of Athens due to his considered wisdom, which resulted in constitutional, economic and moral reform. As the Greek historian Plutarch (c. AD 46–120) wrote:



‘In philosophy, like most of the wise men of that age, he was concerned above all with applying morals to politics.’

Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens.*

Solon is considered one of the Seven Sages, all of whom are from the 6th century BC.



The Seven Sages

Also referred to as the Seven Wise Men, this is a title given to various philosophers, law-givers and statesmen from the 6th century BC. Each of the seven is associated with an aphorism, for example Solon with ‘nothing in excess’. Other figures include the presocratic philosopher Thales (see [Chapter 1](#)) with his aphorism ‘know thyself’, the Spartan politician Chilon (‘you should not desire the impossible’) and the legislator Bias (‘most men are bad’).

What qualifies them as a ‘Sage’ is their intent to incorporate the poetic and philosophical outlook into practical politics. This was a mission that Plato was wholly sympathetic with in his concept of the Philosopher-Kings (see [Chapter 7](#)). Indeed, one of our sources for Solon is Plato himself, who crops up in many of his dialogues. Plato’s uncle (possibly!) was Critias (c. 460–403 BC) who was a writer of tragedies, friend and pupil of Socrates and also one of the leading members of Thirty Tyrants (see *above*) that were installed by the Spartans to rule Athens after they defeated it in the Peloponnesian War. Although the Thirty Tyrants ruled for just 13 months, it was a violent and oppressive time resulting in the killing, by some estimates, of up to 5 per cent of the Athenian population.

As stated, Socrates’ death had a profound impact upon Plato. Undoubtedly the fact that his friend and teacher was condemned by democrats was one reason why 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. In addition, Plato had witnessed first-hand the humbling of the once-mighty Athens as a result of the Peloponnesian War, and saw this defeat as a result of poor decision-making and lack of political wisdom on the part of the Athenian state, and so he regarded it as his mission, through the mouthpiece of Socrates, to question the Athenian political system and to suggest alternatives. This resulted in his greatest work, *Republic*.

However, because of Plato’s close friendship with Socrates his own safety was compromised. Perhaps for this reason Plato decided to leave Athens and undertake a 12-year exploration of the known world. His travels seem to have included Egypt, where he was impressed by the theocratic system – the rule by an educated priestly class. It has even been speculated that Plato reached as far as the banks of the River Ganges – but despite certain similarities between his own philosophy and eastern religions it remains 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 tightknit community of like-minded people. Pythagoras' teachings survived and spread over southern Italy and Greece. 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 the notion 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 numbers, which existed in an abstract and 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 'stuff' of the universe that provides the key to understanding.

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. During his time in Syracuse, however, Plato had a long and turbulent relationship with the ruler's brother-in-law, Dion, for whom he wrote poetry and described him as his 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.

At the age of 80, Plato – who never married – died and was buried in the Academy. The Academy itself continued to thrive, producing such notable alumni as the philosopher Aristotle (a student of Plato) and developing important schools in, for example, mathematical science and astronomy. The Academy was closed down by the Roman Emperor Justinian in AD 529.

Plato's works



'Reading the Socratic dialogues one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time! What's the point of these arguments that prove nothing and clarify nothing?'

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

A very rare thing indeed is that we are fortunate to possess copies of the entire corpus of Plato's writings. That is to say, whenever a writer from history refers to a work by Plato, a copy still exists. The same thing cannot be said for most of the Ancient Greek writers. As we have seen, virtually nothing exists for the Presocratics, and even for Aristotle (who came after Plato) works have been lost. Perhaps this indicates just how important Plato was for the Greeks themselves for them to ensure that none of his works suffered the same fate.

Having said that, we cannot be sure that all the works that are attributed to Plato are actually his, for some may well be spurious; either notes of Plato's that have been compiled (and altered) by his students, or possibly works written by someone else entirely. Therefore, although 35 dialogues are attributed to Plato, some of the shorter works may not have originated from Plato's own hand. For example, one work, usually translated as *Rival Lovers* (Greek *Erastai*), is included in the traditional corpus despite doubt as to its authenticity as a work by Plato, largely because the character of Socrates (who engages in a dialogue with

an unnamed man who, it has been suggested, could have been Democritus who did visit Athens) comes across more like the less philosophical character portrayed by Xenophon than by Plato.

Plato's works are frequently divided into three periods: early, middle and late. This, it should be pointed out, is useful to give us some idea of the 'phases' in Plato's thought, but it is by no means certain what the chronology of Plato's works actually is. To some extent, then, this is an artificial division: • The **early period** was mostly concerned with moral issues and heavily influenced by Socrates. These are referred to as the **aporetic** dialogues (derived from the Greek *aporia*, 'impasse') because some of them (but not all) conclude in a state of *aporia*. This is a rhetorical device adopted by Socrates who begins by expressing doubt (possibly feigned) concerning his position on a particular subject (for example, love, courage or virtue) and asks his interlocutors to explain or define a concept. The dialogue concludes with Socrates expressing *aporia*, or uncertainty, as to whether a concept has yet been fully defined. From the perspective of the reader it is then left to them, quite deliberately, to speculate further, rather than for Socrates to provide the answer. One good example of *aporia* is the dialogue *Lysis*, which will be looked at in [Chapter 8](#).

- As already noted, it is quite possible that much of this work really features the philosophy of Socrates rather than much originality from Plato himself. Perhaps it is more accurate, and more fruitful, to see these works as Plato being as yet unprepared and, perhaps, too philosophically immature, to assert himself and go on an all-out attack on certain accepted (especially sophistic) positions. Usually included in the early dialogues are *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches* and *Lysis*.
- The break from this early period to the **middle period** comes first with the works of *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, where the character of Socrates expresses a greater concern with such issues as politics and metaphysics, and shows how Plato now begins to assert his voice more. The characters of Protagoras and Gorgias were both well-known Sophists, and so Plato is setting out here to attack them directly, often through ironic humour, which expresses a confidence of writing style and philosophical maturity. The middle period, then, was Plato at his peak, producing other important works such as *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and, best known of all, *Republic*. The *Republic* is a rich book in which all aspects of philosophy are connected 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 learned 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. What is particularly characteristic of this period of dialogue is that Socrates' arguments tend to be more extended and developed, containing such key Platonic ideas as his Theory of the Forms (see [Chapter 4](#)).

- Plato's later works, written in the last 12 years or so of his life, are perhaps less dramatic in terms of his poetry and humour, and more engaged in logical analysis. Many of these works, such as *Theaetetus* (an **aporetic** dialogue) and *Parmenides*, are a further development of Plato's earlier philosophy, with the character of Socrates playing a smaller part in conversations. For example, in *Laws* the main character is simply called the Athenian Stranger which, one suspects, is Plato himself. In fact, this dialogue, which was most likely Plato's last, is the only work that does not feature Socrates at all. The works *Sophist* and *Statesmen* also have Socrates taking a backstage role, with the main character called the Eleatic Stranger (which may have been Parmenides, who came from Elea). *Timaeus*, which may belong to the later period (although some argue it is part of the middle period), contains an interesting creation myth of a divine craftsman who imposes order on a chaotic world (see [Chapter 11](#)). This echoes Plato's own concern for order and the belief that such logical and systematic structures do exist. These later dialogues tend to be more technical and, therefore, more philosophically demanding for the reader.



Key terms

Aporetic dialogue: From the Greek *aporia* ('impasse'), a style of dialogue that occurs in some of Plato's works in which Socrates concludes by expressing *aporia* as to whether a concept has been defined or not.

Helot: The subjugated population of Sparta. Essentially slave labour that, largely, worked in agriculture.

Sparta: An ancient Greek military city-state. During Plato's life, Athens was frequently at war with Sparta.





Dig deeper


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Fact check

- 1 The name 'Plato' may have been a nickname. Why was he called this?
- a Because he liked to eat from big plates
 - b Because he had broad shoulders
 - c Because he was born on a plateau
 - d Because he was very playful
- 2 Who said that European philosophy is but 'a series of footnotes to Plato'?
- a Ludwig Wittgenstein
 - b Aristotle
 - c Bertrand Russell
 - d A. N. Whitehead
- 3 What was the name given to the 'university' that Plato founded in Athens?
- a The Academy
 - b The Lyceum
 - c The Parthenon
 - d The Acropolis
- 4 What was the name of the war between Sparta and Athens?
- a The Polynesian War
 - b The Peloponnesian War
 - c The Persian War
 - d The Peninsular War
- 5 What were the names of Plato's two older brothers?
- a Glaucon and Adeimantus
 - b Adeimantus and Charmides
 - c Glaucon and Potone
 - d Potone and Charmides
- 6 What is the name of Plato's ancestor who was one of the Seven Sages?
- a Colon
 - b Zolon
 - c Holon
 - d Solon
- 7 What was the name of the group of philosophers who influenced Plato and who believed in the immortality of the soul and in reincarnation as well as a belief that nature was subject to a mathematical order.
- a The Pythagoreans
 - b The Spartans
 - c The Hindus
 - d The Presocratics
- 8 Which of the following is a translation of the Greek word *aporia*?
- a Knowledge
 - b Illusion
 - c Impasse
 - d Enlightenment
- 9 Which one of the following is a work by Plato?
- a *The Sage*
 - b *Ethics*
 - c *Lysis*
 - d *Metaphysics*
- 10 Which one of the following was a pupil of Plato?
- a Pythagoras
 - b Democritus
 - c Socrates
 - d Aristotle
- 

The Forms

In the last chapter we examined Plato's life and put him into historical context. In considering his dialogues, his great work *Republic* stands out. When students learn about Plato, *Republic* tends to be the focus. To some extent this is a great shame since Plato wrote many other excellent dialogues that examine important and still relevant issues and it is hoped that this book will encourage the reader to look beyond *Republic*. Nonetheless, there are many valid reasons why *Republic* is placed on such a pedestal, and so it is only fitting that a good proportion of this book is devoted to the arguments within it. This chapter, and the next three, will, therefore, focus largely on *Republic* and, no doubt, this dialogue will crop up on a number of occasions elsewhere. Indeed [Chapter 12](#) will also be entirely devoted to *Republic*.

The death of Socrates had a profound influence upon Plato. Any political ambitions he had held were now of no concern to him. He was disillusioned with politics and saw his mission to carry on the legacy of his mentor, to be a philosopher. After a number of years travelling and soul-searching, Plato returned to his native Athens and began to teach and write. His early dialogues (as much as we can be certain that they *are* his early dialogues) were records of conversations that Socrates might have had with various individuals: for example, with Euthyphro on what it means to be pious, or with Crito on the subject of civil disobedience.

Plato also wrote an *Apology*, which was a defence of Socrates against his critics. However, it was one thing to defend the life of Socrates, it was another to demonstrate that the 'examined life' was the best life to live. To achieve this Plato set out to prove that the philosopher, more than any other profession, was after Truth. In this sense Plato was going much further than Socrates, for his mentor never claimed to know anything – to have absolute knowledge of truth. It was this belief that we can have true knowledge that developed into Plato's famous **Theory of the Forms**.

The Analogy of the Cave

One reason why Plato's works have remained so popular after all these years is that he was aware of his audience. His dialogues were designed for popular consumption, and there is evidence that Plato did not write down his more advanced philosophy, as it was not meant for the general public. He appreciated the importance of explaining often-difficult concepts in a way that could be more

readily understood. To achieve this, Plato often made use of **analogy**. An analogy is when you make a relationship between two or more entities to bring out their similarity; for example, to make an analogy (though not a very good one) between the structure of an atom and the solar system. To explain his Theory of the Forms, Plato used the well-known Analogy of the Cave.

This analogy is from Plato's *Republic*. As usual in his dialogues, the main character is Socrates. It is Socrates who describes the cave to his fellow interlocutors: • Deep down at the very bottom of the cave is a group of prisoners. The prisoners are firmly shackled so that they cannot move, or even turn their heads. They all face only one direction, the wall of the cave. These prisoners have been in this condition since they were young children.

- Behind the prisoners a fire burns away, and between this fire and the prisoners there are many people who are walking by, talking and carrying artificial objects such as figures of men and animals made of wood and stone. The people walking by are hidden by a screen, so that only the artificial objects appear above the top of the screen • The fire casts a shadow of these artificial objects upon the wall of the cave. It is this wall that the prisoners can see. The prisoners are not aware of what is happening behind them and so, for them, the whole of their reality consists of shadows on the wall. They can only see the shadows of the artificial objects, which, of course, are also, in a way, 'shadows' of their makers. When they hear talking or other sounds they believe it comes from the shadows.
- One day, one of these prisoners is let loose from his chains and is forced to turn around, look and walk towards the fire. The released prisoner finds all of these actions painful and is dazzled by the light, having spent his life in almost complete darkness and not being able to move. He is told that the objects he now sees are the real objects and that what he had experienced all his life were mere shadows.
- Confused and frightened, the prisoner wants to return to the bottom of the cave, but he is dragged further away and up towards the entrance. Faced by the daylight he is unable to see a single object. Only over time can he gradually grow used to it, first by perceiving the lights of the night sky, then the shadows of objects cast by the sun and finally the objects themselves in broad daylight.
- Finally, after a period of getting used to the light of day, the released prisoner

is even able to gaze at the sun itself.



“A strange picture,” he said, “– and strange prisoners!”

“Ones that resemble us”, I said.’

Plato, *Republic*, 515a

A more modern analogy today would be the cinema, where the audience would watch the play of shadows thrown by the film coming from a light behind them. The audience would believe that the events in the film are ‘real’ to them as opposed to the events outside the cinema.



Plato and *The Croods*

The Croods (2013) is a 3D animated film from DreamWorks. This storyline might sound familiar once you have read about the cave analogy: a family of cavemen, who believe they are the only cavemen in existence, live in a dark cave which they rarely leave. Grug (voiced by Nicolas Cage), the head of this family, tells his children every night that it is important that they obey the rules that are marked on the cave walls if they are to survive. It is only as a result of an earthquake that they are forced to venture further out and come across a nomad called Guy who shows them fire and how it can bring light to the darkness of a cave.

The path to enlightenment

As Socrates tells his tale he asks his colleagues to imagine what the prisoner must have thought and felt during this whole experience. The released prisoner’s initial reaction is fear and confusion; a desire to return to the comfort and security of what he had lived with all his life, even though he has been told that it is an illusion. Forced to experience the world outside, he experiences a gradual awakening; an awareness that there is a more beautiful and real world so very different from the dark world of shadows where he has spent his life. In time, the prisoner also realizes that all things he had cherished and felt were so important to him previously, now no longer mattered. The chained prisoners would, among

themselves, gain status and honour by attempting to determine the sequence of events that would occur among the shadows and so on. The released prisoner, however, realizes that this quest for glory was illusory.

By perceiving the sun itself, the prisoner realizes that it is the source of all things; it produces the changing of the seasons and controls everything in the visible world, including the fire and, from that, the shadows that he used to think were the only reality. Aware of all this, the prisoner would rather be 'a serf to a man with nothing' (516d) than to be the person he was before he was released.

Socrates then speculates on what would happen if the prisoner were to return to the bottom of the cave; not to return to the life he led but to tell the other prisoners what wonderful things lay beyond the darkness of their experience. He asks us to imagine how the others would respond to this. Would they welcome him with open arms and want to see this world for themselves? Quite the opposite, Socrates thought. For the released prisoner, having grown accustomed to the outside world, would fumble in the darkness and could no longer engage in the complexities of divining the motion of the shadows. The prisoners would see him as a fool, a bumbling idiot. In fact, if he made any attempt to free them from their shackles, they would gang together and kill him.

And yet, even if the prisoner knew that his companions at the bottom of the cave would not understand him and that his own life would be in danger, Socrates thought that the prisoner should return. To keep his knowledge to himself and allow his companions to remain in ignorance is a crime.

This curious tale works on many different levels. What is it meant to teach us? First of all, his audience will have known who the prisoner represents: it is Socrates himself. The man who had no concern for the conventions of everyday society, of the quest for glory or honour; the man who talked of higher things, who saw it as his mission in life to tell people that their dearly held beliefs are a sham; the man who was often mocked because of his appearance and lack of practical sense. Ultimately, the man who many feared and whose life was not only in danger but, in the end, was ended by those who refused to understand. In a much broader sense, the prisoner is every philosopher: the searcher for truth and whose purpose in life is to teach this truth to others.



The Matrix

Another film, more philosophically sophisticated than *The Croods*, is *The Matrix*. This is often considered an example of Descartes' sceptical doubt (see Case Study in [Chapter 5](#)), but it can also be seen as inspired by Plato's cave analogy. Just like the prisoners in the cave, Neo is a prisoner in the matrix and does not realize he is a prisoner, believing that the world as perceived is the real one. Morpheus represents the freed prisoner, the 'Socrates', who gives Neo the choice to remain chained or to be freed both physically and mentally.

The Realm of the Forms

The Analogy of the Cave is not only about the quest of the philosopher. It is also a way of explaining Plato's Theory of the Forms. What are the Forms? In the story *The Little Prince*, by the French poet and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–44), the author recounts how, as a young boy, he lived in a house where there was supposed to be some buried treasure. The treasure was never found, but the possibility that it might exist gave the house a special quality and beauty.

As Saint-Exupéry says, 'what is essential is invisible to the eye'. In a similar vein the sculptor Michelangelo (1475–1564), when receiving praise for his work, would retort that all he had done was to remove the excess marble from the block and so reveal what was already there. In a sense the Forms are what is 'already there', but we usually cannot see them and are instead concerned with the 'excess marble'.

In *Republic*, the character of Socrates points out that his analogy is a picture of the human condition. People are trapped by the illusory world of the senses; they are like the prisoners at the bottom of the cave. However, Plato believed that the ability to perceive the truth behind this illusion is contained within our very souls. The Forms are the world beyond the shadows. We take the shadows to be reality, but they are really only appearance... It is no coincidence that this realm of the Forms bears some resemblance to the Christian concept of heaven, since Plato's philosophy had considerable influence on the development of Christian thought.

For Plato, this world is not the real world. The real world is invisible. It lies beyond our senses of sight, taste, touch, smell and hearing. But what led Plato to believe that there is such a world beyond this one? This question will be considered more in the next chapter. Students often ask me what *evidence* Plato has for such a theory, but really the point Plato is making is that no evidence is sufficient to *definitively* prove something to be the case: empirical method has its limits. Further, Plato does not really present a 'theory' of the Forms, but more

modestly presents it as a *possibility*. Hence the use of analogy. Language has its limitations and it's possible to misrepresent what one means, whereas the use of analogy may in such cases prove to be better suited. Remember, also, that Plato did not work in a vacuum; he was a product of his time and the inheritor of a school of thought that goes back to the Presocratics. For example there was the influence of the Pythagoreans who saw the cosmos as mathematical patterns, or Parmenides who stressed the importance of reason to go beyond what our imperfect senses tell us.

THE FORM OF BEAUTY



'I imagine', I said, 'that while those who love to listen or to see sights, embrace beautiful sounds, colours, figures, and everything that is crafted out of these, their minds are incapable of seeing, let alone embracing, the nature of the beautiful by itself.'

Plato, *Republic*, 476b

We can see many beautiful things – a beautiful flower, a beautiful painting, a beautiful woman and so on. But what is *beauty itself*? In other words, how do we know that so many different objects all share the attribute of beauty? One response to this might well be that we learn through experience. However, Plato believed that our knowledge of beauty is innate. That is, we are not born an 'empty slate' with no knowledge at all, but possess within our soul all knowledge already. The trick is to be guided towards that knowledge.

OTHER FORMS



'These couches of ours, then – there turn out to be three of them, don't there, in a way? First, there's the one that's there in nature, which I imagine we'll say

was fashioned by god – who else?’

Plato, *Republic*, 597b

In fact, it is not just beauty, but everything appears to have a Form. For example, an object such as a table has a Form of a table. Although tables differ from each other in size, colour, texture and so on, they all share the attribute ‘table’. Likewise, if we talk of a telephone box being red, a car being red, an apple being red, then they all partake of the Form ‘red’.

Try to draw a circle. How does it look? Depending upon how steady your hand is your circle will most likely be imperfect in some way or other; it might be a little pear-shaped. But how do we know what a perfect circle is? How do we know that every time we attempt to draw a circle it isn’t ‘quite right’? For Plato, it is because there is a Form of a circle, and this tells us something about what the Forms are. They are perfection. When you see a beautiful flower it is not perfectly beautiful, but partakes of perfection. Similarly, a table might be perfectly functional but you might well be able to conceive of a better table; one that is sturdier, longer-lasting and so on.

When we say that design in furniture is getting better, Plato raises the question how do we know it is getting better? What is this ‘better’ that we are aware of? We can see how this affects many aspects of life. When we say that society, quality of life, morality, *etc.* is progressing then we are making the assumption that there is something to progress towards. Plato, as well as Socrates, believed that there is such a thing as moral truth; that morality is not a relative matter, dependent upon the society or time you live in. When one society claims to be more morally advanced than another it is the same as saying there is such a thing as independent moral standards.

If we return to the Analogy of the Cave, our prisoner’s journey towards daylight is an educational one. Through proper training – that is, in becoming a true philosopher – he will attain knowledge of the Forms, and, as a philosopher, it is his duty to return to the cave and enlighten his fellow man. At the same time, the Forms cannot be taught. We know them already, but refuse to acknowledge them for to do so is a painful and confusing process; it takes us away from the security of our illusions. The prisoners in the cave are, for Plato, the people of Athens. They are in a state of ignorance. Even the ‘highest’ among them – the politicians and educators of Plato’s Athens – have no greater knowledge than the ‘lowest’.

THE FORM OF THE GOOD



'For goodness' sake, Socrates,' said Glaucon, 'don't stand aside just when you're at the finish, as it were. Even if you only discuss the good in the same way you discussed justice, moderation and the rest, it'll be enough for us.'

'Yes, my friend,' I said, 'and more than enough for me too. I'm afraid I won't be able to manage it; I'd cut a sorry figure, eager though I'd be able to do it, and you'd laugh at me...What I am willing to talk about is something that is clearly the offspring of the good, and bears a close resemblance to it – if you're happy for me to do that; if not, let's pass on it.'

Plato, *Republic*, 506d–506e

From the above quote, Socrates expresses his own unwillingness to explain what the good actually is for fear of being ridiculed and misunderstood, but prefers to present its 'offspring'. By that he means making use of analogy in the way that a son is *like* his father, but is not *really* his father.

In the Analogy of the Cave, the Form of the Good is represented by the sun. The sun is the source of all things: it gives light so you can perceive other objects, and it gives life to all other things. The sun is responsible for the changing of the seasons, for the weather, and for the food we need to live.

Plato believed that there is a hierarchy of Forms. Whereas there are particular Forms for beauty, for justice, for a chair, and a bed, and so on, there is one Form over and above all of these: the Form of the Good. All existence and perfection ultimately flows from the Form of the Good. Like the sun, it gives light and life to all other things, including the other Forms. Therefore, when you have awareness of the Form of the Good you have achieved true enlightenment, 'nirvana' if you like. When the early Church Fathers developed Christian theology, they borrowed heavily from the works of Plato. In Christianity, the Form of the Good becomes God: the source of all things, immutable, eternal, perfect and invisible.

The following provides an outline of what these Forms are: • The Forms represent Truth or Reality. This cannot be attained by the senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing) rather by the exercise of the mind, that is, through the use of the intellect. Throughout this book, the conventional translation of 'Forms'

has been used, although in Greek the term *eidos* or *idea* would translate better as 'idea'. However, translators have often been wary of using the word 'idea' as it perhaps suggests that it is something that humans have 'come up with' themselves rather than being to some extent independent of human thought.

- The world of sense-experience (the objects we see, touch, etc., around us) 'partakes' in the Forms in that they contain likenesses of, for example, perfect beauty, good, red and so on. When we recognize that an object partakes in, for example, the Form of Beauty, it is because we recollect our knowledge of the Form of Beauty that was acquired before birth. In other words, our knowledge of the Forms is innate; we are born with it and through a process of education we are able to recollect this knowledge.
- The Forms are eternal and unchanging, whereas the world of the senses is temporal and changing. In that sense we cannot know things that are in a constant state of flux, for what is there to know?

Criticisms of the Forms

The Theory of the Forms has perhaps caused more controversy and confusion than any other aspect of Plato's philosophy. Here is a brief outline of just a few of the concerns raised by the Theory:

- Is there a Form for literally everything? For example, if it is the case that you can reduce the world to the most basic particles, is there a Form for atoms, or even a Form for the nucleus of an atom? In which case, is anything really universal and static?

- Connected with the above concern, to what extent can you reduce the Forms to objects? Is there a Form for the planet Earth? In which case, can there then be separate Forms for all the objects of the Earth?
- In what sense do these Forms exist? Plato talks about the Forms as distinct and separate 'things' that are immutable, eternal and invisible, but what does this really reveal about their actual nature?
- In terms of there being Forms for morality, how is it possible to separate morals from everyday actions? The philosopher Aristotle, Plato's one-time pupil, believed morality couldn't be eternal and unchanging. Can there really be ultimate moral standards? In Chapter Six of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* he launches into a critique of Plato's concept of universal Good or the

Form of the Good. It is certainly understandable that Aristotle needs to address this issue, despite the fact that Plato was a friend of his, because it was a popular conception of the Good at that time. Whereas Plato argued that there must be one universal Form of the Good that applies to all things, Aristotle states that there surely cannot be one universal idea of the Good, or an 'essence' of Good, as the term is used relative to particular individuals, places, circumstances and times. How, then, can one single ideal encompass both the absolute and the relative given that it does not have one particular meaning? For example, what an individual understands as a good diet in one culture or time could differ greatly to that of another culture or time. Likewise, a slice of chocolate cake would be 'good' if it were your first slice, but perhaps not so if it were your tenth in succession! Good, in this sense, is context-related.

- Further, Aristotle argues, the idea of good is used in numerous categories. There are different standards of good in different fields and walks of life. For example, 'good' could be a reference to moral goodness, but also to a good (as in 'useful' or effective) work tool or a good (as in relaxing, peaceful, or whatever your preference) place to go on a holiday. In addition, Aristotle uses an example of 'whiteness' to show that Good itself can be no different from particular good things in the same way a whiteness itself can be no different from particular white things. Even if such a Good were attainable, which Aristotle doubts, he fails to see what possible use it could be, given that we live in a world of particulars.
- Plato also argued that if a person knows what is right and wrong, he will do what is right and avoid what is wrong. For example, if you have knowledge of the Form of Justice and from this you know it is wrong to steal, then you will not steal. Is this a realistic view of human nature?



Aristotle's criticisms

Although Aristotle was a pupil of Plato and respected him greatly, he did not agree with Plato's Theory of the Forms and he presents a series of criticisms against them in his work the *Metaphysics*, which can be paraphrased here: First of all, Plato's argument that our sense-experience gives us only illusion presents a serious threat to the validity of science. While Aristotle will admit to the limitations of science, of empirical method, for us to have any foundation for knowledge at all and for anything to be meaningful requires us to assert the actual existence of at least certain objects presented to our senses, otherwise we can believe in nothing other than some mythical intuitive experience and, even then, how can we be sure that it is

genuine?

A more famous criticism by Aristotle – although to be fair to Plato he also used the same criticism in his own dialogue *Parmenides* – is the Third Man Argument (TMA for short). There are general terms we use to apply to a number of different things, for example, ‘dog’, ‘house’ and so on. Aristotle uses the example of the general term ‘man’ (Plato, in *Parmenides*, uses the example of ‘largeness’). There are many instances of ‘man’: Socrates is a man, Plato is a man, Aristotle is a man and so on, but whereas these are a number of instances of ‘man’ none of them are identical with the general term. Indeed, if you provide every single individual ‘man’ alive today you will not, as a collective, be identical with the general ‘man’. It seems, then, that ‘man’ in a general sense is ‘one over many’ as Aristotle refers to it, for it transcends its many instances. So what’s wrong with that, for surely isn’t that what Plato means by his forms?

Aristotle argues that by saying there are many instances of ‘man’ then we are confronted with the following problem: **1** Say there is man A, man B and man C. According to the ‘one over many’ there is Form of Man (call this Man1).

2 But, keeping with the ‘one over many’ principle, Man1 can be added to man A, B and C, creating a new plurality of things: Man1, man A, man B, man C.

3 But then there has to be a Man 2 to encompass all these instances.

4 Again, following the ‘one over many principle’, we will need a Man 3 over Man1, Man2, man A, man B, man C.

The result, of course, is an infinite hierarchy of Man, not just a third, but a fourth, fifth, *ad infinitum!*

Plato at no point devotes a great deal of analysis of the Forms and in his later works, most notably the *Parmenides*, he seems more open to the difficulties and criticism of his theory. Nonetheless, Plato’s belief that there exists a Realm of the Forms is prevalent throughout the philosophy of his middle period especially, and so we will encounter it, and some of the concerns expressed above about it, throughout this book as we consider his views on not only epistemology but also human psychology, education, politics, ethics and religion. Despite the obvious problems with the theory, the main point is an important one: if there are such things as absolute standards then where do they come from?



Key terms

Analogy: Using an analogy is a way of explaining an often-difficult concept by showing its similarity to more familiar things.

Theory of the Forms: Not so much a 'theory', but a philosophical possibility that what is real is something that is beyond our sense-experience.





Dig deeper

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Fact check

- 1 What is a definition of an analogy?
 - a A comparison between one thing and another, usually for the purpose of clarification
 - b A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable
 - c The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite
 - d A rhyming couplet

- 2 What is the Theory of the Forms?
 - a The view that the world of our senses is all that there is
 - b The view that reality is non-physical and beyond our senses
 - c The view that there is no reality
 - d The view that God is the creator of all things
- 3 In which Plato dialogue will you find the cave analogy?
 - a *Gorgias*
 - b *Euthyphro*
 - c *Crito*
 - d *Republic*

- 4 In The Analogy of the Cave, what is the Form of the Good represented by?
 - a Shadows
 - b Fire
 - c The freed prisoner
 - d The sun

- 5 Which Ancient Greek philosopher criticized the Forms?
 - a Aristotle
 - b Socrates
 - c Pythagoras
 - d Democritus


- 6 In which dialogue did Plato himself examine some of the problems with the Forms?
 - a *Euthyphro*
 - b *Apology*
 - c *Parmenides*
 - d *Gorgias*

- 7 What is the name of the argument against the Forms that concludes with the following: 'The result is an infinite hierarchy of Man, not just a third, but a fourth, fifth, *ad infinitum!*'
 - a The Thin Man Argument
 - b The Third Man Argument
 - c The Thirsty Man Argument
 - d The Thrifty Man Argument
- 8 What does Socrates think would happen to the freed prisoner if he returns to the cave?
 - a The other prisoners would think he was mad and may even try to kill him
 - b The other prisoners would greet him with open arms
 - c The other prisoners would want him to free them as well

d The other prisoners would treat him like a god **9** Which one of the following films portrays the cave analogy?

- a** *The Croods*
- b** *Minions*
- c** *The Flintstones*
- d** *The Cave*

10 From which book is the quote, 'what is essential is invisible to the eye' taken?

- a** *The Little Prince*
 - b** *The Happy Prince*
 - c** *The Prince of Thieves*
 - d** *Prince Caspian*
- 

Knowledge, opinion and ignorance

In the previous chapter we looked at what Plato meant by his Theory of the Forms. The concept of the Forms, that the world we see with our senses is not the ‘real’ world, has obvious implications in terms of what we know, what we think we know, and what we are capable of knowing.

To better understand what Plato meant by the Forms it helps to consider his views on knowledge. For Plato we can only have knowledge *of* something. This might sound obvious enough, but you can see how this would be affected by his Theory of the Forms for, if what we see around us are not real, then it follows that what we think we know is not really true knowledge. If that is the case, then how can we have knowledge of anything at all, and where does this knowledge come from? For Plato, the obvious answer is the Forms, but we need to examine how he came to this conclusion.

Protagoras and relativism

In one of Plato’s dialogues, *Theaetetus*, the question of what is knowledge is discussed. This is Plato’s **epistemology**. Theaetetus is a young mathematician who, when engaging in conversation with Socrates, is asked what knowledge is. This is how Theaetetus replies:



‘In my opinion anyone who knows something perceives that which he knows, and so, as it seems at the moment, knowledge is nothing other than perception.’

Plato, *Theaetetus*

Here, Theaetetus is presenting the common view most famously presented by the Sophist Protagoras: ‘Man is the measure of all things.’ You know something when you perceive it; that is, taste, touch, hear, smell or see it. However, Socrates is quick to point out that our sense-perceptions can be a very subjective matter:

- For example, someone who comes in from the cold will put his hand in a bucket of cold water and it will feel warm to him. Or when you drink some sweet wine when you are ill it tastes bitter. How can the same object have a different quality? Which understanding of the object is the right one?

- Why should it only be man who is the measure of all things? If the human

being's perceptions were real for him, it would logically follow that a pig, a baboon or even a tadpole's perceptions are also real for it! This is actually a very perceptive point and is a concern that has been raised by more recent philosophers. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) thought it somewhat arrogant of Man for him to think that what he perceived is actually there. Rather, we can only see things through 'human spectacles'. We see things in three dimensions (four dimensions if you want to include time as the fourth), but who is to say that there are not higher dimensions?

- Perhaps most importantly it can lead to relativism (see [Chapter 2](#)), for if we are to say that each human being is to be the judge of what is and what is not, then it is not possible to make judgements of the views of others. If one person were to say that an apple is green and another that it is red then there can be no definitive judgement one way or the other. On a more personal level, Socrates was having a go at Protagoras, who was a teacher. Surely, if there are no absolute standards, a teacher cannot teach right and wrong?

