

Plato: An Introduction

classmate

Date _____
Page _____

Plato, the most famous disciple of Socrates, was an ancient Greek philosopher of the Classical period who is considered a foundational thinker in Western philosophy and an innovator of the written dialogue and dialectic forms. He influenced all the major areas of theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy, and was the founder of the Platonic Academy, a philosophical school in Athens where Plato taught the doctrines that would later become known as Platonism.

Plato was the son of Ariston and Perictione. His parents were Athenians of distinguished lineage. His relatives were friends of Socrates and through them Plato, as a boy, was introduced to him. It is believed that Plato started his career as a poet but soon after his meeting with Socrates, he destroyed his poems and drama and began to take active interest in philosophy and politics. He wanted to shine in politics but after the execution of Socrates in 399 B.C. he abandoned politics and retired for a time to Megara with other followers of Socrates. In the next twelve years he took active part in many of the Athenian wars and travelled extensively. He visited Egypt, North Africa, Sicily and Italy. In Sicily he met Dionysius I and formed his life long friendship with Dion of Syracuse and the Pythagorean Archytas of Terentum. Because of these friendships he remained involved in Syracuse politics throughout his life. When he was more than eighty years of age, he breathed his last in 347 B.C.

About 387 B.C. Plato founded the Academy in the grove of Academus and for forty years he presided over this institute where he supervised work on philosophy, mathematics, natural sciences, Jurisprudence and practical legislation. In this Academy he worked hard and wrote about twenty-five dialogues and the Apology. Plato's work has been roughly divided in three periods of his life. The first period includes Apology, Laches, Charmides, Euthyphro, Crito, Hippias, minor; the middle

includes Phaedo, Symposium, Republic and the third period includes Sophist, Statesman, Protagoras, Timaeus, Laws.

If the history of European thought is essentially a series of footnotes to Plato's philosophy, the history of criticism may also be likewise considered a series of footnotes to Plato's observations on beauty, art and poetry. Plato had formulated in his Dialogues many of the burning problems in philosophical aesthetic. But sometimes his formulations have been characterized by a rigour of analysis leading him to aesthetic theories unfriendly to poets and rhapsodists. But it must not be forgotten that it was Plato who gave genuine philosophical formulation to aesthetic and critical problems. During the course of philosophical discussions, in several of his Dialogues especially Ion, Symposium, Republic, and Laws, his utterances on literature occur. Although they are no more than scattered references in a bigger context, the profundity of their thought makes them a very important contribution, the first of its kind, to the art of criticism.