

# The Life of Plato

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Plato was born around the year 428 BCE into an established Athenian household with a rich history of political connections -- including distant relations to both **Solon** and **Pisistratus**. Plato's parents were **Ariston** and **Perictone**, his older brothers were **Adeimantus** and **Glaucon**, and his younger sister was **Potone**. In keeping with his family heritage, Plato was destined for the political life. But the Peloponnesian War, which began a couple of years before he was born and continued until well after he was twenty, led to the decline of the Athenian Empire. The war was followed by a rabid conservative religious movement that led to the execution of Plato's mentor, **Socrates**. Together these events forever altered the course of Plato's life.

The biographical tradition is unanimous in its observation that Plato engaged in many forms of poetry as a young man, only later turning to philosophy. **Aristotle** tells us that sometime during Plato's youth the philosopher-to-be became acquainted with the doctrines of **Cratylus**, a student of **Heraclitus**, who, along with other Presocratic thinkers such as **Pythagoras** and **Parmenides**, provided Plato with the foundations of his metaphysics and epistemology. Upon meeting **Socrates**, however, Plato directed his inquiries toward the question of virtue. The formation of a noble character was to be before all else. Indeed, it is a mark of Plato's brilliance that he was to find in metaphysics and epistemology a host of moral and political implications. How we think and what we take to be real have an important role in how we act. Thus, Plato came to believe that a philosophical comportment toward life would lead one to being just and, ultimately, happy.

It is difficult to determine the precise chain of events that led Plato to the intricate web of beliefs that unify metaphysics, epistemology, ethics

and politics into a single inquiry. We can be certain, however, that the establishment of a government by Sparta (after the chaos of Athens' final defeat in 404), and the events that followed, dramatically affected the direction of his thinking. Following the turmoil of the war, a short eight month oligarchical tyranny known as the Thirty Tyrants governed Athens. Two of Plato's relatives, **Critias** (his mother's uncle) and **Charmides** (his mother's brother) played roles in this regime. Critias was identified as one of the more extreme members and chief advocate of the government, while **Charmides** played a smaller role as one of the Eleven, a customs/police force which oversaw the Piraeus.

The oligarchy made a practice of confiscating the estates of wealthy Athenians and resident aliens and of putting many individuals to death. In an effort to implicate **Socrates** in their actions, the Thirty ordered him to arrest **Leon** of Salamis. **Socrates**, however, resisted and was spared punishment only because a civil war eventually replaced the Thirty with a new and most radical democracy. A general amnesty, the first in history, was issued absolving those who participated in the reign of terror and other crimes committed during the war. But because many of **Socrates'** associates were involved with the Thirty, public sentiment had turned against him, and he now had the reputation of being profoundly anti-democratic.

In what appears to be a matter of guilt-by-association, a general prejudice was ultimately responsible for bringing **Socrates** to trial in 399 on the charges of corrupting the youth, introducing new gods into the city, atheism, and engaging in unusual religious practices. During his trial, which is documented in Plato's *Apology*, **Socrates** explained that he had no interest to engage in politics, because a certain divine sign told him that he was to foster a just and noble lifestyle within the young men of Athens. This he did in casual conversations with whomever he happened to meet on the streets. When Socrates told the court that if set free, he would not stop this practice, claiming that he must follow the voice of his god over the dictates of the state, the court found him guilty (though by a narrow margin), and he was executed one month later. This final sequence of events must have weighed heavily on Plato, who then turned away from politics, somewhat jaded by the unjust behavior of the Thirty, dissatisfied by the follies of the

democracy, and forever affected by the execution of **Socrates**.

At this point Plato left Attica with other friends of **Socrates** and spent the next twelve years in travel and study. During this period, he sought out the philosophers of his day. He met with the wise-men, priests, and prophets of many different lands, and he apparently studied not only philosophy but geometry, geology, astronomy, and religious matters. His exact itinerary is not known, but the earliest accounts report that Plato left Athens with **Euclides** and went to Megara from where he went to visit **Theodorus** in Cyrene. From there he went to Italy to study with the Pythagoreans (including **Philolaus** and **Echecrates** mentioned in the *Phaedo*), and then after Italy he went to Egypt.

Whether or not Plato began to write philosophical dialogues prior to **Socrates'** execution is a matter of debate. But most scholars agree that shortly after 399 Plato began to write extensively. Although the order in which his dialogues were written is a matter of strong debate, there is some consensus about how the Platonic corpus evolved. This consensus divides Plato's writings into three broad groups. The first group, generally known as the "Socratic" dialogues, was probably written between the years 399 and 387. These texts are called "Socratic" because here Plato appears to remain relatively close to what the historical Socrates advocated and taught. One of these, the *Apology*, was probably written shortly after the death of **Socrates**. The *Crito*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor* and *Major*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias* and *Ion*, were probably written throughout this twelve year period as well, some of them, like the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, most likely at its end.

Plato was forty the first time he visited Italy. Shortly thereafter, he returned to Athens and founded the Academy, located nearly a mile outside the city walls and named after the Attic hero **Academus**. The Academy included a nice grove of trees, gardens, a gymnasium and many shrines -- including one dedicated to Athena herself, the goddess of the city. Plato created his own cult association, setting aside a portion of the Academy for his purposes and dedicating his cult to the Muses. Soon this 'school' became rather well-known on account of its common meals and sympotic lifestyle, modified, of course, to suit a

new agenda. Indeed, Plato's Academy was famed for its moderate eating and talk as well as all the appropriate sacrifices and religious observances. Overshadowing all of that was, of course, its philosophical activity.

It seems that over the next twenty six years Plato's philosophical speculation became more profound and his dramatic talents more refined. During this period, what is sometimes called Plato's "middle" or transitional period, Plato could have written the *Meno*, *Euthydemus*, *Menexenus*, *Cratylus*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Phaedo*. These texts differ from the earlier in that they tend toward the grand metaphysical speculation that provides us with many hallmarks of Platonism, such as the method of hypothesis, the recollection theory and, of course, the theory of ideas, or forms, as they are sometimes called.

In 367 **Dionysus** of Syracuse died, leaving his son as the supreme ruler of a growing empire. Dion, his uncle and guardian, persuaded young **Dionysus II** to send for Plato, who was to serve as his personal tutor. Upon arriving, Plato found the situation unfavorable for philosophy, though he attempted to teach the young ruler anyway. In 365, Syracuse entered into war, and Plato returned to Athens. (Around the same time, Plato's most famous pupil, **Aristotle**, entered the Academy.) In 361, **Dion** wrote Plato begging him to return. Reluctantly, Plato did so, setting out on his third and final voyage to Italy. But the situation had deteriorated beyond hope. Plato was soon spirited out of Syracuse from where he went back to Athens.

We know little of the remaining thirteen years in Plato's life. Probably sick of his wanderings and misfortunes in Sicily, Plato returned to the philosophical life of the Academy and, most likely, lived out his days conversing and writing. During this period, Plato could have written the so-called "later" dialogues, the *Parmenides*, *Theatetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Philebus* and *Laws*, in which **Socrates** plays a relatively minor role and the metaphysical speculation of the "middle" dialogues is meticulously scrutinized.

Plato died in 347, leaving the Academy to **Speusippus**, his sister's son. The Academy served as the model for institutions of higher learning until it was closed by the Emperor Justinian in 529 AD, almost

one thousand years later.