Theaetetus' response to Socrates' latter criticism is by talking of perceptions as being useful, rather than true or not. For example, we might not be able to say for certain whether the traffic light shows red or green, but it is worthwhile for the teacher to correct someone who claims the light is green when the teacher and pretty much everyone else sees it as red.

This may seem an unsatisfactory response, however, for in this case knowledge seems to be based on nothing more than what the majority may perceive. However, it comes down to what the purpose of the teacher is: to promote harmony, order and social standards in the same way the doctor's role is to promote good health, not that good health is an objective thing that we must therefore pursue. The fact is that if we disagreed on whether a traffic light showed red or green and then acted upon our own individual and somewhat rare perception, then it would not be long before we are involved in a traffic accident.

However, Plato rightly points out that what is 'useful' or 'worthwhile' can hardly be synonymous with what is morally right. If a state decides it is 'useful' to condemn innocent people to death this does not make it right. Ultimately, Plato's concern is that we should not confuse knowledge with perception, or that all knowledge simply comes down to a person's opinion, even if this is the majority opinion.

Heraclitus and change



‘In his [Heraclitus’s] proximity I feel altogether warmer and better than anywhere else. The affirmation of passing away and destroying, which is the decisive feature of a Dionysian philosophy; saying Yes to opposition and war; becoming, along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of being – all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else thought to date.’

Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Why I Write Such Good Books’, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Ecce Homo, tr. Walter Kaufmann, p. 273

Plato, as well as Socrates, was familiar with the writings of the philosopher Heraclitus (see [Chapter 1](#)). For Heraclitus, the world is in a constant state of change and flux. All objects are in the process of becoming something else. For example, the chair you may be sitting on is ageing and wearing down, even rocks are being eroded by the wind and rain. Human beings, too, are changing all the time. Cells, such as skin cells and blood cells, are dying all the time (although the notion that all your cells are replaced every seven years is a myth; some brain cells, for example, live for as long as you do), which is why your skin flakes off, your hair falls out and your nails grow. When you look at a picture of yourself as a baby you may struggle to see much resemblance.

Heraclitus viewed the world as a vast battlefield of conflicting, opposing forces, all governed by a natural law that controls this strife between the elements. This natural law he called *Logos*, which can be variously translated as ‘word’, ‘truth’, ‘reality’, ‘reason’ or ‘God’. However, for Heraclitus, this was not some metaphysical substance, but is contained within nature itself and is more akin to DNA than a god.



‘The sea – he [Heraclitus] says – water most pure and most impure; for fishes

drinkable and healthy; for humans undrinkable and deadly.'

Hippolytus of Rome in *Refutation Of All Heresies*, 9.10.2–5

This view of the world, however, was anathema to Plato. Plato adopted a view not dissimilar to an earlier Greek philosopher, Parmenides (see [Chapter 1](#)), who believed that the *Logos* is One, and is therefore immutable. If the world is in a state of constant change, then there can be nothing that is eternal and immutable and, of course, there can be no ultimate truths. Plato believed that, although the world might appear in a state of change and multiplicity, it is possible to perceive an underlying form and singularity.

Plato's main criticism of Heraclitus is that if it is the case that things are constantly in motion, then it is impossible to define a thing. For example, 'white' cannot be called 'white' if it is actually becoming something else (not-white). How then are we able to call something 'white'? In fact, if you wish to call something 'black' then it is just as correct as calling it 'white'; neither one of you can be wrong or right. Every answer, on whatever subject, is correct. This would also be a criticism of Protagoras for, if all of our knowledge comes from perception, then all of our knowledge must be correct, no matter what it is.



Heraclitus the intolerant

Heraclitus was not one to tolerate other people. One quote attributed to him is: ‘Men are unable to understand [my teaching] when they hear it for the first time as before they have heard it at all...and know not what they are doing when awake, even as they forget what they do in sleep.’

For Plato, therefore, it was unacceptable that our understanding of the world, of our views on good or bad and so on, is merely relative (according to Theaetetus) or continually changing (according to Heraclitus).

The philosopher defined



‘I imagine,’ I said, ‘that while those who love to listen, or to see sights, embrace beautiful sounds, colours, figures, and everything that is crafted out of these, their minds are incapable of seeing, let alone embracing, the nature of the beautiful itself.’

Plato, *Republic*, 476b

In *Republic*, Plato provides a definition of the philosopher. The philosopher is someone who loves wisdom. In fact, this is the very translation of the phrase *philo-sophos*: ‘wisdom-lovers’. The character of Socrates makes it clear that these must be distinguished from *philo-theamones*: ‘sight-lovers’. Sight-lovers are those who go from one play, book, exhibition, *etc.* to another, taking it all in and calling this knowledge. You might consider the modern analogy of the snap-happy tourist, taking pictures of great monuments without really appreciating what she sees. The philosopher, therefore, is not superficially acquiring facts and figures, but is reflecting on the very nature of things.

Importantly, Plato wishes to make a distinction between when you say you know something, and you believe something. If I say that I know that the Earth is round, this is different from saying I *believe* that the Earth is round. Following

on from Parmenides, Plato believed that you can only have knowledge of what is. If I know that the Earth is round, then it really is round. However, opinion (or belief) can be of what is and what is not. If I say that I believe the Earth is round (what is), it could really be flat (what is not).

Plato was concerned that people can have completely opposite views on the same thing. For example, someone might judge a painting as beautiful, whereas someone else would judge it as ugly. Another example was with morality; someone might consider a certain act as just, whereas someone else would consider it unjust. In this sense, it is belief. We, the 'sight-lovers', are part of the 'multiplicity' of things, of things that are and are not (the painting both is beautiful and isn't beautiful). The philosopher, however, is only concerned with what is eternal and immutable.

It also follows that if you perceive what is not, then you are in a state of ignorance. You may have a belief that something is not beautiful when in actual fact it is.

Objects of knowledge	= the forms	= what is
Objects of opinion	= the 'many things' that partake in the forms	= what is and is not
Objects of ignorance	= nothing	= what is not

The roots of knowledge

Things that can be qualified do not count as knowledge. For example, Helen of Troy is beautiful, but not unqualifiedly beautiful (she may be ugly when old or perhaps it is possible that not *everyone* considers her beautiful; therefore she 'is and is not' beautiful), or giving back what you owe is not unqualifiedly just (for example, giving back a weapon to someone who is mentally ill). What is knowledge is what cannot be qualified. It is not subject to time, place or the perspective of the individual. This is why Plato, through Socrates, would also get his interlopers to qualify their statements in the hope that, eventually, a definition could be reached in which it could no longer be qualified. Only then have you achieved what is true.

The French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) believed that if we are to

discover what we can know for sure we must begin by sceptically doubting our supposed knowledge of all things. We must reject our belief in a wholesale manner and start all over again. Plato, however, asserts that our beliefs can help our understanding, not hinder them. We must look to our beliefs first, rather than be sceptical about them.



Cartesian Doubt

In the history of philosophy, perhaps the most important thinker on the topic of knowledge is René Descartes. Like Plato, he was a rationalist, and argued that our senses provide us with a limited understanding of what is really true. In his work *Meditations*, Descartes engaged in methodical doubt; subsequently named **Cartesian Doubt** after him. In the first chapter of this work – the First Meditation – Descartes shows that the senses cannot be trusted through his ‘three waves of doubt’: first, he notes that his senses are sometimes mistaken, for example objects from a distance turn out to be something other than what one thought they were when you get up close; second, Descartes – like all of us – can have very lucid dreams and so questions how can he be sure that he is not sleeping now; and, third, he presents the possibility that some ‘evil demon’ is making him believe that he has a physical body and that there is a material world around him, but it could all be the creation of this demon and not really exist at all.

Such radical doubt could lead one to **solipsism**: the belief that we cannot know whether other minds or an external world really exist. Descartes then, in his further chapters, builds up the foundations of knowledge, beginning with the first thing he can be certain of: ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist.’ Starting from this foundation and through the power of reason alone, Descartes argues that we can know about the world. Descartes was a mathematician and, like Plato, he also stresses the importance of the mathematical model in building up our knowledge.

Also, like Plato, Descartes was a **dualist**. He believed there are only two existent things: a thinking substance (the soul) and extended substance (matter).

.....

What does it mean to know?

What the Ancient Greeks understood by knowledge differs somewhat from our modern-day understanding. Today, when we say that someone knows something it is unlikely that you will equate this with someone intuitively grasping the Forms, rather it is much more of a proactive intellectual engagement. Plato often refers to medical doctors knowing how to heal, but a doctor has to train for many years, to study many books and engage practically in medicine before you would say that a doctor ‘knows’ how to heal someone.

In modern epistemology, knowledge is commonly classified into three types: 1) knowing that; 2) knowing of; 3) knowing how.

1 Knowing that. Also referred to as ‘propositional knowledge’. For example:

- I know *that* 2 plus 2 equals 4
 - I know *that* the Earth revolves around the Sun • I know *that* Washington, D.C. is the capital city of the United States
- What these statements have in

common is that they are all facts about the world. You can look them up in Wikipedia, and they would be the right answers in a quiz show. They are called ‘propositional knowledge’ because a proposition asserts something about the world, as opposed to, say, a greeting such as ‘hello’ or a command such as ‘be quiet’.

2 **Knowing of.** For example:

- I know Charles well • I know that shop • I know Amsterdam This is often also referred to as ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ because you know something by being acquainted with it or with a person. You do not acquire this knowledge by studying for it or by training, but rather through familiarity.

3 **Knowing how.** For example:

- I know how to make lasagne • I know how to tie a reef knot • I know how to ride a bike 4 In quiz shows such as *University Challenge* you would not expect the contestants to be asked to ride a bike because it is propositional knowledge they are tested on. Rather, this kind of knowledge implies the acquisition of a skill or an ability.

It should be stated that these distinctions can overlap, and there is much debate in epistemology as to whether all three kinds of knowledge can be subsumed under one, but the point is that we nonetheless can know things in different ways and also what is understood by knowledge has not remained static over time. This three-fold distinction did not exist in Plato’s time, and in his dialogues he portrays Socrates as a philosopher who was fascinated by how, for example, a person ‘knows’ how to make a chair or, more specifically, how to make a *good chair*. It was knowledge as a ‘craft’ that appealed to Socrates and, in a way, seems to encompass all three distinction above: a carpenter no doubt has to know certain facts about carpentry, he needs to be acquainted with objects (different kinds of wood, tools, etc.), and he certainly needs to know how to make a chair through trial and error.

The Greek word for craft or skill is *techne*, as opposed to *episteme* (knowledge) which may suggest a distinction, but they do tend to overlap in Plato’s dialogues. In considering crafts such as carpentry, farming, sculpture, pottery, weaving, etc., what Socrates notes is what they all have in common: *ergon*. This can be translated roughly as ‘function’; it is what something does or what it is intended for, and it is this idea of knowledge as having a function, as having a set

purpose, that Plato also regards as intrinsic to the craft of political statesmanship. We will examine Plato's political philosophy in [Chapter 7](#) but, for now, it is worth keeping in mind that Plato saw ruling a state as a craft like any other, and has, or should have, a goal in mind.

All crafts, including politics, are linked with knowledge in this sense. Coming back to our carpenter, if he is highly skilled (that is, he has excellent knowledge) then he will produce an excellent chair. What is interesting for Socrates is how we know a chair is good or not and the fact that we can consider ways to improve upon a chair that is not so good. In addition, this skill is something that can be passed from one generation to the next while seemingly independent of the practitioner. In a sense, good carpentry is 'out there' to be discovered and is something by which we measure our own skills. There is, then, a 'Form' for a chair.

The role of reason

How are we to attain this knowledge of the Forms? Plato was a **rationalist**. He believed that you cannot rely upon the senses for your knowledge and that, ultimately, the power of reason is the key to knowledge. Many more recent philosophers, known as **empiricists**, argue that all of our knowledge comes from experience of the world (*see also* 'empirical method' in [Chapter 1](#)). That is, we only know that $2 + 2 = 4$, for example, because we have experience of adding up these objects. Plato, however, believed that this knowledge is something we can know merely by using our reason, without reference to the outside world.

For Plato, therefore, reason plays a crucial role in the acquisition of knowledge and is an essential part of his political and educational agenda. When Plato spoke of the Forms residing in the soul of each man, he also perceived the soul as the seat of the intellect.

The soul

Plato, along with his student Aristotle, had a massive impact on Christian theology. For Plato this is perhaps most prevalent in both his concept of a 'divine' realm of immutable Forms, and in his **dualist** approach to the body and soul. Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament contains a belief in such

a dualism; a separation between the material body and an immaterial soul. The Creeds (statements of faith used in Christian liturgy) explicitly state a belief in the resurrection of the body, although St Paul considers this a 'spiritual body'. In the early centuries of the Church, Christian theology employed the ideas of Plato in its doctrine, and only then did the idea of an immaterial soul come about.

The Greek work *psyche* suffers somewhat in translation, and perhaps 'soul' is not the best rendition because of the specifically religious connotations that have come down to us. A better translation might be something like 'life-principle'. However, as 'soul' is the common usage, it will be used here.

Our main source for Plato's views on the soul can be found in his work the *Phaedo*. In this dialogue Socrates is in conversation with some friends in his prison shortly before his execution. On such an occasion, it is not surprising that Socrates speculates upon the nature of life after death, and the belief in an eternal soul. As with all of Plato's works, we need to be careful as to how much these views can be accredited to Socrates, especially as Plato himself was not actually present on this occasion.

PREPARING FOR DEATH

In *Phaedo*, the character of Socrates explains that the true philosopher should look forward to death and that they should ready themselves for dying. Like the whole of Plato's philosophy, his views on life after death are interlinked with his belief in the eternal Realm of the Forms. As this world is transient and unreal, the philosopher should surely wish to escape the distractions of the body and the world around him so that he can dwell in this realm of pure thought.

The body is seen, then, as a hindrance, a distraction; the desire for food, sensuous satisfaction, illness and so on, are all weaknesses that get in the way of the mental pursuit for truth. The philosopher, in order to attain knowledge of the Forms, is in a constant battle with the world of the senses, and must continually engage in a process of what Plato described as *katharsis*.



The philosophy of Woody Allen

The comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen has quite a lot to say on knowledge and death. For example: ‘Is Knowledge knowable? If not, how do we know?’ (*The Insanity Defense: The Complete Prose*, Random House 2007). Or, ‘My relationship with death remains the same. I’m strongly against it.’ (*Vanity Fair*, 15 May 2010)

- **Katharsis**

The Greek word *katharsis* has come down to us as the English **catharsis**, which usually means to relieve an emotional or neurotic condition by relating a traumatic experience that has been repressed. It is used even more commonly when people talk of reading a book, seeing a film or listening to music that they find to be ‘cathartic’, that is, it allows them to let go of suppressed feelings and emotions.

Katharsis, for Plato, was also a form of purification. Plato was deeply influenced by the mystic group known as the Pythagoreans, who practised a form of regular purification of the body by using types of herbal medicines, fasting, and the practice of music, dance and song.

It is certainly not uncommon today, even in the secular world, for people to feel the need for an occasional purification, even if it is simply taking a day out from eating now and then. Among most religious traditions, forms of purification – most especially through lengthy periods of fasting – are common practice, and are a means of getting more in touch with the ‘spiritual’ side of one’s being, rather than being pre-occupied with bodily needs. More extreme forms of self-purification can involve a degree of self-mutilation, for example in cases of flagellation as a form of religious discipline and penance.

By means of various austere practices the philosopher can become aware of the delusion of material gain and sensuous pleasures and instead be close to the Truth, which, in effect, is close to death. In death, the soul is released from the body and so is no longer subject to its distractions. In such a case, Plato argues, why should the philosopher fear death?

THE NATURE OF THE SOUL

The soul, Plato believes, is eternal. At the death of the body the soul continues in

a disembodied existence as pure intellect. Plato makes clear links between the concept of the soul and the intellect here. The soul is actually possessed of intelligence as it resides within the Realm of the Forms. Therefore, when the soul enters the body, so does intelligence. Education, therefore, is not acquiring new knowledge, but recollecting what the soul possesses already. To attain knowledge you need to look within your own soul.

REINCARNATION

Plato also believed that the soul, once freed from the body, is weighed down by the corruption of the sensual world. If the person who dies has lived an immoral life, then the soul will be reborn into a vice-ridden existence. Drunkards and greedy people are reborn as asses, while tyrants will be reborn as birds of prey. However, if you have lived a virtuous life you may be reborn as a better human being. This idea would have seemed curiously foreign to many Greeks, and resembles more the Hindu concept of rebirth.

THE THREE PARTS OF THE SOUL

In another of Plato's dialogues, *Phaedrus*, Socrates is talking to a young man called Phaedrus while sitting under a tree in the countryside. Socrates is talking on the nature of the soul. The soul is immortal, with no beginning and no end. Further, it is immortal because the ever-moving is immortal. This description of the soul as 'ever-moving', as something that is also moved by its own accord and not by something else, is a property that is not mentioned in the *Phaedo*. However, remembering that the soul is perhaps best translated as 'life-principle', it would make more sense for the Greek mind to conceive of the soul, the *psyche*, as containing movement as one of its properties, for all life is in motion.

In a famous image, Socrates presents a simile to describe the soul's nature:

- Imagine the soul to be a chariot with a charioteer and two winged horses; one white and one black.
- The charioteer and the two horses together represent the three parts of the soul.
- The charioteer represents the rational part of the soul.
- The white horse represents spirit and energy.
- The black horse represents the appetites.

Leaving aside whether to believe that there is an actual soul or not, Plato does present an interesting view of psychology – as a struggle between the various elements of the *psyche*. As an example of how these three parts might interrelate, imagine you have a craving for a cigarette. This is your appetite, the ‘black horse’, talking, and it would be a simple matter to give in to the craving and have a cigarette. Yet your reason, your charioteer, tells you that it is bad for your health, one cigarette will lead to another, and so on. Reason alone, however, is insufficient to stop you from having the cigarette, what is also needed is courage and spirit, the white horse, to prevent you from doing so. Hence, if reason along with spirit work together and rule over the appetites you will not have that cigarette!

PLATONIC LOVE

The significance of winged horses is that it is the natural tendency of the soul to strive upwards, towards the Realm of the Forms. In his later dialogue, the *Symposium*, the soul is not only controlled by the intellect, but is driven by desire, by the god of love, **Eros**, to unite with the eternal realm. However, the soul is trapped, imprisoned within the physical body. The black horse, of course, strives to move downward, while the white horse to fly upward. When the soul becomes entrapped within a body, its wings are destroyed. Socrates describes how true love helps these wings to grow once more, and therefore to be released. It is the natural state of the soul to gaze upon the forms of justice and beauty. When we gaze upon a beautiful object we are, therefore, ‘recollecting’ the pre-existence of our souls within the Realm of the Forms. The soul, therefore, is also the seat of love.

Plato’s Eros is the soul’s impulse towards the Form of the Good. At the lowest level, this manifests itself in our desires for a beautiful person and our wish for immortality by having children with that person. At a higher level, love involves a spiritual union which leads to good within a social sense. However, the highest kind of love is the love of wisdom, of philosophy which, ultimately, can lead to the vision of the Form of the Good itself.

What is interesting here is the move away from the emphasis on reason and intellect for the soul’s escape to the later work that emphasizes love as a way for the soul to grow and escape the world of the senses. In his middle period, Plato believed that the appetites were dangerous and needed to be controlled by reason, whereas in later life he gives the sensuous pleasures freer reign. However, Plato is keen to point out that the highest form of love, Platonic love,

is to get away from pure sensual pleasure and to ascend to the blissful vision of Beauty itself. Plato argued that the power of Beauty is its ability to cause us to recollect the Realm of the Forms from which our soul has descended into the body. This particular interpretation was developed especially by the mystical elements of religious traditions with the emphasis on a love and union with God.

The Cosmic Soul

In *Republic*, Socrates makes reference to the ‘maker of the heavens’, and it is unsure what he means by this. What is the relationship between the Realm of the Forms, the gods, and the world of the senses? Is there a Creator God and did this God also create the Forms?

In Plato’s later work, the *Timaeus* (see [Chapter 11](#) for much more on this), Plato describes the whole universe as a living entity that has both body and soul. The Cosmic Soul rules the universe, including the gods such as Zeus. However, this Cosmic Soul was itself created by the ‘Demiurge’, a Divine Craftsman that created the whole universe using the eternal Forms as its model. This notion of a Craftsman goes back to what was said earlier in this chapter concerning Plato’s fascination with *techne*, with the crafts, so that even the universe is crafted and, also, like all products of the craftsman, has a function.

This Demiurge exists, therefore, separately from the Forms, but is also separate from the Cosmic Soul. The Demiurge, rather, created the universe in its own image, but it is lesser than the Forms because, like human beings, it is contained within a ‘body’. Therefore, the Forms act as the perfect model for the Demiurge to create the universe. Whereas the Forms are perfect, eternal and unchangeable, the universe, since it is made of matter, is imperfect, temporal and changeable.

Imagine a sculptor who wishes to create a statue of a beautiful person, but, as he is limited by his materials, creates something that can give the appearance of the beautiful person, but inevitably is a poorer image of the original. Nonetheless, it is possible to look within the sculpture and see the beauty within it. Here you perceive the true Form of the beautiful person, rather than its image, its ‘shadow’.

Christian doctrine, of course, could not accept the belief in Forms that were separate from God, because then God would not be the creator of everything. Rather the Forms become ideas within the mind of God, who then creates the

universe from these ideas.



Key terms

Cartesian Doubt: Named after René Descartes, who engaged in a philosophical method of doubt to determine what we can know with certainty.

Catharsis: To relieve emotional or neurotic condition by means of relating a traumatic experience that has been suppressed.

Dualism: Dualism is a belief that there are two separate entities: a body and a soul.

Empiricism: Empiricism is the belief that all our knowledge comes from our senses, from our experience of the world.

Epistemology: Also known as the ‘theory of knowledge’, a branch of philosophy that examines what we can know and how we can know. Comes from the Greek word *episteme*.

Ergon: Greek for ‘function’; it is what something does or what it is intended for.

Eros: In Greek mythology, the god of love.

Rationalism: Rationalism is the belief we can use the power of reason alone to acquire knowledge.

Solipsism: The belief that we cannot know whether other minds or an external world really exists.

Techne: Greek for ‘craft’ or ‘skill’.





Dig deeper

Clarke, D. M. (trans.) (2000), *René Descartes: Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*. London: Penguin Classics.

Martin, R. M. (2010), *Epistemology: A Beginner's Guide*. London: Oneworld Publications.

Waterfield, R. (trans.) (2004), *Plato: Theaetetus*. London: Penguin.





Fact check

- 1 Who said, 'Man is the measure of all things'?
 - a Pythagoras
 - b Plutarch
 - c Plato
 - d Protagoras
- 2 What is epistemology?
 - a The study of knowledge
 - b The study of morality
 - c The study of political systems
 - d The study of mathematics
- 3 Who saw the world as in a constant state of flux?
 - a Parmenides
 - b Heraclitus
 - c Theaetetus
 - d Democritus
- 4 What is the meaning of *katharsis*?
 - a A method to help you remember things
 - b A healing drug
 - c A form of poison
 - d A form of purification
- 5 What does the word 'philosopher' originally mean?
 - a Wisdom-lovers
 - b Sight-lovers
 - c Nature-lovers
 - d Music-lovers
- 6 What kind of knowledge would you be tested on in a general knowledge quiz?
 - a 'knowing that'
 - b 'knowing of'
 - c 'knowing how'
 - d 'knowing when'
- 7 What is the Greek word for 'function'?
 - a *techne*
 - b *episteme*
 - c *ergon*
 - d *zygon*

8 Which one of the following describes an empiricist?

- a Someone who believes you cannot rely upon your senses for the foundation of knowledge
 - b Someone who believes that our experience of the world forms the basis for our knowledge
 - c Someone who believes that knowledge comes from God
 - d Someone who believes that knowledge is a permanent and absolute thing
- 9 What is philosophical dualism?
- a A belief that the universe was created by two gods
 - b A belief that humans were split into two halves when they were created
 - c A belief in a separation between the material body and an immaterial soul
 - d A belief in a heaven and a hell

10 Who is the Greek god of love?

- a Cupid
- b Psyche
- c Kamadeva
- d Eros



6

How are we to live?

In the previous chapter we looked at Plato's theory of knowledge: what can we know for certain and how might we come about this knowledge. Key to this is Plato's Theory (if we can really call it a 'theory') of the Forms which, as we saw, relates to his view on the soul and the afterlife. But Plato's Theory of the Forms and his views on the concept of the soul have important implications for his political and educational philosophy. His work, *Republic*, represents Plato at his peak and it is important as it incorporates all of his views in a comprehensive system.

It is very easy to isolate one aspect of his political philosophy without appreciating how it connects to his views on epistemology, morality, and so on. This would be a mistake, and it has caused many critics to declare Plato as totalitarian, anti-liberal and elitist. To an extent these criticisms are justifiable, but should be tempered by considering the age Plato lived in as well as his genuine concern for the welfare of his beloved state. It should also be stressed that Plato placed great importance on the practicality of his political theory only if it is *actually* possible to access the Realm of the Forms, especially the Form of the Good. This by no means excuses him, but it should help to understand him.

What is so special about *Republic*? What sets it apart from other philosophical works? *Republic* is one of the world's greatest works of philosophy and literature. It is Plato's magnum opus and it set the standards and boundaries for future Western philosophy. It is the first major work of political philosophy and presents a comprehensive and radical theory of the state that views the role of the state as not merely an agent of control, but as an agent of virtue. The state is an educational tool to nurture, nourish and develop individual behaviour. In this respect, Plato had great faith in the ability of the state to wield its power wisely. However, *Republic* is more than just a political theory, for it is also very personal. The individual is an indelible part of the state; the two cannot be separated.

Justice

In presenting his political agenda, Plato is also concerned with the personal lives of individuals. At the very beginning of *Republic*, the character of Socrates asks: 'What is justice?' But the word 'justice' is a somewhat unsatisfactory translation of the Greek word *dikaiosune*. The word covers both individual and social morality, and so the concern is with the right way to live both for the individual

and the community. By asking what is justice, Socrates wants to address the broader question of duties and obligations, of the individual's role in society. These are profound and important questions that are as relevant today as they were in Plato's time. Why should I be good? What do I owe the state, and what does the state owe me? What is the meaning of right conduct? In *Republic*, the political and personal are merged, for the individual mind is ultimately shaped through the political system. Plato is only too aware of how powerful the environment is in moulding individuals.

THE CONVENTIONAL VIEW OF JUSTICE

In *Republic*, Plato, through the character of Socrates, begins by asking what justice is of an old and wealthy man by the name of Cephalus; a man shaped by the traditions and conventions of his time and who, indeed, presents a very conventional view of justice: telling the truth and giving back what one has borrowed. But Socrates quickly points out a problem here:



'Now let's talk about this very thing, justice: shall we say, as you've suggested, that it's simply a matter of telling the truth, and of giving back when one's received something from someone; or is it in fact possible to do those very things justly, now unjustly? Here's an example for you. I imagine everyone would agree that if one borrowed weapons from a friend when he was in a state of mind, and he went mad and then asked them back, they shouldn't be given back to him in such circumstances, and the person who did give them back – or for that matter wanted to tell the whole truth to someone in that condition – would scarcely be just.'

Plato, *Republic*, 331c

The above is typical Socratic method: 'is it in fact possible to do those very things justly, now unjustly'. In other words, when defining justice it is a problem when it turns out to be both one thing, yet also the opposite. In order to give a true definition of justice it cannot be qualified in any way.

Cephalus is very limited mentally; his notion of doing right consists of following a few simple rules such as 'don't lie' or 'give back what isn't yours'. He achieves tranquillity, not because of his temperament, but because he is well off and can pay his debts so he is not afraid of what will happen to him in the next

world. What matters to him are external actions, in making sacrifices to the gods. He really has no need for philosophy and seems to only want Socrates' company in the belief that it will encourage his family to visit more if they know Socrates is present.

Cephalus, too old to change his ways or have his comfortable life and views disrupted, quickly chooses to leave the discussion and hand over to his son, Polemarchus.

Both Cephalus and his son Polemarchus are portrayed as morally complacent. Polemarchus looks for an answer by reference to the traditional texts and the revered poets of his day, and quotes the poet Simonides, who says that you should give every man what is due. This is essentially the 'eye for an eye' view of justice: if someone does good to you, then you should return this; if someone does you bad, then you should do bad to him. This is how Socrates responds to this view: • Socrates wonders whether it is ever right to harm others. Long before the leader of the Indian independence movement Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) stated that an eye for an eye only makes the world go blind, Plato questioned whether a morality could really be based upon harming others. Of course, it may be *expedient* to do so, but this does not make it morally *right*.

- Socrates talks of each person possessing what is called *arete*, which can be translated as 'excellence' or 'quality'. He points out that if you harm a horse you make it less excellent than it was before and this could be applied to people. Harming them does not make them better people, but worse.
- Socrates then presents an important analogy. He compares the ruler to that of a physician. It is an analogy Plato makes throughout *Republic*. The physician takes the Hippocratic Oath: do no harm. What if this oath were applied to rulers? A political ruler is like a physician; his role is to look after the wellbeing of his citizens.
- For a state to be a moral state it is important to elicit the moral qualities in each individual. Here, Plato is also presenting his educational agenda: you cannot force people to be good, to be excellent (*arete*); you must teach in a way that brings out the individual's distinctive qualities. Teaching is a process, not something that is inflicted upon the individual. It is essentially through the Socratic method that this is achieved.
- Therefore, can it be right conduct (*dikaiousune*) to detract from the individual's

special excellence (*arete*)? The state, in its role of educator, would have nothing to gain and much to lose if it were to force or intimidate its people into being good.



Cephalus

Cephalus is not an Athenian citizen but a 'resident alien' from Syracuse who has grown rich from trade and manufacture. In fact, primarily from arms dealing! There is irony here in the text because when Plato wrote *Republic* his audience knew that Cephalus' family was ruined after Athens had been defeated by the Spartans. Polemarchus had been executed and the family fortune lost. This shows that, despite Cephalus' belief that his wealth can protect him morally, the possession of money can be temporary and the security it seemingly gives illusory. Money can't buy you love, but it can't buy you a good soul either.

THRASYMACHUS AND THE UNCONVENTIONAL VIEW OF JUSTICE



'Listen to this, then,' he [Thrasymachus] said. 'What is just, I say, is nothing more than what is in the interests of the stronger. Why aren't you applauding? You simply won't, will you?'

Plato, *Republic*, 338c

Having silenced Polemarchus, the important character of Thrasymachus presents his radical and unconventional view of justice. Thrasymachus was a real historical character, a Sophist and a skilled teacher. He believed that there are no eternal truths and that our beliefs and values are relative to the time and place we live in. As a relativist, he denies tradition. In this way, Thrasymachus can be seen as the antithesis of Polemarchus.

Thrasymachus' new premise is this: *might is right*. There is no eternal standard of justice, only a standard of power. It is the rulers who define justice, for they have the most power. In fact, Thrasymachus goes even further than this by presenting another, related premise: *the person who is unjust is the happier person*. Thrasymachus presents an image of the 'superman', a powerful figure who is self-assertive, establishes his own values and defies conventional morality. Consequently, the unjust are not only happier, they are more successful.

This cynical view of justice is a powerful one, but it is important for Plato to refute it for the implications would be a society that has no absolute standards of morality and is concerned only with the pursuit of power and happiness. How does Plato's character Socrates respond?

- Socrates re-introduces his analogy of the ruler and the physician. The physician's primary concern is with the interests of the patient, not only his own. Granted, the physician exercises his power over the patient's body, the power of knowledge, but he does not use this selfishly for personal gain. Remember, he must follow the Hippocratic Oath: do no harm.
- Why, Socrates argues, shouldn't politics be just as professional as medicine? Medicine has knowledge, it is a science. Physicians practise their science for the common interest. Why cannot there be a political science?
- Plato suggests that you can achieve the same kind of professionalism in politics that you have in medicine. Politics would not just be a matter of opinion, but of knowledge. It is possible to turn politics into a noble profession.

Plato is arguing here that politicians *should* be like physicians, not that they *are*. The whole of Plato's response hinges upon the belief that there are eternal standards (the Forms). That political rule and, it follows, the practice of right conduct, of justice, can be based on knowledge, not just opinion, and that rulers, if they should possess this knowledge, would use it wisely and for the common good. When Plato makes reference to the science, or skill, of the doctor the word *techne* is used (see [Chapter 5](#)). In the same way that the doctor has the *techne* to heal, the carpenter to make wood, the horse-trainer to train horses, and so on, the politician can have the *techne* to rule.

Glaucon and the Myth of Gyges

The next character to take part in the discussion is Glaucon, who in history was one of Plato's brothers. Glaucon presents a refashioned version of the Sophist view, but of a lighter temperament than Thrasymachus. He has sympathy with the view presented by the character of Socrates, but is not entirely satisfied with it. Rather than attacking Socrates in the rather dogmatic and insulting manner of Thrasymachus, Glaucon prefers to play devil's advocate, to attempt to refine the arguments presented so far and put forward a series of propositions. Glaucon

believes that what we need to do is to understand the origins of justice, before we can then determine its nature.

