



Plato (c. 429-347 BCE)
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26 November 2020

Introduction

Plato irrupts into the history of human thought around the turn of the fourth century BCE and has fundamentally informed the entire philosophical tradition ever since. He was not exactly the first philosopher, but his self-consciousness about what philosophy consists of, and what philosophers do, mean that he is inevitably regarded as the inventor or founder of what we mean by philosophy. Together with his brilliant student Aristotle, he laid the groundwork for the content and methods of intellectual enquiry into the three great questions that underpinned the main branches of ancient philosophy: how should we live? (ethics and politics), what is being and what lies beyond human experience? (ontology and metaphysics) and how can we be sure of what we know (epistemology).

Plato's central conception of the world is that the one that we perceive with our senses is faulty and changeable, but there is another, perfect realm where eternal, unchanging entities called 'forms' or 'ideas' reside. They somehow constitute models or abstractions of the constituents of the world we can see, hear touch and smell. Some of the most important are the forms of goodness or justice, beauty, equality and change. The philosopher, whose task it is to understand and know the forms of things, must distinguish between the many perceptible objects that appear beautiful or good or equal, and the one entity or form or abstract idea that is what beauty or virtue or largeness actually and essentially are.

Almost all Plato's works address this distinction or are dependent upon it. Some enquire into the moral and practical consequences of this double conception of reality. We need to regard the soul, which can grasp the nature of the forms, as capable of existence independent of the body. In a few passages, for example in the *Meno*, it is said that the soul *recollects* what it once understood of the forms, when it was disembodied before the birth of its possessor, and that in our embodied lives we are somehow rewarded or punished for choices made in previous lives. But the most important consequence of the theory of the forms is that true philosophers, who spend their lives contemplating the forms, are able to become *morally superior* to the unenlightened rest of humanity.

While some of this can now sound mystical, the theory of the Forms is, if nothing else, a brave attempt to answer the conundrum which we now explain by the idea that the human brain is somehow hardwired by genetics to be able to operate cognitively in certain ways, for example in terms of a basic grasp of geometrical concepts, or Noam Chomsky's notion of universal grammar. That is, Plato is the first thinker to have attempted a comprehensive and analytical answer to what philosophers call the **Problem of Universals**. Discrete phenomena share identifiable properties—blueness or shortness or beauty. Do those properties have an existence apart from the phenomena in which they are manifested? And if so, how what type of an existence is it and how do humans identify and talk about these abstract properties? Philosophers today are still not agreed on these issues.

Plato as Writer

Even if we can't accept his theory of forms, we need to acknowledge that Plato was an experimental, thrilling and graceful prose writer, whose works set the bar on the elegance and vividness of philosophical discourse so high that few have ever rivalled him. The dialogue form he used brings to vivid, graceful, delicately characterised and often ironically witty life many important political and intellectual figures in late 5th-century Athens. They include the great sophists Protagoras, Hippias and Gorgias. Several dialogues contain extended purple passages of narrative or storytelling which have exerted incalculable influence as passages of literature. One is Protagoras' version of the Prometheus myth. Prometheus's brother Epimetheus has made the creatures that walk the earth on the order of the gods: 'Prometheus came to inspect the distribution, and he found that the other animals were suitably furnished, but that man alone was naked and shoeless, and had neither bed nor arms of defence. The appointed hour was approaching when man in his turn was to go forth into the light of day; and Prometheus, not knowing how he could devise man's salvation, stole the mechanical arts of Hephaestus and Athene, and fire with them (they could neither have been acquired nor used without fire), and gave them to man. Thus man had the wisdom necessary to the support of life, but political wisdom he had not; for that was in the keeping of Zeus, and the power of Prometheus did not extend to entering into the citadel of heaven, where Zeus dwelt, who moreover had terrible sentinels; but he did enter by stealth into the common workshop of Athene and Hephaestus, in which they used to practise their favourite arts, and carried off Hephaestus' art of working by fire, and also the art of Athene, and gave them to man. And in this way man was supplied with the means of life'.

