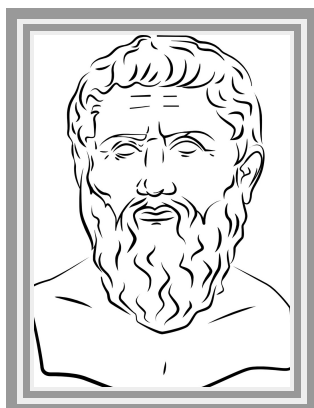


*quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*¹
Classical Thought²
Plato³ (428BC - 347BC) 1



Background, Context and Life

Plato's background was troubled. The Greek playwrights had run their course from the optimism of Sophocles (who died in 406BC before Plato was born) to the despair of Euripides. In philosophy the sophists⁴ were on the scene now. Sophists realised that if the gods were rejected nothing was left as a foundation for morals – everything was fluid and open to the imagination. “With Zeus uncrowned chaos and whirlwind rules” said the tragedian Aristophanes. There was no longer a settled moral order; Sophists thought moral codes were culturally changing and relative. They taught either that you should learn the rules of your own culture and obey them in order to get on in society or even that since moral rules are culturally relative they are not binding and you can therefore do as you like.

In 400BC, when Plato was a young man, the Peloponnesian War⁵ ended in defeat for Athens. This brought civil and political trouble with tension between the oligarchy⁶ and the city's democracy and he grew up in these years of defeat. When the war was over he might have gone along with the oligarchy but he had seen not only the destructive tendency that came from the democracy but also the excesses of the oligarchy. He thought a different social order was called for. What impressed him greatly was the example of Socrates who was 40 years older than him.⁷

It was a time of cynicism in philosophy. Antisthenes⁸ the cynic was teaching his disciples to throw off the restraints of civilization and the teachings of the hedonists were flourishing.⁹ All around him Plato saw social and intellectual trouble, turmoil and despair. Previous Greek philosophers did not have satisfactory answers to the philosophical questions: is there an objective reality? Is it knowable

1 Who will guard the guards themselves? Juvenal.

2 These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy 3 Courses Taught at Christ College* by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr. Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 Find him on your Synchronological Chart of History.

4 Term 2 week 1 Day 4

5 You can see this on your Synchronological Chart of History.

6 Groups of nobles who rule.

7 See below.

8 Term 2 Week 1 Day 4

9 Term 2 Week 2 Day 4

by means of human reason? What is the source of ethics and how can we have a stable foundation for civilization?

Plato came from an aristocratic family descended from Solon, (Σόλων) (c.638 – c.558 BC) the Athenian statesman and poet, but he did not go into politics. Instead he chose to try to influence society for good through philosophy. He was the first grand systematic philosopher of the ancient world.¹⁰ He founded the Academy, the greatest educational institution in the history of Athens. It became a training ground for intellectuals and future statesmen in Athens.

Plato wanted to develop a systematic philosophy that would say something about epistemology, ethics and metaphysics. He saw that in a good philosophy these three areas should harmonize: they should relate to each other and support each other. Previous philosophers did not achieve this but Plato (and later Aristotle) provided a network which did fit together.

Plato aimed at a philosophy that held to the objectivity of reality and the usefulness of man's reason in knowing it and an absolute good by which men should live.

Plato regarded the sophists as his intellectual enemies and he was very concerned about their adverse influence. They were opposed to traditional and conservative values and to ancient Greek religion. Plato was also opposed to superstition but not to conservative traditional values. He wanted to oppose the sophists' teaching that the sensations we have of the world are only private subjective states and that there is no universal objective knowledge of the universe discoverable by human intelligence. The sophists were teaching that truth was just common human opinion and was relative. This was especially dangerous in the area of morality and of civil law which flowed from it. They taught that there was no higher law to which we are responding to when we act morally. They said that only power matters in this world and you should use rhetoric and debate skills to get your own way and manipulate people. Some even went further and proposed that raw military power should be used with “justice” being just a word we give to the interests of who ever is strongest.

He saw that the Atomists¹¹ could not bring back stability either. They showed how change was possible and accounted for what we see so that we could have a philosophy of the natural world but they said that knowledge was subjective. The Atomist Democritus developed an epistemological dualism where there are two different kinds of truth one perceived through our senses another through the use of reason. This idea also appealed to Plato and he also liked the Atomists' refusal to appeal to authority or faith. But there were problems with their ideas too. Their idea of atoms falling through space removed the irregularity of the old capricious gods but to such an extent that man's free will disappeared also. Epicurus¹² had tried to account for free will with his idea of an uncaused swerve in the atoms but this is highly unsatisfactory and arbitrary. Abstract ideas could not be properly accounted for. Atomism gave a mechanistic explanation of the cosmos but it was incomplete, leaving questions unanswered or with poor answers. As for ethical values, if we are all just atoms falling through space; whose moral ideas are right?

One influence on Plato was the Pythagorean idea that cosmos is pervaded by a mathematical order.¹³ Plato agreed that there is an intangible¹⁴ order to things that has a mathematical character. Pythagoras, however, had been arbitrary and esoteric.¹⁵ Scientific knowledge for the Pythagoreans

10 He was followed by Aristotle (see later lessons). After these two philosophers to a large extent the history of philosophy is the attempt to deal with the difference between them!

