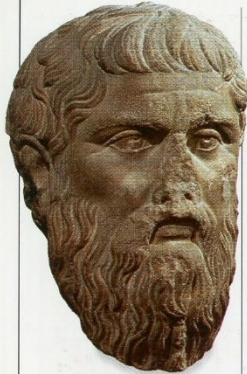


Plato

There is a lot to learn about Plato, and we will cover it in depth in class. For now, try to get an overview of Plato's main ideas and a sense of his general approach.

Answer the questions at the end of the text.



A WRITER BUT NOT A RULER

Plato was a genius in more ways than one. His dialogues, in the finest Greek prose ever written, were works of art as well as works of philosophy. When he tried to influence practical politics, however, he was not successful.

KEY WORKS

The Republic
for an overview
of Plato's whole
philosophy.

The Symposium
for his views
on love.

The Apology,
the Phaedo and
the Crito
for his portrait
of Socrates.

PLATO

BRIDGING THE HUMAN AND ABSTRACT WORLDS

There is a well-known saying that the whole of Western philosophy is footnotes to Plato. This is because his writings have set an agenda which philosophy as a whole – and not only moral philosophy – can be said roughly to have followed ever since.

NONE OF THE PHILOSOPHERS we have considered up to now left written works which have survived. So everything we know about them comes from references and quotations in the writings of other and later thinkers, who knew them or their works, works that have since been lost. Some of the references and quotations are extensive but nevertheless they are incomplete, and second-hand. Socrates wrote nothing at all, and so it is only through the writings of others that we know anything at all about him. Yet we have a vivid sense of his character.

Our chief source here is Plato, who was one of his pupils. Plato was the first Western philosopher who wrote works that survive intact. What is more, we have reason to believe that we possess pretty well his entire output. As with his teacher Socrates, there are many people who regard him as the greatest philosopher of all time.

SOCRATES' PLATO AND PLATO'S SOCRATES

Plato was about 31 when Socrates was executed in 399 BC. He was in the courtroom throughout the trial. That whole sequence of events seems to have come as a traumatic experience to him, for he regarded Socrates as the best and wisest and most just of all human beings. After the death of Socrates, Plato started to circulate a series of philosophical dialogues in which the protagonist is always Socrates, quizzing his interlocutors about the basic concepts of morals and politics, tripping people up with his questions. Plato seems to have had two main motives for doing this. One was defiant, to reassert the teachings of Socrates in spite of their having been officially condemned; the other was to rehabilitate his beloved mentor's reputation, showing him to have been not a corrupter of young men but their most valued teacher.

It is generally agreed among scholars that the chief source of the ideas in Plato's dialogues changed

as the years went by. The early dialogues contain a more or less accurate portrait of the historical Socrates, if we allow for the usual artistic or journalistic licence. The subjects raised were the subjects raised by the real Socrates, and things that Plato had heard him say were put into his mouth. But by the time Plato had come to the end of this material he found he had created an enthusiastic reading public that was eager for more. So, having plenty more to say, he went on writing and publishing dialogues, in what was by now a

“LET NO-ONE
ENTER HERE
WHO IS
IGNORANT OF
MATHEMATICS”

PLATO

popular and accepted form that features Socrates as the protagonist; but now he was putting his own ideas into that figure's mouth. Inevitably, this creates a problem for scholars about where the real Socrates ends and Plato begins. Perhaps this can never be satisfactorily solved. But there is little room for doubt that the earlier and later dialogues of Plato present us with the philosophies of two different philosophers, the earlier being Socrates and the later being Plato.

The earlier is solely concerned with the problems of moral and political philosophy, and is dismissive of philosophical problems about the natural world. One of this earlier philosopher's



THE SCHOOL OF PLATO

Ancient Greece was the first society in which students were taught to think for themselves – to discuss, debate, argue, and criticize – and not just to parrot the views

of their teacher. It led to the most rapid expansion of understanding there had ever been, and to the idea that knowledge can actually grow through criticism.

most committed beliefs is in the identification of virtue with knowledge; and he pursues knowledge entirely through discussion and argument.