Another Platonic 'purple passage' that has exerted a massive influence and has recently become a sort of manifesto for gay rights, is the speech of the comic dramatist Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. This dialogue concerns a drinking party held to celebrate the victory in a drama competition of a tragedian named Agathon and features a stellar guest list including the young statesman Alcibiades, the doctor Eryximachus and Socrates as well as Aristophanes. The entertainment consists of the diners making speeches about Love, or Eros. Socrates' own narrates how as a young man he was taught the true nature of Love by a wise woman called Diotima. She taught Plato that Eros drives people to seek beauty—first beautiful bodies, and then, as the lover grows in wisdom, beautiful souls—this is part and parcel with love of wisdom or philosophy. The lover progresses up a ladder from recognising the beauty of his beloved, to understanding beauty as an ideal concept, which leads to thinking about divinity, which is the source of that beauty, to love of divinity itself. By thinking about the essence of beauty, the philosopher can give birth to fine thoughts and speeches; the maieutic metaphor, of the philosopher as a midwife to ideas, is central to Diotima's argument.

But Aristophanes' speech is charming and humorous and humane, if less elevated and mystical. He says that originally there were three sexes—men, women and an androgynous combination. These prototypical humans were spherical, and had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways. They moved by somersaulting their bodies along. But they got above their station and dared to attack the gods. Zeus punished them by cutting them in two, 'like an apple which is halved for pickling, or as you might divide an egg with a hair'. These humans, physically split from their literal other halves, grew melancholy. Zeus took pity and redesigned them so that they could embrace frontally. Now man and woman, or man and man, or woman and woman can 'be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life: so ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of humankind... Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish...is always looking for his other half... And when one of them meets with his other half, the actual half of himself, whether he be a lover of youth or a lover of another sort, the pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy, and would not be out of the other's sight, even for a moment: these people pass their whole lives together; yet they could not explain what they desire of one another. For the intense yearning which each of them has towards the other does not appear to be the desire

of lover's intercourse, but of something else which the soul of either evidently desires and cannot tell'.

There is humour aplenty in Plato, such as the sending-up of the tactics of the charlatan sophist brothers Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in *Euthydemus*. In *Laches* there is a hilarious description of an embarrassing incident when Stesilaus, the celebrated exponent of fighting in armour, got his spear stuck in the rigging of a ship. There are caricatures of crazed performers of poetry, such as the star rhapsode in *Ion* and the lovesick Hippothales in *Lysis*. The funniest passage of all occurs in the most tragic of the dialogues, the *Phaedo*. The topic under discussion is memory and recollection, but one of Socrates' disciples keeps saying that he has forgotten what stage they have got to in the argument and needs to be reminded.

Plato also thought up some of the most beautiful images and descriptions in the cultural canon, such as the setting of the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue on the immortality of the soul. Unusually, it takes place in the countryside. Socrates describes the setting: 'Here, a fair resting-place, full of summer sounds and scents. Here is this lofty and spreading plane-tree, and the withy high and clustering, in the fullest blossom and the greatest fragrance; and the stream which flows beneath the plane-tree is deliciously cold to the feet. Judging from the ornaments and images, this must be a spot sacred to Achelous and the Nymphs. How delightful is the breeze—so very sweet; and there is a sound in the air shrill and summerlike which makes answer to the chorus of the cicadae. But the greatest charm of all is the grass, like a pillow gently sloping to the head'. Later, Socrates tells Phaedrus the myth of the cicadas they can hear, who will report their conversations to the Muses of Philosophy: 'The cicadas are said to have been human beings in an age before the Muses. And when the Muses came and song appeared, they were ravished with delight; and singing always, never thought of eating and drinking, until at last in their forgetfulness they died. And now they live again in the grasshoppers; and this is the return which the Muses make to them—they neither hunger, nor thirst, but from the hour of their birth are always singing, and never eating or drinking; and when they die they go and inform the Muses in heaven who honours them on earth. They win the love of Terpsichore for the dancers by their report of them; of Erato for the lovers, and of the other Muses...they win the love for the philosophers of Calliope the eldest Muse and of Urania who is next to her...for these are the Muses who are chiefly concerned with heaven and thought, divine as well as human, and they have the sweetest utterance. For many reasons, then, we ought always to talk and not to sleep at mid-day'. (Both the cicada theme and the hour lunchtime lecture format are therefore in the tradition of both Plato and Thomas Gresham, with his grasshopper!) In this lecture, after a look at the biographical evidence, and Plato's relationship to earlier thinkers, especially his teacher Socrates, we analyse his masterpiece, the *Republic*. The conclusion then consists of a few words about Plato's Atlantis story and influence on the subsequent history of thought.