First, Glaucon rejects the view of Polemarchus that our ideas of justice come from the Gods, or from some eternal realm. He presents a **social contract theory**: mankind formed into a society and all agreed to conform to certain laws as a form of mutual protection. People followed justice not because it is an eternal truth, but because it is convenient to do so; it provides security and protection. People behave because they are afraid. If they go outside the law then they know they may get caught and punished. Justice, then, is a compromise between what is most desired (being unjust and avoiding punishment) and what is undesired (suffering injustice without any redress).

And so, Glaucon is presenting a view of human nature not unlike that of Thrasymachus: it is human nature to be selfish, but right conduct is a product of a selfish act in the sense that there is an awareness that it is a convenient way of maintaining order in society.

Although this might appear a selfless act, the individual would, if he could get away with it, be unjust! Being good, Glaucon suggests, goes against the grain of human nature. To demonstrate this, Glaucon recounts the Myth of Gyges. One day an earthquake caused a huge chasm to appear in the ground where Gyges, a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia, was tending his flock. The shepherd descends into the chasm where he finds, among many other things, a corpse. From the finger of the corpse he takes a ring and makes his way out. At a meeting of fellow shepherds, he was fiddling with the ring when his companions started to talk about him as if he wasn't there. Eventually, he realized that twisting the ring in a certain way caused him to be invisible. Appreciating the power this gave him, Gyges used it to seduce the queen, murder the king and seize the throne for himself.

Glaucon then asks Socrates to imagine that two such rings existed; one for the man who had spent his life being unjust, and one for the man who had spent his life being just. In this experiment, Glaucon wonders, would the just man really be able to resist the temptations that the ring gave him? The fact that he could steal things from the market, murder people without being discovered and generally act like a god? Would not the just man behave the same way as the unjust man so that the two could not be distinguished from each other? The just man would soon learn that injustice is the happier option.

The soul of the state

Plato now has to prove that justice is preferable, not because it leads to success and material benefits, but because it is a good in itself. In other words, the true nature of Man, his very soul, is to be just. It is at this point that Plato launches into his description of the ideal state, of his 'republic'. For, he argues, to understand the soul of the individual you have to understand the soul of the state that is the individual writ large. Since justice can be a characteristic of the individual and society, it will help, Socrates argues, to look first to the state – like placing a magnifying glass over justice to make it easier to identify – and then to find something similar in the individual.



'I think we should approach the subject as if we were in the sort of situation where someone had told a collection of not very sharp-sighted individuals to read something in small letters from a distance, and then one of them noticed that the same letters were to be found somewhere else, only bigger and on something bigger – in such a situation, I imagine, it would be a godsend to read these first and so be in a position to examine the smaller letters and see if they really are the same.'

Plato, *Republic*, 368d

Socrates does agree with Glaucon that there is a 'Gyges gene' in all of us, but there is also a tremendous capacity to be rational and good. The fact that individuals may behave like Gyges is not because individuals are naturally inclined to behave that way, but because society has made them that way.

What Plato aims to show is that for man to be true to himself, to be able to exercise his true *arete*, he must be allowed to do so through the encouragement of the state, his educator. What is at fault is Athenian society for producing people who selfishly pursue their own interests, whereas the 'natural state' would be one that would allow the individual to act according to his nature; self-discipline through the dominance of reason. Athens is a corrupt city and it must be 'purged' through three waves of change that sweep away the old system.

The ideal state

Although many Athenians saw their city-state, their *polis*, as the perfect ideal, emphasizing the city's cultural and military achievements, Socrates had taught Plato to be wary of a community that gives no place to those who have expertise in politics. Plato, also, was only too aware of the darker side of Athens: its contempt and cruelty towards other states, its own arrogance, its serious political and military mistakes, and injustices towards its own citizens, especially towards Socrates. For Plato, Athens could hardly be considered the Greek ideal. Yet, the fact that there might well be an ideal – Plato's 'City of the Forms' – encouraged Plato to study and teach political science. In *Republic* especially, Plato constructs a detailed account of a new society; the ideal *polis*. To create this new society, three major changes have to take place. These are the three 'waves' that will wash away the old, corrupt society and replace it with the new: **1** A new ruling class of Guardians must be established who will be Philosopher-Kings.

2 These Guardians will consist of men and women.

3 The Guardian class will have no private property and will live communally.

These three measures were not only radical for their time, they can also be seen to be so in more recent times. Plato has still yet to define what he means by justice. He believes, however, that if we look at the principles that make up a just state we can then transfer these to the individual. Plato, through the character of Socrates, begins by considering the basic requirements to create a social structure.

The 'City of Pigs'

Socrates rejects Glaucon's social contract theory. Rather, men are not born self-sufficient and they cannot satisfy their needs alone. Socrates describes the formation of the state in the following stages: • A state is when a group of people gather and settle in one place who have different various requirements.

- This gathering engages in mutual exchange, depending upon the needs of each individual.
- The most important of these needs is food, followed by shelter and clothing.

- In order to satisfy these demands, the individuals will take on various tasks: one will be a farmer, another a builder, a third a weaver, a fourth a shoemaker, and so on.
- In this state it is more logical and sensible that each person should do his specific task according to his abilities. The farmer should develop his farming abilities, providing food not only for himself but also for the others in the community. Likewise, the shoemaker should concentrate on shoemaking for the whole community. This is better than the farmer only producing food for himself, then having to spend the rest of his time also making shoes for himself, building a house, *etc.*
- Socrates then goes on to explain this community in more detail – needs for craftsman, shepherds, tradesmen, a marketplace and a currency, and shopkeepers.
- Finally, Socrates presents a community that satisfies all the basic needs, consisting of a relatively small number where each has his allotted trade in life.

Plato here presents a very idyllic, romantic vision of society. But Plato's brother, Glaucon, describes it as a 'city of pigs' (372d) because it does not satisfy the needs of the civilized man. Where are the comforts and luxuries? What Plato pictured was a state that satisfied the basic economic needs, without any mention of a political structure. In fact, Plato saw this basic *polis* as the ideal because people would live long due to a healthy diet, and, most likely, there would be no need for a government – it is effectively self-governing. Conflicts can be settled through rational arbitration, although it would be such a moral community anyway that there would not be much need for forceful policing.

Also, as a philosopher, Plato would have felt that there would be no need for luxuries. Indeed, Socrates himself lived a very frugal life. What is envisioned is a community of philosophic-minded people who have no interest in acquiring wealth and possessions, or in satisfying one pleasure after another. They would only require the essentials of life and live a love of Truth. The material world, for Plato, was a transient one, and so why would you want to load yourself up with material things that distract from the pursuit of the awareness of the Realm of the Forms?

However, in order to determine how injustice occurs in society, Plato is prepared

to paint a picture of society with the luxuries of life, obviously believing that it is these elements that disrupt the healthy and ideal *polis*.

THE CIVILIZED STATE

The civilized state would possess the following elements: • The *polis* will no longer be a small community. It will be swollen in size because of the necessity for people catering for needs that are not basic. For example, artists, sculptors, embroiderers, painters, musicians, poets, dancers and more servants.

- Inevitably, wealth will lead to greed, envy, jealousy and increased conflict. Many more doctors will be required because of greater ill health due to overindulgence in luxurious foods and stressful living.
- To feed these people, more land will be required, which will mean infringing on the territory of other states. This will lead to war, and so soldiers will also be needed. Further, to maintain unity for this large and multifarious state, rulers will be needed. These soldiers and rulers make up what Plato calls the Guardians.

THE THREE CLASSES

Plato believed that injustice is caused by disharmony in society. If society functions so that the intellect rules and is not distracted by desire, then you have a healthy and just community. However, as Glaucon pointed out, this ideal is not a realistic one, for societies are much more complex than this and basic needs must include things such as theatre, music, art and good food. Accepting this, Socrates wonders how justice can possibly be maintained in such a society. Here he presents the need for government and a strict division of society into three classes: • **The Rulers.** The Rulers make up the upper echelon of the Guardians of the *polis*. They effectively govern the state.

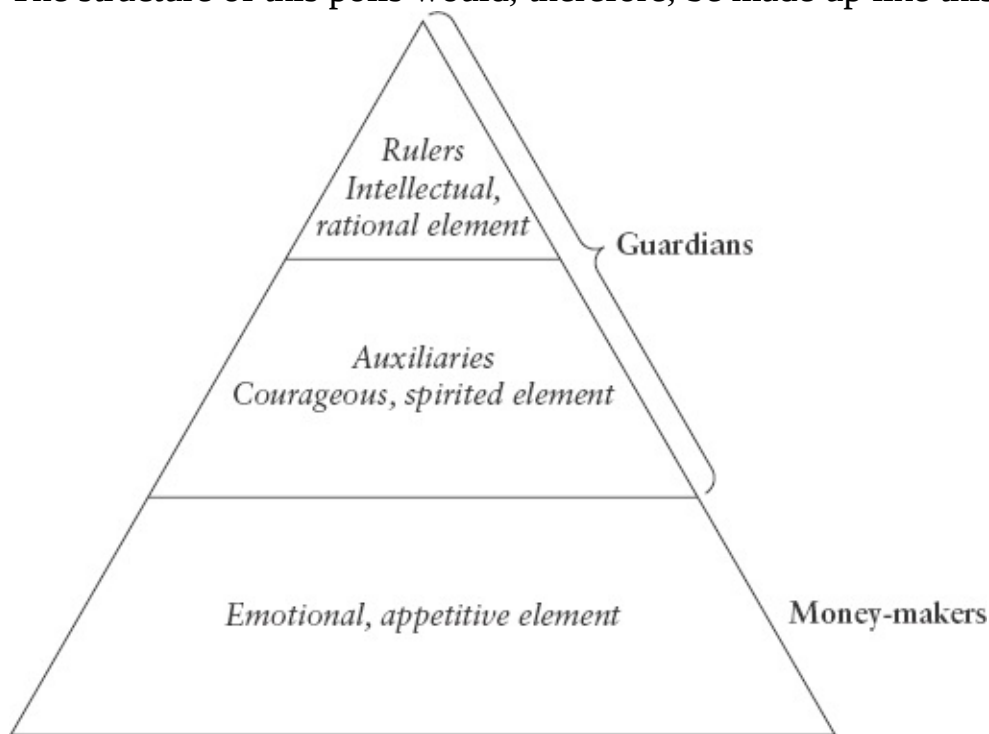
- **The Auxiliaries.** These make up the lower echelon of the Guardians. These are the military. This fits in with Plato's belief that the best society should concentrate on specialization; that is, each to his trade. Normally, all citizens of the *polis* were considered as potential soldiers should the need arise, but Plato saw the merits of having a section of society specifically trained in the art of fighting.
- **The Money-makers.** This, the economic class, consists of the farmers,

artisans and traders – basically, anyone who is not involved in governmental or military affairs.

For the rest of *Republic*, Plato concentrates mostly on the education and character of the Guardians. As a single group they possess talents that lend them to a philosophic nature. However, the Rulers will be the ones that will engage in more advanced philosophical study and so will be separate from the Auxiliaries depending on their temperament. The Rulers will have a more intellectual, rational and contemplative temperament, while the Auxiliaries will have a more ‘spirited’ and fierce quality, but will be obedient to the Rulers.

The third class will continue to exercise their appetites as they see fit, and their function is to satisfy the economic needs of the state. It should be pointed out that the third class are not ‘working class’, as they are able to own property and make money. However, Plato points out that measures need to be taken to avoid excessive wealth or, for that matter, poverty.

The structure of this polis would, therefore, be made up like this:



Really, there should be a fourth strata, that of the slaves. However, Plato assumed that any society would require slaves and they were not, in Plato’s time, considered as possessing any rights. This, of course, strikes us as shocking today but it must be remembered that Plato was writing at a time when any society of any degree of sophistication required a slave-class in order to function. The fact

that Plato did not see this as in any way immoral may well be an argument for moral relativism! It does certainly show that Plato was a product of his time.

THE LIFESTYLE OF THE GUARDIANS

In order for this *polis* to function, Plato highlights the importance that the Guardians receive the right education and live a certain lifestyle – otherwise the state would be just as corrupt as any other. At first impression, this might well be the conclusion, since it appears that this caste system would allow the Rulers and Auxiliaries to have immense power. Plato does not deny that they would possess the power – both political and military. However, remember that Plato believed that power could be wielded wisely and for the good of the community, provided those who have the power are brought up correctly.

Socrates says that the Guardians should possess the same qualities as a good watchdog, that of courage, strength and loyalty. The Guardians are to be gentle and protective towards their own, and also dangerous and fierce towards their enemies. Socrates also believed that as a dog loves those it knows, it therefore has a love of knowledge, and so has that essential quality: a philosophic nature!

Socrates argues that the Guardians must lead a lifestyle that will enable them to perform their duties while avoiding the temptations that power can offer and, as a result, doing damage to the community. Therefore, the Guardians must always act in the interests of the *polis* as a whole, and not for their own selfish concerns. How can this be achieved? The picture Plato paints of the Guardians' lifestyle is a radical, some might say 'communistic' one, with very strict conditions (the Money-Making class, of course, will not be governed by any of these rules):

- They are to have no personal wealth or own any property. Since they will share things, there will be no dissension, envy or jealousy. They will not be concerned with the acquisition of wealth, and will not fight over who possesses what.
- They are to have no family ties and are to live communally. Plato saw the family, especially the complex kinship ties that existed in his time, as a divisive force that encourages selfishness rather than a concern for the community as a whole.
- Men and women are to be seen as equals provided they share the same capabilities. This was certainly the most radical and, for many Greeks at the time, shocking proposal. However, Plato saw this purely from a practical

perspective in that not using women is a waste of half Athens' population. Women and men only differ in a bodily sense, not in qualities of the intellect or character.

- The children will also be brought up communally, bred and raised in common, with no specific mother or father. Adult Guardians will regard every child as their own, and the children will see every Guardian as their parent. This would result in an 'extended loyalty' as you will see all others as your family.

This lifestyle is actually modelled on a real society; that of Athens' arch enemy, the *polis* of Sparta (see Case Study in [Chapter 3](#)). To live a 'Spartan lifestyle' has now entered everyday language and is synonymous with austerity and discipline. The Spartans were single-mindedly devoted to the state and they lived a continuous military existence, living communally in barracks. However, despite certain qualities that Plato admired, he also found them to be deficient in a number of respects. For example, the Spartans had a system known as **helotry**. The helots were slaves who worked the Spartan land. These helots were treated far more severely than the slaves of Athens, being perceived as little more than animals and were even hunted and killed as part of military practice. Not surprisingly, helots frequently revolted against their overlords, which meant that the Spartans had to be continually on their guard. Further, the Spartans were not renowned for their intellect, and their stupidity was mocked by the Greek comic playwright Aristophanes (c. 446–c. 386 BC) in his play *Lysistrata*. Certainly, the Spartans would not have Plato's requirement of a philosophic nature!

The 'Noble Lie'

How will Plato maintain this strict division of the classes? Plato argues that his *polis* should introduce a 'magnificent myth' or 'fine fiction'. This myth will be taught to all three classes of the *polis* and will teach that all members of the city are brothers, born of Mother Earth, and forged within her womb. And so the very land they live on is their mother, and its entire people are brothers forged from the same soil. The Rulers have the metal of gold mixed in their composition, the Auxiliaries have silver, and the Money-makers iron and bronze. Knowing this, people will accept their place because it is their constitution, and it would be a terrible thing if someone of a lower metal, such as iron or bronze, ruled the state.

This myth has often been translated as the 'Noble Lie', although perhaps this

helps feed criticisms that Plato is using propaganda. Indeed, Plato's most vehement critic, the philosopher Karl Popper (1902–94), believed the myth is typical of Plato's desire to create a totalitarian and propagandist state. It certainly smacks of inherent inequality and bears a strong resemblance to the Hindu beliefs that provide support for their caste system. However, Plato is recognizing the influence of myth upon society (see [Chapter 12](#)); certainly in his own day when the Athenians governed their lives and moral sense on the writing of poets and myth-makers.

Plato's class system was not entirely stringent, however. As all three classes are brothers, it is conceivable that someone from the Money-making class may be born with gold or silver in their composition, and likewise someone born in the Guardian class with bronze or iron. In such a case, this would be acknowledged and that person would shift classes. There is, therefore, a degree of social mobility and an acknowledgement of merit. Although Plato does not specifically refer to the education of the third class, it must be the case that they would get at least a rudimentary level of education to not only function as Money-makers, but to also identify those who have philosophic natures. Likewise, if someone born among the Guardians proves not to have the intellect or courage required, they would enter the third class as a farmer or craftsman.

The just state and the just individual

Plato believes that this vision of the state will be a just one provided each section of society knows its place. The Money-makers will be able to pursue their appetites, but will be governed by the reason and spirit of the Guardians. Likewise, the Auxiliaries will have their spirit tempered by the reason of the Rulers. Here we have a perfect balance and, consequently, a healthy and civilized state. It is the social embodiment of justice. But would the Guardians be happy?

The picture portrayed of the life of the Guardians certainly does not seem a happy one, lacking luxuries or sensual pleasure. However, Plato believed they would be happy because the possession of knowledge is in itself a satisfying thing. Further, the Guardians would obtain satisfaction from the fact that they were benefiting the whole of society by their actions rather than simply satisfying their own desires.

The healthy soul

Having pictured the state as a whole, Plato can now compare this to the individual. The three classes function in the ideal *polis* in the same way as the three elements of the soul. The Rulers represent reason (the charioteer), the Auxiliaries spirit (the white horse) and the Money-makers are the appetites (the black horse). In the same way that the just and good city is kept in check by the Rulers, the good and just soul needs to be controlled by the charioteer; not an easy task with two such diverse horses.

And so Plato's definition of justice is when the three elements of the soul, the *psyche*, know their places. The healthy soul, controlled by reason, is the just soul. In the same way justice in society is a harmonious relation between the classes, so justice in the individual is a harmonious relation between the different elements of the personality. Therefore, Plato is making a link between the just soul and the healthy soul. To be just is also to be physically and mentally stable and healthy.

Has Plato satisfactorily responded to the criticisms of Thrasymachus and Glaucon?

- First, Plato has to show that Man is just by nature rather than by convention. Glaucon argued that Man would naturally be unjust if he could get away with it. If it is the case that the soul's natural state is when the three elements function properly and are controlled by reason, then Plato could argue that Man, by nature, is just.
- Second, Plato has to show that it is to the individual's benefit to be just. Thrasymachus argued that it is better to be unjust rather than just. If Plato can argue that justice can indeed be equated with physical and mental health, then this would obviously be to the individual's benefit.
- Much depends, therefore, on whether it is reasonable to link the just soul with the healthy soul. Plato's theory has similarities with the psychology of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939, see Case Study below). Freud also divided the *psyche* into three elements: the **ego**, **super-ego** and the **id**. The ego and the id correspond closely to Plato's reason and desire, while the super-ego – the conscience – assists the ego (reason) by providing an emotional force to keep the id (desire) in check. Plato believes that when desire – the appetites – are allowed to run free then we behave immorally. Therefore, when the three

elements are not functioning properly we are mentally unstable and liable to commit immoral acts. There are, however, a number of problems with this:

- When someone acts immorally it seems far-fetched to say that they are mentally sick. There are many people who act unjustly yet seem to behave quite normally mentally. Even if it is the case that the mentally stable condition is where reason controls the appetites, it is debatable whether the rational part cannot be used to be unjust. For example, you can exercise your reason and self-discipline to rob a bank!
- What we consider to be mental illness seems conditioned by our environment. In today's society we would regard someone who thinks slavery is a good thing as 'sick', but this would not be the case in Plato's day.
- Freud believed that excessive repression of desire could itself be harmful and lead to mental illness. Plato's soul, like its analogy with the ideal state, is authoritarian and suggests that the appetites will be suppressed, although this criticism may be somewhat unfair on Plato as the distinction between the three parts of the soul is not so clear-cut; rather than the suppression of the appetites, it might be better described as 'reasoned emotion'.



The Interpretation of Dreams

Freud regarded his 1899 work *The Interpretation of Dreams* as his most important, yet it sold only 351 copies in the first six years after publication. As a result, the second edition was not published until 1909. After that it grew in popularity and a further six editions were published before he died in 1939.

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In Plato's ideal state, the Rulers will act like the psychiatrist who determines what is good for the *psyche*. This is based upon Plato's conviction that experts in political science can rule the state. Whether the day-to-day running of the state can really be considered a science is certainly a debatable point, although Plato argues that the Guardians will have the expertise required.

Plato places much emphasis on the need for authority, whether it be the rule by the Guardians in the state, or the rule by reason and spirit in the soul. For Plato, a 'democratic soul', like a democratic state, would result in a liberal attitude towards the appetites, which would be given too much freedom, which, in turn, would lead to immorality.



Id, ego and super-ego

Plato's concern with mental wellbeing and his idea of the tripartite *psyche* has a more recent counterpart in Freud's psychology. Freud also saw the *psyche* as structured into three parts: the id, ego and the super-ego. The **id** (or 'it'), analogous to the appetitive aspect of Plato's soul, is the primitive and instinctive side of our personality and includes such drives as sex (which Freud calls Eros after the Greek god of love) and aggression, or death (which Freud calls Thanatos, the god of death). The id resides in our unconscious and it is instinctual in that it demands immediate satisfaction, irrespective of the reality of the situation or what our reason might tell us. Freud says that a new-born child is entirely id.

The **ego** (or 'I') acts as a mediator between the id and the external world, so whereas the id acts according to the pleasure principle, the ego acts according to the reality principle. This is analogous with Plato's rational part of the mind, and Freud also uses Plato's horse analogy in describing the ego as, 'like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse'. (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923) The super-ego (or 'above-I') is somewhat analogous to Plato's spirited element, though that analogy is perhaps weakest of the three. The super-ego is the moral element. Whereas the ego reigns in the id to achieve realistic goals without a concern with the moral character of the act, the super-ego strives to 'persuade' the ego to pursue moral goals. If the ego fails to reign in the id, the ego can be 'punished' by the super-ego through the feeling of guilt. Alternatively, if the ego succeeds in overcoming the id, then it is rewarded with feelings such as pride. Like Plato, Freud is acknowledging the importance of society in the formation of our morals and values.




Key terms

Arete: A Greek word that can be translated as ‘excellence’ or ‘quality’. Plato believed that all things have an arete. For example, a pair of scissors’ arete is to cut. Humans, too, have an arete. The difficulty is in determining what this is.

Dikaosune: A Greek word that is often translated as ‘justice’. However, it has a much wider meaning. It concerns the central issue of what is the right way to live your life, and how do you know that you are leading a good life?

Social contract: Many philosophers have speculated upon the origins of human nature and have suggested that humans form a ‘social contract’: that is, they agree to form a society and live under certain rules.





Dig deeper

Bobonich, C. (2004), *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Popper, K. (2011), *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.





Fact check

- 1 Which one of the following describes the Noble Lie?
 - a The three classes are forged from the same soil but possess either gold, silver or bronze in their physical constitution
 - b The three classes are forged from the same soil but possess tin, copper or iron in their physical constitution
 - c The three classes are forged from the same soil but their class is determined by their karma
 - d The three classes are forged from the same soil but they possess gold, frankincense and myrrh
- 2 Which one of the following is a translation for the Greek word *arete*?
 - a justice
 - b excellence
 - c soul
 - d function
- 3 In *Republic*, which of the following represents the views of Cephalus on justice?
 - a Telling the truth and giving back what one has borrowed
 - b What is just is what is in the interests of the stronger
 - c An 'eye for an eye'
 - d Give and ye shall receive
- 4 In *Republic*, which of the following represents the views of Polemarchus on justice?
 - a Telling the truth and giving back what one has borrowed
 - b Might is right
 - c An 'eye for an eye'
 - d The meek shall inherit the Earth
- 5 In *Republic*, which of the following represents the views of Thrasymachus on justice?
 - a Telling the truth and giving back what one has borrowed
 - b What is just is what is in the interests of the stronger
 - c An 'eye for an eye'
 - d Loving thy neighbour
- 6 In *Republic*, what is the name of the mythical character who possessed a ring that made him invisible?
 - a Gollum
 - b Wotan
 - c Alberich
 - d Gyges
- 7 What is the social contract theory?
 - a People agree to imprison anyone who is not social
 - b People agree to reject any kind of society
 - c People agree to form a society and to live under a set of rules
 - d People agree to disagree
- 8 Which one of the following is one of Plato's three 'classes' in his ideal state?
 - a Preliminaries
 - b Secretaries
 - c Luminaries
 - d Auxiliaries

9 Which element describes the Guardians?

- a** courageous, spirited element
- b** intellectual, rational element
- c** emotional, appetitive element
- d** hysterical, irrational element

10 Which one of the following is a translation for the Greek word *dikaioisune*?

- a** craft or skill
- b** function
- c** justice
- d** soul



The Philosopher-King



‘[Socrates] Given that philosophers are those capable of getting hold on that which remains forever exactly as it is, and those who have no such capacity, lost and wandering as they are in a multiplicity of things that are now this and now that, are non-philosophers, which of these should lead the city?’

Plato, *Republic*, 484b

Having previously considered Plato’s theory of knowledge in *Republic* we then, in the last chapter, linked this with his political views, for his politics and epistemology cannot really be separated. The key question in *Republic* is ‘what is justice?’ and we considered the differing views of justice, *dikaiosune*, and how Plato, through the voice of Socrates, approached this subject ‘writ large’ by considering the just state, with its three parts of Guardians, Auxiliaries and Money-makers, before then comparing this to the three parts of the soul of the individual.

Plato has been accused of being totalitarian in his political views, but remembering that his political philosophy is closely tied to his views on where our knowledge of what is true comes from, he argues against the democratic state because it inevitably detracts from truth. In order for the human being to flourish, he or she needs the right environment: the right society and the right education.

The three *polis*

In *Republic*, Plato presents a picture of three very different city-states (*polis*):

- The City of Athens
- The City of the Forms
- The City of the Republic

Plato sees the first, the **City of Athens**, as corrupt. It is, remember, the city that killed Socrates. It is the city that does not allow the man of thought to practise

his wares, but bows to the whims of the mob. Plato who had, as a young man, considered entering public life and becoming a politician, became disillusioned with the state of Athenian society and the way politicians behaved.

The second, the **City of the Forms**, is the ideal city that transcends earthly existence. Plato admits that this is an ideal that we should strive for and may not ever be a reality. In every way, it is perfect. The great Christian philosopher and theologian, St Augustine, was heavily influenced by the writings of Plato and it was this idea of the City of the Forms that prompted him to write *The City of God* (see below and [Chapter 13](#)).

The third, the **City of the Republic**, is the ‘in-between’ of the other two. As we move away from the City of Athens towards the City of the Forms, we can create a real and better society on Earth. Plato was not just presenting a theoretical vision of society, for he believed it could, to some extent at least, actually be achieved, although humans being the imperfect creatures that they are it might never be as perfect as the City of the Forms, but it can get close to it.



St Augustine of Hippo

Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis, better known simply as St Augustine, was a philosopher and Christian theologian who was influenced by Plato’s philosophy (see also [Chapter 13](#)). Augustine was born in AD 354 in what is now Algeria, but then it was called Thagaste and was part of the Roman Empire. As a full Roman citizen, he received a good education in Latin literature and the writing of the Greeks, including Plato and Aristotle of course. In particular, he became skilled in rhetoric, the art of discourse. Whereas Socrates, in Plato’s dialogues, practises dialectic, Aristotle states in his work *The Art of Rhetoric* that rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic. By ‘counterpart’, however, Aristotle did not mean the opposite of dialectic. Rather it is better understood as a replacement for rhetoric for specific scenarios, especially in matters of civic affairs in law. Whereas dialectic is more theoretical and concerned with how we define our terms, rhetoric might be regarded as more ‘practical’. Regardless of these rather subtle distinctions, what both rhetoric and dialectic aim to achieve is to persuade, though the systematic methods differ.

Augustine, like Plato, was influential in education, being an advocate of critical thinking skills. He converted to Christianity in AD 386 at the age of 31 after he heard a voice telling him to ‘take up and read’, which he understood to be a command from God to open the Bible and read the first thing that he saw – a passage from Romans ([Chapter 13](#), verses 13&14), which outlines how the Gospel transforms believers. Augustine died in AD 430 and was canonized in 1298 by Pope Boniface VIII. He is the patron saint of theologians, printers and brewers! In his *City of God* Augustine, like Plato’s Republic, conceives of an ideal city for which humans can only aspire to. Our salvation, however, is not by rational thought and acquiring knowledge of the Forms, but by adhering to Christian principles.

The critique of democracy



Democracy

Athens is regarded as the birthplace of democracy but, if democracy is interpreted here as power belonging to free male citizens (as was the case with Athens in the 6th century BC) then there is a case for its origins in many other parts of the world before Athens, including possibly Mesopotamia and independent Indian states.

For Plato, the problem with the democracy that existed in Athens was that there was no sense of individual responsibility. The democratic system inherently lacks direction, without any real order or restraint upon the desires of the masses. The ‘democratic man’ has no desire for change in his life because he perceives himself to be free and happy, while lacking civic duty. *Republic* is not just a critique of democracy, but also a critique of liberalism, the kind of liberalism that allows people to pursue wealth and power but without any thought for the welfare of the state as a whole or, more importantly, with any concern for knowledge. What matters most in the Athenian state is whatever the opinion of the masses happens to be.

THE PHILOSOPHER-KING



[Adeimantus] ‘...if people take up philosophy, not just in order to complete their education, and something to be abandoned before they’ve grown up, but rather as something to spend their time on even after that, they mostly become downright peculiar, not to say totally corrupted, and even the ones that seem the most responsible, when they’re subjected to this kind of treatment by the pursuit you praise so much, turn out to be of no use to their cities.’

Plato, *Republic*, 487d

Having defined the philosopher as the lover of knowledge, and believing that there is such a thing as knowledge and not just opinion, Plato wanted to show that those who are experts in knowledge should rule the state. Either kings should become philosophers, or philosophers should become kings. But Plato is

confronted by a severe criticism from another character in *Republic*, his other brother Adeimantus. Adeimantus is not quite as prepared as Glaucon to be so amenable. Although, Adeimantus argues (*see* quote above) it may well be the case that those with knowledge of statesmanship should rule the state, it seems a ridiculous claim that this should be philosophers! Take a look around you! What a funny bunch philosophers are! Can they, argues Adeimantus, really make good rulers? If anything, they appear worthless and useless to society.

To the surprise of Adeimantus, Plato's character Socrates agrees with him. Yes, they are worthless and useless individuals in Athenian society. However, Socrates intends to argue, that this is the fault of society. It is society that needs to change if philosophers are to be true philosophers.

THE SIMILE OF THE SHIP

To illustrate his critique, Socrates presents the image of the simile of the ship (*Republic*, 488b–489c). This simile, the 'ship of state', is not uncommon to us today, but it was first set forth by Plato.

- On this ship, this 'ship of democracy', the captain is bigger and stronger than any of the crew, but somewhat short-sighted and a little deaf. He is also no expert in seamanship.
- The crew of sailors constantly quarrel over who should be in control of the helm, although none of them have learned navigation. In fact, the crew believes navigation is not something that can be taught at all.
- The crew begs and cajoles the captain into allowing them to take control of steering the ship and, ultimately, those who are most successful at persuading the captain – whether through the art of oral persuasion or through more underhand means such as plying the captain with alcohol or opium – take control and turn the voyage into a 'drunken carousel'.
- The man at the helm then elects as a navigator whoever helps in his quest to control the captain, regardless of whether or not that person actually has any navigation skills.
- Meanwhile, the true navigator, the one who has studied the stars, winds and seasons of the year is more than capable of steering the ship safely to its destination. The others see this genuine navigator as a 'stargazer' who spends his time in idle chatter and is useless to them.

How can we ‘unpack’ this parable?

- The ship itself represents the democratic state. That is, Athenian society during Plato’s time.
- The captain of the ship represents the citizens of the state; large and powerful, but rather deaf and short-sighted and lacking the skills of statesmanship. The captain can only understand the **rhetoric** of the crew, not the science of navigation.
- The crew are the politicians; each vying for power and attempting to persuade the citizens that they, the politicians, should represent them. They will use any means, including the ‘opium’ of rhetoric. They are the Sophists, like Thrasymachus, who manipulate the mob but are not concerned with truth.
- The genuine navigator, of course, is the Philosopher-King. The Greek poet and playwright Aristophanes in *The Clouds* (a play Plato was familiar with) characterized Socrates as a ‘stargazer’.

This parable is not only an attack on democracy, but also the consequences of democracy; the emphasis on opinion rather than knowledge. Knowledge is not something that can be determined by the vote. For example, using the analogy of the physician once more, if you are sick you do not vote for the person to heal you who happens to be the most persuasive. Rather, you rely on the physician’s knowledge and experience, as well as his concern for your best interests.



Winston Churchill on democracy

Even in more recent times, and in democratic societies, many have doubted the benefits of democracy. The quote ‘The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter’ is often attributed to the British statesman Winston Churchill (1874–1965), although there isn’t any concrete evidence he ever said this. He did, however, say: ‘Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.’ (House of Commons speech, 11 November 1947). This is actually much more positive towards democracy and, as Churchill admits himself, not an original quote by himself!

THE BEAST

Plato presents another parable to illustrate how the Sophists manipulate the masses. He asks us to imagine the keeper of a large and powerful animal (493b). If the keeper is to control this animal he must learn its moods and needs, how it should be approached and handled, what makes it gentle or savage, the meaning of its language, what tones of voice soothe it and so on. Having studied all of this, the keeper will call this study ‘science’, reduce it to a system, and set up a school.