None of these things is true of the later philosopher. This one, Plato, is passionately interested in philosophy right across the board, every bit as much applied to the natural world

as to how we should conduct our personal lives.

No aspect of reality fails to arouse his interest.

Far from being unconcerned with mathematics or physics, he regards these as the keys to understanding the natural world. Over the door of his academy he inscribed the words: "Let no-one enter here who is ignorant of mathematics." Many of his most important



THE SIREN VOICE OF ART

This Roman fresco in a private villa provided people in the house with a view of an imaginary garden,

as if the wall did not exist. Plato believed that all art deceived in this way, and was a snare to the soul.

*“The wise Plato
saith, as ye
may read
The word
must needs
accorde with
the deed”*

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

CRADLE OF
WESTERN CULTURE

Plato knew Athens in its golden age in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, when this one city was producing not only great philosophy but great physics, mathematics, astronomy, history – and also great sculpture, architecture, and drama. In addition to all this it was the first democracy.



A SCENE FROM THE SYMPOSIUM

Alcibiades the statesman arrives at the house of Agathon the poet for an evening of conversation that will last for ever.

doctrines are expounded in long explanations that are not discussions or dialogues in any real sense but only in a purely token form, with a cardboard character chiming in every now and again with a “Yes indeed” or “That has to be admitted.” And he rejects the doctrine that virtue is solely a matter of knowing what is right.

Where Plato never parts company with Socrates is in his commitment to the view that the only real harm that can come to a person is harm to the soul, and therefore that it is better to suffer wrong than to commit it; and also in his commitment to thinking for oneself, taking nothing for granted, being ready to question everything and everybody. It was this latter belief that carried him forward over the years from expounding the ideas of Socrates to expounding his own ideas. After all, to think in Socrates’ way, the way Socrates taught other people to think, is to think for oneself

independently of any authority; so for Plato this meant thinking for himself, independently of Socrates. By departing from Socrates he followed Socrates.

THE FIRST PROFESSOR

Plato lived for half a century after the death of Socrates, dying at the age of 81. During this time he published some two dozen dialogues which vary in length from 20 to 300 pages of modern print. The most famous of all of them are the *Republic*, which is chiefly concerned with the nature of justice, and which attempts, among other things, to set out a blueprint for the ideal state, and the *Symposium*, which is an investigation into the nature of love. Most of the rest are named after whoever appears in them as the chief interlocutor of Socrates. Thus we have the *Phaedo*, the *Laches*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Theaetetus*, the *Parmenides*, the *Timaeus*, and so on.

These dialogues are among the world’s great literature. In addition to containing some of the best philosophy ever produced they are beautifully written – many language scholars think they contain the finest of all Greek prose. Perhaps the most moving of all, and therefore the best to read first, are those most directly to do with the trial and death of Socrates: the *Crito*, the *Apology*, and the *Phaedo*. The *Apology* purports to be the speech made by Socrates in his own defence at his trial, and is his *apologia pro vita sua*, his justification for his life.

Plato is to be considered as an artist as well as a philosopher. Also, it was he who established the prototype of the college. "Academy" was simply the name of his house, and because he taught grown-up pupils there the word came to be used for any building in which young people of mature years receive a higher education.

IDEAL EXISTENCE

The doctrine for which Plato is best known is his theory of Forms or Ideas, by which for these purposes he meant the same thing. (In this context, the words Form and Idea are usually spelt with a capital letter to make it clear that they are being used in Plato's sense.)

Reference has been made to the fact that when Socrates asked "What is beauty?" or "What is courage?" he regarded himself not as trying to pin down the definition of a word, but as trying to discover the nature of some abstract entity that actually existed. He regarded these entities not as being in some place, or at any particular time, but as having some kind of universal existence that was independent of place and time. The individual

beautiful objects that exist in our everyday world, and the particular courageous actions that individual people perform, are always fleeting, but they partake of the timeless essence of true beauty or true courage; and these are indestructible ideals with an existence of their own.