Plato's Life and Works

Plato was born into a rich and distinguished family, both his parents being of aristocratic descent. His mother included amongst her ancestors the great Athenian lawgiver Solon; his father Ariston's family was said to be descended from Codrus, one the earliest mythical kings of Athens, and through Codrus from the sea-god Poseidon himself. Plato had a sister and two brothers, Glaucus and Adeimantus, who both appear conversing with Socrates in the *Republic*. His real name was Aristocles, but he was universally known as Plato. This means 'broad', and some ancient authorities say that he was a boxer and it referred to his broad chest. Others say that he had a wide forehead or that it referred to his capacious writing style and wide range of interests. His father died when he was little, and his mother remarried; he also had a younger half-brother named Antiphon, who appears in his *Parmenides*.

Plato was born around the time of the death of Pericles and was in his mid-twenties when, at the end of the Peloponnesian War, the Thirty Tyrants took power in 404 and ran Athens very despotically. One of the men they killed was Polemarchus, at whose house in the Piraeus the *Republic* is set. Two were close relatives of Plato (his uncles) named Critias and Charmides. Plato was either *not* disgusted by what they did, and/or carefully portrayed them in *Charmides* and *Protagoras* in their youths before they were corrupted by politics. Charmides also appears in *Symposium*. These authoritarian politicians were both killed in battle by the pro-democracy forces that ousted them. Plato dislikes democracy, but in *Republic* he is even more critical of tyranny, so the question of what he really thought about them remains open.

After the death of his inspirational teacher Socrates in 399 BCE, Plato probably travelled for a decade or so, perhaps studying mathematics with the Pythagoreans in Sicily. He may have begun writing soon after the death of Socrates, starting with the *Apology* and going onto other early dialogues including *Protagoras*, *Euthyphro*, and *Ion*. He founded the Academy at Athens in around 385 BCE, and it was to stay in operation for nine hundred years. He made at least one visit to Sicily, where a friend named Dion wanted him to supervise the education of his nephew, Dionysius II. But Plato subsequently returned to Athens, and continued work at the Academy until his death in his early 80s.

Plato was fortunate to be born into the Athenian intellectual culture where some of the greatest of the early philosophers—the sophists such as Protagoras, Hippias and Gorgias—had been or were about to start teaching. Aristotle says that Plato as a youth was familiar with the doctrines of the Pre-Socratics Cratylus and Heraclitus, and his debts to Pythagoreanism have been well demonstrated as well. But of course, it was Socrates who had by far the greatest influence on the development of his thought. Because Socrates left no writings of his own, while featuring as the star of most of Plato's dialogues, we are left with a major problem in distinguishing the thought and methods of the two men. We know there were certain differences—for example, Socrates was interested in natural science in his earlier days, where Plato has nothing to say about such matters. Socrates, although he fell foul of the democracy in a way that precipitated his death, seems in his prime to have been a loyal democrat who fought bravely under the command of the radical democrat Cleon; Plato, on the other hand, had very little time for the Athenian-style democracy at all. But the main principles of Platonic philosophy, especially the concept of the realm of the ideal or abstract forms, the distrust of rhetoric, the quest for truth and true enlightenment, and the elenctic method, seem to have been Socrates' central principles, too. I sometimes talk about the philosophy of an amalgam I name 'Platocrates', but today I will stick to 'Plato'.

Plato seems to have begun writing dialogues as a response to the execution of Socrates, tried for impiety and corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens in 399 BCE. His *Apology* contains Socrates' own speech in his self-defence; his *Crito* sees him condemned, in prison and refusing his disciple Crito's offer of money to secure his departure from Athens (he was offered a choice of exile of hemlock). His *Phaedo* reports his discussions in the hours leading up to the administration of the hemlock with most of his important disciples, although *not* Plato, who tells us he was unwell. There is no doubt that Plato mightily admired and loved his teacher and that his death must have affected him deeply.

