

# 1 Plato's Life

*"I am that gadfly which God has given the state and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you."*

—Socrates, *Apology*

Plato has been called, with no exaggeration, the Father of Western Philosophy. Though he hadn't aspired to such a role, he probably would not have shied away from it. (He was not known for his humility.) Like many other great figures in history, Plato came to play the role he did as much because of circumstance and chance as because of his own decisions.

What we know about Plato today, nearly 2,400 years after his death, stems mostly from his numerous writings (some 650,000 words have been attributed to his hand, according to Plato historian Christopher Planeaux). Through what he mentions in his work, and through biographies of Plato written by his contemporaries, we have produced a fairly good picture of what Plato's life was like.

But this picture, like most old images, has been blurred by time. Some of what we know of Plato stems from writings that tried to make him seem legendary in stature, so it is important to try to weed out some of the more grandiose descriptions of his background. Other information comes from his letters, the only written work from Plato where he actually mentions events in his life. Unfortunately, there is some dispute as to whether all the letters attributed to Plato were even written by him, placing their accuracy in question.

This book covers the information on Plato's life that is believed to be true by most scholars; alternative theories about Plato are mentioned for the sake of completeness, but not in great detail. (You can find more information on Plato and his life by consulting one of the references in the appendix at the end of this book.)

## Plato's Early Life

There is some debate as to whether Plato was actually the philosopher's given name or a nickname that was generally accepted. It has been suggested by some, including Planeaux, that Plato's real name was Aristocles and that Plato was a nickname that loosely translates to "the broad." It isn't known whether *broad* refers to the width of his shoulders, the size of his forehead, or a description of his personality. Regardless, the name Plato seems to have stuck, at least with modern scholars.

### A Silver Spoon

Most scholars believe that Plato was born in the year 427 B.C.E. in Athens, the third child of Ariston and Perictione. He had two older brothers and a younger sister. The family was one of the more wealthy in the Greek city-state of Athens, which had been democratically organized for just over 80 years when Plato was born. A city-state was a political organization in ancient Greece that tended to be geographically small areas dominated by a central metropolitan organization.

Some of the more legend-minded biographers and peers of Plato maintained that Plato descended from a long line of rulers that included Codrus, the last king of Athens. Whether this is true is a matter of debate. But it is generally well established that Plato's family was politically strong and active in Athenian society. In Plato's later years, these political connections would dramatically affect his life.

What influence Plato's father might have had on his third-born will unfortunately never be known, as Ariston died when Plato was very young. In keeping with Athenian tradition, which held that a woman could not head a household, Plato's mother soon remarried. From his mother's second marriage, Plato would get a half-brother.

Not much is known about Plato's early years. Like most Greek men of his time, he would have likely received the best education his family could afford. Given the political background of his family, he was very likely groomed for a life of politics and leadership.

Many biographers have pointed to evidence that Plato was skilled in the physical arts as well as the mental ones. Gifted with a strong body and athletic prowess, Plato won many wrestling contests, a sport that was among the most popular in Greece at the time. That he was so healthy and skilled in athletics is a testament to his family's financial status.

Although Plato's family was prosperous in Athens, they did not particularly enjoy the leadership under which they lived. Being wealthy and tracing (if somewhat ambiguously) their lineage back to ruling nobles, families like Plato's grew

increasingly discontent under the democratic rule of law. Apparently, what prosperity they had was not enough, and families like Plato's missed the past, when their families ruled over everything instead of just participating in government with other, less-noble people as equals. This attitude left quite an impression on the young Plato, whose political leanings would always remain opposed to the concept of democracy.

## A Time of War

Just before the birth of Plato, Athens found itself embroiled in the midst of a rather bothersome war. If this description sounds nonchalant, it reflects the initial attitude the Athenians had toward the war and their enemy, the city-state of Sparta. The war between Athens and Sparta would have a profound impact on Plato's life.

Athens and Sparta had long been at odds with each other. The problem wasn't just that the city-states differed in their approaches, but that each city-state thought its methods would be best to rule over all of mainland Greece. Athens preferred a democratic approach to self-governance, while Sparta opted for a militaristic tyranny to rule itself. Although Sparta's expansionist army was generally greater than that of Athens, Sparta had been soundly beaten by Athens's massive navy and forced to sign a 30-year armistice.