However, is this really what we can call knowledge? The keeper is not in the least bit concerned as to whether the desires and moods of the animal are good or bad, so long as they are satisfied. It is rather like having a pet monkey that likes eating bananas all day and never wants to sleep: you know you can control it by giving it bananas and letting it play all day, but you will end up with a fat and tired monkey! Therefore, it may be the most expedient thing to do, but it is not the right thing to do. Another illustration would be if you have young children. Do you give them sweets every time they cry merely to stop them crying?

The meaning of the parable is quite clear:

- The beast represents the people of the state. They are strong and powerful, but liable to be cajoled and persuaded so long as their basic needs are satisfied.
- The keeper represents the politicians, especially the Sophists, who are able to cater to the people’s needs and call this ‘science’, when in fact they have no knowledge or concern for justice or right conduct.

The true philosopher



‘With any seed or growing thing,’ I [Socrates] said, ‘no matter whether it’s a plant or an animal, we know that if it hasn’t had the particular nourishment that’s appropriate to it, or the right weather, or location, the more vigorous specimen it is the greater the number of ways it will fail; bad, I think, is more opposed to good than it is to something that’s merely not good.’

Plato, *Republic*, 491d

Having presented these parables or similes, Plato has hoped to show why the philosopher is seen as worthless to society. In the simile of the ship the philosopher is the stargazing navigator, while in the beast simile he would not be appreciated by the animal because he does not allow it to do as it wished. In Athenian society, nobody likes a know-all even if, as a result, the ship of state ends up sinking in the middle of the ocean, or the beast dies at an early age of an avoidable heart attack.

In the corrupt city that was Athens, the philosophers are perceived as useless rogues, and here Socrates is making a strong case for the influence of society upon a person’s character. Remember that for Plato – and for most Greeks – the individual was an integral part of society. If the community as a whole is corrupt then this is bound to affect the individual within that community.

Further, Plato argues, it is true of any growing thing that those of the finest nature suffer more from evils done to them than those of an average nature. The ‘philosophic nature’ is something inherent in certain individuals; a powerful force for good that, however, can be manipulated as a force for bad. A Jedi knight can become Obi-Wan Kenobi or Darth Vader! For example, a dog can be brought up to be useful to society, perhaps as a guide dog or a sniffer dog, or as a companion for the elderly. However, the same dog, if given a bad upbringing, could be vicious, attacking postmen and biting the hand that feeds it. The philosopher, ultimately, cannot be educated according to standards different from the community he is a part of. Should he ever recall his philosophical nature and wish to pursue philosophy once more, the peer pressure will be so

great he will be compelled to put aside this yearning.

The 'common people' would not approve of true philosophy and will pressure those with the talents of a philosophic nature (courage, intellect, self-control, etc.) to use their skill for other goals, perhaps in business or entertainment. A modern-day analogy might be a talented poet who is compelled to write advertising slogans for a living because society has little patience or understanding of poetry. Plato argues that the reputation that philosophy has for intellectual vigour and wisdom will remain, but, in the unscrupulous society, will attract rogues who, like the simile of the ship, declare themselves navigators but have little or no knowledge of navigation.

However, there will always be a few true philosophers; but society looks upon them like the useless stargazers, and they are forced to withdraw from society and only watch the corruption and decline of their society.

Therefore, if the true philosopher is to be accepted by society as its ruler it is necessary for the whole of society to change. What Plato next proposes is a radical change in the structure of society that will sweep away the old democratic city of Athens and replace it with his republic.

Education

One of the lasting legacies of Plato's philosophy is the value he placed upon education. Today, receiving a state education may be taken for granted by many people, but in Plato's time this was not seen as a duty of the state, and not necessarily a valuable thing to have. The *polis* of Sparta, which many Athenians envied because of its strict discipline and order, was also renowned for its stupidity! Although Sparta was more advanced than Athens in that it did have a state system of education, the content of what was taught and how it was taught was radically different from Plato's proposals. Even in Athens, it was only the aristocracy who received any kind of decent education, and this was left to the initiative of private individuals and organizations.

Plato was perhaps not so radical as to suggest an equal education for all people. The education he describes is limited to the Guardian class only. His ideal *polis* would still have slavery, while the Money-making class would probably be limited in their education to what they required to fulfil their tasks well. However, he did see the importance of a good education if you were to have a

responsibility in running the affairs of the state, and that a good education was in the best interests for all in that state.

What is also important is how Plato thought education should be taught. His teaching methods and his attitude towards the learning process says as much about his views on human psychology as it does about his philosophy. Socrates, of course, always believed that you cannot really teach anybody anything, only point them in the right direction, and this view is something that Plato was also a proponent of. You cannot force people to learn, to drill facts into them. Rather, you can only guide people in how to think for themselves.

THE FOUR STAGES OF COGNITION

Plato's thoughts on the educative process are in line with his metaphysical beliefs; the belief that there is a Truth, a reality, a Realm of the Forms.

Ultimately, therefore, the best education a person can get is an awareness of the Forms and, especially, the Form of the Good. The Analogy of the Cave is also an analogy for the educative process. As the released prisoner makes his way up towards the entrance and out into the daylight he is, painfully, undergoing a learning process. Another way to imagine it is like steps up a ladder; you have to take one step at a time until you finally reach the top. These are the steps of **cognition** (knowing). There are four major steps: • *Eikasia*

The first stage is at the bottom of the ladder, and it is the step at which most of Athens was at, according to Plato. In the cave analogy, it is the prisoners tied up at the bottom of the cave. It is also the character of Polemarchus in *Republic*, who readily accepts the traditional wisdom of his day and is uncritical in his thinking. In the metaphysical sense, it is an acceptance of the world of appearances, what Plato called *eikasia*; the world of images. For example, you may believe that you are a moral person simply because the gods command it.

- *Pistis*

The second stage takes great effort to get to. You have to break away from the comfort and security, the belief that 'God is in heaven and all is well with the world'. This is when you begin to develop your critical thinking skills and begin to question the conventional views. In *Republic*, the character of Glaucon might fit into this category. Plato called it *pistis* or 'common-sense belief'. That is, you have yet to be at the stage of knowledge, but your beliefs are correct ones, although you are not yet able to substantiate them. For example, you have come to your own conclusion that, say, killing is an immoral act, but you are not yet

able to support and defend this view to any great extent.

- *Dianoia*

The third stage is a giant leap up the ladder of cognition. Plato called this *dianoia* or ‘thinking’. At this level you can engage in discursive thought. You not only believe something to be the case, you can defend it through discourse and logic. Although you do not yet have perfect knowledge, you have arrived at abstract notions of reality. Through the study of science, mathematics and geometry, you have an awareness of abstract, universal concepts. As a rather crude example, you know that one dog and one cat equals two animals but, rather than concentrating on the differences in the nature of the animals (one is a cat and one is a dog), you are aware of the oneness and universality of the mathematics of one plus one equalling two. Obviously, you would be aware of a lot more complex mathematics than this!

- *Episteme and noesis*

The fourth and final stage Plato called *episteme* and *noesis*: ‘knowledge’ and ‘intelligence’ respectively. This is the true philosophic stage, away entirely from superficial appearance and partaking in the Realm of the Forms. Rather than having to engage in reasoning from premises to conclusion, you can grasp the conclusion itself by apprehension and perceive the whole structure of knowledge. This is the enlightenment stage, when the prisoner in the cave analogy can perceive the Sun itself. In a more practical sense, it is when, through the conversational technique of dialectic, you are able to reach the true meaning of concepts such as justice.

THE SIMILE OF THE DIVIDED LINE

In *Republic*, Plato illustrates these epistemic states through yet another simile, that known as the Divided Line (509d–511e). This works rather like our ladder analogy above, as Socrates asks his interlocutor, in this case Glaucon, to imagine a line divided into four sections in all. Each of these sections ‘represents difference in relative clarity and obscurity’, so at the very bottom section would be *eikasua*, while the very top section would be *noesis*.

This simile is not quite as colourful as his others; there are no beasts, ships or caves here! However, the simile of a line can help in other ways, for it suggests that the move from *eikasua* (illusion) to that of the intelligible realm is connected whereas the cave analogy seems to regard the realm of the good as far

removed from the prisoner of the cave, so as to be different worlds altogether. In the cave analogy the world of illusion is nothing more than a distraction from the Realm of the Forms, whereas the line analogy suggests that even at the bottom of the line this provides some kind of support for further up the line, giving us a closer relationship between the empirical world and the world of ideas. Here we have a simile that is more closely aligned with Plato's epistemological views in later dialogues, notably *Timaeus* (see [Chapter 11](#)).

THE CURRICULUM

In order to progress up the ladder of cognition, the children of the Guardians in Plato's ideal *polis* follow a strict educational curriculum that consists of three elements:

- *Mousike* (the liberal arts)

- *Gymnastike* (physical education)
- Mathematics.

For the children to be good Guardians, it is necessary for there to be a careful balance between these three elements.

- *Mousike*

Although this might be translated as 'music', it had a much broader meaning in Plato's time than it does today. In effect, it covers all the liberal arts. Plato acknowledges the huge influence literature, theatre and music have in the formation of character and is well aware of its importance as an educational tool. In our modern society it is now acknowledged that young children in nurseries learn ideas and values through role play, music, stories and songs.

Equally, however, Plato believed the arts could have a powerful negative influence on character. In Athens, every child was brought up on a heavy diet of the great myth-makers such as Homer and Hesiod. However, Plato believed these were destructive rather than constructive; the only kind of character they form are those like Polemarchus: too accepting of the beliefs presented in these works. As a result, Plato presents a radical overhaul of the teaching of the liberal arts:

- Virtually the whole corpus of such works by Hesiod and Homer would be banned as these portray traditional heroes and gods as liars, deceivers, thieves, adulterers and so on.

- Only stories that present gods and heroes as perfect, honest and truthful should be promoted. They must have a strong moral content that encourages virtuous conduct rather than praising immorality.

- In Plato's time, children learned the myths by acting out the roles, what is called *mimesis* ('imitation'). Plato thought such acting would be bad for character as it could leave an indelible mark on young children embodying immoral characters. Therefore, acting, too, would be restricted to only portraying morally upright characters. Guardians must be single-minded and not have fragmented characters.
- For song and music, this too must be limited. Any form of music that encourages idleness, softness, indulgence or a lack of self-control would not be allowed. Music should only be used to express order, harmony and beauty. (See [Chapter 12](#) for more on Plato's views on the arts.) • *Gymnastike*

A balanced character also requires a physical education.

- Physical training will aim to produce good physical health as well as prepare for war.
- Diet will also be simple, with the avoidance of rich foods, so that health will be seen as preventative.
- The young Guardians will be taken to battlefields to watch warfare in practice to prepare them for adulthood.

- ***Mathematics***

When Plato talks of the ideal *polis* being ruled by Philosopher-Kings, it is often misinterpreted as portraying philosophers as the 'head-in-the-clouds' type. However, Plato saw his philosopher as not only very practically minded, but also an expert in the sciences. Mathematics provides training in reasoning abilities and is to be encouraged from an early age.

- The very young children will not be compelled to study mathematics, but will learn the techniques through play.
- At a more mature age, the young Guardians will study arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmonics.

It is interesting that Plato's concern for the morality of our heroes has a modern ring to it, especially our concern with the influence of popular culture. However, his degree of censorship is extreme, and it is questionable whether the educational benefit of not having any awareness of immorality would be a good thing. Plato, however, was the first systematic thinker to see education as

important in the development of character, rather than specific education or skills. He makes no mention of attaining grades or passing exams, or being expert in specific subjects over others.

It has been pointed out that the US education system is run on Platonic lines, with an emphasis on acquiring moral and social values and relationships with others, while academic achievement is left until secondary education. Plato, too, is making special reference to young children, whose reasoning abilities are still limited. However, Plato can be criticized for enforcing too rigid a teaching of social values at an early age, not allowing the individual to be able to discriminate between good and bad. There is a large amount of conformity, no alternative schooling, and much censorship, although Plato did believe that later in life they would be autonomous agents and intellectually adventurous.



The Education Reform Act

In the UK, the Education Reform Act, 1988, states that the aims of education are to ‘promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of the pupils; and to prepare such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.’ This is not that far removed from Plato at all!

The four imperfect societies

In presenting his ideal *polis*, Plato was concerned with creating a society that, by promoting physical and moral health, would result in a finely balanced and harmonic society. Remember that Plato linked the state and the individual closely; if you have a just and healthy state then this is mirrored in the just and healthy individual, and vice versa. Plato was only too aware of the inadequacies of, not only Athens, but also other societies, and he highlights these to demonstrate the importance of a good moral and physical education.

These four imperfect states are:

- The timocracy
- The oligarchy
- The democracy
- The tyranny.

TIMOCRACY

A timocracy is a state where rulers are established upon the degree of honour (the ‘spirited’ part) they possess. This state is really that of Sparta, and Plato presents it as an example of a defect in education of the ruling class. In Sparta there was much greater emphasis on the physical than the mental, and this resulted in a warlike and aggressive manner that is divisive. As the timocrats grow old, they place more emphasis on wealth and property and the state turns into an oligarchy.

OLIGARCHY

An oligarchy is ruled by the wealthy. The love of money stems from the desires for things that money can buy, and so this state represents the appetitive element. In effect, Plato sees this as not a unified state at all, but two states: the state for the rich and the state for the poor. The result is excessive greed, and inevitable civil strife among the classes. In time, the poor overthrow the rich and democracy is formed.

DEMOCRACY

This, of course, is Athens, and much has already been said about Plato's critique of democracy. In a democracy the whole mob of appetites are satisfied. In terms of education, there is no credence given to those of intellect, rather for those who can persuade the masses. In time, a man will arise who can persuade the masses to follow him and a tyranny will result.

TYRANNY

A tyrant, by Greek standards, was not necessarily a cruel ruler. Rather, one who gains power illegitimately. As the democratic state sinks into anarchy, with varying forces vying for power, a leader will be chosen who will need to seize power by force in the name of restoring order. Having no legitimacy, the tyrant can only rule through the continuous use of force and the imposition of fear. In the elements of the soul, it is the dominance of the appetite for power.

The root of all evil

At the root of all evil in society are the defects in education of the Rulers. This is why it is not enough to provide an all-round education that the Auxiliaries, the soldiers, might receive, since this will result in an imbalance in the state resembling a timocracy. Rather, the best of the Guardians must pursue their studies further into the realm of abstract reasoning. This may take many years of both study and practical work before they can truly become Philosopher-Kings.



Key terms

Cognition: A philosophical term that refers to the action or faculty of knowing, to distinguish this from feeling and desire.

Democracy: A state ruled by the majority. However, in the case of Athens, only adult Greek males had the franchise.

Dianoia: A Greek word that can be translated as 'thinking'.

Eikasia: A Greek word that can be translated as 'appearance'.

Episteme: A Greek word that can be translated as 'knowledge'.

Gymnastike: A Greek word that can be translated as 'gymnastics' and includes all physical exercise.

Mousike: A Greek word that can be translated as 'music', although it has a much broader meaning in that it includes all the arts.

Noesis: A Greek word that can be translated as 'intelligence'.

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

Pistis: A Greek word that can be translated as 'common sense'.

Rhetoric: Broadly, the art of discourse, but it can have more complex and deeper meanings when applied to Plato or Socrates, for example.

Timocracy: A state ruled by people because they possess a certain amount of honour that is considered more important than intellect.

Tyranny: Also known as despotism. The state ruled by force by one ruler.





Dig deeper

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Fact check

- 1 Which one of the following does Plato consider to be corrupt?
 - a The City of Atlantis
 - b The City of the Forms
 - c The City of the Republic
 - d The City of Athens
- 2 In the simile of the ship, what does the ship represent?
 - a Sparta
 - b The democratic state
 - c Plato's ideal city of the Forms
 - d The philosopher
- 3 In the simile of the ship, what does the navigator represent?
 - a The Sophists
 - b The philosopher
 - c The citizens of the state
 - d Sparta
- 4 What does the beast represent?
 - a The people of the state
 - b The philosopher
 - c Plato's ideal city of the Forms
 - d The Sophists
- 5 Which one of the following is the highest stage of cognition (i.e. the highest in ladder or 'line')?
 - a *Eikasia*
 - b *Pistis*
 - c *Dianoia*
 - d *Episteme*
- 6 Which one of the following is the lowest stage of cognition (i.e. lowest in ladder or 'line')?
 - a *Eikasia*
 - b *Episteme*
 - c *Pistis*
 - d *Dianoia*
- 7 Which one of the following is Ancient Greek for the liberal arts?
 - a *Mousike*
 - b *Gymnastike*
 - c *Mimesis*
 - d *Kouloura*

8 Which one of the following is a name for a state ruled by someone who gains power illegitimately?

- a** Oligarchy
- b** Timocracy
- c** Tyranny
- d** Democracy

9 Which one of the following is a name for a state ruled by the wealthy?

- a** Democracy
- b** Timocracy
- c** Tyranny
- d** Oligarchy

10 Which one of the following is not a simile by Plato?

- a** The simile of the ship
- b** The simile of the beast
- c** The simile of the circle
- d** The simile of the line



8

Love and friendship

In the previous four chapters we have concentrated primarily on the philosophy presented in Plato's dialogue *Republic*. Deservedly so, for it is a great work, but it must not be forgotten that Plato wrote many other dialogues that elaborate on important and interesting topics that are as relevant to us today as they were to the people of Athens. One such important issue that no doubt affects us all, and always will do, is love and friendship, and so this will be examined in this and the next chapter. Having said that, sexual relationships in Athenian society had a uniqueness that the modern reader may find curious and complex.

Pederasty

Plato, alongside many other Ancient Greek writers, including Herodotus and Xenophon, liked to explore the issue of same-sex love, especially the prevalent practice of **pederasty**; that is, the erotic relationship between an adult man and an adolescent boy. The importance of this for Ancient Greece is indicated by the use of words used in the previous sentence that have Greek origins: 'pederasty' and 'erotic'. 'Pederasty' derives from the Greek *paiderastia*, meaning 'love of boys', and is a compound of *pais* ('child' or 'boy') and *erastes* ('lover'). The boy – considered such until able to grow a beard – is the *eromenos* (the 'beloved') of the relationship and, therefore, the passive and subordinate recipient of the dominant *erastes*.

Now, the word 'paedophile' also comes from the Greek, as you can probably now recognize, but its modern concept needs to be separated from the Ancient Athenian practice which, in terms of the law of the state, recognized mutual consent between the partners (keeping in mind we are only talking about the free Greek citizens here, not slaves).

In establishing the pederastic relationship, there was no such thing as a 'legal age' as such, although the boys were usually between the ages of 15 to 17, and, in fact, the adult could be as young as 20, and so it might well be the case that there was not such a huge age difference between lover and loved, while it was nonetheless considered important that one is older than the other, or at least this was considered the ideal model for this kind of relationship.

As was so often the case for the Ancient Greeks, they would look to the gods for guidance as to how to live their lives, and what was regarded as perhaps the best model of pederasty was that between the god Zeus and the mortal Ganymede.

Zeus was so taken by Ganymede, who was considered the most beautiful of mortals, that he made his *eromenos* immortal. In this relationship there is certainly a considerable age difference, given Zeus' immortality and the fact that he is regarded as the father of gods and men. Another ideal relationship because of the age difference can be found in Plato's work *Symposium* (see [Chapter 9](#)). The *symposium* in this case was hosted by the handsome young poet Agathon, who was *eromenos* for Pausanias. The difference in age was about ten years, starting when Agathon was 18. Neither married or had children and it seems that their relationship lasted longer than the usual, perhaps lifelong. *Symposium* also makes reference to another pederastic relationship that was considered less than ideal, that between the Greek heroes Achilles and Patroclus. This is a more contentious relationship because they were of a similar age, so that it is difficult to determine who was the *erastes* and who the *eromenos*.



'Aeschylus talks nonsense when he says that Achilles was Patroclus' lover: he was more beautiful than Patroclus (indeed, he was the most beautiful of all the heroes), and was still beardless, as well as much younger than Patroclus, as Homer tells us.'

Plato, *Symposium*, 180a



The Myth of Ganymede

In Greek mythology, Ganymede is born in the city-state of Troy, the son of the ruler of this state, Tros (from where the name ‘Troy’ derives) and his wife Callirrhoe, who was the daughter of the river-god Scamander. One story (there are a number of versions) tells us that Ganymede was tending his sheep – despite such noble parentage – when Zeus, in the guise of an eagle, abducted the young boy and took him to Mount Olympus. According to the tale told by Homer in *Iliad*, Ganymede’s father was compensated for his loss by the gift of fine horses, but the tale is indicative of the importance of pederasty by the fact that Ganymede’s father was consoled that his son was so honoured to be loved by the greatest god of them all, although Socrates, in *Symposium*, argues that Zeus loved Ganymede non-sexually; for his mind rather than his body. Zeus gave Ganymede eternal youth and he held the official and honoured office of cupbearer to the gods. Ganymede’s beauty proved a big hit among the gods, with the exception of the jealous Hera, Zeus’ wife.

The Latin form of the name Ganymede is *Catamitus*, and this is from where we get the English word ‘catamite’, which in modern usage refers to a boy who is the passive (that is, receiving) partner in anal intercourse with another male. Images of Ganymede, especially on vases, understandably portray him as young and athletic. A popular portrayal in painting is of his abduction by the eagle, with a variety of interesting viewpoints presented. For example, Rembrandt’s (1606–69) rather strange painting *Rape of Ganymede* (1635) shows the boy as a crying, cherubic baby clearly distressed and wetting himself as he is carried off.

Sexual relationships in Athenian society were a complex matter, with the practice of pederasty seen as an important educative process, with the *erastes* acting as mentor for the *eromenos*, and which required the approval of the father of the boy who would appoint one of his slaves, called a **pedagogue** (the Greek *paidagogeos*, or ‘to lead the boy’), to ensure the subject of the lover is not taken advantage of and that the intricate etiquette is followed.



Pederasty

Pederasty is not exclusive to Ancient Greece, but has in fact existed among many cultures in various forms. Perhaps not surprisingly in Ancient Rome, due to the influence of Greek culture, but it has also existed in the Middle East, China, Japan, North and South America, and Europe. Some have argued that a form of pederasty existed in English public schools until late into the 20th century.

Lysis

It is within this helpful context that the reader can understand one of Plato's earlier dialogues – *Lysis*. In any quiz that asks someone with some familiarity with Plato to list his works, it's quite likely this one will *not* be on the list, as it perhaps does not present the reader with the finest of examples of Socratic dialogue, of *elenchus*, in comparison to, say, *Republic* or *Euthyphro*, and it presents something of a confusing argument at times. Nonetheless, in terms of the topic of love and friendship, and the deeper philosophical issue of how we define ourselves in relation to others, this short work presents us with some thought-provoking ideas and is worth some perseverance. Remember it is a very early work by Plato, so far as we can determine, and it had even been suggested that it was written while Socrates was still alive.

The dialogue begins with Socrates, who was on one of his walks having just come from a *gymnasium* (which in Ancient Greece was not just for physical exercise but for the intellect too, as well as often places of religious observance) just outside Athens called the Academy (which was later to become Plato's Academy) and was heading to another *gymnasium* to the north-east of Athens called the Lyceum (which was to become the home of Aristotle's famous school – the Lyceum). Socrates is met on the way by some young men, two of whom – Hippothales and Ctesippus – invite Socrates to come with them to a *palaestra* (a wrestling-school). Having been told that an old and respected friend of Socrates will be there, he agrees to go with them, provided they answer two questions: First, what are they expecting of him? Second, who will be the most beautiful boy there? Ctesippus ignores his first question and answers the second by stating that it is a matter of opinion; when Socrates asks Hippothales he can tell immediately from the latter's blushes that he is in love with someone. It is

Ctesippus, who then tells Socrates that Hippothales is in love with a young man by the name of Lysis.

At this point Socrates is determined to find out what love is, although this dialogue differs to some extent in that Socrates seems less concerned with the usual method of considering an 'ideal' (such as love, goodness, beauty, etc.) and seeks a definition for it via his interlocutors and, instead, is less 'philosophical' in Socrates' greater, almost banal, concern with how a person can win one's beloved and, even more specifically, how Hippothales can win the love of Lysis. Such a conversation as this would not seem out of place in any general conversation in a bar or dinner party throughout the ages.

Socrates is, at first, critical of Hippothales because he likes to bore his friends by composing poems that praise his beloved. Socrates is critical because he makes the psychological observation that these poems have not really been composed to praise Lysis at all, but is motivated by Hippothales' need to praise himself. If Hippothales succeeds in acquiring the love of Lysis, then it is Hippothales who achieves praise for winning such a great prize (although this also runs the risk of looking the fool if he fails). In addition, Socrates states that Hippothales is making it even harder to capture his love by singing his praises, as it only gives Lysis a much higher opinion of himself.

Having told Hippothales how not to woo the boy, Socrates then sets out to show how it should be done. Interestingly, Socrates is not in this case claiming his usual ignorance in such things, but is instead putting himself forward as an old hand in matters of the heart. Once inside the *palaestra*, Socrates engages in a more rigorous *elenchus* with Lysis himself, although the latter's responses are short and acquiescent, and he seems more amused by Socrates than particularly intimidated. During this dialogue, Hippothales listens in, but remains hidden, and this allows Socrates to fulfil his role of educating both Hippothales in how he should woo Lysis, and also in teaching Lysis the importance of being the *eromenos* to an older man.

While Lysis has friends of roughly his own age, friendship (*philia*) is not the same as sexual love (*eros*). For example, a close friend of Lysis is Menexenus, and Socrates also converses with him with the intention of determining what the differences are between love and friendship, although the reader of this dialogue may find such semantics rather confusing and, indeed, sophistic in nature. Take, as an example, this quote:

.....



'Is that thing for the sake of which the friend is friend to the friend a friend, or is it neither a friend nor an enemy?'

'I'm not quite with you there,' he [Menexenus] said.

'That's not surprising,' I [Socrates] said.

Plato, *Lysis*, 218d

.....

No wonder Menexenus is confused! This is not helped by the problem of translating a word such as 'friend'; not just in terms of its literal translation, but also within the context of Ancient Greek society. As Robin Waterfield notes in his translation of *Republic*, for example:



'Whereas nowadays we think of friends primarily as those we like or feel affection for, the less sentimental Greeks thought of them as those who do you good. Friendship involved ties of loyalty as much as those of warmth.'

Plato, *Republic*, p.382

.....

The Socratic *elenchus* with *Lysis* and *Menexenus* goes something like this: • i) Lovers may not also be friends

Socrates sets out to show that a relationship that involves friendship, such as that between *Lysis* and *Menexenus*, is not the same thing as a loving relationship for in the latter someone could love someone but not be loved in return and, indeed, may even be hated by the person who loves them.

• ii) **Likeness as a condition of friendship** If lovers are not necessarily friends then, Socrates wants to know, who are friends? As Socrates often does, he appeals to the poets and to the earlier philosophers for guidance: for example, the poet Homer who said that 'God always brings like with like' (Homer, *Odyssey* XVIII, 218) and the philosopher Democritus who, when talking of his atoms, explains their attraction as like with like (see [Chapter 11](#)). So, then, is friendship a matter of like loves like? Is likeness a condition of friendship? Now, here Socrates says this cannot be applied in

all cases, for what of bad people? Consider this quote from *Republic*:



'Now do something else for me, and answer me this: do you think a city or an army, or pirates, or thieves, or any other group that jointly undertakes some enterprise in injustice, would be able to achieve anything if they treated one another unjustly?'

Plato, *Republic*, 351c

What Socrates is asking Thrasymachus here is relevant to Socrates' belief that the bad cannot be friends with other bad people for, being bad, they will inevitably do their 'friends' an injustice which, of course, means they are not friends at all. If only good people can do good to other people, then only good people can be friends and so, it seems, the good are friends!

However, Socrates is not at all happy with this definition of friendship either. Keep in mind the Waterfield quote above; the importance of friendship as a form of utility, of being of service to others. Socrates is being very strict in his understanding of like being friends with like in that this likeness is identical. But if someone is identical to me then that person has nothing to offer me, nothing that I cannot do for myself. This logic will certainly seem misconstrued by the modern reader, for Socrates seems blind to the possibility that two people can be alike in some ways, not all, and, therefore, can be of use to one another and form a friendship because of this.

A relationship can be built because I may be deficient in one thing, for example, I'm poor at maths, but my friend can help me with that. Likewise, my friend may be awful at cooking, whereas I can rustle up a fine casserole; he or she does not have to be alike in every respect in order to be useful to me, and vice versa (given Socrates equates friendship with mutual utility).

• **iii) Dissimilarity as a condition of friendship** Instead of this, however, Socrates then suggests that friendship must therefore be based on **dissimilarity. The greatest friendship is of opposites! But Socrates is also quick to dismiss this possibility because surely the good man is not the friend of the bad and so we are left with 'neither like is friend to like nor opposite to opposite' (216b).**

- **iv) The good is the friend of the neutral** If we follow the logic of the above, we are left with only one option. Let's just go through these again:
 - **The good cannot be the friend of either the good nor the bad**
 - **The bad cannot be the friend of anyone**
 - **Like cannot be friend with like**
- Therefore, the good is the friend of the neutral (i.e. what is neither good nor bad).

The conclusion above is based on Socrates' view that there are three categories of things: good things, bad things and things that are neither good nor bad. If this is the case then it follows deductively that the only conclusion that can be reached is that the good can only be friends with this final category, as the other two have already been ruled out. The example Socrates gives, and keeping in mind the importance of friendship as 'utility', is one he is very fond of using in his dialogues; the doctor and medicine. In this case, here are the three categories of things: The good thing = medicine

The bad thing = disease

The neutral thing = the human body

The human body (the neutral thing), in this case, is only 'friends' with medicine (the good thing) when it is diseased (the bad thing). Now, remember Socrates has already said that bad things cannot be friends with anything, so how can he now say that the bad thing (the disease) is friends with a good thing (the medicine)?

Socrates presents a rather convoluted, but poetic, argument here that involves Menexenus' hair dye! Socrates asks Menexenus to imagine that his hair is dyed white and asks him if it really is white or only seems to be white. Menexenus answers, obviously, with the latter, but then Socrates says that when Menexenus is an old man his hair will actually be white: that is, it will permanently become what is temporarily present within it ('whiteness'). By analogy, a body which is diseased is only seemingly possessing 'bad', but it is not a permanent state. Hence, the body is still 'neutral' to all intents and purposes. Hence, Socrates exclaims:



'So now, Lysis and Menexenus,' I said, 'we've done it! We've discovered what a

friend is and what it is not. We say that in the soul, in the body and anywhere else, it is what is neither bad nor good that is the friend of the good because of the presence of the bad.’ The two of them agreed wholeheartedly, admitting it was so.

Plato, *Lysis*, 218c

Frustratingly, but also very typical of Socrates, this is not to be his final word on the matter and he is not himself satisfied with this definition of friendship. The reason for this is a common one with the arguments that Socrates presents in so many of his dialogues, and it is the use of analogy, for analogy as arguments are only as good as the analogy is, and Socrates himself feels that the doctor–medicine example is not really that good an analogy with that of true friendship. This is because the analogy requires moving from a particular example (medicine) to something much more universal in nature (friendship) and, as a consequence, something gets left out. Socrates’ main concern here is that medicine is desired by the body for the sake of something else – health – but surely, he argues, true friendship with another is not for the sake of something else (that is, it’s contingent) but is rather self-contained, otherwise it is not genuine friendship but a means to an end.

While this does concern Socrates, it is not entirely clear – at one level anyway – why this should be such a worry, given the understanding of friendship as in some way ‘useful’, which does imply a means-end relationship. However, this comes back to the Socratic concerns with ‘universals’; Friendship with a capital ‘F’, like Good, Beauty, *etc.* Socrates is also concerned that friendship is, if only ‘temporarily’, reliant on the presence of evil (as in ‘diseased body’ analogy): can I not form a friendship with someone with the presence of evil? And doesn’t ‘evil’ in some way taint true friendship which seems to imply a goodness and a purity?

This dialogue is finally laid to rest with Socrates’ dismissal of evil as a possible element of friendship and, instead, focusing on desire as the cause of friendship. But a desire for what (if not bad desiring good as in disease desiring medicine)? Socrates asserts that you can only desire what you do not already have (remember a truly good person would not desire another truly good person because he already has goodness) and, therefore, he concludes that, ‘the object of passionate love, friendship and desire is, in fact, it seems, what is akin.’ (221e).

Now, in the hope that the reader has been following this argument, you may

seem a little puzzled here, for isn't 'akin' the same as 'alike', and hasn't Socrates ruled that out as a possibility? Socrates is fully aware of this and is about to enter into further dialogue in an attempt to determine how 'akin' differs from 'alike', when Lysis and Menexenus are dragged away by their tutors and Socrates is left alone lamenting that he had found new young friends, yet was unable to determine what friendship actually was. For the reader, too, we are left alone, not knowing what friendship is either, although with the possibility that 'kinship' is a kind of natural attraction between two people, but what this actually entails is left afloat. What we are left with is that friendship is based upon desire, but we do not know why we desire it. It remains a mystery!