Twenty-five dialogues, including those leading up to Socrates' death, have survived that are believed to be by Plato himself. They are usually placed into three chronological categories, early, middle and late, on various grounds including stylometry. They are all written in the fourth century BCE but portray discussions that ceased with the death of Socrates in 399 BCE. They cover a wide range of topics—what is beauty in the *Hippias Major*, what if any is the best kind of falsehood in the *Hippias Minor*, what is courage in the *Laches*, what is friendship in the *Lysis*, what sort of knowledge do poets have of the subject-matter in their poems (e.g. warfare) in the *Ion*. In the *Cratylus* Plato

asks what the relationship is of words to things, and names to people: are they arbitrary social constructions or do they reveal something about the true nature of what they are labels for? He asks what is wrong with sophistic argument in the *Euthydemus*, what is the difference between sense-perceptions and true knowledge in the *Theaetetus*, and what is the nature of true pleasure in the *Philebus*. But the underlying Socratic- Platonic philosophical position, centring on the immaterial world of ideas, is common to all.

The ones that seem of most immediate relevance today, besides the *Republic*, include the *Gorgias*. In this Socrates debates with one of the greatest teachers of rhetoric, the Sicilian Gorgias, what rhetoric is and whether it can be used for good purposes. Socrates thinks that, in practice, rhetoric is not really a craft or science but merely a knack of flattering audiences. The skilled speaker knows how to make his audience feel good by identifying with the speaker's argument. Rhetoric is problematic when it is taught and used by people who have not studied moral philosophy and do not know what is good. Socrates distinguishes between mere opinion and truth. He gets Gorgias to agree that a skilled speaker is more effective when his audience is ignorant, because his control of the tools of persuasion make him appear to have conviction, regardless of the facts. He compares rhetoric to baking pastries with fancy crusts or using cosmetics—surface ornamentation only imitates or fakes what is actually a good pie or a good physique. The dialogue ranges over other matters, including whether morality is itself an absolute, or something that depends on your relative and culturally learned point of view. *Gorgias* ends with Socrates relating what his interlocutors think is a myth, but which he says is true. This is the story called *The Judgement of Naked Souls*. Cronos used to judge men just before they died, and when they still had their clothes on, deciding whether each one deserved to go after death to the Isles of the Blessed or to Tartarus. But the judges were fooled by appearances. Zeus, however, innovated when he became Top God by stripping bodies after death but before judgement, implying that to know a man truly, you need to divest him of all outward trappings and concentrate on his soul.

The Republic

Set during the Peloponnesian War, the *Republic* brings together and develops most of Plato's core ideas in a very long conversation that would have taken many hours in reality. I here break it down into a summary of each of the ten books but focus on the chief images and analogies as well as the principal arguments.

Book I: Socrates and Plato's older brother Glaucon visit the Piraeus to attend a festival of the recently introduced Thracian goddess Bendis. At the house of the wealthy resident alien and philosopher, Polemarchus, who Plato's audience knew had died at the hands of the tyrants, Socrates speaks to Polemarchus' father Cephalus and argues that justice cannot be defined as being truthful and returning what one owes. Polemarchus thinks that justice is helping one's friends and harming one's enemies, but Socrates disagrees because it is hard to know who our real friends are, so it is better to be just to everyone. Socrates also tackles the bullish sophist Thrasymachus' definition of justice as the advantage of the stronger party. But Thrasymachus insists that the unjust person, provided he is undetected, will be happier than the just person, like a tyrant who can do anything he wants. Socrates disagrees, but says they can't decide whether the just life is better than the unjust life until they define justice itself.