Chafing under the enforced peace, Sparta, a very militaristic society, began to build up its armies for another try at Athens. In 431 B.C.E., four years before the birth of Plato, Sparta found its excuse in a small border skirmish and quickly set upon Athens with its large army. Athens resignedly set itself up for another confrontation with Sparta. Even though Sparta's army outnumbered Athens two to one, Athens had its own secret weapon: a very large navy, which Athens quickly used to bypass the land-based Spartans and attack Sparta directly.

Though each side felt that it would soon gain the upper hand, a stalemate arose between the two warring sides, as neither Athens nor Sparta could get a clear victory. Ultimately, the two city-states agreed to another armistice: the 50-year Peace of Nicias. Nicias was the ruling general of the Athenian forces at the time he helped craft this peace agreement, which basically allowed both sides to go home with nothing lost and nothing gained. He is described by his peers as a cautious and patient general, but he had rivals in the Athenian government who would soon cause him more trouble than Sparta ever did.

One of Nicias's rivals was Alcibiades, a very talented politician and orator. In 415 B.C.E., when Plato was 12 years old, Alcibiades whipped the Athenian Assembly, the ruling body of Athens, into an expansionist frenzy and convinced the leaders to send the army and navy to conquer the Greek city-states on the island of Sicily. Such a victory would have brought much wealth and power to the Athenian Empire had the plan worked.

Unfortunately, the army, still led by Nicias, was completely defeated, and half of the once-powerful Athenian navy was burned and sunk in the Syracuse harbor in 413 B.C.E. To make matters worse, Sparta took notice of the outcome. Worse still, the Persians, whom Athens also trounced in the first half of the fifth century B.C.E., decided to use the opportunity to take revenge on Athens.

Athens was attacked by two powerful and allied opponents: Sparta and Persia. With its military forces severely depleted, Athens fought a very good fight, fending off its allied enemies for a few years. But in 405 B.C.E., the remainder of the Athenian navy was defeated, which left the city-state up for grabs. One year later, Athens surrendered completely to Sparta.

For its part, Sparta did what most conquering powers would have done at that time: It tore down the walls of Athens, forbade Athens from ever having a navy again, and put its own puppet government in place, a group of 30 Athenians who would become known as the Thirty Tyrants. Among the Thirty Tyrants were Plato's uncle and great-uncle, who soon invited the 23-year-old Plato to participate in the new ruling government of the now-conquered Athens, an invitation he declined.

## **The Influence of Socrates**

Determining how much influence Socrates the teacher had on Plato the student is difficult, particularly because most of the biographical knowledge we have about Socrates comes from Plato himself. This is mainly due to one very important difference in the approaches of Plato and Socrates: Plato typically wrote his important thoughts down, while Socrates thought writing a waste of time and instead followed a more oral tradition. It is important to recognize that without the diligence of Plato, the thoughts and teachings of Socrates would be forever lost.

### **Meeting Socrates**

Exactly when Plato first met Socrates is a matter of conjecture by many historians. Most traditional views place their first meeting fairly early in Plato's life, when he was 20. Although this is certainly when Plato became Socrates's student, other historians have speculated that the pupil actually met his future teacher quite a bit earlier. This earlier meeting was likely to have occurred when Plato was a boy, as he was being groomed for the family "business" of Athenian politics. Socrates was a close associate of Plato's family, including his mother's brother Charmides and his mother's uncle Critas. Although Charmides and Critas participated in the Athenian democracy, they did so begrudgingly; they still longed for the earlier days when their family was one of the ruling families of Athens. Socrates, who was at best apathetic about the concept of democracy, provided philosophical fuel to Plato's kinsmen in

their quest to return to the good old days. Thus, it was likely that Plato met Socrates earlier in Plato's life, through one family function or another.

Before Plato became one of Socrates's students, Plato learned the way other upper-class Athenian men learned, becoming knowledgeable in the teachings of Cratylus, Pythagoras, and Parmenides—pre-Socratic philosophers who stretched Plato's knowledge of the universe with the concepts of metaphysics and *epistemology* (the study of the very nature of knowledge).

Aristotle, Plato's future student, later wrote that Plato was also an accomplished poet, his first major pursuit until he was the age of 20. At that time, Plato inexplicably decided to burn all his poems and devote his attention to philosophy.