Plato took up this implied theory about the nature of morals and values and generalized it across the whole of reality. Everything, without exception, in this world of ours he regarded as being an ephemeral, decaying copy of something whose ideal form (hence the terms Ideal and Form) has a permanent and indestructible existence outside space and time.

Plato supported this conclusion with arguments from different sources. For example, it seemed to him that the more we pursue our studies in physics, the clearer it becomes that mathematical relationships are built into everything in the material world. The whole cosmos seems to exemplify order, harmony, proportion – or, as we would now put it, the whole of physics can be expressed in terms of mathematical equations. Plato, following Pythagoras, took this as revealing



THE CLARKE PLATO
Before the invention of printing, the only way writings could be circulated was through being re-copied by hand. Thus a work's being known and studied, perhaps even its very survival, depended on copying, as in the case of the Clarke Plato (895 AD). Throughout the Middle Ages this was one of the chief occupations of scholars and churchmen. So it is through the medieval church that a great deal of pre-Christian culture has been transmitted to the modern world.



RATIONAL ORDER IN ALL, FROM MATHEMATICS TO LAW

Plato continues to crop up in images from his time to our own. This 16th-century fresco in a Romanian monastery shows him in the company of the mathematician Pythagoras and Solon, the great Athenian reformer and legislator.

AN AUSTERE REGIME
Sparta, the ancient Greek city state that dominated the southern Peloponnese, was flourishing as a rival to Athens when Plato was in the prime of life – but he lived to see its downfall. Its social structure was essentially a military one, and by contrast with cultured, democratic Athens its way of life was disciplined and austere. The word "Spartan" remains in use to this day as a byword for a harsh regime.

THE REPUBLIC

Plato's Republic begins as an enquiry into the nature of justice, but broadens out into a consideration of human nature as a whole, including the nature of man's social life, until by the end it has addressed most of the main questions of philosophy. It also contains the first known blueprint for an ideal society. For all these reasons it has now come to be thought of as Plato's masterpiece, the dialogue providing the best overview of his mature philosophy.



THE GREEK IDEAL
The Greek genius for combining order with emotion found expression in their way of life, from their politics to their art. Even their vases show an ideal blend of form and feeling. This balance has been regarded as an ideal ever since, and is known as "the Greek ideal", but no subsequent society has succeeded in achieving it.

that, underlying the messy, not to say chaotic surface of our everyday world, there is an order that has all the ideality and perfection of mathematics. This order is not perceptible to the eye, but it is accessible to the mind, and intelligible to the intellect. Most important of all it is there, it exists, it is what constitutes underlying reality. In pursuit of this particular research programme he drew into the Academy some of the leading mathematicians of his day, and under his patronage great strides were made in the development of various aspects of mathematics and what we now think of as the sciences. All were then part of "philosophy".

PLATO AND CHRISTIANITY

This approach, developed by Plato with great richness across a wide area of subject matter, resulted in a view of total reality as being divided into two realms. There is the visible world, the world as it is presented to our senses, our ordinary everyday world, in which nothing lasts and nothing stays the same – as Plato liked to put it, everything in this world is always becoming something else, but nothing ever just permanently is. (This formulation became shortened to "everything is becoming, nothing is.") Everything comes into existence and passes away, everything is imperfect, everything decays. This world in space and time is the only world that our human sensory apparatus can apprehend. But then there is another realm which is not in space or time, and not accessible to our senses, and in which there is permanence and perfect order. This other world is the timeless and unchanging reality of which

**"EVERYTHING
IS BECOMING,
NOTHING IS"**

PLATO

our everyday world offers us only brief and unsatisfactory glimpses. But it is what one might call real reality, because it alone is stable, unshakeable – it alone just is, and is not always in the process of sliding into something else.