Book II: Attempts are made to divide good things into components (those good in themselves, those good in their consequences and those good in both). Plato's brother Glaucon has not been persuaded by the arguments in the previous discussion. A problem is identified that one might be happier if unjust but with a *reputation* for justice and *vice versa*. Glaucon, who is the brother of Plato, asks whether any man can be so virtuous that he could resist the temptation of killing, robbing, raping or generally doing injustice to whomever he pleased if he could do so without having to fear

detection. Glaucon wants Socrates to argue that it's beneficial for us to be just apart from all considerations of our reputation. He posits in opposition the myth of **Gyges' Ring of Invisibility**. Gyges was a shepherd who discovered a magic ring of invisibility inside a bronze horse revealed by an earthquake. By means of the ring's power he murdered the king and won the affection of the queen. Glaucon says, 'Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a god among men... For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice... If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice'.

Socrates proposes that a way out of the conundrum—or philosophical quagmire—of justice and its relationship to happiness would be to identify justice in the city first and only then proceed by analogy to the individual. Socrates begins by saying that we enter life in the city community together because we are not as individuals self-sufficient. Each one of us has certain natural abilities and the only efficient way to run the city is to have each individual stick doggedly to a single job s/he is suited for. The city will also need an army to defend it and carefully educated guardians. Poetry and stories need to be censored and **ONLY** present the gods as good, unchanging and averse to deception.

Book III: Socrates continues to discuss the censorship of the arts with Glaucon. Only good examples of behaviour and character are allowed. There can be no theatrical imitation because it affects character, whether you are acting or spectating. The Guardians should also receive good physical training. They, however, should be prepared to tell citizens a myth—indeed, a **Noble Lie**—to ensure that everyone accepts his/her position in society. Socrates comes up with the '**Myth of Metals**'. This explains how rulers contain gold, guardians silver, and everyone else (farmers, craftsmen) bronze. The Guardian class will share communal property, get what they need from taxes paid by the other classes and eat in common messes. Movement between or mating between the different metal-classes will be nearly impossible. This use of a myth Socrates explains, in a way that sounds rather sinister, as 'a contrivance for one of those falsehoods that come into being in case of need...some noble one'.

Book IV: Plato's other brother Adeimantus says the Guardians won't be happy. Socrates says the aim is to make the whole city happy. So there should be neither extreme wealth nor poverty and the city should not be too big. The Guardians should share wives and children, rarely innovate and follow traditional religion. Such a city will be wise, courageous, moderate, and just. Justice consists in each class performing its proper function. The next step is to identify those four virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation and justice in the individual. He argues that the soul has three parts—rational, spirited and appetitive or desirous. These need to be balanced and this is justice, like each class performing its own function in the city.

Book V: Socrates wants to compare unjust (because imbalanced) political regimes and the corresponding unjust individuals. But Adeimantus and Polemarchus have been rattled by the reference to shared women and children, so Socrates can't at this point get on with defining justice. He suggests Guardian women have the same job as Guardian men. The best Guardian men are to have sex with the best Guardian women to make the best babies. Marriages will be determined by lot. The best Guardian men can sleep with as many women as they like. Children are to be reared away from the parents and the parents won't know who their own biological children are. Socrates also gives instructions on how these 'best people' will be trained for war. Then he gets back to

justice: the Rulers must be philosophers. Philosophers are the only ones who can identify unified principles or abstract 'forms' behind multiplicities of appearances, and truly know them rather than just have opinions about them

Book VI: Socrates continues that philosophers should be the rulers, regardless of their being unelected, because they hate falsehood, are moderate, courageous, quick learners, have good memories and are pleasant. Adeimantus however objects that actual philosophers are either useless or bad people. Socrates shows that they are not true philosophers with the analogy of the **Ship of State** to show that true philosophers are falsely blamed for their uselessness. He compares the general population to a strong but short-sighted shipowner ignorant of maritime affairs. The constantly quarrelsome sailors are demagogues and politicians. The navigator is the philosopher. The sailors imagine they can captain the ship, and each tries to get the shipowner to give them the command. They chain up the navigator, drug him and deride him as a useless stargazer even though he is the only one with the knowledge to steer the ship aright. So-called Philosophers can be bad because they are corrupted by a bad education, like the sophists were. True Philosophers however avoid corruption by leading a quiet life. Philosophers need to do nothing but philosophy. But the ideal city can only come into being if it is to be begun again entirely anew. Philosophers must study the Form of the Good. And the Good is not pleasure nor knowledge.