## Becoming Socrates's Student

When Plato was 20 years old (the age when he began to study with Socrates), Athens was still in its desperate struggle against the Spartan and Persian armies. Athens's final defeat was only three years away.

A tale passed on from this time indicates that Plato considered leaving home to become a mercenary soldier in the still ongoing war, and that Socrates talked him out of it and asked Plato to join him instead. This may be more fable than truth, but whatever the circumstances, Plato became one of Socrates's faithful students.

When Plato began to study under Socrates, he pursued his teacher's own quest for the substance and meaning of virtue. As Socrates engaged in dialogues with his students, the one overall theme was this quest for a noble character.

Plato, in an early display of the wisdom for which he is so renowned, was able to use his background education to apply the question of virtue to politics and morality. Plato reasoned that how we think and what we perceive as reality are important components to how we act. So, in the journey to a virtuous life, a person should always have a philosophical approach so he better molds himself with virtue. This would be a tenet that Plato would hold throughout the rest of his life, even after he grew past the teachings of Socrates and put forth his own unique ideas.

Plato was very good at unifying many different subjects—virtue, metaphysics, epistemology, and politics, for example—into a single question that he would then approach with methodical and careful reasoning. In fact, he was one of the first (if not the first) philosophers in Western culture to combine different disciplines to examine larger questions. But before he taught these ideas, Plato would first learn at the feet of Socrates and focus on the issue that beguiled Socrates until his death: the pursuit of the meaning of virtue.

## Defending Socrates

After Athens was soundly defeated in 404 B.C.E., the Spartans and Persians divided their respective spoils, and then Sparta opted to set up the puppet government known as the Thirty Tyrants. The Tyrants (in those days, *tyrant* had the less-sinister meaning of “leader”) were what is known as an *oligarchy*, a government made solely of a small faction of people. Sparta chose members of the conquered Athenian Assembly who would stay under the control of their Spartan masters and keep Athens from ever becoming a threat to Sparta again. Among the Thirty Tyrants were Plato’s kinsmen Critas and Charmides, who invited Plato to actively participate in exerting their rule over the Athens puppet state.

Even though Plato was raised in an antidemocratic family and he himself tended to lean away from democracy, he resisted joining his family in ruling Athens. This was a surprising decision, because his great mentor, Socrates, was also a critic of the old Athenian government, believing that nobility could not be found in leadership by the masses. In fact, Socrates’s teachings would be forever linked to the Thirty Tyrants, because they parroted his works in order to justify their actions.

Perhaps it was the Tyrants’ actions that repelled Plato, for the Thirty certainly shaped the modern definition of the word *tyrant* with their violence and cruelty toward the conquered citizens of Athens. Even though Socrates had many negative beliefs about democratic government, he refused to actively involve himself in politics, preferring to stay out of such worldly affairs. Such neutrality may have influenced Plato to stay out as well.

After a mere eight months, the Thirty Tyrants were violently overthrown and replaced by a new democracy in 403 B.C.E. This new democracy, a far cry from the old government, was a far more conservative and religious group of men—and it was also a group that never forgot a grudge. After regaining power from the Thirty Tyrants, the new democracy craftily began to take their revenge on the members of that short-lived oligarchy and anyone who helped support the Tyrants. The new democracy had to be careful, however, to prevent any overt revenge from reawakening the ire of their Spartan masters. If this new democracy wanted to stay in power, they would have to continue to receive the tolerance of Sparta.

They found the perfect target in Socrates. Although Socrates had maintained all along that he didn’t want to actively participate in political affairs (and indeed, he never did), the new government of Athens nonetheless saw him as the embodiment of all that was wrong with the Tyrants’ rule. What gave the ruling power the excuse to finish Socrates once and for all was Socrates’s continued insistence that his search for truth and virtue was motivated by a divine dream. This dream was a sign to him that he should continue to teach the young men of Athens a noble and virtuous lifestyle—a lifestyle that the Athenian government perceived as decidedly antidemocratic.

The government fed its own fears to the general public, who also remembered how Socrates was associated with the Thirty Tyrants, until there was a great public outcry to arrest Socrates and halt his teaching. In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was arrested and charged with corruption of youth, participating in odd religious practices, introducing new gods, and atheism (though how one could believe in new gods and still be an atheist is a point that seems to have been lost on the Athenian government).

