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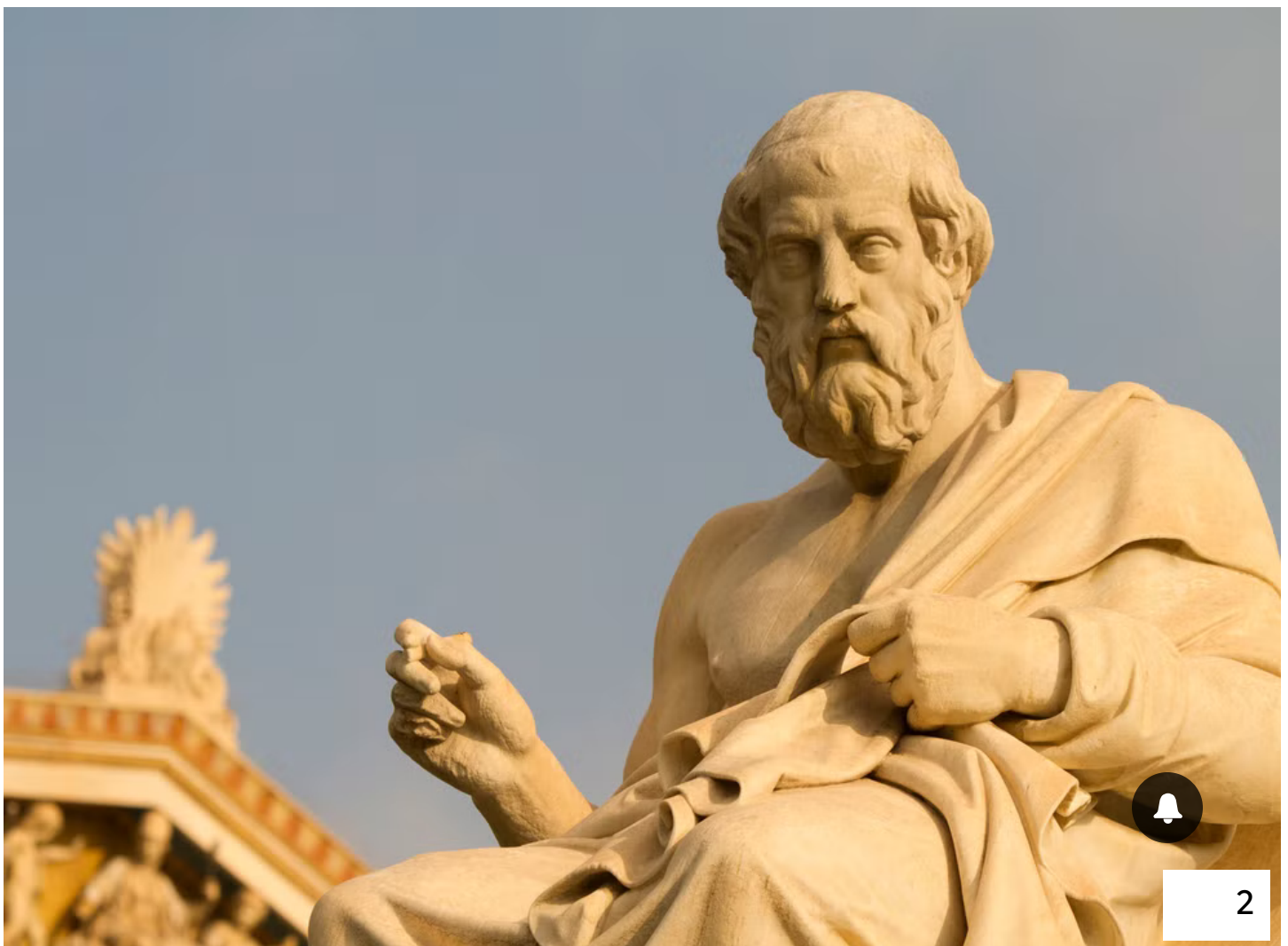
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THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

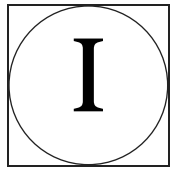
Plato brought philosophical dialogue to perfection

Our series continues with one of the founding fathers... as AN Whitehead remarked – the safest characterisation of western thought is that ‘it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato’

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It is likely that Plato took military service during his life
(Getty/iStock)



It is possible to argue about who is the finest **Renaissance** painter. It is possible to argue in this way about sculptors, **writers**, poets, more or less any sort of artist. However, if the question is who writes the best dialogues, then there is no room for controversy. **Plato** (428–347BC) has no peers.