Socrates attempts to explain what the Form of the Good is through (1) the **Analogy of the Sun**. As the sun illuminates objects so the eye can see them, so the Form of the Good renders the objects of knowledge knowable to the human soul. As the sun provides things with their ability to be, to grow, and with nourishment, the Form of the Good provides the objects of knowledge with their being even though it itself is higher than being. Socrates now offers the analogy of (2) the **Divided Line** to explain the Form of the Good even further (509d-511d). He divides a line into two unequal sections once and then into two unequal sections again. The lowest two parts represent the visible realm and the top two parts the superior, intelligible realm. In the first of the four sections of the line, Socrates places images/shadows. In the second section he places visible objects. In the third section he places truths arrived at via hypotheses as mathematicians do, and in the last section the Forms themselves. Corresponding to each of these, there is a capacity of the human soul: imagination, belief, thought, and understanding.

Book VII: Socrates then illustrates how the Philosophers will learn true understanding with (3) the **Analogy of the Cave**. Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine a group of men living in an underground cave, approached by a long passage leading to the daylight. The men have been chained there from infancy, with their necks bound so they can only see in front of them. A fire burns at some distance behind and above them; between the men and the fire a wall resembling the screen set up by puppet masters. Other people carry objects which show above the wall—statues and model animals. The prisoners, naturally, infer that the shadows of these objects cast upon the back wall of the cave which they must face are the only realities. But Socrates argues that if one of them were set free and led towards the fire, and then the sunlight, he would eventually accept that the sun is the real cause of everything in the visible world, and that the shadows down in the cave were unreal.

The Philosopher-Kings of the Republic, who would be thus enlightened, will at first study poetry, music and PE like the other Guardians. Then mathematics, geometry, astronomy, harmonics and Dialectic which will allow them to understand the Forms and the Form of the Good. Then they are to undergo no fewer than fifteen years of practical political education. Since we need to make our ideal city from scratch, the best thing would be to expel everyone over the age of ten from an existing city.

Book VIII: Glaucon remembers that Socrates was about to describe the four types of unjust regime along with their corresponding unjust individuals. Socrates says that the important thing is that

people must stay in their classes or there will be class conflict. There needs to be aristocracy or **Rule by The Best**, meaning not the hereditary nobility, but the best qualified and trained—that is, the Philosopher-Guardians. The first deviant regime is (1) TIMOCRACY, which emphasises pursuit of honour and success rather than wisdom or justice. This corresponds with there being too much spiritedness as well as rationality in an individual. The next deviant regime is (2) OLIGARCHY, which pursues money. The oligarchic individual has too developed an appetitive part of the soul and also spiritedness. The third deviant regime is (3) DEMOCRACY, which arises because appetitiveness dominates. The democratic individual has no shame and no self-discipline. The fourth deviant regime is (4) TYRANNY: tyrants take ‘democratic’ freedom and appetitiveness to an extreme.

Book IX: The tyrannical individual is mad with appetites and lust and will do anything to slake them. He is enslaved to his passions and is therefore miserable and incapable of trust, friendship, fearful, and miserable. Socrates concludes from this that *the just are happier than the unjust*. He then offers another proof of this—that the just are happier than the unjust—by analysing pleasure. Most pleasure is not true but only a relief from pain. The only truly fulfilling pleasure is that which comes from understanding, since the objects it pursues are permanent. Socrates adds that it is *only* if the rational part rules the soul that each part of the soul can find its proper pleasure. He calculates how many times the best life is more pleasant than the worst: 729! The number is probably not as arbitrary as it sounds. 729 is 27 squared and its centre is 365, the days of the year. It was an important figure in Pythagorean mathematics and, intriguingly, in early Chinese wisdom literature. Socrates concludes by discussing an imaginary hybrid beast to illustrate the consequences of justice and injustice in the soul and to advocate justice.