Plato and the other students of Socrates immediately came to their teacher's defense, loudly and rightly defending their master in court and in the court of public opinion. Though Socrates and his students did their best, as documented in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates was found guilty by a narrow margin and put to death a month later. Plato visited his master often during this final month, but he did not attend the execution of Socrates.

This event and the abuses of the Tyrants were pivotal to Plato's decision to completely abandon the active pursuit of politics. Thus, Plato's path to a purely philosophical lifestyle was forever set. Disillusioned, Plato left Athens with his fellow students to seek the elusive truth in other lands and cultures.

## Plato's Travels

Immediately after the execution of Socrates, Plato and his companions relocated to nearby Megara, where a small school of Socratic thought was established. During the next nine years (from 399 to 390 B.C.E.), Plato committed his first works to writing, a body of works that included *Laches*, *Protagoras*, and *Apology*. These works are collectively known as Plato's Socratic dialogues, because they are heavily focused on and influenced by his late teacher.

During this same period, it is speculated that Plato did a two-year stint (between 395 and 394 B.C.E.) with the military, possibly fighting in the Corinthian War, in which Athens and a collection of other city-states banded together to overthrow Spartan rule. It is not known for sure if he did indeed fight in this war, though there are some legends that he fought well enough to gain some decorations. During this time, Plato is also supposed to have journeyed to Egypt, where he visited Alexandria and possibly learned the secrets of the water clock, which he would bring back to Greek society. Again, this information is not well documented, so it may fall under the category of apocrypha.

What is known for sure is that Plato traveled to southern Italy for the first time in 390 B.C.E., at the age of 37. There he met Archytas of Tarentum, who was leading a resurgence in the study of the works of Pythagoras. This exposure to Pythagoreanism had very profound effects on Plato; it formed the foundation of the notion that mathematics was the truest way of expressing the universe that Man could use.

These ideas showed up in many of his later works, including *Republic*, as Plato used mathematical concepts to describe the nature of the universe and the human mind.

It was here in Sicily that Plato met Dion of Syracuse, the brother-in-law of Dionysius I, who ruled Sicily with an iron hand. Dion became Plato's student and close friend. Dionysius I, ever wary of Dion attempting to gain his throne, ultimately sent Plato away from Sicily in what appears to be a fit of resentment. Plato returned to his Athenian home and began the next phase of his life and writings.

## The Opening of the Academy

Upon his return to Athens, Plato founded a new school on land a mile outside the city that was sacred to the old Greek hero Academus. The school, named after this hero and called the Academy, was founded in 387 B.C.E. and contained open land, a gymnasium, and several shrines, including one to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. Plato's goal for the Academy was to teach young men how to become enlightened in the ways of governing so that they would grow into philosopher-rulers or wise advisors to rulers.

Plato's Academy flourished, as men from all over the Athens region journeyed to hear and learn from him. Indeed, he began to obtain an almost cultic following, and it was in this time period that many divine motivations and rationales were attributed to Plato. It is unclear whether Plato himself encouraged such attributions, but he did make one thing clear to the ruling powers in Athens: He would not actively participate in Athenian politics. In fact, he repeatedly stated his cynical view that he had yet to see anything worthwhile in politics for him to deal with.

During this period, Plato produced his next phase of written works, what is known as his mature works. These works, including *Meno*, *Symposium*, and perhaps the greatest of all his works, *Republic*, focused on merging philosophic thoughts and ideals into the governance of men. If a true philosophical ruler could be in power, Plato believed, then that ruler would be fair, just, and strong by the very virtue of his abilities.

For the next 20 years, Plato continued to write and teach at his Academy, and it seemed that he would happily continue to do so for the rest of his life. History had one more role for Plato to play, however: a chance to finally apply his ideal government in the real world.

## Plato's Return to Italy

In 367 B.C.E., Dionysius I died, leaving a young Dionysius II in charge of a fairly large kingdom. Dionysius II's uncle Dion, Plato's friend and student, persuaded the



boy king to send for Plato to properly advise and teach him the ways of being a good ruler. At the same time, Dion sent his old friend Plato a separate letter, trying to convince his mentor that here was his chance to put into practice the great ideas from his *Republic*. Now Plato could help realize the worthy goal of a philosopher-king.