The implications of the existence of these two realms are the same for us human beings considered as objects as they are for everything else. There is a part of us that can be seen, while underlying

IDEALS THAT LAST

The Venus de Milo (c. 200 BC) is perhaps the most famous statue in the world. It shows the Greek goddess Aphrodite as the ancient Greeks' ideal of feminine beauty.



this is a part that cannot be seen but of which our minds are capable of achieving awareness. The part that can be seen consists of our bodies, material objects that exemplify the laws of physics and inhabit the realm of space and time. These physical bodies of ours come into existence and pass away, are always imperfect, are never the same for two moments together, and are at all times highly perishable. But they are the merest and most fleeting glimpses of something that is also us and is non-material, timeless, and indestructible, something that we may refer to as the soul. These souls are our permanent Forms. The order of being that they inhabit is the timeless, spaceless one in which exist all the unchanging Forms that constitute ultimate reality.

Readers who have been brought up in a Christian tradition will at once recognize this view as familiar. That is because the school of philosophy that was dominant in the Hellenistic world in which Christianity came on to the scene and proceeded to develop was the tradition of Platonism. The New Testament was, of course, written in Greek; and many of the deeper thinkers among the early Christians were profoundly concerned to reconcile the revelations of their religion with Plato's main doctrines.

What happened was that the most important of these doctrines became absorbed into orthodox Christian thinking. There was a time when it was quite common for people to refer to Socrates and Plato as "Christians before Christ". Many Christians seriously believed that the historic mission of those Greek thinkers had been to prepare the theoretical foundations for some important aspects of Christianity. The detailed working out of these connections was something that preoccupied many scholars during the Middle Ages.

Plato, to state the obvious, was neither Christian nor Jew, and arrived at his conclusions in complete independence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In fact, he arrived at them by philosophical argument.

They do not call for any belief in a God, or in religious revelation, and during the period since him they have been accepted in whole or in part by many who were not religious. Plato himself did in fact come to regard the Ideal Forms as divine, because perfect; and he also came to believe, as Pythagoras had done, in reincarnation; but the bulk of his philosophical influence has been on thinkers who declined to go along with him in either of those respects, some completely irreligious.

PLATO'S HOSTILITY TO THE ARTS

Plato believed that for an intelligent person the ultimate aim in life should be to pierce the surface of things and penetrate to the level of underlying reality. This may in turn be understood as a kind of intellectual mysticism, for it means acquiring an intellectual grasp of that world of Ideas in which the soul exists already, and will go on existing for all eternity. In this sense it is rather like rehearsing for being dead – which is exactly what Socrates is quoted in the *Phaedo* as saying the philosopher does.

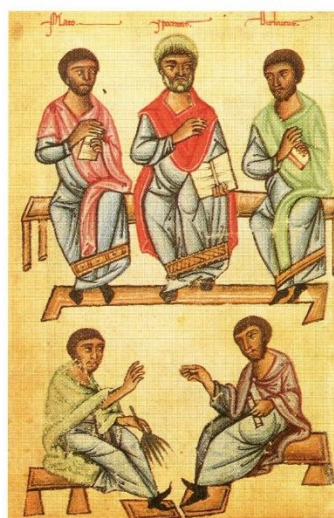
To achieve this, clearly, the individual needs to see through (in both senses) the decaying ephemera that constitute the world of the senses, to free himself from their attractions and seductions.

It is this requirement that leads Plato to be hostile to the arts. He views the arts as being of their nature representational, and as making a powerful appeal to the senses – and of course the more beautiful the art the more powerful this appeal is bound to be. Works of art are, in his view, doubly deceptive, for they are illusory semblances of things that are illusory semblances. They glamorize the fleeting things of this world, and they enrich our emotional attachment to them, thereby holding us back from our true calling, which is to soar above their level altogether to the timeless and non-sensory reality beyond. So they are a danger to our souls. In an ideal society they would not be allowed. This doctrine of Plato's has since helped to give confidence to people wishing to ban or control the arts.



DANCE BEFORE THE GOD DIONYSOS

The Greek world in which Plato was philosophizing was one in which religious rituals were widespread. For a prominent person to deny the existence of certain pagan gods was for him to put his life in danger. This makes it difficult to be sure to what extent, if at all, Plato really believed in them.