Book X: Socrates claims that his earlier ejection of imitative poetry— theatre and epic poetry—from the just city is now justified. He distinguishes several levels of imitation through the **example of a bed**: there is the Form of the bed, the particular bed, and a painting of a bed. Only the Form is true. Poets and painters produce imitations without knowledge of the truth. Socrates uses a comparison with **optical illusions** to argue that imitative poetry causes the parts of the soul to be at war with each other and this leads to injustice. The just city should not allow such poetry in it but only poetry that praises the gods and good humans. Imitative poetry prevents the immortal soul from attaining its greatest reward.

Glaucon wonders if the soul really is immortal. Socrates says it is. Things that are destroyed are destroyed by their own evil, as the body is destroyed by its own evil, disease. The soul’s evils are ignorance, injustice and other vices, but these do not destroy the soul. So the soul is immortal. We can’t understand it if we only discuss it in relation to the body.

Finally, Socrates finally describes the rewards of justice to Glaucon. The gods love the just and hate the unjust; good things come to those whom the gods love. Socrates lists various rewards for the just and punishments for the unjust in this life. He then tells the **Myth of Er** to illustrate reward and punishment in the afterlife. Socrates explains the multiples by which people are punished and rewarded. The souls of the dead are able to choose their next lives and then they are reincarnated. Socrates ends the discussion by prompting Glaucon and the others to do well both in this life and in the afterlife.

Timaeus and Critias

No general account of Plato would be complete without mentioning one of his ideas that has exerted a huge influence, but more on visual art, fiction and cinema than on philosophy—that is, the story of the lost land of Atlantis. This is told in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias* in some of Plato’s most beautiful writing. A priest addressing the wise Athenian Solon speaks to him of a mighty sea power based in a visually beautiful kingdom sacred to Poseidon, ‘which unprovoked made an expedition against the

whole of Europe and Asia... This power came forth out of the Atlantic Ocean, for in those days the Atlantic was navigable; and there was an island situated in front of the straits which are by you called the Pillars of Heracles; the island was larger than Libya and Asia put together... Now in this island of Atlantis there was a great and wonderful empire which had rule over the whole island and several others, and over parts of the continent, and, furthermore, the men of Atlantis had subjected the parts of Libya within the columns of Heracles as far as Egypt, and of Europe as far as Tyrrhenia'. This vast sea power attacked the Greeks, but they fought her off, led by the Athenians. 'But afterwards there occurred violent earthquakes and flood...and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared in the depths of the sea.' Although Plato himself probably dreamt up Atlantis as an entirely fictional metaphor for the Athenian democratic naval empire, which he would have liked to be superseded by a non-naval city-state ruled by philosophers rather than working-class oarsmen, marine archaeologists' search for this lost kingdom under the sea has never ended. Atlantis has also featured in large number of movies ever since the silent era and is familiar to any child with access to the Disney Channel.

Plato's Afterlife

When Plato died, the Academicians selected Speusippus, his nephew, to lead the school, which exerted an enormous influence over the remainder of classical antiquity. The Academy continued in operation for several centuries, although its centre of activities moved to Alexandria. It did enter the cause of paganism against Christianity with the Neo-Platonism of Ammonius and Plotinus, but most early Christian philosophers and St Augustine were Platonists, too; they found Plato's ideas of a higher realm of ideas and the immortality of the soul beautifully compatible. Neo-Platonism was revived in the Italian Renaissance and exerted sustained interest thereafter, especially after Aristotle was dethroned in the Early Modern Period from his primary position in the universities.