Wary that such a young king would be difficult to teach, not to mention concerned by the presence of internal and external political turmoil in Sicily, Plato had little hope that such a plan would succeed. Still, Dion was his very good friend, and little hope was better than none. So Plato traveled to Syracuse to mold the young king, Dionysius II, before the influences of the court formed by the tyrannical Dionysius I got their hooks into the boy. Unfortunately, the plan was a disaster from almost the very beginning. The atmosphere of the king's court was highly charged with jealous courtiers who inherited the dead king's suspicions of Dion. Four months after Plato's arrival, Dion was charged with conspiracy and exiled.

The young Dionysius II was jealous of Plato's friendship with his uncle Dion. Dionysius continually tried to supplant himself into a similar relationship with Plato, thus replacing his uncle in Plato's affections. Dionysius II would not, however, fully commit himself to learning what Plato was trying to teach him. After two years, Plato decided to opt out of the situation, citing the fact that Sicily was now at war and the king would have no time to learn from him. Plato persuaded Dionysius II to let him return to Athens, promising the king that he would return to Sicily with Dion upon the conclusion of the war.

In 365 B.C.E., Plato, with his friend Dion, was back at the Academy and Plato seemed content that his active life in politics was finally at an end. Happily ensconced in this familiar environment, Plato spent the next four years teaching and writing. But in 361 B.C.E., Dionysius II had an apparent change of heart and strongly requested that Plato come back to Syracuse to resume his instruction. Plato initially refused, not believing the king's sincerity and also citing that the agreement was for Plato to come back with Dion, not alone.

Dionysius II surrounded himself with philosophers in his efforts to convince Plato that his intentions to learn were real. Among them was Archytas of Tarentum, for whom Plato still had much respect and affection. Archytas's promotion of Dionysius II, the fact that Dion was eventually granted permission to return, and Plato's Academy students' affectionate urging for their teacher to succeed in this endeavor finally convinced Plato in his decision to return to Sicily a third time.

If anything, this final trip to Syracuse was a worse disaster than the last journey. Plato believed that he would have to start afresh with Dionysius's teaching, which the king immediately rankled against. After all, the proud king reasoned, he had already had some instruction from Plato before, as well as from his collected group of court philosophers.

Meanwhile, Dionysius II cut off his uncle Dion from his lands and property. Dion was used to hold Plato hostage in the palace; every time Plato requested that he be allowed to leave, Dionysius would ask him to just wait another season, promising that doing so would help Dion's fortunes. Figuring he wasn't going to leave without Dionysius's permission anyway, Plato agreed to wait. The tyrannical king cut off Dion even more, by selling Dion's property. Luckily, Plato managed to get a message to Archytas, who visited with Dionysius and persuaded the king to let Plato return home.

Furious at Plato's treatment at the hands of his nephew, Dion began to raise support for a rebellion against the king, and he asked Plato to join him one last time. This time, Plato refused and stayed firm on his decision. He had had enough of politics and, besides, he was an old man and had no business fighting in a war. Plato returned to the Academy in 360 B.C.E. He was 67 years old.

## The Final Years

Because not much was written by or about Plato in the remaining 13 years of his life, not much is known. There are some clues to his life after his return to Athens, however. Letters attributed to Plato indicate that, although he did not actively participate in Dion's attempt to oust Dionysius II, he still supported his friend and wrote to encourage him and find out how things were proceeding. (Dion's faction eventually took over, though Dion himself was assassinated in the coup.) Indeed, the Academy took an active advisory role in the Dionian government of Syracuse until 354 B.C.E., when the pupils of the Academy withdrew their support.

During this time, Plato wrote again—writings that are classified as part of his late period of works. His writing of this time has a distinctively introspective flair; Plato was trying to fine-tune his thoughts on government and philosophy with specialized works as *The Laws* and *Kritas*.

Certainly, Plato interacted with his greatest pupil, Aristotle, during these years, and passed on his knowledge and wisdom to his student as Socrates had done with Plato.

Plato died at the age of 80 in 347 B.C.E. His school continued until C.E. 529, when the Christian emperor Justinian closed it. The Academy's 916-year lifespan makes it the oldest learning institution in history.

Plato's influence is still strongly felt in Western culture and government, as his words began to ask the first important questions of who we are and how we can interact with one another.