Despite the complexity of the arguments on this dialogue, and the unsatisfactory nature of the *elenchus* here, Lysis still has much to offer a careful and considerate reader, and for different reasons. At one level, perhaps the more 'literary' one, it does feel that you are unveiling a slice of life here, peering through the keyhole of a moment frozen in time with characters who display such human characteristics of youthfulness, uncertainty, bashfulness, love, friendship, desire, identity problems and old age. At the 'philosophical' level, questions concerning the extent we can truly know such abstract notions as 'friendship', 'love' and so on, divorced from the particular time and place, is a key problem that preoccupies so much of the Socratic corpus. Also, of course, the question of what is friendship and the reason why and how we form friendships and fall in love are both psychological and philosophical concerns.

What is perhaps most intriguing about this dialogue is the ending which, in some ways, has a sadness to it, for Socrates seems himself to desire friendship, yet surely a good and wise man such as he would not, by his own definition, be in need of the friendship of others, for what can they offer him? Perhaps this is one reason why Socrates always denied he was wise at all, and that it is only through companionship with others that one can gain wisdom; that is, others can give you what you do not have yourself. Remember, also, that this is a clear example of an **aporetic dialogue** (see [Chapter 3](#)): Socrates concludes in a state of uncertainty and it is deliberately left to the reader to take the dialogue further. Like a good teacher, the question is left open for the student to explore, rather than simply give the 'answer'.

Phaedrus

Brief reference was made to Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* in [Chapter 5](#) when talking about the soul. *Phaedrus* does not cover such a variety of topics as *Republic* does, and so is often ignored in terms of school and university curriculums, but this is a great shame as it stands out for other reasons. This dialogue is stylistically one of Plato's finest works and can be appreciated exclusively as a work of great literary worth. Its main themes are on love and the nature and limitations of rhetoric. It is interesting that these two themes have been combined in the one work, and it provides a link with *Gorgias* (see [Chapter 10](#)), which is concerned with rhetoric, and with *Symposium* (see [Chapter 9](#)), which is concerned with love.

This dialogue contains three philosophical speeches on love, which still makes the work very topical, for human nature's attitude towards love does not differ today from the time of the Ancient Greeks, and so this work speaks to us across these ages perhaps more effectively than, say, politics or epistemology.

There are only two characters in this dialogue, Socrates and Phaedrus. The dialogue is set at around 418–416 BC, which would put Socrates in his fifties, and Phaedrus in his twenties. Phaedrus is an enthusiast for rhetoric and so is concerned here with words or, more particularly, what is said in a particular speech. While they take a private stroll along the side of the river Ilissus (which, at the time of Plato, ran outside the defensive walls of Athens) the young and handsome Phaedrus was impressed by a speech of seduction by someone of similar age called Lysias (not to be confused with Lysis!). Phaedrus recounts the speech to Socrates. The latter notes that Phaedrus, who has spent the morning in the company of Lysias, has that very speech hidden in embarrassment under his cloak and he asks him to read it out loud to him.

THE FIRST SPEECH

This first of the three speeches of the dialogue, then, is arguing for a somewhat cynical view of pederasty that is divorced entirely from love, for love – or Eros – is a disruptive force that causes the older man in the relationship to behave in an irrational manner, whereas a relationship based on sex that is divorced from love is much more productive and beneficial to both parties in that it provides sexual pleasure for the older man and a better education for the younger. By saying that love is a form of madness, Lysias is arguing that relationships between non-lovers (involving sex entirely divorced from love) is better because it is independent of emotions.

The speech that Lysias utters is also an entreaty for Phaedrus to have sex with him for the very reason that he does not love him (or, perhaps, claims not to love him). What Lysias is essentially arguing for is that love is a desire that corrupts both the lover and the beloved because it is purely selfish. By equating love with desire it is perceived as wanting to possess the other and in which the appetites take over so much that one's moral sense and self-control are subsumed by this passion. This argument might strike the reader as somewhat confused, for surely love, in the pure sense, is more spiritual than sexual desire, but it is for this reason that the young Phaedrus, naively impressed by this speech, is also confused and wants to know what love is. Also, Phaedrus' confusion is not helped by the fact that it is not a particularly good speech, either in a literary sense or in a philosophical sense, for his terms have not been clearly defined and nor is it well-structured or logically progressive. Socrates, of course, is quick to point this out to Phaedrus:



'...I didn't think even Lysias himself thought the speech adequate; and in fact he seemed to me, Phaedrus, unless you say otherwise, to have said the same things two or three times over, as if he wasn't altogether well off when it came to saying so many things about the same subject, or else perhaps because he didn't care at all about this sort of thing; indeed he seemed to me to be behaving with a youthful swagger, showing off his ability to say the same things now in this way and now in that...'

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 235a

The above quote demonstrates not only Socrates' criticism of the content, but also of the actual structure of the speech, hence the concern with *logos* (in this sense, 'speech', 'discourse', etc.). Now Socrates tells Phaedrus that he could provide him with a much better speech than the one given by Lysias.

THE SECOND SPEECH

In terms of form, Socrates' second (and, indeed, his third) speech is set out as an example of expert *logos*-making by starting off with a definition of the subject of love; something that Lysias' speech failed to do.



‘So let us, you and I, avoid having happen to us what we find fault with in others: since the discussion before you and me is whether one should rather enter into friendship with lover or with non-lover, let us establish an agreed definition of love, about what sort of thing it is and what power it possesses, and look to this as our point of reference while we make our enquiry as to whether it brings help or harm’.

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 237d

.....

This speech certainly improves upon Lysias’ from the perspective of defining love, but also in terms of its overall logical structure. Despite this, Socrates does not seem to differ in his view of what love is from that of Lysias. He begins his speech by telling a story about a man who is in love with a boy, but he seems to largely agree with Lysias that love does indeed lead to such negative emotions as jealousy. However, in his third speech, Socrates wants to argue that this should not be a reason to have a relationship that is purely sexual, *i.e.* a relationship between non-lovers. On the contrary; love is important in this kind of relationship. Socrates says that if love is (or should be) nothing more than desire, according to Lysias’ view, then you should never fall in love.

THE THIRD SPEECH

Why the need for a third speech? Socrates is simply not satisfied with what he has said so far:



‘... the madness of love we said was best, and by expressing the experience of love through some kind of simile, which allowed us perhaps to grasp some truth, though maybe also it took us in a wrong direction, and mixing together a not wholly implausible speech, we sang a playful hymn in the form of a story...’

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265b5-c1

.....

In other words, Socrates believes there is more to be said, although he does not specify in what way his second speech ‘took us in a wrong direction’. However, there may well be another point being made here, and this is about rhetoric and its limitations. Socrates, remember, values the cut and thrust of conversation,

and he is often critical of the written form which he says is too limited and 'definite'. Whereas conversation is by its nature in a state of flux, progression and so on, a speech is formalized and a monologue does not allow for questioning. Socrates is a hesitant speech-maker and, in his second speech, insists on speaking with a hood over his head to hide his shame for engaging in such a form. Essentially, then, the philosopher should always be dissatisfied with speeches, no matter how 'good' they may seem. It is 'good' because it is structured and even poetic, but it is also very limited in terms of being able to 'grasp' the truth because it lacks the dialectical process.



'... I think writing has this strange feature, which makes it truly like painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them something, they preserve a quite solemn silence. Similarly with written words: you might think that they spoke as if they had some thought in their heads, but if you ever ask them about any of the things they say out of a desire to learn, they point to just one thing, the same each time.'

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275d

After his second speech, Socrates is eager to finish there and return to the centre of Athens (where he can more comfortably engage in philosophical dialogue) but he is persuaded to stay and explain himself more fully. So Socrates gives another speech in which he sets out to avoid poetic distraction, simile and so on, and to do what a really good speech should do: tell the truth.



Could Socrates read?

In Ancient Athens very few could read and write and it has raised the possibility that Socrates himself was illiterate.

While the second speech is somewhat negative, Socrates now argues that such 'madness' of love is a good thing nonetheless. Not all madness is evil, but it is what takes place when the gods inspire humans. For example, prophecy or lyric poetry is often regarded as a kind of madness (how many prophets have been

considered mad?), yet this comes from the gods. Remember, also, the cave analogy and how the prisoner returning to the bottom of the cave is regarded as mad by the other prisoners, even though he utters what is true! In this respect, given that the cave analogy is really a reference to Socrates, then Socrates is ‘mad’, for he is a poet in a sense, and a lover, not only of wisdom, but of his fellow Athenians; yet our ‘mad Socrates’ is nonetheless wiser for this madness and a paradigm for a kind of human being. Love is one kind of madness, but this is a good thing for it makes you a better person; it is good for your soul – as well as those who you love – for it also brings you closer to the gods and makes you god-like.

At this point Socrates provides us with his wonderful chariot analogy (see [Chapter 5](#)) to argue that it is through love that we can enter the soul-world and perceive a memory of perfect beauty that we saw in an earlier life, before the soul became trapped in the physical world. This is a very different view of love from that presented by Lysias; no longer purely physical pleasure, but a spiritually uplifting experience for both the lover and the beloved that allows both to partake in the divine and to perfect the soul. If anything, physical pleasure gets in the way of the perfection of the soul if it is regarded as merely physical, independent of love. Pure love, which combines the physical and the spiritual, provides a bridge between heaven and earth.



‘... the madness of the man who, on seeing beauty here on earth, and being reminded of true beauty, becomes winged and, fluttering with eagerness to fly upwards like a bird, and taking no heed of the things below, causes him to be regarded as mad: the outcome is that this in fact reveals itself as the best of all kinds of divine possession and from the best sources for the man who is subject to it and shares in it, and that is when he partakes in this madness that the man who loves the beautiful is called a lover.’

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d4-e1

Socrates then comes back to what makes a good speech. Socrates states that his speech tells the truth, which is best for the individual and, for that matter, for society as a whole. The best kind of speech, therefore, should behave like a conversation by containing dialectic with opposites that juxtapose and mesh

together in synthesis. The speech essentially becomes lyrical poetry, becomes a work of art in itself like a Bach concerto.



Key terms

Erastes: Greek for 'lover'. The more proactive, dominant and older partner in the relationship.

Eromenos: Greek for 'beloved'. The younger, subordinate and passive partner in the relationship.

Pederasty: A term to describe a relationship between an adult male and a pubescent or adolescent male, from the Greek *paidēraistia* ('love of boys').





Dig deeper

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Fact check

- 1 Which one of the following is Greek for 'lover'?
 - a *Pais*
 - b *Eromenos*
 - c *Paidierastia*
 - d *Erastes*
- 2 Which one of the following is Greek for 'beloved'?
 - a *Erastes*
 - b *Eromenos*
 - c *Paidierastia*
 - d *Pais*
- 3 In the dialogue *Lysis*, who is in love with the character of the title?
 - a Ctesippus
 - b Hippothales
 - c Socrates
 - d Menexenus
- 4 Where does Socrates meet Lysis?
 - a The *gymnasium*
 - b The *palaestra*
 - c The *agora*
 - d The *symposium*
- 5 In the dialogue *Lysis*, Socrates states there are three categories of things: good things, bad things and things that are neither good nor bad. What analogy does Socrates use to demonstrate this?
 - a Medicine
 - b Carpentry
 - c Politics
 - d Baking
- 6 In the dialogue *Phaedrus*, what is the name of the person who writes a speech declaring his love for the character of the title?
 - a Lysis
 - b Ctesippus
 - c Socrates
 - d Lysias
- 7 How many speeches are presented in *Phaedrus*?
 - a Three
 - b Four

- c Five
- d Six

8 What, according to Socrates, should a really good speech do?

- a Deceive
- b Confuse
- c Tell the truth
- d Raise the spirits

9 What is pederasty?

- a Same-sex love
- b Love between humans and gods
- c Love between free men and slaves
- d Love between husband and wife

10 What is the Myth of Ganymede?

- a When Ganymede is lost in a labyrinth
- b When Ganymede has an invisible ring
- c When Ganymede is abducted by Zeus
- d When Ganymede is given a riddle to solve



In praise of love: *Symposium*

In the last chapter we looked at the topic of love and friendship through two of Plato's dialogues: *Lysis* and *Phaedrus*. The main theme of *Symposium*, which is usually considered one of Plato's middle-period dialogues, is also love, and it takes place at a banquet in honour of Agathon, who is a young and extremely handsome tragedian poet and has just won first prize at a religious festival for one of his compositions. The date of this event was early 416 BC. Socrates, who seems to have made more of an effort than usual to make himself presentable, is, of course, present for this drinking party.

The setting



The Symposium

A *symposium* should not be compared to, say, going for a drink down the pub, or even a dinner party at home or in a restaurant. The Greeks liked to converse with the good-looking and the great-minded, but, behind the closed doors of the *symposia*, this was not done in a very informal or relaxed manner. The male, and only male, guests reclined on benches (although the younger, yet to prove their full worth, had to sit up straight). They would dress up, wearing wreaths. There was food and wine, as well as entertainment which could include music and dancing. Slaves would prepare food such as pastries, fried fish, and lentil soup.

There was considerable social etiquette involved, which were all part of a test to demonstrate your skills in citizenship; even drinking wine from the broad and shallow cup called a *kylix* was quite a difficult process when reclining, and would result in most of the drink dripping over your tunic if you are a novice or have drunk too much. *Symposia* frequently ended up being drunken, rowdy affairs despite the presence of (perhaps because of) the *symposiarch*; the one chosen among those present to be in charge of the evening, including deciding how many units of watered-down wine would be drunk that evening (in Plato's *Symposium* a more democratic process seems to be involved in which all agree not to drink too much on this occasion). Aside from the drink, the entertainment and the opportunity for older men to be in close proximity with younger men (and vice versa), it was really meant to be a place for intellectual stimulation and networking. They were the gatherings of the 'great and the good' that could meet privately, behind closed doors, like an ancient form of masonic lodge, and could last well into the night and, indeed, there are accounts of them lasting up to 36 hours!

At this particular *symposium* we encounter a number of historical individuals. Aside from Socrates himself, none of those present would be described as philosophers: some are Sophists, others are artists (poets, tragedians, etc.) and so when each talks of love, and praises the god of love, Eros, they inevitably fail to get to grips with what Love truly *is*, as one might expect from a true philosopher, but, rather, they perhaps reveal more about *themselves*, for when we talk about

love, we often end up talking about ourselves.

Of those present we have Agathon, of course, being the guest of honour, although all of his works have unfortunately been lost. Socrates sits next Agathon, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the Greek word *agathon* means 'good', and so Socrates is sitting himself next to 'the good' here. In addition, much of this dialogue is about what constitutes the 'good': the good speech, the good lover and so on. Aside from Agathon's appearance in *Symposium* with his lifelong lover Pausanias (see [Chapter 8](#)) they also both appear together in Plato's *Protagoras*. Aristotle also mentions Agathon in his work *Poetics*, commenting on Agathon's play *Anthos* as being particularly innovative for its time by introducing original characters, against the orthodoxy of using mythological subjects.

Another important character who makes a drunken appearance is Alcibiades, of which more will be said later. Another figure present is the comic playwright Aristophanes. A large number of his plays have survived complete and one in particular, *The Clouds*, presents a caricature of Socrates (and, hence, this makes the play our oldest source for reference to the philosopher) that caused Plato (in his *Apology*) to cite this work as contributing to Socrates' execution because it helped to fuel a public mistrust of Socrates. However, in *Symposium*, Aristophanes seems to get on well with Socrates, even though this would have been after *The Clouds* had been performed.

In terms of how this dialogue is constructed it is extremely complex, starting, as it does, as an account of the *symposium* by the narrator Apollodorus to an unnamed friend. However, Apollodorus himself was not at the *symposium* (he was, he says, only a child at the time) and so he is narrating a report given to him by Aristodemus which, in turn, Apollodorus has recounted to Glaucon! Aristodemus was apparently at the party and 'one of the people most in love with Socrates at the time'. (Plato, *Symposium*, 173b). This approach of hearing a report from a 'friend of a friend' is perhaps a deliberate strategy on Plato's part, for what it demonstrates, given that the topic is love, is just how difficult it is to get to the truth on such matters; one is always 'removed' and distant in some way.

What makes *Symposium* unusual in the Platonic corpus is that we are not confronted here with the usual cut and thrust of Socratic dialectic. Instead we have a series of speeches on love by three different characters that are all capable of existing independently of each other, although Socrates' speech, as the final

of the four, does perform as a response to what has been said previously.

The first three speeches

The first three speeches are, in some way or other, inferior to what is to then follow, but they are important because they possess a common thread in being concerned primarily about physical love, about the body, and, consequently, fail to grasp a great, more metaphysical, understanding of love.

PHAEDRUS' SPEECH

Having decided that the guests would only 'drink as much as was pleasant' (Plato, *Symposium* 176e) and to send away the flute player, the topic chosen was due to Phaedrus having, on previous occasions, lamented the lack of eulogies to love. Phaedrus, therefore, is selected to provide the first (and, in this case, the shortest) speech on this subject. A eulogy, or **encomium**, is a standard rhetorical form that contains a set pattern that should include the genealogy of the subject, its benefits and how it compares to other subjects.



'It's only lovers who are willing to die for someone else.'

Plato, *Symposium*, 179b

The above quote, said by Phaedrus, is perhaps his key point, hence the emphasis on why it is of particular benefit, *i.e.* it encourages us to be virtuous by at least being prepared to courageously sacrifice ourselves for another, while some might argue that love is selfish.

PAUSANIAS' SPEECH

The second speech that is reported (there were others, but Aristodemus could not remember them) is given by Pausanias, which contains more argument than Phaedrus'. Pausanias states that Phaedrus has presented a somewhat simplistic view of love and therefore it is easy to praise its virtues. Rather, it is not a single thing and, consequently, not all kinds of love can be seen as equally

praiseworthy.



‘Every activity in itself is neither right nor wrong. Take our present activity: we could be drinking or singing or discussing. None of these is right in itself; the character of the activity depends on the way it is done. If it is done rightly and properly, it is right; if it is not done properly, it is wrong. So not every type of loving and Love is right and deserves to be praised, but only the type that motivates us to love rightly.’

Plato, *Symposium*, 181a

As readers of this book will by now be aware, homosexual relations in Athens were a common enough practice, but here Pausanias (and, indirectly, Plato) is expressing the concern that was raised in the dialogue *Phaedrus* by Lysias (see [Chapter 8](#)): that sexual love that is purely of a physical nature – whether it is homosexual or heterosexual – is not ‘true love’ but what he calls ‘Common Love’, contrasting this with ‘Heavenly Love’ which, though possessing a physical element too, also involves rational, educational and ethical development. This is the kind of love that Socrates praises in *Phaedrus*.

ERYXIMACHUS’ SPEECH

It was then Aristophanes’ turn to speak but, ‘as it happened, he was having an attack of hiccups, from overeating or some other cause, and couldn’t speak’ (Plato, *Symposium*, 185c), so Eryximachus took his place in the queue. He extends the view of Pausanias to talk about love between not just human beings:



‘Love is not only expressed in the emotional responses of human beings to beautiful people, but in many other types of response as well: in the bodily responses of every kind of animal, in plants growing in the Earth, in virtually everything that exists. I feel sure it’s from medicine, my own area of expertise, that I’ve realized how great and powerful a god Love is, and how his power extends to all aspects of human and divine life.’

As the quote above points out, Eryximachus is a medical doctor (who, before his speech, gives advice to Aristophanes on how to stop his hiccups; advice that one still receives today such as holding your breath for a long time or gargling with some water) and presents here an almost ‘new age’ (which, in fact, in many respects is ‘old age’) vision of cosmic love.

The speech of Aristophanes

Aristophanes who, remember, was not liked by Plato, is presented as a character who is very much in touch with the sensual world. He likes to gorge himself on food and drink (hence his hiccups), to play around, to joke and so on. In many respects, he possesses all of those characteristics in a human being that Plato saw as morally sick and even dangerous: Aristophanes’ desire to entertain, after all, resulted in his work *The Clouds*, with no regard for the consequences for Socrates.

Having overcome his hiccupping fit, it is now the turn of the comic playwright Aristophanes, who presents a bizarre and comic genealogy of human nature in which, long ago, there were three human genders, the third being a combination of the male and female (**androgynous**). Also, each human being was spherical (see [Chapter 11](#) on the importance of the sphere as a kind of perfect animal), with four hands, four legs, and, although only one head, two identical faces on a circular neck with four ears. These early humans were so strong they tried to climb up to heaven and attack the gods. The gods did not want to kill off the humans because then they would no longer have a species to honour and make sacrifices to them, so Zeus decided to cut them in half:



‘I shall now cut each of them into two; they will be weaker and also more useful to us because there will be more of them. They will walk upright on two legs. If we think they’re still acting outrageously, and they won’t settle down, I’ll cut them in half again so that they move around hopping on one leg.’

Plato, *Symposium*, 190d

Remember, Aristophanes is a comic playwright, and one might wonder what this

deliberate fiction has to do with love. Aristophanes tells us that this physical rupture also resulted in great emotional stress, for the two halves longed to be reunited to the extent that this desire and resulting depression resulted in an inability to engage in anything else. Zeus, therefore, moved their genitals round to the front (they were previously at the back of their bodies), which allowed them to have sex which, to some extent at least, relieved them of their desire to become permanently whole with another. Those who are cut from the original androgynous gender result in the male seeking a female; those cut from male genders result in male seeking male; and those cut from the female gender now seek fellow females for sex.

This is a fascinating and appealing story (for many readers, it stands out more than Socrates' speech later on) on many levels. Aristophanes wants to stress that this is not 'just a comedy' (193b); there is a moral message here too. The human race can only achieve happiness when we are able to fulfil our true nature, which is to find our 'other half'. In a metaphorical sense, then, happiness is equated with true love for another human being, which is only possible if that other human being is suitable to one's own character; whether this a heterosexual or homosexual relationship is irrelevant. While it is highly unlikely to find our actual other half, we should aim for as close as possible to this. What Aristophanes is also stressing here is the importance of physical proximity in order to know the 'other' which, in turn, helps us to understand ourselves, as opposed to a life of ascetic, celibate existence. It has implications in terms of knowledge and the importance of other people to determine what we can know, how we are to be ethical, and how we are to be happy and self-fulfilled.

What this myth also tells us is the kind of person Aristophanes was, or at least how Plato wanted to portray him: as someone who is 'half a man', as someone who does not feel complete, and does not truly understand himself unless he is engaged in sexual activity. Interestingly, remembering that Aristophanes was a comic writer, this psychological portrayal has frequently been repeated among comedians through history, as the saying 'tears of a clown' denotes. The comic seeks for humour as a refuge from one's self.

Agathon's praise of love

Moving from the comic of Aristophanes, we come to the tragic poet Agathon, and one might expect his speech on love to be tragic in nature. Agathon states

that all the previous speeches have focused on what benefits humans have received from love, but none of them have considered the nature of the god of Love, of Eros, himself. Therefore, Agathon gives us a praise of Love, as being the most beautiful, the youngest, the most sensitive, moderate, brave, and so on. After Aristophanes' comic and entertaining speech, this comes across as somewhat disappointing and not really tragic at all, though full of rhetorical devices and formula. However, remember that Plato always does things with some intention in mind, and the reader is encouraged to consider why this is such an unsatisfactory speech from someone who has, after all, just been awarded first prize for his poetic skills. Plato himself is sceptical as to the value of tragedy (see [Chapter 12](#)), which he sees as employing various rhetorical tricks to produce an emotional response, but without really getting at the truth of things; hence Agathon's speech comes across as mere trickery, which is certainly full of praise, showy, and may well raise an emotional response, but – when looked at more closely – lacks any moral or educational content, rather like some 'bubble-gum' music. It is worth mentioning that Agathon is a student of Gorgias (see [Chapter 10](#)), and, like his teacher, Agathon reveals the sophistic tendency to say a lot without really saying anything!

While Agathon's speech may well follow the correct formula for good rhetoric it, nonetheless, is poorly argued in terms of logic. For instance, he fails to make a distinction between love and desire, although he is not the first to do this. Agathon argues that love is the motivating force behind poetry, as well as the other creative arts, but is this really love? Take this quote by Agathon:



'It was by following where his desire and love led him that Apollo discovered the arts of archery, medicine and prophecy, and this makes Apollo a pupil of Love. In the same way, it makes the Muses pupils of his music, Hephaestus in metalwork, Athena in weaving and Zeus in steering gods and humans.'

Plato, *Symposium*, 197a-b

But what has love got to do with the desire to discover archery or to engage in metalwork? As the previous speeches, this tells more about the speaker on love, than about love itself, and here we have someone who is narcissistic, who is very much in love with himself. His praise of love is really a praise of Agathon.

Socrates' speech



'I'm not giving another eulogy of that kind – I couldn't do it. However I am prepared to tell the truth, if you'd like that, though in my own way, not competing with your speeches, which would make me look ridiculous. So let me know, Phaedrus, whether there's any need for a speech like that, one which tells the truth about Love, but which uses whatever words and phrases happen to occur to me as I go along.'

Plato, *Symposium*, 199a-b

No one in the *symposium* is going to refuse Socrates the opportunity to talk, of course, but what Socrates is doing here is stating that his speech will not be covered up in flowery and poetic language (unlike Agathon's), but will get to the bare-bones of the subject of what love actually is.

Socrates, in fact, starts by not giving a speech at all but, in typically Socratic fashion, begins by interrogating Agathon. Agathon's confusion between love and desire is quite understandable, given that the Greek word *eros* can mean either. Socrates is fully aware of this, and, indeed, starts by connecting these two understandings of the term himself. He gets Agathon to abandon his view that love is beautiful by stating that love is always *of* something, rather than something in itself. For example (giving Socrates' own example), a brother is not just a brother, he is a brother *of* someone. Therefore, a lover isn't just a lover, he or she is a lover *of* someone. There is also a motivation involved here, for why do you seek love of another? This is a very important question, which Aristophanes' myth only examines to a limited extent. Here, Socrates argues that love is a state of deficiency; that is to say, it is lacking in something that it needs. Again, using Socrates' example, a tall person does not look for tallness, but a small person might. So what does love lack? As love is not itself beautiful, then it lacks beauty, and this is what is needed: love is of beauty.

It was mentioned earlier that Plato seems to deliberately construct this dialogue with a chain of reporters so as to demonstrate how difficult it is to get to the truth for such a slippery subject as love. Now the chain goes one further back, for the

report on Socrates' speech is now no longer from Socrates at all, at least not directly. As Socrates says himself:



'I'll try to restate for you the account of Love that I once heard from a woman from Mantinea called Diotima. She was wise about this and many other things... She is also the one who taught me the ways of Love. I'll report what she said...'

Plato, *Symposium*, 201d

While *symposia* may not allow women to be physically present for the conversations (only as entertainers, servants or prostitutes), here we have a woman present in the sense of these are her words, as reported by Socrates. So this is not really a speech at all, but a report on a Socratic dialogue that took place between Diotima and Socrates.

Diotima is a prophetess and so receives divine inspiration, and Socrates sought her out as a guide and a teacher. She says that love is not a god, because gods are perfect, they do not lack anything whereas, as Socrates has already stated, love is a deficiency. Rather, love is something in-between the human and the divine and acts as a bridge between the two. Love is described as full of longing, a longing for truth, knowledge, wisdom, perfection. When we fall in love, we see an image of Perfection, of perfect wisdom, beauty and so on. This is very different from Aristophanes' notion of love, which is more directed at the lover (in Aristophanes' case, at himself) seeking to be whole, whereas Diotima sees love as the desire for what is good. This, as the reader will no doubt be aware, relates to the Theory of the Forms; the quest for the Form of the Good, for Beauty itself beyond the realm of the mundane, physical world. Through love we are able to 'ascend' to the Realm of the Forms and to move from seeing beauty in a lover, to Beauty Itself. Coupled with this is the quest for immortality, to not be tied to this time-bounded world. We desire to possess the good for eternity and, through sexual reproduction, this provides us with a means for us to 'carry on' in some form.

In the same way that questions arise as to whether the Guardians, once attaining Knowledge of the Good, would be either willing or able to engage in the mundane world of politics, the same question arises as to whether the lover would continue to display any interest in a sexual partner once he or she has ascended to the realm of Beauty.

Alcibiades barges in

At the end of this speech, all present applaud, with the exception of the stubborn and arrogant Aristophanes, who wants to rebut Socrates. But before he has the opportunity to do so, in barges Alcibiades. A historical figure that readers of Plato's dialogues at that time would certainly know of, for he was a famous statesman and military general from one of Athens' most powerful aristocratic families, Alcibiades had been trained in the art of rhetoric, but he also had Socrates as one of his teachers (and lovers) and, indeed, one story tells that it was Socrates who once saved Alcibiades' life at the Battle of Potidaea in 432 BC.



Alcibiades

At the time this dialogue was taking place, Alcibiades, in his mid-thirties, would have been at the height of his powers as a general in the Athenian army, but the readers of *Symposium*, coming much later, would know Alcibiades differently: his enemies in Athens, for which he had many, had successfully called for his execution on the accusation of sacrilege, which caused Alcibiades to defect to Sparta, where he acted as a military adviser. However, he was also to fall out with the Spartans, causing him to flee once more, this time to Persia where he also gave military guidance, to the detriment of Athens. Despite this, following an Athenian coup in 411 BC, Alcibiades was welcomed back to Athens and played a major part in the Peloponnesian Wars. He was assassinated in 404 BC, possibly by Spartans.

In *Symposium* Alcibiades rudely bursts onto the scene, exceedingly drunk to the extent he needs to be supported by a courtesan. While interrupting the flow of the argument on love, Alcibiades' speech is not entirely disconnected from this theme and, in fact, he brings us back to the kind of physical, sensual love that began the dialogue and for which Socrates, through Diotima, had removed the interlocutors and readers from such a carnal, bodily expression of love to one of true Beauty and the Good. But Alcibiades' own speech is also connected to Diotima's notion of love in that the drunken general provides us with a eulogy of this kind of love as characteristic of Socrates himself. Here we have interesting contrasts: on the one hand, Alcibiades who is externally beautiful but internally an ugly and corrupt soul, while, on the other, Socrates who is externally ugly but possessing a pure and beautiful soul. Needless to say, for the philosopher, what matters is what is internal, not the superficial external aspect.

Despite his drunkenness, Alcibiades remains eloquent, and gives a speech that follows the rules of rhetoric, beginning with a general character portrayal of Socrates as someone who, while physically ugly, is nonetheless god-like in his soul. Alcibiades talks up Socrates' virtues: his moderation and his courage, and his skill in dialectic.



'Whenever I listen to him, my frenzy is greater than that of the Corybantes [ecstatic dancers]. My heart pounds and tears flood out when he speaks, and I

see that many other people are affected in the same way. I've heard Pericles and other good orators, and I thought they spoke well. But they haven't produced this kind of effect on me; they haven't disturbed my whole personality and made me dissatisfied with the slavish quality of my life.'

Plato, *Symposium*, 215d-216a

Alcibiades, then, praises Socrates which, given that Socrates was executed partly for corrupting others (including his pupil Alcibiades), is a deliberate strategy on Plato's part to defend Socrates' legacy. Alcibiades, while praising Socrates, also reveals his sexual frustration for the philosopher, for it seems that Alcibiades saw their relationship in the same way as that described by Pausanias earlier, that is, as one that results in sexual gratification; whereas Socrates was not interested in that kind of love with Alcibiades, or with anyone else for that matter. Socrates, effectively, had ascended so far up the ladder of love as to no longer be concerned with such physical things.

What is interesting, however, is that although Socrates has ascended to the real or true Beauty, he is certainly not averse to flirting with young men, hence Alcibiades' own frustrations and confusion as a result of misunderstanding Socrates' intentions. But this is typically Socratic in style: like in his conversations he lures people in with a false sense of security and self-confidence, only to shatter their beliefs and cause them to question their very souls. In the same way, Socrates flirts so as to reel in these young souls and, as a result, by not meeting their expectations, he gets them to question the value of such expectations and to question what love truly is.



Alcibiades the troublemaker

Alcibiades' mixed career means that he is praised by some in history, and condemned by others, and this division still exists today among modern scholars. Wherever he went he caused trouble, often being accused of treachery and disloyalty. Importantly here, however, is how Plato portrays him. Alcibiades is undoubtedly attractive, a good orator and charismatic individual but, for Plato, he is also a corrupted and divided soul. In many ways Alcibiades represents those who could be Guardians of Plato's republic if they are educated in the right way but, in the wrong hands, could end up being incredibly dangerous and morally corrupting, not only for themselves, but for others.

So this, to some extent, answers our earlier question: would someone who has attained knowledge of the Good, of Beauty, of true Love be either able or willing to 'return' to the physical world of interpersonal relationship? In the case of Socrates who, after all, represents the ideal philosopher, the answer is a resounding 'yes'. One does not, as a result of enlightenment, retreat in isolation, but instead 'goes down' and instructs others, despite the fact that this may result in confusion, anger, frustration among others, as well as endangering the life and reputation of the philosopher himself.



Key term

Symposium (pl. *symposia*). A drinking party, but also a place for intellectual stimulation and networking.





Dig deeper

Cooksey, T. L. (2010), *Plato's 'Symposium': Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum.

Gill, C. (trans.) (1999), *Plato: The Symposium*. London: Penguin.