Jonathan Swift was an admirer of Plato. He owned two editions of his works and chose the head of Socrates as the image on his personal seal. The *Republic* is central to his political philosophy and use of allegory. Although Socratic ideas permeate his work, especially when he is puncturing pompous Christian dogmas, it is in Book IV.8 of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) that the influence of Platonic epistemology is best revealed. It is difficult for the Houyhnhnm master, a common-sensical equine spokesman of Socratic belief in the distinction between true knowledge and opinion, to comprehend the meaning of the word opinion, or how a point could be disputable; because reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain, and beyond our knowledge we cannot do either. Nearly two centuries later, an Irish admirer of Plato and Swift named Robert Noonan wrote a satire dissecting the false opinions about reality which allowed the oppressive British class system to perpetuate itself. The central trope of *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, published posthumously in 1914 under the pseudonym Robert Tressell, is the Platonic allegory of the cave. The novel narrates a dark, cold winter in the lives of a group of Edwardian workmen renovating a mansion near Hastings known as 'The Cave', and their oppression by capitalist overlords. It analyses their sedation by alcohol and their unthinking reproduction of false ideas required to perpetuate their oppression. Just one worker, a painter and decorator named Frank Owen, has studied socialism and Marxism, and 'has seen the light'—the truth about the economic system. He is as angry with his colleagues for their uncritical regurgitation of the lies they are fed as with their evil exploiters. Tressell uses the Platonic allegory of the Cave to explore the notion of false consciousness. He exposes how people living under an oppressive class system accept the ideology used to maintain it, which is in reality as false as the shadows the Platonic prisoners think are existent objects.

Karl Popper would have taken issue with the socialist use of Platonic epistemology in Tressell's novel. In his rightly famous *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* (1945), Popper linked Plato's *Republic* to the nightmare of Fascist and Communist one-party state. He wrote 'The

Utopian attempt to realise an ideal state, using a blueprint of society as a whole, is one which demands a strong centralised rule of a few, and which is therefore likely to lead to a dictatorship'. For Plato is nothing if not controversial. Nietzsche loathed him, writing in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), 'For heaven's sake, do not throw Plato at me. I am a complete sceptic about Plato. . . Plato is boring. In the end, my mistrust of Plato goes deep: he represents such an aberration from all the basic instincts of the Hellene, is so moralistic, so pre-existently Christian'. One more recent writer who wrestled with his ideas all her life was Iris Murdoch. In *The Fire and the Sun* (1977) she argued against Plato's denunciation of the arts in the *Republic*. But in her novels, especially *The Black Prince* (1973), she shows a consistent fascination with Platonic ethics and models of virtue.

I have sympathies with all these views. I am myself more inclined towards Aristotle's appreciation and analysis of perceptible reality, a philosophical attitude which we will be examining in the next lecture in this series, than to Platonic idealism. I appreciate the Cynic Diogenes' statement that although he can see cups on the table he can't see 'cupness'. I am often exasperated by the manner in which the arguments of the dialogues proceed. I find myself as stumped as Socrates' interlocutors when he announces that the ideal Republic would require getting rid of everyone over the age of ten, while virtually banning any movement between classes and ancestral occupations. I am annoyed when he uses a blatant fiction despite banning poetry and art from the Republic, or when he is rude about the oarsmen of Athens, who, by being the majority of its citizens under the historical democracy, were the executive power in the first great democratic constitution in history. Yet I suspect Plato *wants* to elicit these reactions in order to make me *work* so that I can properly, philosophically, justify holding a contrary position. Part of his genius lies in this spikey, interrogatory relationship with his reader. Plato trains you in argumentation regardless of whether you agree with Socrates' opinions.

So ultimately I cannot help agreeing with the famous conclusion drawn by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in his book *Process and Reality* in 1929: 'The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. His personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience at a great period of civilization, his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization, have made his writing an inexhaustible mine of suggestion'.

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Further Reading

Hobbs, Angie (2019) *Plato's Republic*, illus. Angelo Rinaldi. Ladybird Books.

Kahn, Charles H. (1996) *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*. New York: CUP.

McCabe, Mary Margaret (1994) *Plato's Individuals*. Princeton University Press.

Monoson, S. Sara (2000) *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*. Princeton University Press.

Rowe, Christopher (2009) *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*. CUP.

A.E. Taylor, (2001), *Plato: The Man and His Work*. Dover Books.

Viewing

Roberto Rossellini's movie *Socrates* (1971), which enacts Plato's *Symposium*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, is available with English subtitles if you click the right icon at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SY-mqZbuxBA&t=3133s>

There is an excellent BBC film by Leo Aylen and Jonathan Miller of the same dialogues, originally broadcast in 1966, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6y7_0KuT5E. Leo McKern is an unforgettable Socrates.