While it is true that a handful of philosophers have had a stab at writing dialogues, and some such works are of serious philosophical interest, there really is no comparing them to Plato's writings. Plato has the possibly singular distinction of simultaneously inventing and bringing to perfection a kind of art.

It is clear that things might have been different. Plato was probably destined for a career in politics or at least public life. His father, Ariston, was allegedly descended from the last king of Athens. Some sources report that his mother, Perictione, was a relative of the Athenian statesman Solon. When his father died, Plato's mother married a friend of Pericles. Plato had an impressive pedigree, and his family was well connected and wealthy. It is sometimes said that the injustice surrounding the execution of Plato's mentor, **Socrates**, led Plato to reject public life and pursue **philosophy**. We know that Plato and some of his relatives and associates were staunch anti-democrats, and following the fall of the 30 Tyrants, anti-democratic sentiments were not rewarded in Athens. So it is also possible that it was the lack of opportunity for people with his political leanings that kept Plato out of political life. We simply do not know.

Early life

Little is known about much of Plato's life. It is likely that he undertook military service, possibly as a member of the Athenian cavalry in action against Sparta. The image of Plato thundering into battle on horseback is not an easy one to come to grips with, but it is worth remembering "Plato" was a nickname, meaning "broad" or "wide" – a reference to his broad shoulders. So he might have been something of a warrior. His actual name




was Aristocles. But for a nickname that stuck, English might have been lumbered with “Aristoclic relationships”.

“We know that he travelled, probably to Egypt and certainly to Syracuse. Seneca reports that he suffered an illness as a result of his travels late in life, but whether or not this killed him is an open question – it seems unlikely. We also know that he and a few others founded the Academy in 385BC, widely considered the first university but probably nothing of the sort. According to some reports, “The Academy” was actually the name of Plato’s house, and it seems likely that he and only a few like-minded individuals took on a small number of students and offered private tuition. It is not clear that Plato actually lectured there – in his writings, Aristotle, a student at the Academy for 20 years, mentions only the dialogues when considering Plato’s views, as opposed to lectures or discussion. At any rate, the place would have been unlike a modern or even medieval university in nearly all respects. Nevertheless, it did have a remarkable lifespan, continuing for 900 years. That tireless promoter of Christianity, the Roman Emperor Justinian, considered it a pagan institution and saw to it that its doors were finally and permanently closed.



We apply the word ‘blue’ to a variety of things, but how on earth did we learn to do so when we never actually encounter an unambiguous example of blue?

If little reliable information about his life has come down to us, we are staggeringly fortunate in having probably all the dialogues he wrote. They are usually organised into at least three periods, though the precise ordering is a matter of continuing controversy. Socrates is the main figure and hero in most. The so-called early dialogues are thought to reflect the historical Socrates’s own interests, but in the middle and later periods Socrates becomes more and more a mouthpiece for Plato. Nevertheless,  is clear that Socrates casts a very long shadow over Plato, and some of Plato’s most profound insights are attempts to deal with Socratic worries,

or at least worries emerging from Socratic interests.

Defining the virtues

The early dialogues have Socrates searching for definitions of the virtues, motivated by the view that one must know what, for example, justice is before one can hope to act justly. It is worth noting that Socrates never finds an acceptable definition, and it is possible that this raises a difficulty which Plato's middle and later works attempt to answer. Other difficulties, closely connected, probably motivated Plato too. We will have a look at a few of them; for example, our use of a general term like 'blue'.

We apply the word "blue" to a variety of things, but how on earth did we learn to do so when we never actually encounter an unambiguous example of blue? Everything we see is blue and cold or blue and bitter or blue and small: how then did we learn to use the word "blue" in the first place?

Or consider what we take to be our knowledge of something blue, let us say, for instance, my mundane knowledge that my shirt is blue. It is fairly clear that the world around us is constantly changing. My blue shirt will be washed and washed; it will begin to fade, and soon it won't really be the same fetching blue that it is today. I might inadvertently wash it with something else that is not colour fast, something bright orange, in which case my faded shirt will not even be blue at all. Regrettably, in the fullness of time, it won't even be a shirt any more, returning, as all things must, to dust. Two questions arise from all this.

First, as my shirt fades, what standard do we use to say, truly, that it is not as blue as it was? As my shirt falls apart and looks less and less like a shirt (perhaps more and more like a rag), what standard do we use to say, truly, that it is not a shirt any more? Some unchanging standard seems needed to make sense of these judgements, but what could do the job in this changing world?