Fact check

- 1 What is a *symposium* in Ancient Greece?
 - a An academic conference
 - b A drinking party
 - c A religious retreat
 - d A theatre
- 2 Who, in *Symposium*, is the guest of honour?
 - a Socrates
 - b Alcibiades
 - c Aristophanes
 - d Agathon
- 3 Who gives the first speech in *Symposium*?
 - a Pausanias
 - b Eryximachus
 - c Socrates
 - d Phaedrus
- 4 Who gives the third speech in *Symposium*?
 - a Pausanias
 - b Eryximachus
 - c Phaedrus
 - d Aristophanes
- 5 Who, in *Symposium*, said: 'It's only lovers who are willing to die for someone else'?
 - a Socrates
 - b Eryximachus
 - c Phaedrus
 - d Pausanias
- 6 Who had an attack of hiccups in *Symposium*?
 - a Socrates
 - b Eryximachus
 - c Aristophanes
 - d Pausanias
- 7 What was the name of the comedy written by Aristophanes?
 - a *The Clouds*
 - b *The Sun*
 - c *The Wind*
 - d *The Earth*

8 Who was Diotima?

- a A lover of Socrates
- b A prostitute
- c A prophetess
- d A dancer

9 What is the name of the man who barges into the *symposium* drunk?

- a Diotima
- b Aristophanes
- c Agathon
- d Alcibiades

10 What does the Greek word *eros* mean?

- a Love
- b Hate
- c Anger
- d Despair



10

Gorgias

The previous two chapters considered the topic of love and friendship but, as we also saw, this is closely tied to the importance of giving a good speech. This essentially applies to any topic: if we are to understand what something is then we do this through conversation, through dialogue and, it logically follows, if the dialogue is poorly constructed then it will be much more of a struggle to get at the truth, and this, the art of rhetoric, is the primary concern of the dialogue *Gorgias*.

Gorgias

Gorgias was written near the end of Plato's 'early period', quite possibly around the same time as *Protagoras*, and both deal with similar themes. It is also significant in that it was written very soon after the death of Socrates, to the extent that Plato's anger at the execution of his mentor comes across within this dialogue. The structure of the work can be divided into three parts or three linked dialogues within the overall work: Socrates–Gorgias, Socrates–Polus and Socrates–Callicles. This corresponds with Book I of *Republic* (which may have been written earlier than the rest of the dialogue) with Gorgias/Cephalus, Polus/Polemarchus and Callicles/Thrasymachus in terms of their views, age and so on. In fact, readers will find it helpful to read Book I of *Republic* first before then reading *Gorgias*, and you will see how the latter elaborates upon the former.

Socrates as a character is more forthcoming, more quick to criticize the Sophists, and this was also evident in his attack on the Sophist Protagoras in the dialogue of the same name. *Gorgias* is sometimes provided with the subtitle of 'Concerning Oratory', for Gorgias himself was a Sicilian teacher of oratory. Gorgias was the teacher of Agathon, who makes his grand speech in *Symposium* (see [Chapter 9](#)), which is lacking much in the way of philosophical rigour. One might suspect that Gorgias is an easy target for Socrates, for the former's teaching of oratory results in the production of interlocutors in Plato's works who have been educated to produce bombastic rhetoric, rather than true philosophical and meaningful content. Gorgias is extremely important, then, because he represents, perhaps more than any of the other Sophists in the dialogues, the kind of rhetorician that Plato saw as dangerous and irresponsible: if Socrates is the angel of philosophy, then Gorgias is the fallen angel Satan.

Gorgias' form of discussion differs in one crucial aspect from that of Socrates:

whereas Socrates, as has been shown, looks for the *essence* of something, for example, what beauty truly *is*; Gorgias uses *examples* to try to illustrate what something is. What Socrates shows in this dialogue, and so many others for that matter, is that giving specific examples is insufficient because there are always exceptions to the rule. For something to have an essence means that it is universally the case.

What, then, do we know about Gorgias? He was born in Leontini in Sicily in around 485 BC, and so he is Italian rather than Greek although, as stated in [Chapter 1](#), he was nonetheless 'Hellenic'. As a Sophist, he would travel and teach for money in various cities. He would also feature in speech competitions, which helped to solidify his reputation as a great orator. In 427 BC he came to Athens with other delegates to ask for protection for his city against the aggressive neighbouring Sicilian city-state of Syracuse. It turns out that Athens also proved to be profitable for Gorgias, given the demand for great orators, and so he decided to remain in the city where he acquired considerable wealth from teaching many of the nobles of Athens (of which many appear in Plato's dialogues) as well as a reputation as the greatest of Sophists. He died in Larissa in the Thessaly region of Greece in, it is said, around 380 BC, which meant he led a very long life indeed for that time.



A long and pleasureless life

Gorgias lived to be well over 100 and when he was asked how he managed to live for so long he said it was 'by renouncing pleasure'. In fact he could well have lived longer than he did if he had not decided his own fate by choosing to stop eating.

Little of his writings survive, although he is known to have written at least four major works: *The Encomium of Helen*, *Defense of Palamedes*, *On Non-Existence* and *Epitaphios*. Together these works act as a manual for rhetorical structure and also call for extreme relativism to the extent that Gorgias is often referred to as 'the Nihilist'. *The Encomium of Helen*, which exists in its entirety, is a reference to Helen of Troy in Greek legend and, as this is an encomium, this is a speech in praise of Helen of Troy in response to accusations that she was an evil woman. Here, then, Gorgias sets himself up with a major challenge by arguing for something that is essentially unpopular, paradoxical and even absurd, for, among the Greek populace, Helen of Troy, though being considered the most beautiful woman in the world, was also considered evil incarnate: the woman who 'launched a thousand ships', the start of the Trojan War, which resulted in the tragic death of so many Greek heroes and Helen's own treachery. Yet Gorgias sets out to defend what seems the indefensible. What Gorgias intends to show here is just how powerful language can be. However good or bad you may be, whatever good or evil you have done, Gorgias is saying that that is irrelevant. What matters most is whether it is possible to *persuade others* as to whether or not you are good or bad.



Gorgias the celebrity

Gorgias was such a celebrity and became so rich from his performances that he had a life-size statue of himself made of gold, which he presented to the Delphic oracle.

It is said that Gorgias had so much power with words that he could hypnotize an audience. Importantly, Gorgias never laid claim to be presenting what is true, because he believed that there was no such thing as truth, only the art of persuasion. What matters is not so much the content of the speech, what it actually means, but rather achieving the end result.



Gorgias the charismatic

When Gorgias arrived in Athens he went to the *agora* (the main gathering place) with a fellow orator by the name of Tisias. Gorgias cut a striking figure, robed from head to toe in purple, and the two engaged in a verbal sparring match that amazed the audience. The Sophist Flavius Philostratus (c. AD 170–247) wrote in *Lives of the Sophists* that Gorgias demonstrated ‘oratorical drive, innovatory audacity, inspired gestures, sublime tone, the ability to pause effectively and resume dramatically, poetic expression and tasteful decoration’ (I 9, 2). Given that Philostratus wrote this some 600 years later, we can’t trust such an account, but it nonetheless suggests that Gorgias was certainly a challenge to Socrates.

Another of Gorgias’ great works, *On Non-Existence* (or *On Non-Being*) is, alas, now lost, and so we only have paraphrases of it from other scholars. This is an attack on Parmenides’ concept of Being (see [Chapter 1](#)) and begins with the premise that nothing exists! Second, even if you wish to proclaim that things do exist, Gorgias argues that you cannot know for sure that these things actually exist. Third, and finally, that even if anything does exist and you can know it, you will not be able to communicate it to others. Essentially, words do not actually correspond to real things, for nothing is real, and words, therefore, are simply ways of getting what you want. You can see why this would be so much an anathema to the likes of Plato, who argues for the Forms, and yet Gorgias provides a wonderful platform for which Plato can perform his own argument in response to this nihilism as well as a feather in Plato’s cap if he can demonstrate just how powerful Socratic dialectic can be against Gorgias’ rhetoric if the latter can be persuaded by the philosopher.



Helen of Troy

Helen was the daughter of the great god Zeus and the mortal Leda, Queen of Sparta. She becomes the wife of the King of Sparta, Menelaus. The accounts of the story of Helen are most famously recounted in Homer's works *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, although it appears in various other accounts, including Euripides' play *Helen*. Accounts do differ, naturally, but in most of the stories it is told that when Helen was young (some say as young as seven, others that she was of childbearing age), with a reputation for outstanding beauty, she was abducted by Theseus, the ageing King of Athens, and Pirithous, King of Larissa. Like Helen, these were both the offspring of gods and so they believed their noble status entitled them to be married to the semi-divine. Helen, therefore, was an ideal choice here, and Theseus intended to marry her, while Pirithous wanted another daughter of Zeus, Persephone. Theseus took Helen to Athens, which resulted in Sparta invading Athens to get her back, which was successful. Helen then married Menelaus and they ruled Sparta for some ten years until a Trojan prince called Paris made a diplomatic mission to Sparta with the intention of seducing Helen. Paris had been promised the most beautiful woman in the world by the goddess Aphrodite and, upon seeing Helen, he took this as Aphrodite's promise and took Helen back to Troy with him. Stories differ as to whether or not Helen went willingly, but it resulted in Menelaus summing his allies against Troy, resulting in the ten-year Trojan War, hence the expression that Helen was the 'face that launched a thousand ships' (the expression actually comes from a play by Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*). At times Helen seemed to be on the side of the Trojans, at other times on the side of Menelaus, hence the reputation she has for duplicity.

.....

The setting

It is difficult, from anachronistic references made in *Gorgias*, to determine when exactly this dialogue is meant to have taken place, but it must certainly have been when Gorgias was in Athens (i.e. from 427 BC) and most scholarship leans towards this being near the end of Socrates' life as his philosophical bearing is very mature here.

The dialogue begins with Socrates bringing in one of his students, Chaerephon, to see Gorgias at the home of Calicles. Aside from these characters, of which Chaerephon has little to contribute, is another student of Gorgias by the name of Polus. Socrates wishes to meet Gorgias to find out for himself what these rhetorical skills are that he has such a reputation for.

It begins with Socrates urging his young student Chaerephon to ask Gorgias who he is. At first Chaerephon is somewhat confused by what Socrates means by this, as the reader – also in this sense a student of Socrates – may be too, but it is a wonderful dramatic moment when Chaerephon seems to recall Socrates'

teaching and almost ‘become Socratic’ in his questioning. It is a fascinating, though so very brief, example of the student truly learning from the teacher. The question ‘who are you?’ is by no means trivial, either, certainly not in its philosophical sense for which it is meant here, for it gets at that very thorny and key philosophical question concerning identity; your place in the world and your understanding of who you are. It also immediately makes the reader think about how it is actually very difficult to properly describe or define what it means to have an identity, and this, in turn, brings us to the difficulties with language and communication, which is central to this particular dialogue.

When at first they encounter Gorgias he is exhausted from recently taking part in one of those public exhibitions of rhetorical skills, and so it is Polus who initially puts himself forward to converse with Socrates.

Polus, younger than Gorgias, is a historical figure who was also from Sicily. Little else is known about him, however, other than he authored a work on oratory. His quickness (and, interestingly, his name in English translates as ‘colt’) to step in for the great Gorgias in the belief that he can be just as expert is quickly exposed by Socrates, for Polus proves to be no match for the philosopher and, indeed, Socrates has little respect for the young, uncritical and impetuous Polus in contrast to the high regard he shows for Gorgias. This is a common feature in Socratic dialogues; those who are quick to put forward their opinions and to confront Socrates are usually those who are less able to support their views. They are quick to talk, but slow to think.



‘... when Chaerephon asks you what art Gorgias is master of, you embark on a panegyric of his art as if someone were attacking it, without, however, saying what it is.’

Plato, *Gorgias*, 448

The above quote by Socrates, which is addressed to Polus, reveals how Polus differs from Chaerephon. Whereas the latter engages in Socratic questioning, the former merely responds with a **panegyric**, a speech in praise of oratory of the kind that resembles, though is much poorer than, those of his older tutor Gorgias with his *encomiums*.

PHASE ONE: SOCRATES–GORGIAS (449–61)

It is at this point that Socrates and Gorgias take over the conversation, with Socrates asking Gorgias what it is that he actually does, what is his ‘art’, to which Gorgias replies he is an orator. In typical Socratic fashion, our philosopher wants Gorgias to define oratory and also gets Gorgias to agree to engage in dialectic rather than simply produce speeches like Polus did. Gorgias obliges and provides his definition as the ability to persuade:



‘I mean the ability to convince by means of speech a jury in a court of justice, members of the Council in their Chamber, voters at a meeting of the Assembly, and any other gathering of citizens whatever it may be. By the exercise of this ability you will have the doctor and the trainer as your slaves, and your man of business will turn out to be making money not for himself but for another; for you, in fact, who have the ability to speak and convince the masses.’

Plato, *Gorgias*, 452

This is important for Socrates, and for us, to understand because what Gorgias is saying is that the sole purpose, the ultimate end, of oratory (or rhetoric) is to persuade someone that something is or is not the case, regardless of whether in fact it is or is not *actually* the case. Socrates wants to push this point further, for whereas for other ‘arts’ you would go to an expert – that is someone who has knowledge of a particular subject – it seems unclear to Socrates what it is that oratory gives. If you want a house built you go to a builder for advice, if you want to win a battle then you seek out a general for guidance, but what ‘knowledge’ does the orator possess, what does he teach and what is it good for?

By way of example, Gorgias says that he has a brother who is a medical doctor, and Gorgias has on occasion gone with his brother and other doctors to visit sick patients who have been extremely unwilling to undergo treatment or surgery, which should not be surprising to us given the rather unpleasant and primitive state of medical science at that time. Gorgias, however, through his power of oratory alone is able to achieve what the doctors cannot in persuading these patients to undergo the painful treatment (and, no doubt, Gorgias gets a cut of the fees for his trouble!).

This wonderful, yet simple, illustration clearly brings out the difference between a skill, or art, such as medicine and that of oratory. The former is clearly

teleological; it has a specific purpose (to heal) and it requires a great deal of knowledge of the working body if one intends to be a good doctor. It is for these reasons Plato regularly gives us the example of medicine in his dialogues. Oratory, on the other hand, has no one specific purpose, other than to persuade, and does not require knowledge of a specific subject, other than how to persuade. The rhetorician, therefore, provides a service to others who have specific knowledge, whether they be doctors, businessmen or politicians.

Importantly, Gorgias stresses that the orator is skilled in persuading for either side, and this is where the danger lies, for, as oratory is merely persuading, Gorgias could just as easily persuade the patient to not undergo treatment, *even if* it is actually in the best interests of the patient's health to have treatment. Therefore, rhetoric has nothing to do with 'good' or 'bad', and in this respect, the dialogue *Gorgias* is not so much concerned with the topic of rhetoric, but rather with ethics and epistemology. In terms of knowledge, Socrates is concerned here that rhetoric is nothing more than the ignorant persuading the ignorant, for the orator – who is ignorant of medicine – would not be able to persuade a team of doctors that some treatment or other is good or bad, he would only be able to persuade those who are themselves ignorant of medicine. Ethically speaking, this is very dangerous because the art that oratory possesses is to 'pander' to the ignorant, to produce gratification and pleasure and, therefore, can be compared with cookery, which Socrates regards as more than a 'knack' than an actual skill and whose purpose is primarily to gratify the consumer than to provide any ethical instruction.

In actual fact, although the implications of rhetoric are that you can persuade an ignorant man to do something, regardless of whether it is right or wrong, Gorgias himself insists that he would persuade someone to do what is righteous, which perhaps says more about Gorgias – who, despite his sophistry, Socrates has a high regard for – than it does of his profession. It is rather like a lawyer stating that, so far as he is concerned, he would only defend someone he believes to be innocent, which may be a comment on the moral status of that lawyer than the profession as a whole or the fact that there exist more unscrupulous legal experts. Gorgias, however, is eager to point out that he cannot be held responsible for what his students do with the skill or rhetoric they have acquired, and the example in the *Gorgias* is given of boxing. You can train someone to be a skilled boxer and, while you may hope they will be righteous and only use this skill within the confines of the boxing arena, they may nonetheless choose to go out into the streets and hit people for the fun of it.

However, the question here is whether rhetoric really is the same thing as, say, boxing and, as we have seen, it does not seem to be because it lacks that *'telos'*, that purpose that such skills as boxing, military training, medicine and so on have. If Gorgias were to say that rhetoric has the purpose of making someone righteous, then that is a different matter, but Gorgias isn't saying that at all. Rather, it would be nice if the orator does encourage someone to be righteous in their choices, but it is not the actual purpose of rhetoric to do this.

Socrates seems to have sufficient respect for Gorgias to avoid giving the Sophist a particularly hard time in this dialogue, although it seems that at this point Gorgias is starting to be contradictory in, on the one hand, insisting that rhetoric does not set out to teach virtue while, on the other hand, wishing that it would at least encourage virtue. Having reached something of an impasse, however, the brash Polus takes over once more, and with this character Socrates is less inclined to be kind by holding off those dialectic blows.

PHASE TWO: SOCRATES–POLUS (461–80)

Socrates, having provided his definition of rhetoric as 'pandering' (or, as Socrates stresses, a branch of pandering), is now attacked by Polus, although he does not actually question the power of oratory, but is more concerned with how orators themselves are perceived. Amusingly, Socrates keeps thinking that Polus is launching into a speech rather than asking questions in a dialectic way, because Polus is simply incapable of engaging in dialectic.

Polus is setting out to accuse Socrates of hypocrisy. Rather like the myth of Gyges' Ring (see [Chapter 6](#)), the orator is no worse than anyone else in what he does for, Polus argues, surely Socrates himself would swap his position for the power that a dictator has, for example, if he were able.

Socrates' response at first seems counterintuitive, for he states that, in actual fact, tyrants, dictators, *etc.* (i.e. those in power) have the least power in the state. He elaborates on this point by considering all human action to be driven not for the sake of the action itself, but for a further aim. For example, Socrates once again uses an example from the medical profession whereby someone takes medicine for the further aim of health, even though the act of taking the medicine is disagreeable. Likewise, someone who goes to work every day does not do it simply for the act of work, but for the money it brings. Of course, many actions are enjoyable in themselves – some of us actually enjoy our jobs – but, in fact, even in these cases we do the act because of the further aim of 'enjoyment',

otherwise we would not do it. Essentially, and logically, you do something because of what you can gain from it, rather than the act itself.

In the case of the powerful tyrant, then, an action is also done for the sake of something else, for example someone is executed for the sake of the state. The tyrant, therefore, has very little power at all because the action is for a 'greater good', not the tyrant's own good. This has echoes in Socrates' view that his own execution was entirely a result of the power within him, not a result of the power of the rulers.

This brings us back to Polus' accusation that Socrates is a hypocrite and that he would rather be a tyrant if he could, because Socrates, in a somewhat intricate manner, has argued that the tyrant, despite seemingly free to kill, torture or imprison whomsoever he wishes, is in the unenviable position of having no real power over his actions! This gets at the very heart of the dialogue, which is ethical in nature, and results in Socrates declaring one of his most famous of quotes:



'... I would rather suffer wrong than do wrong'

Plato, *Gorgias*, 469

In response, Polus argues that many people who do wrong also happen to be happy, but Socrates disagrees with him, stating that doing wrong results in shame for the evildoer, and hence unhappiness, even if the evildoer escapes actual punishment. Polus finds this argument preposterous, and gives examples of tyrants who seemed happy enough with their lot, but this approach by Polus comes back to Socrates' distaste for oratory; it's reliance upon particular examples rather than getting to universal definitions. As Socrates points out:



'The fact is, my dear sir, that you are trying to prove me wrong by the use of oratory, like people in the law courts. They think that they have got the better of the other party when they can produce a number of respectable witnesses to what they say, while their opponent can produce only one or none at all. But this kind of proof is useless in establishing the truth; it can easily happen that a man is overborne by the false evidence of several apparently respectable persons.'

.....

This argument is not entirely convincing, but is sufficient to silence Polus, and perhaps it is also Plato's bitter insistence, given the timing of this dialogue, that the state is shamed for the execution of Socrates. In addition, bearing in mind the views of goodness expressed in *Republic* especially, Plato here is aligning his ethics with the Theory of the Forms and the central argument that it is better to be just than unjust.

PHASE THREE: SOCRATES–CALLICLES (481–527)

We are now at the stage whereby Socrates has argued that someone who has done wrong would be so miserable that, even if he could get away Scot free, he would be better off handing himself in to the local police station and embracing his punishment of a prison cell or worse. The now impatient Callicles, quite understandably, at this point asks Chaerephon whether Socrates is joking, to which Chaerephon tells Callicles to ask Socrates himself.

It's quite possible (though by no means certain) that Callicles is not a historical figure at all – at least nothing outside of Plato's writings is known of him – and so is a creation of Plato. The character portrayed is someone – an ambitious, young and rich Athenian politician – who is the opposite to Socrates; of someone who sees morality as lacking any universal values in themselves but merely as a tool to get what you want in life. His view does not differ from that of Thrasymachus in *Republic* and, in fact, his impatient character is likewise parallel: morality is simply something invented by the weak to defend themselves against the powerful. Callicles, Thrasymachus and a number of other Sophists in Plato's dialogues, together with various noble politicians trained by Sophists, represent for Socrates a dangerous set of people who are after nothing but power and have no real sincerity in their beliefs. Their views sway from one thing to another depending upon various power struggles and, importantly for Socrates, it means that these people do not know themselves. They have no fulcrum, no values and, therefore, no knowledge of themselves, and are full of contradictions. As Socrates says to Callicles, you 'shift your ground this way and that' (Plato, *Gorgias*, 481).

Socrates does not mean to be joking, or at least no more than Socrates' humour is also meant to have a seriousness to it, and so he asks Callicles to explain to him why he thinks that the view that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong is nothing more than a joke. What follows is an excellent and lengthy speech by

Callicles (482–86). This speech is a praise for power and immorality that Machiavelli would be proud of:



‘... by convention an attempt to gain an advantage over the majority is said to be wrong and base, and men call it criminal; nature, on the other hand, herself demonstrates that it is right that the better man should prevail over the worse and the stronger over the weaker. The truth of this can be seen in a variety of examples, drawn both from the animal world and from the complex communities and races of human beings; right consists in the superior ruling over the inferior and having the upper hand.’

Plato, *Gorgias*, 483

A good man is a happy man, and a happy man is a man who wants and has power, regardless of its moral status. Not only is this the best life, but Callicles goes so far as to invite Socrates to surrender his life as a philosopher and pursue this good life, for, as Callicles says:



‘It is a fine thing to have a tincture of philosophy, just so much as makes an educated person, and there is no disgrace in a lad philosophizing. But when a man of maturer years remains devoted to this study the thing becomes absurd, Socrates, and I have the same feeling about philosophers as I have about those who stammer and play childish games.’

Plato, *Gorgias*, 485

Callicles feels sorry for Socrates for spending his time in philosophizing, for it is not providing him with the necessary skills to survive in this dog-eat-dog world and as he says, poignantly given what is to occur to Socrates, any man could bring Socrates to trial even when he is innocent and he would be executed because of his inability to raise the crowd with oratory.

How does Socrates respond to Callicles? To begin, Socrates asks whether it is sufficient to have mastery only over others, but no mastery over one’s self. By self-mastery, Socrates means being in control of one’s desires and, therefore, acting in moderation. Callicles, however, thinks this is a ridiculous notion; for

him, 'self-mastery' is synonymous with repression of desires and, therefore, would make a man miserable by having to deny his appetites. Callicles is presenting Socrates with a picture of what nature is really like, as 'will-to-power' as the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called it, and that it is therefore required for Man to fulfil his nature by exerting his powers to the full, not in restraining them.

Socrates then gives us a delightful story (493) of the image of the soul as a leaky bucket! No matter how much you attempt to fill it, you will never keep it full. This, Socrates suggests, is the problem with always having desires; you will never be satisfied, your bucket will never be full. The temperate man, however, is satisfied with what he has and nothing more. Callicles, however, still sees things differently; for him the man who is seemingly satisfied with his lot has nothing left to crave for, to strive for, and might as well be dead.

Socrates now takes a different tack in this dialectic and considers what Callicles means by pleasure, for, Socrates wants to know, does Callicles say that pleasure and good are the same things, for surely there are 'evil' pleasures? It is at this point that Callicles becomes less confident in his assertions, for Callicles is no supporter of hedonism. He sees the implications of hedonism are that he would have to admit that, so long as someone is engaging in satisfying all of his desires, he is the kind of man that Callicles sees as his happy ideal. If this is the case, then we could all think of people who devote their lives to drinking, smoking, drugs and so on who we would certainly not consider as either happy individuals or role models!

Callicles, so appalled with the conclusions of this argument, now retreats and goes into something of a sulk, giving simple 'yes', 'no' or 'have it your way' responses that are far removed from the confident oratory delivered earlier. While Callicles was certainly correct in his prediction that Socrates' adherence to the philosophic life will lead to his death, this is not a sufficient reason to give up that life and engage in whatever happens to please you at that moment. This does not only apply to professional, full-time philosophers such as Socrates, but is a prescription for all to aim for at least some degree of the philosophic life, most especially the rulers: if philosophers cannot be kings, then kings must become philosophers; to be moderate and moral for the sake of the community as a whole.

This wonderful dialogue concludes with Socrates having silenced his interlocutors, and he is left to make lengthy speeches rather than engage in

dialectic. As Socrates says at the very end of *Gorgias*:



‘It would be shameful for men in our present condition, who are so ignorant that we never think the same for two moments together, even on subjects of the greatest importance, to give ourselves to be led by the truth now revealed to us, which teaches that the best way of life is to practise righteousness and virtue, whether living or dying; let us follow that way and urge others to follow it, instead of the way which you in mistaken confidence are urging upon me; it is quite worthless, Callicles.’

Plato, *Gorgias*, 527



Key terms

Encomium: Literally means ‘the praise of a person or thing’, from the Greek enkomion.

Hedonism: The view that the pursuit of pleasure is the most important intrinsic good.

Oratory: A type of public speaking. Socrates is critical of oratory and is often synonymous with the term ‘rhetoric’ (see [Chapter 7](#) for a definition).

Panegyric: From the Greek panegyris, meaning ‘a speech fit for a general assembly’, thus a formal public speech.

Teleological: From the Greek telos, meaning ‘end’ or ‘purpose’. Therefore, a teleological account of the universe is to argue that it has purpose.





Dig deeper

Wardy, R. (1996), *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and their Successors*. London: Routledge.

Waterfield, R. (trans.) (2008), *Plato: Gorgias*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Fact check

- 1 Which period in Plato's dialogues is *Gorgias* considered to be written in?
 - a Early
 - b Middle
 - c Late
 - d Unknown
- 2 Which one of the following is **not** a work by Gorgias?
 - a *The Encomium of Helen*
 - b *On Non-Existence*
 - c *Gorgias*
 - d *Epitaphios*
- 3 Which one of the following is a word for 'the praise of a person or thing'?
 - a Encomium
 - b Titanium
 - c Hedonism
 - d Humanism
- 4 What is the name of Socrates' young student in *Gorgias*?
 - a Callicles
 - b Chaerephon
 - c Chorus
 - d Lysis
- 5 What is a *panegyric*?
 - a Socratic dialectic
 - b A speech designed to attack someone's character
 - c A formal public speech
 - d A kind of poem
- 6 Who is Socrates addressing in the following quote: '...when Chaerephon asks you what art Gorgias is master of, you embark on a panegyric of his art as if someone were attacking it, without, however, saying what it is.'?
 - a Callicles
 - b Polus
 - c Protagoras
 - d Pythagoras
- 7 Which one of the following quotes, from *Gorgias*, can be attributed to Socrates?
 - a 'I would rather be good than bad'
 - b 'I would rather be ignorant than a philosopher'
 - c 'I would rather suffer wrong than do wrong'

d 'I would rather be man than a woman'

8 Who asks if Socrates is joking?

- a** Chaerephon
- b** Protagoras
- c** Polus
- d** Callicles

9 What is hedonism?

a The view that the pursuit of pleasure is the most important intrinsic good **b** The view that it is important to refrain from pleasure **c** The view that pleasure and pain are irrelevant and what matters is reason **d** The view that pleasure and pain are an illusion **10** Who, does Socrates argue, has the least power in a state?

- a** The citizens
- b** The Sophists
- c** The philosopher
- d** The dictator



Plato's dialogue *Republic* is the best-known of his works and we have devoted much space in this book to its contents and, indeed, will be coming back to it in the next chapter. However, we have seen that there are many other fascinating dialogues that Plato wrote which raise important philosophical questions. Also, *Republic* has not always been the most famous of Plato's works; for many hundreds of years this accolade was given to his work *Timaeus*.

The dialogue *Timaeus* is generally considered to be one of Plato's later works. I say 'dialogue' but in actual fact it is unique for Plato as it is virtually a monologue. Socrates only appears briefly at the beginning before taking a back seat and allowing *Timaeus* centre-stage with a long speech. Why doesn't Socrates engage in his usual dialectic? There has been much speculation concerning this and one possibility is that he was simply not all that interested! *Timaeus* is a 5th-century Pythagorean astronomer (though no evidence that he actually existed is available), but Socrates was far more interested in the human being, particularly what it means to be good, so perhaps speculation on the physical world was something that Socrates could not relate to his own philosophy. From Plato's perspective it may well be that such speculation on natural phenomena did not, in a stylistic way, lend itself well to *elenchus*. Indeed, some scholars consider *Timaeus* to not be a work of philosophy at all, but more Plato's desire to provide a cosmological story.

The setting



Timaeus and Christianity

Historically, *Timaeus* is very important. If you look at the famous painting *The School of Athens* by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael (1483–1520), the central figure of Plato is pointing up at the heavens while holding in his hand the book *Timaeus*. This is because it was not *Republic* that was considered Plato's greatest work during the Middle Ages in the Western world for, in fact, it was not so readily available, rather *Timaeus* was considered representative of Plato's main views and so when people talked of Platonic philosophy it was *Timaeus* they were referring to. Therefore, it was also *Timaeus* that had a huge influence on Christian theology.

.....

Timaeus begins with a meeting of Socrates with three other people, *Timaeus*, *Hermocrates* and *Critias*. Socrates is asked to remind them all what he had been

discussing with them the day before and what we are then presented with is essentially a summary of the political philosophy discussed in *Republic*. In this sense, *Timaeus* seems to carry on where *Republic* left off. Socrates, having recounted his speech of the day before, now asks the others for speeches from them in return. Critias then gives an account of an ancient city that reminds him of Socrates' constitution, and this now-lost city was called Atlantis. In the short, unfinished Platonic dialogue called *Critias*, he provides a more detailed account of this city. Following this, Timaeus now begins his monologue (Hermocrates seems to get away without having to make a speech!).

Timaeus and organicism



'I once heard someone reading from a book by Anaxagoras, and asserting that it is Mind that produces order and is the cause of everything. This explanation pleased me. Somehow it seemed right that Mind should be the cause of everything; and I reflected that if this is so, Mind in producing order sets everything in order and arranges each individual thing in the way that is best for it... These reflections made me suppose, to my delight, that in Anaxagoras I had found an authority on causation after my own heart. I assumed that he would begin by informing us whether the Earth is flat or round, and would then proceed to explain in detail the reason and logical necessity for this... It was a wonderful hope, my friend, but it was quickly dashed. As I read on I discovered that the fellow made no use of Mind and assigned it no causality for the order of the world, but adduced causes like air and ether and water and many other absurdities.'

Plato, *Phaedo*, 97B, trans. Hugh Tredennick

It is worth keeping the above quote in mind when looking at Plato's philosophical views. As has been stressed throughout this book, no thinker works in a vacuum and Plato was inheriting a rich philosophical tradition from what are referred to as the Presocratics. These early philosophers were as much scientists in that they sought natural explanations for why the universe existed and how it functioned. They did not, of course, possess the empirical tools we have available to us today, so there was inevitably a high degree of speculation

but, nonetheless, within the boundaries of knowledge available to them at the time, they sought the most rational explanation that they could.

The Presocratic Anaxagoras (c. 510–428 BC), who travelled to Athens as a young man, saw, like Democritus, the universe as consisting of atoms, or ‘seeds’ as he prefer to call them, but Anaxagoras differed from Democritus in that the latter saw these elements as forming into the objects we see around us almost by accident, without any guiding principle behind it, whereas Anaxagoras suggests a ‘Mind’, a superior intellect. However, as the quote from Plato above states, it is not altogether clear what this Mind does, if anything at all, much to the frustration of Plato. This may have been somewhat unfair of Plato, for Anaxagoras did, in fact, reach the conclusion that Mind was necessary as some kind of controlling force for the elements.

What both Plato and Anaxagoras share is the belief that the universe does not come about accidentally or without any purpose. What Plato sets out to do in *Timaeus* especially is to develop these ideas much further. In this work he expresses his dissatisfaction with Democritus’ notion (although does not mention him by name) of ‘like is moved by like’, illustrated by the **doxographer** Sextus Empiricus:



‘Democritus bases his argument on both animate and inanimate things. For animals, he says, congregate with animals of the same kind – doves with doves, cranes with cranes, and so with the other irrational animals. Similarly in the case of inanimate things, as we can see from seeds that are being riddled and from pebbles on the sea-shore. For in the one case the whirling of the sieve separately arranges lentils with lentils, barley with barley, wheat with wheat; and in the other case, by the motion of the waves, oval pebbles reformed into the same place as oval pebbles, and round pebbles as round pebbles, as though the similarity in things contained some sort of force for collecting things together.

Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, VII 116–18

It’s fascinating to read this as it is a clear example of empirical method in action; looking at the natural world and then seeking the most likely explanation. Why was Plato so dissatisfied with this notion of a ‘force’ that collects ‘like with like’? Plato believed that while this does explain how objects are formed or sorted, such as the elements of earth, water, air and fire, the cosmos is far more

complex than that, and it is not a *sufficient explanation*; in other words it tells us so much, but not enough.