11 Term 1 Week 8 Day 4

12 Term 2 Week 2 Day 4

13 Term 1 Week 3 Day 4

14 Unperceived by the senses.

15 Abstract and difficult.

was not mainly a way of understanding the world but rather something through which they thought they had found a way to spiritual redemption through religious rituals and aesthetic practices.

Sophism, Hedonism, Atomism, political turmoil – Plato developed his philosophy against this background. This was the cultural situation that drove him to try to save Greek society from everything that surrounded him ideologically, socially and politically.

Plato greatly admired Socrates (c.470 – 399 BC). Socrates had fought in the war bravely not as a leader or politician. What set him apart was his intelligence and humility. He did not think himself better than his fellow Athenians. The only difference was that he *knew* that he was ignorant. Socrates believed there was a reality to moral goodness and there were objective standards by which men should live. He was sceptical about common opinions but also had deep moral and even religious consciousness. This got him into trouble with the public in Athens because he did not take public opinion seriously and he cross examined it to show that people's convictions were not reliable. As he challenged common notions he therefore also challenged the values of democracy. But to the Athenians to challenge the state was to challenge the gods. So he was charged with corrupting the youth of Athens by getting them to think critically. He was called an atheist because he was undermining the cherished values and authority of the state. Called before the assembly to defend himself, he refused to make the normal appeal to emotion to defend himself. Rather than citing his family's need and hardship should he be put to death, he said he had done a great service for Athens and should be thanked. He was therefore sentenced to die. At this point he would normally be given the chance to flee, this was the custom in Athens. His friends arranged for this but he refused and said, appealing to a moral absolute, that he had a contract with the state and if he were to break his word for his own advantage he would be no better than others. One must submit to the state even though one thinks them wrong, he said.

Plato would have been young when he saw these events: he was not one of the older and leading students of the master. Socrates made such an impression on him that instead of going into politics he decided to be a philosophy teacher.

The Socratic problem

When we read Plato's dialogues the spokesman for Plato is called Socrates. Is this the Socrates of history or is this Socrates a literary character used for convenience to be Plato's substitute? All we know of Socrates depends on Plato's dialogues. How much of this is Socrates and how much Plato? Most authorities say we cannot separate the two out and in any case it is not important. It is possible therefore that we know nothing of the historical Socrates. On the other hand maybe Plato just refined Socrates ideas. Are the early dialogues mostly Socrates and the later one mainly Plato? We cannot tell. We must consider Socrates/Plato as one character in the history of philosophy.

The death of Socrates confirmed Plato's opposition to aristocratic prejudice. He decided a bad state could not produce good men and when a state is ruled by the many (democracy) it must be bad because the many are ignorant, self centred, not morally noble and not stable. Plato therefore had to find a basis for a good state. He thought that for this you need good men and above all intelligent men. Because they have to rule, they have to understand the objective reality of the world and know for certain what they know – not just rely on convention. By this he meant that you could never have a good state until it was ruled by philosophers.

Plato almost had a chance to set up the idea Philosopher King in real life. In 368BC Dionysius I Διονύσιος (c. 432 – 367 BC) of Syracuse, died leaving his brother Dion to raise his young son Dionysius II and prepare him to rule. Dion was an enthusiast for Plato so he asked him to come and educate Dionysius II for the throne. However, Plato had only been there a short time when rival groups forced Dion and Dionysius II out of the city. In 366BC, therefore Plato returned to Athens

where he eventually died aged about 80.

The theme of the philosopher as ruler occurs throughout western history over and over again. The idea is that the intellectuals need to be the rulers since the common people can't be trusted to rule. They are uneducated, emotional, unstable don't understand what is going on, a philosopher is needed. But Plato, although he was a philosopher, did not have great aspirations himself to rule the state. He thought more indirect influence was helpful. An educator preparing the culture for choosing better rulers was his rôle.

Plato's way of teaching was unusual. He used the literary form of a dialogue. This was not just literary genius. The reason was that the conversations he wrote were not meant to be conclusive. Often the conclusions reached are just negative with no positive theory to be put in place of what has been shown to be untrue. After he sets out his theory of forms¹⁶ in his dialogues (especially the one called *Parmenides*) Plato ruthlessly criticises his own teaching of the forms. He thought we should cross examine our own opinions as we moved closer and closer to the truth. There are problems with his best theories. Even the rationalist cannot give us a perfect and tidy solution. Yet he thinks the dialogues make progress.

In his *Letter 7* Plato says that he did not attempt to put down in writing his views about the subjects he studied seriously. He said that you can't put in writing the final perception of the truth. His treatises, he claimed, never give the full answer to the subjects he was studying because the full answer cannot be expressed verbally. Dialogues helps to make things plain and to work problems at a lower level but your thinking can only go so far like this. Nevertheless, he did believe that using human language to work out problems at this lower level through rational discussion was necessary preparation for this final vision of the truth that could not be put into words. He does not reject rationality, he just found it inadequate as a final step.

The Christian notices that Plato, the greatest rationalist of all times, has to admit he can't put everything into rational expression and that ultimately the truth comes in a vision like a flash of light. How did he try to solve these problems and show that there is an objective reality that is knowable by reason? How did he try to make a place for ethics and give a stable foundation for civilization? We will discover the answer in next week's lesson.

NB:- This week's lesson is long and rather complex, involving revision of previous material to understand the concepts involved. Follow up the footnotes carefully in order to understand this background to Plato ready for next week's lessons which will explain his ideas.

16 See subsequent lessons.