IMAGINARY LIKENESS

Manuscripts, before the age of printing, were often illuminated with illustrations. These are one of our chief sources of portraits of the philosophers of antiquity, as in the picture of Plato (top left) above. But usually there was nothing on which to base a likeness of the original.

GREEK TRAGEDY

Greek tragedy dealt with some of the deepest of all human concerns, and was therefore of interest to many philosophers. The three outstanding tragedians were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, all of whom are still performed. One of the perennial themes was the conflict between the individual's private desires or relationships and his duty to society as a whole: an individual who comes into head-on conflict with society almost always ends by being destroyed.



ST JOHN
The New Testament apostle St John the Evangelist (1st century AD), to whom the letters of John are traditionally ascribed, was a Jew steeped in Greek thought. He launched the centuries-long process of accommodating it to the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

"If a man seeks from the good life anything beyond itself, it is not the good life that he is seeking"

Plotinus

PLATO AND CHRISTIANITY
Plato had more influence on the development of early Christian thought than any other non-Christian. Greek was still the language of international culture and scholarship in the world into which Jesus was born; and the best-known philosophy in that world was Plato's. The New Testament was written in Greek.

Plato sees the human individual as made up of three conflicting elements: passion, intellect, and will. And he deems it essential for the intellect to be in control, governing passions through the will. From this appraisal of persons, he extrapolates a corresponding view of society as a whole. In his ideal society, an intermediate police class, which he calls the auxiliaries, would keep the masses in order under the direction of a philosophically aware governing class, who would act as the guardians of society as a whole. Put like this, it sounds not unlike a description of the communist societies of the 20th century; and it was indeed to be the case that Plato's political ideas had an immense influence down the centuries, and not least on the utopian totalitarian philosophies of Left and Right that characterized the 20th century.

DISCIPLES OF GENIUS

The writings of Plato, plus those of philosophers who developed under his influence, were to dominate philosophy in Europe for six or seven hundred years – until, that is, the rise of Christian thought to a position of comparable and then greater pre-eminence.

The most gifted of Plato's successors was one of the most immediate, his pupil Aristotle, whose work is of such importance that it will receive extended consideration in its own right. Aristotle founded a tradition in philosophy that was different from Plato's, and often at odds with it – yet, even so, he several times says "we" to describe the disciples of Plato. Apart from Aristotle, the outstanding philosopher to emerge directly

from under the influence of Plato's teaching came hundreds of years later, towards the end of its period of dominance, in the 3rd century AD. He was Plotinus, who was born in 204 AD and died in 269 AD.

Plotinus, though an Egyptian (with a Roman name), wrote in Greek, and can be thought of as the last of the great Greek philosophers, the end of a line of succession that had begun with Thales in the 6th century BC, and indeed the last great philosopher of antiquity altogether. His thought developed the mystical strain in Plato's and came to be known as Neo-Platonism. He was not a Christian and he never mentioned Christianity in his writings, yet his philosophy stands recognizably close to those of the two greatest Christian philosophers of the next thousand years, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. His influence on the development of Christian thought was enormous. The famous 20th-century Christian writer Dean Inge refers to him as "the great thinker who must be, for all time, the classical representative of mystical philosophy. No other mystical thinker even approaches Plotinus in power and insight and profound spiritual penetration."

THE PHILOSOPHER-MYSTIC

Plotinus' work, more than that of anyone before him except for Plato himself, made Platonic philosophy central to the intellectual development of Christianity. Plotinus taught that since ultimate reality consists of Plato's Ideal Forms, what exists is ultimately mental, and therefore for something to be created is for it to be thought. There are, he believed, three ascending levels of being.

The lowest, on which human beings are, is soul. The next level up, on which the Ideal Forms are apprehended, is intellect. The highest level is the good.