In Plato's *Laws* he notes that the universe is a 'fitting and harmonious' blend of *opposites* (Plato, *Laws*, 889b) such as hot and cold, soft and hard, dry and moist. That is to say, if the natural order is to seek like for like, the cosmos would be quite a boring place, consisting of nothing more than the basic elements. What Plato is doing here is not looking at things close-up, but rather at the 'cosmic level' and, from that perspective, the universe consisting of diversity and opposites all of which are being accommodated. As an analogy, it is rather like trying to understand complex sentences by breaking them down into their basic components, *i.e.* letters; it actually ceases to make any sense at all.

It is likely not correct to see the Presocratics in the same way as modern materialist views of the universe, for although many did reduce matter to elements such as atoms they nonetheless saw matter as *alive*, not inanimate. Greek **organicism** views the cosmos as a living thing and the use of the Greek word *physis* is better translated as 'life' rather than 'matter', given the modern connotations of the latter word. Therefore, Plato follows on with this intellectual tradition in *Timaeus* by describing the cosmos as a created living thing. Being materialist is not the same as mechanist and, in fact, for the Ancient Greeks what mechanical devices that existed would hardly be regarded as reliable, regular or ordered; better to look to biological life.

While the dialogue seems to follow on from *Republic*, its philosophical outlook differs considerably, at least if we are to take the views presented by Timaeus as representative of Plato's own views, which is by no means certain. Whereas in Plato's *Republic* the concern is more with the perfect Realm of the Forms than anything that this imperfect world has to offer, in *Timaeus* the focus is very much on *this* world. However, the differences are perhaps overemphasized by some scholars.

The Demiurge

In [Chapter 5](#) we discussed how Socrates was fascinated by *techne*, or craftsmanship. In the same way as, say, a carpenter has a goal or function (*ergon*), so does (or, rather, should) the political ruler. The importance, then, of the Philosopher-King engaging in his 'craft' in creating and maintaining the state, which, in turn, is following the pattern of the Forms, is not that far

removed from the notion presented in *Timaeus* of a divine craftsman, a **Demiurge**, who follows an ‘eternal pattern’ in the creation of the cosmos. The word ‘*demiurge*’ literally translates as ‘craftsman’ and it is certainly radical to Greek myth to envision a god who seemingly engages in what was considered the demeaning enterprise of manual labour! But, again, we need to keep in mind how important ‘craft’ is in this respect; the *demiurge* is much more than a god engaged in dull, laborious tasks; rather he is a ‘geometer god’, constructing the cosmos according to universal, geometric principles.

The *demiurge* initially is the only god there is, for he is responsible for the creation of the other gods who assist him in the formation of the universe. So, at the ‘beginning’ there exists the *demiurge*, the eternal patterns or Forms, and the materials (referred to as ‘chaos’) out of which the cosmos is created. Presumably all of this has existed for eternity and it is only the actual crafting of the universe – from chaos into material objects – that occurred in time. Plato’s god is not like the omnipotent Christian God who creates the universe *ex nihilo*, ‘out of nothing’, because the *demiurge* is limited in what he can do by two things: the materials that already exist, and the necessity to follow the divine patterns, rather like someone who puts up a flatpack shelf with instructions. What the *demiurge* does is impose order upon the cosmos, but that order is a set of mathematical instructions that already exists.



Ex nihilo

Ex nihilo is a Latin term meaning ‘out of nothing’ and in theology there has been considerable debate over the centuries as to whether God created the universe out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) or, like in *Timaeus*, out of pre-existent matter (*creatio ex materia*). In Christianity, scholars point to biblical references that could defend either view but, generally, the Platonic approach was rejected by most biblical scholars.

.....

Plato presents a **teleological** account of the universe. Like other crafts, there is purpose and necessity and, in this way, there is a clear link with Plato’s earlier philosophy in terms of the question of how we, as human beings, should live. For Plato, when we look to the heavens we do not see a blind, purposeless machine, but a purpose-driven, well-ordered, good and beautiful organism. As human beings we should strive to live in harmony with this, to be like gods ourselves, and to align our minds with this harmony.

The *demiurge*, out of necessity, constructs the universe out of the pre-existing and universal principles of beauty, simplicity and order, and uses mathematics

and geometry to construct this harmonious universe. This is, of course, far removed from our modern-day Darwinian picture of life and intelligence as accidents of evolution, but, for Plato, the universe has meaning and purpose in the same way a human being has meaning and purpose, and is not simply a collection of atoms.

This all links with Plato's epistemology, his theory of knowledge, and in considering the question of how we can know what is true in the universe. If we were to subscribe to the nihilistic view that the universe essentially is meaningless, then it follows that there is nothing we can truly know about it. Certainly, we can determine how the laws appear to operate, but that does not explain why things are the way they are. Plato's cosmology, however, goes much further than the empirical approach. Given his portrayal of the universe as constructed through the principles of order, beauty, simplicity, mathematics and geometry, then it is conceivable for human beings to understand the universe by adopting these self-same principles in our own lives.

The universe and its natural state In modern cosmogony – the model of how the universe came into existence – there is much speculation as to whether the universe could have existed in any other state than it actually is. The **anthropic principle**, or **Goldilocks enigma**, suggests that the universe's physical laws are 'just right' for the existence of life on Earth and, indeed, for the universe to exist at all. Just the tiniest of changes in certain parameters

and the universe would have collapsed in on itself long ago or, at best be unimaginably different from what it is. This leads to the conclusion that either these physical laws must exist for a universe to exist, or that there are many universes, each with different physical laws.

For Plato, however, there is only one universe, and the ‘stuff’ of the universe, or ‘chaos’, does not – as the name suggests – have any inherent order at all; the *demiurge* imposes order upon it. This differs from Aristotle’s cosmogony, which pictures a universe that has always existed with an inherent order. In his *Metaphysics*, when Aristotle talks of the gods in the plural sense he seems to mean the more anthropomorphic characters that colour Greek myth. However, when he refers to God in the singular he means something very different. This God exists necessarily; he does not depend on anything else for his existence. He never changes or has any potential to change and he has no beginning or end. This eternal being is also immaterial, for if He were to be made up of any kind of matter He could not then be immutable. As God is immutable He cannot engage in any kind of physical, bodily action for there is no ‘body’ or movement.

What, then, does God do? God is pure intellect; His activity is *theoria*. What, then, does God contemplate upon? God could not think about anything which could cause Him to change or be affected in any way, so this leaves out the material world. Aristotle states in his *Metaphysics* that God only contemplates upon himself, God is ‘thought of thought’. God knows only Himself and is not affected by the material world in any way and nor does it impose order upon the world. For Aristotle, purpose – teleology – is within nature already whereas, for Plato, the *demiurge* is what has purpose.

The creation of the cosmos by gods from the chaos may seem similar to Hesiod’s *Theogony* (see [Chapter 1](#)), but Hesiod’s gods seem more capricious,

whereas Plato's gods follow the principles of reason and order.

The cosmos as animate



'The appropriate shape, for the living being that was to contain all living beings within itself, would be the one that includes all shapes within itself. And so he made it perfect spherical, equidistant in all directions from its centre to its extremes, because there is no shape more perfect and none more similar to itself.'

Plato, *Timaeus*, 33b

Plato conceives of the world as organic, a perfectly spherical animal. It has no eyes nor ears because it does not need them, nor does it need any organs as it is entirely self-sufficient. It has no limbs because it does not need hands to defend itself nor feet to walk upon. This sphere is, in fact, perfectly smooth and a sphere is the most natural shape for such an animal to be. Therefore, while it certainly looks very different from any other animal, the world nonetheless possesses a soul, like all other living creatures. And, like other souls, it contains three parts (see [Chapter 5](#)): the rational, appetitive and spirited. The world-animal, therefore, is as perfect as any material thing can be, in that the rational part of the soul controls the other parts of the soul but, nonetheless, the 'lower' part of the soul does exist, hence the world's imperfections.

The *demiurge*, by necessity, can only do what is good, and so there is only one world because the *demiurge* could only create the best world. To create any other worlds is to create either better or worse worlds as there can only be one best world. The soul resides at the centre of the world but, nonetheless, diffuses throughout the world. This world does, of course, contain many living things, all of which possess their own soul, but these should not be seen as entirely separate from the world soul. Rather, they are interrelated. In a sense the world is an ecosystem of one living thing with component parts.



The origins of man

Many of the Presocratics speculated on how the creatures that we know today came about. Empedocles (c. 490–c. 430 BC), for example, considered it to be entirely by chance when various parts of the body wandered about and joined up by random. As he describes it: ‘Here many heads sprang up without necks, mere arms were wandering around without shoulders, and single eyes, lacking foreheads, roamed around.’

Why does Plato present the world as animate given what some of the Presocratics had previously said? For example, Anaxagoras said that celestial bodies are just hot stones, and it was not uncommon for other Presocratics to see planets and stars as purely physical as opposed to animal. Plato’s reasoning for this comes back to his need to attribute meaning to the universe for he believed that purely physical things can only be explained in a physical manner, whereas animate or ‘intelligible’ things can likewise be explained in an intelligible manner. It’s rather like the difference between explaining what a chair is compared with a particular person: a chair can be fully explained and understood using mathematical equations, but the same cannot be said for a particular human being.

The world soul is also a god, as are all the other celestial bodies in the heavens. They all have souls, and are intelligent, but they are largely circumscribed in terms of what they do and think:



‘He [the demiurge] endowed each of the gods with two kinds of motion: even rotation in the same place, to enable them always to think the same thoughts about the same things; and forward motion, under the sovereignty of the revolution of identity and sameness. But with respect to the other five kinds of motion, they were to be stable and unmoving, so that each of them might be, to the fullest extent, as perfect as possible. And so all the fixed stars were created as divine, ever-living beings, spinning evenly and unerringly for ever.’

Plato, *Timaeus*, 40a

The ‘soul’, therefore, is better understood in the Latin sense of *anima*: that which animates the physical. The celestial bodies, their souls being controlled by the rational part, also do what is good for the sake of the cosmos as a whole. In other

words, the cosmos is not ethically neutral but purposeful and good. While there are geometrical laws to follow, the universe could choose to not follow them. However, like the Philosopher-Kings who, when they know what is good will be compelled to do good, the celestial bodies do likewise. This is why the universe is ordered and regular; not because of the inherent nature of the physical world or as a result of a set of mathematical equations, but because the celestial gods act according to what is best and rational for the universe.

The Great Chain of Being In 1936, the American philosopher Arthur Lovejoy (1873–1962) published *The Great Chain of Being* in which he explores the notion, going back to Plato, but existing throughout Western philosophical history, of a world in which all living beings are related to each other in a hierarchical chain.

Plato, in *Timaeus*, portrays the *demiurge* creating the world, but it is this world god that then goes on to create other living beings, beginning with human beings, then animals, then plants. Each creation is an imitation of its creator, but at each stage of copying there are more imperfections, so the Earth is less perfect than the *demiurge*, humans are less perfect than the Earth god, animals less perfect than humans, and so on. Hence we have this hierarchy or ‘chain of being’ from the most perfect to the imperfect. Whereas humans are, therefore, to some extent removed from perfection, they do also partake in it and this idea that we are in some way connected in this ‘chain’ proved to be a huge influence on future philosophy, especially Neoplatonism (see [Chapter 13](#)).



Alfred North Whitehead and process philosophy

The British philosopher and mathematician A. N. Whitehead (1861–1947) famously declared that European philosophy is but ‘a series of footnotes to Plato’ (see [Chapter 3](#)). Certainly, Whitehead’s own philosophy was heavily influenced by Plato’s writings, especially *Timaeus*. It was, in fact, during the 1927–8 Gifford lectures that Whitehead, looking to *Timaeus*, asserted that Plato’s philosophy is a form of organicism. In Whitehead’s work *Process and Reality* (1929), he radically argued that reality consists of processes, rather than simply physical objects. What he means by this is, in a very Platonic way (at least in *Timaeus*), that matter is not a static thing but constantly changing or flowing. While we like to label things, to give them an ‘essence’ (partly as a result of the limitations of language), in reality there are not enduring ‘things’ as such, but a ‘society’ of events and ‘occasions of experience’ (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York: Free Press, 1979, p. 34). Whitehead moves away from a mechanistic view of the universe, to one of interconnectedness and creativity. For example, a tree does not merely grow independently of other things in a fixed and predictable manner, but develops in response to the existence of other entities. This notion of interconnectedness and processes similarly applies to God, seen by Whitehead as not separate from existence and unaffected by it, but interacts with the universe to the extent that God not only changes the universe but is changed by it. Whitehead’s process philosophy has thus been developed into what is called process theology, most notably by the American philosophers Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000) and John B. Cobb (b. 1925); the latter famous for his works on ecological interdependence in which he states that we have a duty to preserve our world because of this interdependence. Such views stem directly from Whitehead, who argued for what he called ‘world-loyalty’ (Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1996, p. 60).

Being ethical

In *Timaeus*, Plato to some extent bridges the gap between the material world and the ‘spiritual’, or the world of the Forms. In *Republic*, you may recall, it is not always clear what the relation is between these two seemingly diverse realms. The world of matter, if anything, is nothing more than an illusion and, in fact, acts as an obstruction and distraction from the ‘real’ world of the Forms, as suggested in, especially, the cave analogy. However, as we saw in [Chapter 7](#), the simile of the Divided Line suggests a closer link between the material and the non-material.

However, the human being portrayed in *Timaeus* is a microcosm of the cosmos and, therefore, can learn by embracing the created world, rather than to subtract himself from it. This world that we live in contains, if you like, patterns of ethical conduct, if we are only prepared to perceive them. Whereas in *Republic*, the Forms are the objects of knowledge, in *Timaeus* this is no longer the case, at least in not such an obvious manner. We can learn how to be good by reading what is in the heavens and, indeed, in *Theaetetus*, Socrates says that philosophers spend their time ‘searching the heavens’. The good life is effectively being at one with nature. What is also interesting here is that, unlike *Republic*, the worldview presented in *Timaeus* seems less elitist: reason is still

very important if one is to have your soul correspond with the world-soul, but as we are all the creation of the Earth god and we all therefore contain a ‘spark’ of perfection within us, then it is quite possible for salvation to be within the reach of all of us, not just philosophers; although we need to add the caveat that no doubt rigorous philosophical training can help towards this perfection.

However, whereas the Earth god is unhindered by senses or the need to engage in motion (other than those already mentioned), it is less distracted than humans. Our lives are constantly bombarded by sensations and our task is to try to control these and give them order as best we can if we are to live good and just lives. The body is important, but – like in Republic – it is the mind that is most essential for our salvation:



‘When a man is caught up in his appetites or his ambitions and devotes all his energies to them, the mental processes that go on inside him are bound to be restricted entirely to mortal beliefs, and he himself is bound to be completely and utterly mortal as a man can be, since that is the part of himself that he has reinforced. But anyone who has devoted himself to learning and has genuinely applied his intelligence – which is to say, anyone who has primarily exercised his intellect – cannot fail to attain immortal, divine wisdom, if the truth should come within his grasp.’

Plato, *Timaeus*, 90b

What *Timaeus* shows us is that it can be inaccurate to describe Plato as a rationalist in the modern sense of the term; as a philosopher who has no time for empiricism or for the value of the senses. What is obvious from *Timaeus* is that, as human beings, it is vitally important for our knowledge of the world and, indeed, consequently for our very salvation, to use our senses and to see the world around us: to look at the stars above and their motions, to seek patterns, beauty and order in nature and to imitate these in our own lives.



Key terms

Anthropic principle: Also known as the **Goldilocks Enigma** from the *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* tale. It is the idea that the universe is 'just right' for the existence of life on Earth.

Demiurge: Literally translates as 'craftsman' and is a reference to a divine craftsman.

Ex nihilo: Latin for 'out of nothing'; it is particularly used with reference to creation of the universe.

Organicism: The view that the cosmos is organic: a living thing, and not just inanimate matter.





Dig deeper

Davies, P. (2007), *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?* London: Penguin.

Waterfield, R. (trans.) (2008), *Plato: Timaeus and Critias*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.


Whitehead, A. N. (1978), *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (2011), *Religion in the Making*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.





Fact check

- 1 Is Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* generally considered to be...?
a ... one of his early works b ... from his middle period c ... one of his later works d ... unknown 2 Which one of these works by Plato was regarded as the most influential during the Middle Ages in Europe?
a *Timaeus*
b *Republic*
c *Critias*
d *Gorgias*
- 3 Which of the following is a definition of organicism?
a Food produced without the use of chemicals b The view that the cosmos is organic c The view that the cosmos has organs d The view that the cosmos is like a machine 4 Which of the following is a definition of *demiurge*?
a A divine craftsman b A minor god c The cosmos d The Earth 5 What is the Latin term used to state that the universe was created 'out of nothing'?
a *ex materia*
b *ex deo*
c *ex nihilo*
d *via negativa*
- 6 What is the term used to argue for the universe as having purpose?
a Teleological b Ecological c Biological d Ontological 7 Which philosopher came up with the concept of the 'great chain of being'?
a James Lovelock b Bertrand Russell c Alfred North Whitehead d Arthur Lovejoy 8 How does *Timaeus* describe the Earth?
a As a perfectly spherical animal b As a geometrical circle c As a hot stone d As the *demiurge*
- 9 How, as human beings, can we learn how to be good, according to *Timaeus*?
a By retreating to a cave b By looking to the heavens c By following the laws of the state d By following Socrates 10 Aside from *Timaeus* and Socrates, which one of the following characters also appears in the dialogue *Timaeus*?
a Lysis
b Gorgias
c Plato
d Critias
- 

The war between philosophy and poetry
and the Myth of Er

Chapters 4 to 7 explored various themes in Plato's *Republic*, before we then went on an excursion to other dialogues and other themes. I now want to bring us back to *Republic*, to the final book: Book X. Book IX of *Republic* seems to bring us to a natural end of the dialogue. Socrates (591e–592b) states that the role of the philosopher is to look at the regime within himself. It is the soul of the philosopher that is the 'just city', not an external thing, for 'it makes no difference whether it [the just city] actually exists anywhere or will exist' (Plato, *Republic*, 592b). It seems then that the ultimate intention of Plato's *Republic* is not, after all, to create an actual perfect state on Earth, but rather an 'internal polis': what it means to be a fully human being. When seen this way, Plato's political philosophy, the accusations of totalitarianism and what have you, can be seen as more metaphorical than literal. What is most important is what this tells us about ourselves. Given such a quite satisfying conclusion, it is somewhat grating to many scholars to then see the addition of Book X of *Republic*, the final chapter.

Book X, in fact, seems to have been written at a later date and it does not fit well with what was written in the rest of *Republic* in that it contradicts some of the previous views and, on the whole, is not as philosophically rigorous. Given this, it is puzzling as to why Plato – who seems so skilled in literary prowess – should add this extra chapter, other than perhaps he felt the need to tidy up some loose ends with an 'appendix'.



The relevance of Book X

The Plato scholar, Julia Annas, made the following revealing remarks concerning the final chapter of *Republic*: ‘... Book 10 itself appears gratuitous and clumsy, and it is full of oddities. We can see why Plato thought it relevant to the rest of the *Republic*; but the level of philosophical argument and literary skill is much below the rest of the book.’ (Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic*, p. 335)

In Book X of *Republic*, Plato contentiously argues for tragic poetry to be banned in his state. In the same way our modern understanding of the word ‘myth’ is not the same as understood by the Ancient Greeks (see [Chapter 1](#)), we need to be clear what the word ‘poetry’ also means for Plato and the people of his time. In English it is a reference to a somewhat narrow genre of literature, but the Greek word *poiein* means ‘to make’ and refers to virtually all kinds of artistic production, so that a more appropriate modern translation would be ‘media’. Especially popular in Ancient Greece were the tragic festivals that represented the popular culture of the day, the ‘power of the media’, and, though most no longer survive, there were many thousands of tragedies, and the festivals were attended by many thousands of people.

While Plato does not go so far as calling for a ban of the tragic poets in any of his other works, there are nonetheless a number of criticisms levelled against them that we can find. For example, when in the *Gorgias*, which we looked at in the previous chapter, Socrates accuses Callicles and orators of merely ‘pandering’ to their audience without regard for their real interests, he compares this to such things as flute-playing and dithyrambic poetry (501). In the *Apology*, Socrates says the following about the poets:



‘I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean. It seemed clear to me that the poets were in much the same case; and I also observed that the very fact that they were poets made them think that they had a

perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant.'

Plato, *Apology*, 22c

Whereas Socrates sees *his* 'inspiration' as helping in his understanding, he sees the inspiration of *poets* as unreliable. These two forms of inspiration, therefore, are not the same thing. This view is also continued in an early dialogue by Plato, *Ion*, where Socrates argues that poetry is produced from a Dionysian ecstasy and, as a result, casts reason aside, whereas Socrates' inspiration is informed *by* reason.

As we have seen with Socrates' concern with rhetoric, here the same concern is expressed with poetry; it is intuitive, but it is not knowledge. Poets, like politicians trained in the arts of rhetoric, have the power to persuade their audience, but the danger is that they persuade them in what is evil or mistaken. Like rhetoric, poetry is a skill without any basis in knowledge and, in fact, it is not concerned with knowledge, with truth.

This is why the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche blamed Socrates and Plato for the death of tragedy in their call for it to be replaced with scientific reasoning.



Nietzsche on Socrates and tragedy

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is perhaps most famous for his philosophy of the *Übermensch* (the ‘Superman’ or ‘Overman’) and for his declaration that ‘God is dead’, but he was also professor of Greek at the University of Basel from 1869 until 1879 and his early work was, quite naturally, concerned with Greek culture. The first book he published was *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, and this work reflects Nietzsche’s wider concerns over the decline in values in Europe at the time he was writing, coupled with the decline in religious belief. A key theme throughout all of Nietzsche’s work, as he was very much a moral philosopher, is his desire for a new set of values given that people no longer believed in God. But where would these values come from? In *The Birth of Tragedy* he looks to art, and tragedy in particular, for salvation.

Nietzsche’s description of Greek tragedy shows it as an interactive, unifying and even mystical experience. The audience does not simply watch the show, but is so engaged in it that it provides a therapeutic outlet for a people who are only too aware of the horrors of everyday life in nature. The audience, by partaking in tragedy, becomes a work of art themselves. For Nietzsche, the greatest tragedians were Sophocles (c. 497–406 BC) and Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC), whereas he was especially critical of Euripides (c. 480–406 BC) who, by getting rid of the chorus in the drama, effectively killed what was central to tragedy; its ‘irrational’ element. Socrates, like Euripides, stressed the importance of the power of reason, so that tragedy should be ‘rational’ and should, as a result, reveal truth. Nietzsche, however, always placed a greater emphasis on the irrational and the instinctual; that there is actually no such thing as truth, but at least great art (i.e. Greek tragedy) could put people in touch with nature and what it means to be human. At the time Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy* he saw his contemporary Richard Wagner (1813–83) as a composer who reflected best this need for art to return to these Greek roots (although Nietzsche changed his mind about this later on).

Republic Book III

Whereas in his other works, Plato seeks to undermine the status of the poets, in *Republic* he goes much further; he wants them banned. In Book III of *Republic*, Plato, through the voice of Socrates, is concerned with how a state is to educate its philosophers (and, therefore, the state’s future leaders):



‘... *The first thing we must do is to supervise our story-tellers, approving any story they put together that has the required quality and rejecting any that*

doesn't. We'll induce nurses and mothers to tell children the ones we've approved, and to use stories to mould their souls far rather than their hands to mould their bodies. But most of the stories they currently tell will have to be thrown out.'

Plato, *Republic*, 377c

.....

Socrates argues that, in the same way a painter paints a portrait that bears no resemblance to its subject, many of the poets – greats such as Hesiod and Homer included – misrepresent the nature of gods and heroes. Asked to provide an example by his interlocutor Adeimantus, Socrates recounts the story told by Hesiod in his *Theogony* about what Uranus did to Cronus and what Cronus did in revenge.



Cronus

Uranus was ruler of the universe and his son, Cronus, envied this power. Egged on by his mother, Gaia, Cronus attacked Uranus, castrating him with his sickle and throwing the testicles into the sea.

Socrates' concern is that even if such tales are true, they represent bad role models for the young and impressionable, for they are incapable of appreciating the deeper meaning of such stories and are liable to take them literally. The gods, Socrates argues, are good and, therefore, can only be responsible for good things and, therefore, only poems that praise the gods are to be allowed. What is interesting here is that Plato is not claiming to know more about the gods than the poets did but, in the creation of his new state, he is being pragmatic and fully aware of the power of religion over the people. Religion can be a tool for good or bad, and Plato wishes it to be a tool for good by presenting the gods of good role models. He is, in effect, leaning towards the one, omnibenevolent, omnipotent and perfect God that is familiar to the monotheistic religions we have today.

Republic Book X

Remember that in Athens at the time, myth as told by the poets was extremely powerful; it moulded people's character and was central to a child's education. Realizing the potency of poetry, Plato wants his state to have philosophers as its educators. Why? Because philosophers deal with truth and, despite the fact that Socrates admits his own love and respect for Homer, which he has had since he was a boy, truth will out in the end. In Book X of *Republic*, Plato presents two arguments as to why the poets' works must be banned:

THE PAINTING ARGUMENT (595A–603D)

This argument is sometimes referred to as the metaphysical critique of poetry because its concern is with the reality that art portrays. It is epistemological in nature because he argues that poetry misleads us and distracts from what is fact. By this stage of *Republic*, the interlocutors and the readers will now be very familiar with the Theory of the Forms, and here Plato initiates his argument by talking of the Forms as what is true. It logically follows that, in Plato's state,

there should be as few hindrances as possible in grasping these Forms.

Through Socrates, Plato gives an example of various objects in the world, but focuses on a couch. In the world there are many couches that are built by craftsman, but what makes a couch a couch is the fact that they all partake in the ‘form’ of the couch, which in itself is produced by ‘another kind of craftsman too’ (596b).



‘This very same craftsman, with his own hands, isn’t just able to make manufactured items. Everything that grows from the Earth, he makes; every living creature he fashions, including even himself. And on top of all that he does – Earth, heaven, gods, the things in the heavens, things in Hades under the Earth – he fashions it all.’

Plato, *Republic*, 596c

This quote is very interesting: while the concept of the Forms is certainly not new, what is startlingly different is this reference to a ‘divine’ craftsman. This certainly suggests that Book X was written at a later date, for he writes much more on the divine craftsman, this ‘creator god’ in his later dialogue *Timaeus* (see [Chapter 11](#)). At this point, however, such an introduction raises far more questions than it answers, especially given what he says earlier in *Republic* regarding the Forms as eternal, so surely this divine craftsman could not have made the Forms too!

Socrates now states that there are effectively three couches that are in descending order of reality, so:

- The Form of the couch is made by the divine craftsman in the quote above. This is the ‘real’ couch.
- The couch that is made by a human craftsman. This partakes in the Form of the couch, but is removed from the real couch.
- The painter who paints a couch made by a craftsman and, therefore, is further removed from the Form of the couch.

Seen in this way, the painter is producing an imitation of an imitation and is far removed from truth or ‘two removes from nature’ (597e) as Socrates describes it. One may respond that the painter could be producing a work of art using the Form of the couch as his model, rather than appealing to the product of the human craftsman, in which case he – like the craftsman – would only be one remove from nature. However, Socrates anticipates this and argues that this cannot be the case. A couch that exists in the world is as it is; a three-dimensional object that takes up space in the world. When someone looks at the object he or she is seeing it from a certain perspective depending on where he or she is standing, what the light in the room is like, *etc.* Therefore, one perspective will vary from another and this is what the painter does: produces a perspective of the couch. Of course, this was long before the various art movements in recent years that have left behind merely representation and in which painters may well argue that what they produce is ‘beyond’ human perspective. To what extent, for example, is abstract art independent of any visual reference to things in the world?

Socrates then extends this argument to all the arts, including that of tragic poetry. Socrates points to Homer as an example here and he has to show that a poet is in the same category as a painter, because he is aware of the view that many consider poets in a different category, remembering what has been said earlier (see [Chapter 1](#)) that they were regarded in many cases as virtually prophets in themselves. Poets, it could be argued, are only once removed from the truth because they communicate directly with the gods and are not mere imitators of the world around them, to which Socrates responds with the following:



‘If he [Homer] were really and truly knowledgeable about the things he is imitating, I imagine he would much sooner busy himself with doing rather than imitating.’

Plato, *Republic*, 599b

Socrates then proceeds to produce empirical evidence to show that Homer ‘contributed nothing to public life’ (600a). In other words, despite his claim to knowledge, and therefore, ‘able to recognize the sorts of things people do that

will make them better or worse people’ (599d), Homer has not governed any great cities to make them better, or invented anything!

Plato’s criticisms of art and artists are certainly extremely harsh, but nonetheless consistent with his views on reason and truth, together with his portrayal of Socrates as a plain talker and thus disinclined to engage in poetical and flowery language. However, his view of art is also incredibly simplistic and denies the complexity and variety of artistry, which though more varied today than in Plato’s time, was nonetheless even then capable of many forms of expression. Criticism of what painters may do does not really carry over that well to what the poets do. The popularity of Greek theatre in our contemporary world demonstrates that it often expresses universal values: it tells us something about ourselves, our humanity, and therefore, it does ‘teach’ us something.

THE STOIC ARGUMENT (603C–606D)

This is sometimes referred to as the psychological critique of poetry as it is more concerned with the effect the arts have on the spectator. It is also more ethical in nature because the psychological effects upset the soul which, in turn, affects our moral character.



‘Reflection,’ I said; ‘reflection about what has happened, so that one can respond to the fall of the dice, as it were, and dispose one’s affairs in the way that reason decides would be best, instead of behaving like children who have fallen over, wasting one’s time howling and clutching, whichever part is hurt.’

Plato, *Republic*, 604c

Socrates then goes on to talk about what happens when someone meets with a misfortune, ‘for example when he loses a son, or something else he values highly’ (603e) and how the resultant grief caused by this makes it more difficult for the person to cope with life. Why is this the case, Glaucon asks, and in the above quote Socrates states that it is because it distracts from the ability to engage in reflection, instead ‘wasting one’s time howling and clutching’.

Presumably, being consumed by grief, as the phrase itself suggests, results in being incapable of running your life in an effective manner. The more rational

and reflective person will adopt a **Stoic** approach and that it is:



'... best to be as calm as possible in misfortune and not to be upset, on the grounds, first, that it is not yet clear which things are good or bad; second, that taking them hard makes things no better for the future; third, that nothing in human affairs is worth serious attention...'

Plato, *Republic*, 604b, c

One wonders if Plato might at least allow some compassionate leave, but he regards the most important thing is to demonstrate calmness and reflection in public life especially.

In terms of the arts, anyone familiar with Greek tragedy knows only too well how much is devoted to grief and to public demonstrations of 'howling and clutching', and so, Plato believes, these public displays are harmful to one's moral character. When, for example, you watch a play like Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex* you empathize with the characters; you feel pity, you feel fear. More than this, however, is that the audience enjoys witnessing these displays and, as a consequence, the spectator ends up wallowing in his or her own misfortunes. Although Plato does not speculate too much on the reasons why, he is right to be making this psychological point and it links with what he says about the importance of *katharsis* (see [Chapter 5](#)).



Aristotle on catharsis

The concept of catharsis is often associated with Aristotle and his work *Poetics* although, in fact, he said little about it, and the result is hundreds of years of scholarship trying to determine what Aristotle meant by it. One perspective is that Aristotle saw the viewing of tragedy as important as a form of ‘purgation’: a way of cleansing our suppressed emotions.

If the audience enjoys watching tragedy and it may even help in their emotional well-being, then why is Plato so critical of it? The criticism seems somewhat similar to that raised in Book III of *Republic*: that they represent bad role models, which results in the audience imitating these actions in real life, but this is not quite the same for, in Book III, we are dealing with characters, the gods primarily, who are great heroes, or even superheroes, but in tragedies we are dealing with characters who display our ‘baser’ elements and experience the kinds of things in life we would much rather avoid if we had the choice. Rather, it is the concern of Plato that releasing our suppressed, irrational part is not therapeutic at all in the ‘catharsis’ sense, but rather undermines reason and its ability to control the soul. Rather than promote our mental well-being, it upsets it.

Plato does not restrict himself just to tragedy, however, but also has a few words to say about comedy. The best kind of comedy can transverse space and time, and much Ancient Greek comedy is not that different from the kind we watch today: lots of dirty jokes and innuendoes, references to bodily functions, and so on. But Plato states that when we go to see a comedy we laugh at things that we would be ashamed to laugh at if we were at home alone. Like tragedy, comedy brings out the worse in us.

The Myth of Er

From 614b of Book X, Plato gives a lengthy anecdote called the Myth of Er. While the first part of Book X is concerned with returning to the topic of poetry, this latter part returns us to the predominant topic of *Republic*: justice. Earlier in *Republic*, Socrates has argued that it is better to be just than unjust because it promotes well-being – a well-ordered soul – and, indeed, you will be happier. Now, however, he wants to also add that you should be just not only for the sake

of this life, but you need to keep in mind the effects of your actions for the afterlife. However, in order to do this, Socrates needs to argue that there is an afterlife for you to be concerned about.

What is most curious here is that Book X of *Republic* up until now has been an argument for the banning of all the arts, of how damaging, distracting and useless they are, and yet he now presents his own work of fiction! It does, however, in some ways, round off the whole book, for at the beginning of Book I we have Cephalus, who believes that he is a just person and he will be rewarded in the afterlife, and now we have Socrates presenting a myth which is also about the rewards for goodness in the afterlife.