Second, it seems that a proposition known could never become false. Opinions certainly could change, as do fashions, but if knowledge is possible, the objects of knowledge must themselves be unchanging. If something is known, it is known forever. "Two plus two equals four,"



“Triangles have three sides,” “Bachelors are unmarried, adult males”: all these propositions are true, and they cannot turn out to be false tomorrow. Knowledge, thought Plato, is above the fluctuating vagaries of this imperfect world. How could this be? What ensures that knowledge is fixed, if everything around us is constantly changing?



An engraving from 1894 showing the School of Athens by the medieval artist Raphael (Getty)

The theory of forms

Plato's Theory of Forms is an attempt to deal with all of this, and the solution is radical. He claims that real, mind-independent entities exist – forms of things like Justice, Good, Beauty, Triangle, Blue, Bachelor, and so on for any general term you like. Socratic interviews really do aim at truth; there are definitions; there is knowledge; words can be learnt; standards underpin judgement; all because there are timeless, stable, perfect, unchanging, intelligible things: forms. We can hope for an understanding of justice because, literally, Justice exists.



Although you will not find Justice in this vale of tears, you can find acts, people, events and laws which, in some sense, resemble or share in or participate in the Form Justice – indeed, it is this which makes all such things just. You will never see perfect Justice, only shadowy copies, but you might come to an intellectual grasp of Justice by engaging in Socratic dialectic, which now has objects at which to aim. You cannot really be said to know anything about this imperfect world, but the unchanging Forms make possible genuine knowledge of the Good, the Beautiful, and so on. Perfect standards for judgements exist too: one who grasps the Beautiful, say, will be so much the better judge of the shadowy reflections of Beauty in this world.

The Theory of the Forms gets an awful lot of press, but it is true that it only appears in the middle dialogues, and Plato criticises the view himself in the later dialogues. The best known objection to the theory, the Third Man Argument, runs as follows. Beautiful things in this world are beautiful just in so far as they participate in or resemble the Form of the Beautiful. The Form of the Beautiful, Plato alleges, is itself beautiful. Does this not require some third Form which the Beautiful itself resembles? Socrates and Milo are both men because they resemble something else, the Form Man. But the Form Man must also be a man (or share in manhood), just as the Beautiful itself is beautiful. Does this not require a third thing, a Third Man, which the Form Man must resemble in order for it, too, to be a man? The regress thus initiated looks viscous and infinite.



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The Theory of Forms, whether or not it overcomes this objection, figures in many of Plato's dialogues. Although it might be an oversimplification, some argue that the theory provides him with the groundwork for almost everything else he writes about, and the breadth of Plato's philosophical interests is genuinely astonishing. He formulates a general metaphysical



outlook, a conception of the soul as immortal (and thus able to visit the realm of Forms), a view of learning as recollection, a complex epistemology, a theory of mathematics, an objectivist ethics, a highly detailed and nuanced (if perhaps disturbing) political philosophy, views on society, a theory of mind, a methodology. Think of any of the usual subdivisions of philosophical enquiry, and Plato has a view on at least a part of it.

Plato's importance

AN Whitehead famously remarked that the safest characterisation of western thought is that "it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato". It has been said since that this is an exaggeration, but not an outrageous one. Others find Plato a little wishy-washy, preferring the tough-minded and careful analysis of Aristotle to the allegorical excesses of Plato's dialogues.

Some grumble a little and say they would rather have the beauty of an argument than the beauty of a metaphor. Whatever one makes of the value of Plato's writings, it is clear that they have travelled well. One still smiles and grimaces, agrees and objects, at all the right places, all the places Plato intended when he wrote the dialogues 2,000 years ago. It is difficult to imagine anyone writing today who will be read in AD 4,000. If there is anything like a university around in that distant year, it is sometimes said, we can be certain that Plato will be required reading.

Major works

We probably have all of Plato's dialogues, but we really cannot say when each one was written. The following are among the most important of Plato's works.

– *Republic* is without doubt Plato's masterpiece. It begins with a consideration of the nature of justice and quickly becomes an extended consideration of politics, epistemology, and much else.

– *Symposium* is not representative of the dialogues, containing as it does a series of speeches at a slightly drunken dinner party, rather than the full Socratic debate of most of Plato's other dialogues, but it is among the most beautiful things ever written. It takes as its topic the nature of love.

- *Meno* deals with virtue, knowledge and the relation between them.
- *Parmenides* contains an interesting critique of Plato's Theory of Forms, including the famous Third Man Argument. It is worth reading if only for the opportunity to see Socrates seem to lose an argument.
- *Theaetetus* takes up the topics of knowledge and wisdom. It concludes with some instructive thoughts on the point of Socratic dialectic.



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