Reflective human beings are engaged in an attempted ascent towards one-ness with the good. Christians translated this into their doctrines that the world has been created in the mind of God, and that human beings are aspiring to one-ness with God, who is perfect goodness.



APPROVED PAGAN PHILOSOPHER

Though not a Christian, Plotinus' ideas found sufficient approval for his sarcophagus to be housed in one of the Vatican's museums.

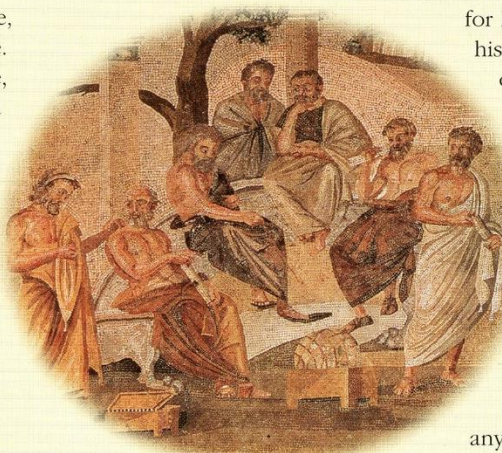
The MYTH of the CAVE

The most famous passage in all Plato's writings occurs in the *Republic*, and is known as the Myth of the Cave. In it Plato puts into symbolic form his view of the human condition, and especially of human knowledge, in relation to reality as a whole.

Imagine, he says, a big cave, connected to the outside world by a passage long enough to prevent any daylight from penetrating into the cave itself. Facing the far wall, with their backs to the entrance, is a row of prisoners. Not only are their limbs chained, they are also fastened by the neck so that they cannot move their heads, and therefore cannot see one another, indeed cannot see any part of themselves. All they can see is the wall in front of them. And they have been in this situation all their lives, and know nothing else.

In the cave behind them is a bright fire. Unknown to them there is a rampart as high as a man between the fire and them; and on the other side of this rampart are people perpetually passing to and fro carrying things on their heads. The shadows of these objects are cast on to the wall in front of the prisoners by the light of the fire, and the voices of the people carrying them are echoed back from this wall to the prisoners' ears. Now, says Plato, the only

entities that the prisoners ever perceive or experience in the whole of their existence are those shadows and those echoes. In these circumstances it would be natural



for them to assume that shadows and echoes constitute all the reality there is; and it would be to this "reality", and to their experiences of it, that all their talk would refer.

ALL THEY
CAN SEE IS
THE WALL
IN FRONT
OF THEM

If one of the prisoners could shake off his chains, so cramped would he be by a lifetime of entrapment in the half-dark, that merely to turn around would be painful and awkward for him, and the fire would dazzle his eyes. He would find himself confused and uncomprehending, and would want to turn back again to face the wall of shadows, the reality he understood. If he were dragged up out of the cave altogether into the world of blazing sunlight he would be blinded and bewildered, and it would be a long time before he was able to see or understand

anything. But then, once he was used to being in the upper world, if he were to return to the cave he would be temporarily blinded again, this time by the darkness. And everything he said to the prisoners about his experiences would be unintelligible to those people whose language had reference only to shadows and echoes.

The way to begin understanding this allegory is to see us human beings as imprisoned in our own bodies, with only other such prisoners for company, and all of us unable to discern the real selves of one another, or even our own real selves. Our direct experience is not of reality, but what is in our minds.

Questions:

1. What differences can be seen between the earlier writings of Plato and his later writing?
2. When Did Plato live? And where?
3. Name a couple of Plato's most famous writings (why am I not calling them 'books'?)
4. What did Plato mean with his idea that "everything is becoming, nothing is..."?
5. For Plato, this world can never represent truth because it is always changing. Truth is to be found in the realm of Forms, or Ideals. Why?
6. Which of Plato's ideas have been adopted by, or influenced, Christianity?
7. Why were the 5th and 4th centuries BC known as the 'golden age' for Athens?

There are many sources of information about Plato, either written or audio-visual.

Try:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDiyQub6vpw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgotDFs6cdE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWlUKJIMge4>