THE IMMORTAL SOUL

Previous to presenting the Myth itself, however, Socrates argues for an immortal soul (608d–611a), and he does it in these stages:

- 1 For every individual thing there is a bad (or evil) as well as a good. For example, the human eye has a good to it – being able to see – but also a bad – a disease such as, in Socrates' example, ophthalmia (inflammation of the eye).
- 2 Bad things are those that destroy and corrupt (e.g. disease) whereas good things preserve and benefit (e.g. our ability to see).
- 3 However, if we find an object that is not destroyed by its own congenital badness, then by definition it must be immortal.
- 4 As previously argued in *Republic*, the 'bad' in the soul is injustice, but whereas this makes the soul worse, it does not destroy it.
- 5 Therefore the soul must be immortal.

It is an interesting, though perhaps not a convincing argument. Socrates points out that badness (evil) of the soul does seem different than other bad things. For example, the badness of the body, illness, will in time completely destroy the body to the extent it can no longer be referred to as a body. That is to say, the congenital bad of a thing causes that thing to cease to exist, whereas this is not the case with the soul. However, it does rest upon various unsubstantiated assumptions. For example, why we should agree that things are only destroyed by one single evil and that this is integral to the thing. The destruction of a thing could have many internal causes: the chair that I'm currently sitting on will decay with age (as will I!), but the causes of this are numerous: exposure to the

air, to damp, to constant use, and so on. Further, its destruction could be caused by something external to it, such as a fire, an earthquake, a bomb, destructive children...

This argument for the soul is, of course, a circular one: you have to buy into the idea that there is such a 'thing' as an immortal soul in the first place to accept that what is internal to it can't destroy it because, well, it is an immortal soul.

THE MYTH

To end *Republic*, Socrates links what he has to say on the soul with the Myth of Er. Er was a warrior who was killed in battle but came back to life while on his funeral pyre and he recounts his journey in the afterlife. Given Plato's dislike for poetry he nonetheless gives us a very poetic portrayal of what the next life contains. Er tells his astonished audience that when his soul left his body it travelled, together with many other souls, to a place of the dead that had four openings, or doors. Two of these doors led upwards to the sky, and two down into the ground. You can imagine thousands of souls, like some crowded railway station, waiting here to be judged as to which opening they will go for, for between these openings sat their judges.

The judges instructed the good to take the openings on the right and up into the sky, whereas the bad had to go to the openings in the left and down into the ground (in Ancient Greece, right was good and left was bad). This journey would take a thousand years (with the exception of some especially bad people who remain in this hell forever, with special mention given to political tyrants), for after that period, they would exit once more from the other opening and recount their tales. In the case of those in the heavens, they came out 'pure and clean... told of pleasures enjoyed and sights of unbelievable beauty', whereas those from down below 'parched with thirst and covered with dust... recalled all the terrible things they had suffered' (614e–615a).

All of this Er witnessed as he was instructed by the judges to remain behind and act as a messenger for mankind as to what occurred. After this thousand-year period, the souls of both good and bad are taken on a tour of the cosmos in which they saw the beauty and order that the cosmos possessed, including the Spindle of Necessity, which causes the planets to rotate. In other words, the cosmos is pictured like a massive spindle; the planets orbiting the centre, the shaft of the spindle, in a series of perfect circles like the whorl of the spindle. As they spun they emitted harmonious music.

Once they have seen the cosmos, each soul is told they will return to Earth to live the next life – they are to be reincarnated. The souls are each given a lottery token and, according to the number on their token, each soul has to choose their next life. Once the choice is made there is no turning back and the souls are warned not to choose in haste. Presented before the souls is a montage of possible lives ‘far more than there were people present’ (618a) of every variety and, this is so crucial to the theme of the whole *Republic*, the soul is now being asked the question what life do you choose? It is an existential question: you have a whole life before you, you have seen what the universe consists of – how beautiful it is – and, it is hoped, you have learned from your past experiences.

This latter hope can be somewhat forlorn, however, as Socrates demonstrates in this myth, of the person who gets to choose first in the lottery – a person who has just spent a thousand years in blissful heaven – immediately, through ‘stupidity and greed’ (619c), chooses the life of a tyrant. Some people, it seems, never learn. No doubt the life of a tyrant has its appeal, the power you have, the life of luxury, and so on, during that one life, but this soul seems to have forgotten the tales of those who have just spent a thousand years in damnation, especially the fact that tyrants suffer worse, for they experience eternal damnation. ‘When he took the time to look more closely, he beat himself and wailed about his choice’ (619c), but it was too late. The message here is that having spent so many years in bliss and comfort he had gone soft, stupefied and lacked caution, whereas those who had spent the time in hell were much more cautious in their choices. In other words, it is important to experience what is bad in order to know what is good.

The very last in line was Odysseus, the legendary Greek hero of Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey*. In Greek literature, Odysseus was always portrayed as the cunning hero, the intelligent hero as opposed to, say, Achilles who, portrayed in Homer’s other great epic *Iliad*, is a bit of a thug. Odysseus, the great hero who was coveted and honoured, nonetheless now chooses for his next life one of obscurity, he wants to be a ‘man who minded his own business’ (620d). He chooses this because, despite all the glory and honour he had in his previous life, he also recalls the misery and suffering he experienced. Odysseus, therefore, represents the philosopher in heaven: sufficiently wisened to events and to learn from experiences so as to know the right life to choose.

When every soul had made its choice they were taken to the plain of forgetfulness and drank from the River Careless. This caused them all to sleep and then to awaken newborn but devoid of any memories. The one exception

was Er, who was prevented from drinking the water but, not recalling how, awakes upon the funeral pyre able to recall what he had experienced.

There is a problem here presented to us of us in this myth, for it may occur to you that those who choose a good life will then be rewarded in heaven with a thousand years of bliss, but then will, like the first person in the lottery, be stupefied to the extent that he or she may choose to be a tyrant and, in consequence, will suffer eternal damnation. It logically follows that, eventually, everybody will end up being damned for eternity. It is interesting, however, that Odysseus chooses a life of obscurity for – despite what Plato says about the Philosopher-King – in Book IX he says that the perfect state is highly unlikely to ever exist and, indeed, if the philosopher’s soul is to truly flourish he would be better off by removing himself from society to avoid the danger of being corrupted by it. If Odysseus represents the philosopher, then he has escaped this danger of eternal damnation because he has achieved a purity of soul and an inherent wisdom that remains with him, which leads Socrates to conclude with the following:



‘And that, Glaucon, is how the story was saved for us instead of coming to an untimely end; it will save us too, if we believe in it, and we shall cross the river of forgetfulness in good shape, with our souls undefiled.’

Plato, *Republic*, 621b, c



Key terms

Poiein: Ancient Greek, usually translated as ‘poetry’, but refers to all kinds of artistic creation.

Stoicism: Stoicism is a school of Ancient Greek philosophy which teaches self-control and fortitude against life’s misfortunes. The word ‘stoic’ has entered the English vocabulary to refer to people who adopt such an attitude.






Dig deeper

Janaway, C. (1995), *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.


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Fact check

- 1 How many 'Books', or chapters, does *Republic* consist of?
 - a Eight
 - b Nine
 - c Ten
 - d Eleven
- 2 What does the Greek word *poiein* usually translate as?
 - a Poetry
 - b Poignant
 - c Tragedy
 - d Poison
- 3 Who is considered to be producing something that is 'two removes from nature'?
 - a The philosopher
 - b The painter
 - c The human craftsman
 - d God
- 4 Which one of the following describes the Stoic?
 - a Someone who 'wastes one's time howling and clutching'
 - b Someone who is 'as calm as possible in misfortune'
 - c Oedipus
 - d The poet
- 5 Why, in Book X of *Republic*, does Plato believe we have an immortal soul?
 - a Because the bad within the soul does not destroy it
 - b Because he has experienced heaven
 - c Because he is a philosopher
 - d Because God told him so
- 6 What is the name of the myth that Socrates recounts?
 - a *The Myth of Her*
 - b *The Myth of Hera*
 - c *The Myth of Sisyphus*
 - d *The Myth of Er*
- 7 What is the name of the Greek hero in this myth that represents the philosopher?
 - a Achilles
 - b Sisyphus
 - c Homer
 - d Odysseus

- 8** What is the name of the Spindle which represents the cosmos?
- a** The Spindle of Necessity
 - b** The Spindle of Harmony
 - c** The Spindle of Beauty
 - d** The Spindle of Delight
- 9** How long do souls reside in the heavenly domain?
- a** One hundred years
 - b** One thousand years
 - c** One million years
 - d** One billion years
- 10** Which one of the following are given special mention that suffer eternal damnation?
- a** Democrats
 - b** Bankers
 - c** Shopkeepers
 - d** Tyrants
- 

In the last chapter we returned once more to *Republic* to consider what Plato had to say about the arts, and also we looked at his own fascinating story-telling through the Myth of Er. What we have seen in these previous chapters is a variety of views presented by Plato, which are sometimes contradictory, but only to be expected from any philosopher who writes over a period of time. We have not covered all of his works, of course, for that would require a much longer book than this; but it is hoped the reader now has sufficient interest to dig deeper. You could spend a lifetime reading Plato alone, but what you will also find is just how influential his thought has been on other people and ideas you may well encounter in your future reading.

Plato died at the ripe old age of 81. He was buried in the grounds of the university that he founded, the Academy. His philosophy, however, continues to live and has proven to be a lasting influence on Western thought and thinkers. When Alfred North Whitehead said that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato he was not, of course, saying that all the philosophy that comes after Plato has nothing new to say, but what is meant here is that Plato established the foundations for philosophical thought: he raised the questions that we continue to ask today, even if these future philosophers may not reference Plato directly.

Aristotle

Plato's most famous student was Aristotle (384–322 BC), who himself became a prominent philosopher. As a pupil of Plato for some 20 years it is hardly surprising that his teacher made a lasting impression. Like Plato, Aristotle emphasized the importance of determining the right way to live and, also like Plato, he looked for guidance by examining human nature in order to show that living a just life is also a happy life. Aristotle also believed that man is a political animal; that politics and ethics are related and that the state has an important part to play in acting as an agent of virtue.

Aristotle studied in Plato's Academy from 357 to 347 BC. His work *Politics* was hugely influential, especially in the Middle Ages, far more so than Plato's political views, and in Book II of *Politics* he specifically criticizes Plato's *Republic*. He argues that Socrates' ideal city is too unified, that a city cannot be like a family in the way Plato portrays it in his Noble Lie ([Chapter 6](#)). Aristotle was less an idealist than Plato and frequently looked to the way the world is rather than how it could be; recall the Raphael painting *The School of Athens*

where Aristotle's hand points firmly towards the ground while Plato's points to the heavens. For Aristotle, when he looks at the cities that existed – and he employed a team of researchers to study the cities of the Hellenic world – nothing even close to Plato's city exists. Of course, Plato does stress that his 'republic' is an ideal, a 'pattern in the heavens', but the main point Aristotle makes is that it simply isn't within the very nature of cities to behave in a familial way. In other words, there is neither any empirical evidence to show that cities can be so unified in the way a family might be (and, of course, a lot of families are somewhat dysfunctional) but that cities do not even function in that way. In addition, an extended family would result in the diffusion of duties and obligations. Fathers would not feel any sense of duty towards their sons.

Another criticism that Aristotle presents is that private property is important because it is not possible to be generous, to be able to give, unless you have private possessions. Plato, in *Republic*, argues that the Guardians will not possess any private property for the city is their family, but Aristotle believes that people only care about things if they belong to them. This certainly has a modern ring to it, and many today argue against social housing and the like because, they say, those who live in them don't look after the properties whereas if you own it and are therefore fully responsible for it, then you are more likely to take care of it. Essentially, Aristotle's portrayal of human nature seems here to be more negative, or perhaps more realistic: if you take away responsibility from humans and hand it to the state, then people become apathetic. No doubt Plato's response to this would be that, yes, when you look at the world around you – in this case the Hellenic world of the 5th century BC then humans do behave that way, but, Plato might say, this does not mean that they necessarily will behave that way given the right environment. I say it has a modern ring, because you can find similar debate which gets to the root of human nature in, for example, comparing the views of the socialist with that of the capitalist.

Aristotle believes it is actually dangerous to be too idealistic, especially in the realm of politics. If you become too pre-occupied with theoretical political ideals you also become too divorced from the harsh realities of the real world. For this reason, having criticized Plato's political philosophy, Aristotle in his work *Politics* then goes on to present his own vision of the best city, but with the stress on what he regards as a feasible city. Aristotle's city, incidentally, combines what he considers to be the best of democracy with that of an oligarchy. Like Plato, Aristotle is concerned that too much democracy results in a form of mob rule and that most citizens lack the necessary knowledge to be

responsible for the decisions a state makes. Therefore, a degree of oligarchy, of rule by the few, is needed to act as a check against the 'mob'. This, again, has a modern resonance for most democratic states today have a constitution of some kind that must be abided by, regardless of what the majority may think.

A few other disagreements that Aristotle had with Plato include the following:

- Aristotle derived his knowledge from observation of the world. If something cannot be observed then there is no reason to believe it. In the case of the Forms, therefore, these cannot be seen, touched, tasted, *etc.* Therefore, why believe in them? What do they tell us about the way people actually behave?
- Ethical knowledge must be that which can guide our actions. How can the Forms, things that are eternal and unchanging, have bearing on the everyday world of changing situations and ethical dilemmas?
- Aristotle believed the soul to have two, not three, elements: a ruling element and a ruled element. The ruling element should be rational, whereas the ruled element should be the irrational. Aristotle applied his theory of the soul to argue that these two elements, the ruled and ruling, exist everywhere. Therefore, he argued, women cannot be rulers because their souls are dominated by the irrational element rather than the rational. It is natural for women to be ruled by men. (He also argued that it is natural for there to be masters and slaves.) The city of Alexandria

The city of Alexandria in Egypt, established in 331 BC, is key to the very survival of Greek and, indeed, Plato's philosophy. The city itself was named after Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), who was at one time a student of Aristotle. Alexander became the king of Macedon in northern Greece and his title of 'the Great' is due to the empire he created by the age of 30, which spread from the Ionian Sea to the Himalaya. Undefeated, Alexander established one of the largest empires of the ancient world. It saw the end of the independent, or semi-independent, city-states and the unification of Greece. Alexander died young and his empire soon splintered, but it nonetheless resulted in the spread of Greek philosophy beyond the Hellenic states.

Although Alexander spent just a few months in the city, Alexandria grew to become the largest city in the world within a 100 years of its foundation. It became the home of a large Greek community, becoming the centre of Hellenistic learning with the largest library in the ancient world. Just how large the library was we do not know with any certainty, but it contained hundreds of thousands of scrolls at its peak. One visitor to Alexandria was the Greek

philosopher and historian Strabo (c. 64 BC–c. AD 24), who describes the city as consisting of one-third royal grounds and gardens, and the ‘Ptolemaic shrine of the Muses’ (or what today we would refer to simply as the ‘Museum’). This museum, according to Strabo:



‘... has a walkway, an arcade, and a large house, in which there is the eating hall for the men of learning who share the Museum. They form a community with property in common and a priest in charge of the Museum.’

Strabo, *Geography*, 2002: 51

The museum was seemingly modelled on Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum, with the great library being housed within the museum.

With the decline of Greece as a world power, Alexandria came under Roman rule in 80 BC. In around AD 47 the library was damaged by a fire, but the greatest damage was likely caused by Christian attacks on paganism, although scholars hid what books they could. There were also a number of natural disasters, including a tsunami in AD 365.

Under Roman rule, the new dominant power in the Mediterranean, Greek philosophy continued to flourish as the empire adopted much of Greek culture. Originally, the great philosophical schools such as Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum were supported by Rome, but this eventually came to an end. Alexandria came under Byzantine rule until AD 641, when it came under Muslim rule and was to remain so until Napoleon conquered Egypt in 1798. When the Muslims entered Alexandria it was the last remaining centre of Western philosophy. There is a story that when the Academy in Athens closed, seven of its philosophers fled to, first, the ancient city of Ctesiphon in the Persian empire, before then setting up in Alexandria. These philosophers were **Neoplatonists** (*see below*) as the Academy by this time was Neoplatonic. Therefore, when the Arabs conquered Alexandria in the 7th century AD, what they encountered was the writings of Neoplatonists.

The Arabs did not, then, begin reading the works of Plato and Aristotle as had been taught originally in the great schools of Athens, but rather translations and commentaries of Plato and Aristotle, which combined Neoplatonism (itself a synthesis of philosophy and religion), Christianity, mysticism and Egyptian

thought. The works that were produced by these Neoplatonists were in Greek, but this was not the only language that the philosophers were translated into before Arabic. They were also available to the Muslims in Syriac, which is a dialect of Aramaic (purportedly the language spoken by Jesus). One can imagine the difficulties that the Arab Muslims had to overcome in interpreting the works of Plato and Aristotle through this varied cultural lens, not to mention the struggle to fit this within an Islamic worldview. It was this task that was to preoccupy so many of the Muslim philosophers in the centuries following (see below).

Neoplatonism

Very little is known about the supposed founder of Neoplatonism, the philosopher Plotinus (c. AD 204/5–270). Speculation says he may have been a native Egyptian, but with family origins in Greece. He studied philosophy at Alexandria for some 11 years before travelling to Persia to study Persian and Indian philosophy. At 40 years of age he settled in Rome to become a teacher and, it is said, he made a failed attempt to persuade the Roman emperor to build a ‘city of philosophers’ that would live under the constitution set out in Plato’s dialogue *Laws*.

Plotinus regarded himself as an interpreter of Plato, but he was much more than that, for his philosophical and religious views essentially created a ‘new Plato’, hence a ‘Neoplatonism’. Alexandria was a melting pot of ideas; not just Greek thought, but it also housed a large Jewish population, and there were many other religious, philosophical and mystical traditions and cultures within its walls. Plotinus’ own travels meant he encountered even more traditions and his interpretation of Plato is a blend of differing cultures, certainly more religious and mystical than the original, and no doubt this made it more appealing to the major religions that encountered it.

Plotinus does not appear to have written anything until he reached the age of 50, and the works we now have are 54 essays that together present his understanding of Plato. In actual fact, much of what we know of Plotinus comes from his disciple Porphyry (AD 234–c. 305), who was born in the ancient city of Tyre (now in Lebanon) and who edited and published Plotinus’ *Enneads* in about AD 300. Porphyry was himself an influential thinker who was very critical of Christianity and wrote on the importance of reason and logic.

Neoplatonism is a complex belief-system, not helped by the fact that it is not one homogenous school of thought. Nonetheless, there are certain characteristic features of Neoplatonism that can be briefly outlined here: • The universe is the result of divine **emanation** from the supreme 'One'.

- The 'One', also known as the Good, is infinite and perfect.
- The 'One' also created the Divine Intellect (*nous*), which contains the Forms and provides order to the universe.
- From the Intellect comes the World Soul (*psuche*), which contains and animates the universe.
- The World Soul is the source for the souls of all living beings.
- There exists, therefore, levels, or gradations, of being: One – Intellect – World Soul – world of matter.

Man, though existing in the world of matter – the lowest gradation – also has the potential to access the higher realms. He can rise to the consciousness of the World Soul, the Intellect and finally to be united with the One when he has overcome bondage to the physical world. This can be achieved through moral and spiritual purification and so on. Neoplatonism, in a variety of forms, has had a huge sway on especially the mystical traditions. It was also a move away from the more rational element of Greek philosophy to the more appealing and accessible emphasis on bodily practices for the achievement of enlightenment.

Muslim philosophers

Reference is made above to the problems the Muslim Arabs encountered when they first came across the Greek philosophers, given the fact that these were often Neoplatonic interpretations, together with the fact that they were translated into Syriac from the Greek. This resulted in something of a scatter-gun approach to what they were confronted with, resulting in confusing Plato's works with those of Aristotle and vice versa, as well as attributing writings to these two philosophers that were not actually the case. The Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato was certainly more appealing to Muslim thinkers than Plato per se; the latter being more dualistic and, therefore, much more difficult to fit within the monotheistic tradition.

The impetus to translate the Greek philosophers grew considerably during the reign of the Abbasid **caliphs** in the 8th and 9th centuries AD, especially under Caliph al-Mamun (AD 786–833). This caliph populated his court with scholars to translate not only the Greeks, but Persian and Sanskrit texts. In his capital of Baghdad, these texts were housed in a library called Bayt al-Hikma, the ‘House of Wisdom’ which, like the library in Alexandria, was actually much more than just a library – it was a university, a museum, a translation bureau. Notable translators include Yahya ibn al-Bitriq (d. AD 835), who is responsible for the Arabic text of Plato’s *Timaeus*. Also, mention should be made of Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. AD 873), who, together with his son and nephew, was responsible for the translation of so many of Plato’s works.

Perhaps the first systematic Islamic philosopher is Abu Yusuf Ya’qub al-Kindi (c. AD 801–73) who studied at the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. He commissioned translations of a number of Plato’s works, while he was particularly taken with Neoplatonism. His best-known work is *Treatise on the First Philosophy*, and in his introduction he states the following:



‘The noblest in quality and highest in rank of all human activities is philosophy. Philosophy is defined as knowledge of things as they are in reality, insofar as man’s ability determines. The philosopher’s aim in his theoretical studies is to ascertain the truth, in his practical knowledge to conduct himself in accordance with their truth.’

Al-Kindi, *Al-Kindi’s Metaphysics: A Translation of the Treatise on the First Philosophy*, trans. by A. L. Ivry, 1974: 97

This is interesting and certainly contentious, for to state that philosophy is the ‘highest rank of all human activities’ would inevitably upset the religious establishment. However, al-Kindi saw no conflict between philosophy and religion, or both were ways to seek the truth, though he encouraged the theologians to use philosophical tools and to not rely on faith alone or a literal interpretation of the Qur’an. Al-Kindi’s understanding of God was certainly influenced by Greek thought, as he prefers to refer to God with such Arabic terms as *al-bari* (‘the creator’) or *al-illat al-ula* (‘the first cause’) rather than the more common *Allah* (‘the God’), and thus presents a more philosophical understanding of God as a causal agent. This is one of the first philosophical debates in Islam: what is the nature of God? Did he create the universe *ex nihilo*

(out of nothing)? The kind of questions you find especially in Plato's *Timaeus* (see [Chapter 11](#)).

Another early Muslim philosopher was Abu Bakr al-Razi (c. AD 864–925), whose works include *Metaphysics According to Plato's View*, *Metaphysics According to Socrates' View* and *Commentary on the Timaeus*. Certainly the influence of Plato's *Timaeus* comes across in al-Razi's philosophy. Al-Razi's view is that there are five eternal beings or principles, which are 'God', 'soul', 'time', 'space' and 'matter'. These five principles coexisted and interacted with each other to create the world we live in. The only things that are beyond time and space are God and the soul, and the world began when the soul mixed with matter, which initially caused chaos and disorder. God's role, in a way not dissimilar to the *demiurge* in *Timaeus*, was to bring order to this chaos. Again, this sits uncomfortably with orthodox Muslim views, especially the idea of five eternal things. In addition, al-Razi also considered the possibility of reincarnation.

There are far too many Muslim philosophers who were influenced by Plato to consider here, but one more must be mentioned: Abu Nasr al-Farabi (c. AD 872–951). In his work *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, al-Farabi parallels Plato's *Republic*. The approach is similar in that al-Farabi compares the virtuous state with the virtuous person, the 'micro-macro' approach.



Plato's musical dialogue

Modern scholarship on Plato continues to be exciting and revealing. For example, Dr Jay Kennedy, an expert in ancient music and ancient mathematics at the University of Manchester, wrote a book in 2011 entitled *The Musical Structure of Plato's Dialogues* in which he argued that Plato's dialogues contain a second layer of meaning, a 'code', a pattern of secret musical symbols. Why Plato might choose to write this way is speculative, but it may well be a result of fear of religious persecution, given, Kennedy says, that the hidden message argues for the importance of science over religion.

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Christian philosophers

St Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430; see also [Chapter 7](#)) was one of the most eminent Doctors of the Church. This small group of 'Doctors' are given such a title in recognition of their contribution to Christian doctrine. Augustine was

well aware of Plato's work and he is important because of his incorporation of Platonic metaphysics with Judaeo-Christian belief: • The Forms could not exist separately from God as this would mean that God was not all-powerful. Rather, God created the universe *ex nihilo* ('out of nothing') according to ordering patterns established by the Forms existing in the mind of God. The Forms are the expression of God's Word, the *Logos*. The emphasis, therefore, is more on God than on the Forms.

- Augustine agreed that knowledge is innate, that it is contained within the God-given soul. However, Augustine believed there is another source of knowledge: Christian revelation as contained in the Bible.
- A direct relationship with God based upon love and faith was more important than the intellectual encounter with the Forms because the Forms themselves were dependent upon God for their existence.

If it were not for the Muslim world preserving, translating and interpreting Greek philosophy, we would not have access to it today. From the 8th century, Islam spread to Europe, to Andalusia in Spain and remained there until the 15th century. Many Muslim philosophers lived in Andalusia, including perhaps the greatest of them all, Abu Al-Walid Muhammad Ibn Rushd (1126–98), better known in the West by his Latin name Averroës. As a result, non-Muslims were able to access the knowledge they possessed, and the first Christian philosophers learned of Plato through the works of these Muslim thinkers.

One great Christian thinker (and Doctor of the Church) who studied Plato through this Muslim lens was the Italian philosopher and theologian St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). Aquinas blended Christian teachings with both Plato and Aristotle. Aquinas accepted that there are Forms, but held that these could be approached through observation of the everyday world. The Forms are embedded within matter. Therefore, sense-experience is important in attaining knowledge, not just reason or faith. This is important because of its emphasis on reason and empirical observation, rather than the reliance on faith alone.



The Cambridge Platonists

In the middle of the 17th century there were groups of theologians and philosophers who called themselves the Cambridge Platonists. They believed that there was no conflict between faith and reason, and that the material world interacts with the non-material world of the Forms.

Modern contributors

Plato continues to inspire and cause controversy. His most severe opponent of recent years was the Austrian-born British philosopher Sir Karl Popper (1902–94; see also [Chapter 6](#)). In his work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) he criticized the political views of Plato because of its totalitarian implications. For Popper, the best kind of society is one that is open to changing circumstances, criticism, differing proposals and problem-solving. This, Popper argues, is what democracy entails, and he cites examples of democratic countries to demonstrate its effectiveness.

Although recognizing Plato's genius, he believed the mistake is in seeking definitions for terms such as 'justice', which, he believed, was futile and misguided. Popper argues it is wrong to be seeking a Utopia and definitions for terms, when in actual fact we should be addressing the problems that exist in our society through immediate action.

However, others have been more positive towards Plato. For example the novelist and philosopher Dame Iris Murdoch (1919–99), who incorporates much of Plato's philosophy within her novels. Another scholar and writer, the Christian C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), was often inspired by Plato. In the final Narnia book, *The Last Battle*, the land of Narnia comes to an end. The children of Narnia enter a new and more wonderful land. It is explained to the children that Narnia was not real, just shadows of the real world they now find themselves in.



Machiavelli

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469–1527) was an Italian philosopher, historian and politician whose most famous and influential work is *The Prince*. Like Aristotle, Machiavelli was a political realist: he was highly critical of realism in politics. He was writing in Italy at a time that has some parallels with Ancient Greece for, in the same way that Greece was not one nation but a number of city-states, Italy was also similarly composed. Machiavelli's own city-state was Florence, but other places included Venice and Pisa. These cities were ruled by a prince, and so Machiavelli's book *The Prince* is concerned with a possible ruler, a 'new prince', of the best kind of city-state. In this work, Machiavelli argues that for a Prince to establish order in society it is sometimes necessary to act immorally. A term that has now entered the English language is **Machiavellianism**, which is a reference to politicians who engage in unscrupulous methods to gain or maintain power. Machiavelli argues that he is being a realist because a ruler who concerns himself with being morally good, with high-minded ideals, will be unable to anticipate the realities of the political world. This is the start of what is called **realpolitik**, a term from the German 'realistic politics', and, as the name suggests, it is the form of politics that bases power on practical concerns rather than moral or ideological. Essentially the ends justifies the means: if the end is to have power, then how you achieve this is irrelevant to morality. In many respects it is reminiscent of Thrasymachus' views in Book I of *Republic*, although there is no evidence that Machiavelli read any Plato. Nonetheless, it raises that question once more as to whether it is better to be good, whether this makes you a happier person, or whether wealth and power is the key to fulfilment.

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There are many more influences, and far too many to recount. You could look at examples of political states based on Platonic models, such as a number of medieval states in Europe, or the *kibbutzim* in Israel. Despite the controversial nature of much of his philosophy, the fact that Plato, some 2,500 years after his death, continues to excite interest is merit and applause in itself. While something of a cliché, certainly, without Plato the world really would be a very different place.



Key terms

Caliph: A title given to the political leader of a Muslim community.

Emanation: Something that radiates from a person or thing. In Neoplatonism, the belief that the 'One' emanates its divine essence.

Machiavellianism: A political strategy in which politicians engage in unscrupulous methods to gain or maintain power.

Neoplatonism: 'New' Platonism that incorporates aspects of Plato's teachings into mystical religious beliefs. Founded by Plotinus in the 3rd century AD.

Realpolitik. A term from the German 'realistic politics'. It is the form of politics that bases power on practical concerns rather than moral or ideological.





Dig deeper

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Fact check

- 1 Which one of the following is a work by Aristotle?
 - a *Religion*
 - b *Economics*
 - c *Philosophy*
 - d *Politics*

- 2 Who did Aristotle once teach?
 - a Plato
 - b Strabo
 - c Socrates
 - d Alexander the Great

- 3 Which one of the following is the name given to a school of thought that incorporates aspects of Plato's teachings into mystical religious beliefs?
 - a Machiavellianism
 - b *Realpolitik*
 - c Neoplatonism
 - d Hinduism

- 4 What is 'emanation'?
 - a Something that radiates from a person or thing
 - b The teaching of dialectic
 - c A form of politics
 - d A form of therapy

- 5 What was the name of the great library in Baghdad?
 - a The House of Fun
 - b The House of Wisdom
 - c The House of Books
 - d The House of Words

- 6 What is the name of the first Muslim systematic philosopher?
 - a Al-Razi
 - b Al-Farabi
 - c Al-Kindi
 - d Al-Ghazali

- 7 Which one of the following is regarded as one of the great 'Doctors of the Christian Church'?
 - a Averroës
 - b Augustine
 - c Al-Kindi
 - d Plato

8 Who is the author of the Narnia books?

- a** C. S. Lewis
- b** A. A. Milne
- c** B. B. King
- d** George R. R. Martin

9 What is the title of Machiavelli's famous work?

- a** *The King*
- b** *The Duke*
- c** *The Prince*
- d** *The Baron*

10 In which country was the Library of Alexandria?

- a** Greece
- b** Egypt
- c** Persia
- d** Italy



Plato's writings

The following translations of Plato's works were used for this book: Gill, C. (trans.) (1999), *Plato: The Symposium*. London: Penguin.

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Saunders, T. (trans.) (1970), *The Laws*. London: Penguin Tredennick, H. (trans.) (2003), *Plato: The Last Days of Socrates*. London: Penguin. Containing Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo.

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Answers

CHAPTER 1

- 1 b
- 2 a
- 3 c
- 4 c
- 5 b
- 6 a
- 7 b
- 8 c
- 9 a
- 10 d

CHAPTER 2

- 1 a
- 2 b
- 3 b
- 4 c
- 5 d
- 6 d
- 7 a
- 8 c
- 9 c
- 10 d

CHAPTER 3

- 1 b
- 2 d
- 3 a
- 4 b
- 5 a
- 6 d
- 7 a
- 8 c
- 9 c
- 10 d

CHAPTER 4

- 1 a
- 2 b
- 3 d
- 4 d
- 5 a
- 6 c
- 7 b
- 8 a
- 9 c
- 10 a

CHAPTER 5

- 1 d
- 2 a
- 3 b
- 4 d
- 5 a
- 6 a
- 7 c
- 8 b
- 9 c
- 10 d

CHAPTER 6

- 1 a
- 2 b
- 3 a
- 4 c
- 5 b
- 6 d
- 7 c
- 8 d
- 9 b
- 10 a

CHAPTER 7

- 1 d
- 2 b
- 3 b
- 4 a
- 5 d
- 6 a
- 7 a
- 8 c
- 9 d
- 10 c

CHAPTER 8

- 1 d
- 2 b
- 3 b
- 4 b
- 5 a
- 6 d
- 7 a
- 8 c
- 9 a
- 10 c

CHAPTER 9

- 1 b
- 2 d
- 3 d
- 4 b
- 5 c
- 6 c
- 7 a
- 8 c
- 9 d
- 10 a

CHAPTER 10

- 1 d
- 2 c
- 3 a
- 4 b
- 5 c
- 6 b
- 7 c
- 8 d
- 9 a
- 10 d

CHAPTER 11

- 1 c
- 2 a
- 3 b
- 4 a
- 5 c
- 6 a
- 7 d
- 8 a
- 9 b
- 10 d

CHAPTER 12

- 1 c
- 2 a
- 3 b
- 4 b
- 5 a
- 6 d
- 7 d
- 8 a
- 9 b
- 10 d

CHAPTER 13

- 1 d
- 2 d
- 3 c
- 4 a
- 5 b
- 6 c
- 7 b
- 8 a
- 9 c
- 10 b