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PLATO

427 B.C.-347 B.C.



The ancient Greek philosopher Plato represents the starting point of Western political philosophy, and of much of our ethical and metaphysical thought as well. His speculations on these subjects have been read and studied for over 2,300 years. Plato stands, therefore, as one of the great fathers of Western thought.

Plato was born into a distinguished Athenian family, in about 427 B.C. As a young man, he made the acquaintance of the noted philosopher Socrates, who became his friend and mentor. In 399 B.C., Socrates, then seventy years old, was tried on rather vague charges of impiety and of corrupting the youth of Athens. Socrates was condemned, sentenced to death, and executed. The execution of Socrates—whom Plato calls “the wisest, the justest, and the best of all the men whom I have ever known”—left Plato with an enduring distaste for democratic government.

Not long after the death of Socrates, Plato left Athens and spent the next ten or twelve years in foreign travel. About 387

B.C., he returned to Athens and founded a school there, the Academy, which continued in operation for over nine hundred years. Plato spent most of his remaining forty years in Athens, teaching and writing philosophy. His most famous pupil was Aristotle, who came to the Academy when he was seventeen years old and Plato sixty. Plato died in 347 B.C., at the age of eighty.

Plato wrote thirty-six books, mostly on political and ethical questions, but also on metaphysics and theology. Obviously, it is not possible to summarize these works in a few short sentences. However, at the risk of oversimplifying his thought, I will try to summarize the main political ideas expressed in Plato's most famous book, *The Republic*, which represents his concept of an ideal society.

The best form of government, Plato suggests, is an aristocracy. By this he means not an hereditary aristocracy, or a monarchy, but an aristocracy of merit—that is, rule by the best and wisest persons in the state. These persons should be chosen not by a vote of the citizens, but by a process of co-optation. The persons who are already members of the ruling, or *guardian* class should admit additional persons to their ranks purely on the basis of merit.

Plato believed that all persons, both male and female, should be given the chance to demonstrate their fitness to be members of the guardian class. (Plato was the first major philosopher, and for a long time virtually the only one, to suggest the basic equality of the sexes.) To insure equality of opportunity, Plato advocated the rearing and education of all children by the state. Children should first receive a thorough physical training; but music, mathematics, and other academic disciplines should not be neglected. At several stages, extensive examinations should be given. The less successful persons should be assigned to engage in the economic activity of the community, while the more successful persons should continue to receive further training. This additional education should include not only the normal academic subjects, but also the study of “philoso-

phy," by which Plato means the study of his metaphysical doctrine of ideal forms.

At age thirty-five, those persons who have convincingly demonstrated their mastery of theoretical principles are to receive an additional fifteen years of training, which should consist of practical working experience. Only those persons who show that they can apply their book learning to the real world should be admitted into the guardian class. Moreover, only those persons who clearly demonstrate that they are primarily interested in the public welfare are to become guardians.

Membership in the guardian class would not appeal to all persons. The guardians are not to be wealthy. They should be permitted only a minimal amount of personal property, and no land or private homes. They are to receive a fixed (and not very large) salary, and may not own either gold or silver. Members of the guardian class should not be permitted to have separate families, but are to eat together, and are to have mates in common. The compensation of these philosopher-kings should not be material wealth, but rather the satisfaction of public service. Such, in brief, was Plato's view of the ideal republic.

The Republic has been widely read for many centuries. It should be noted, however, that the political system advocated therein has not been used as the model for any actual civil government. During most of the interval between Plato's day and our own, most European states have been governed by hereditary monarchies. In recent centuries, several states have adopted democratic forms of government; there have also been instances of military rule, or of demagogic tyrannies, such as those of Hitler and Mussolini. None of those forms of government is similar to Plato's ideal republic. Plato's theories have never been adopted by any political party, nor have they formed the basis of a political movement in the way that the theories of Karl Marx have. Should we therefore conclude that Plato's works, though spoken of with respect, have been completely ignored in practice? I think not.

It is true that no civil government in Europe has been pat-

terned directly on Plato's model; nevertheless, there is a striking similarity between the position of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe and that of Plato's guardian class. The medieval Church consisted of a self-perpetuating elite, whose members had all received training in an official philosophy. In principle, all males, regardless of family background, were eligible to enter the priesthood (although females were excluded). In principle, too, the clergy had no families, and it was intended that they should be motivated primarily by concern for their flock, rather than by a desire for self-aggrandizement.

Plato's ideas have also influenced the structure of the United States government. Many members of the American Constitutional Convention were familiar with Plato's political ideas. It was intended, of course, that the United States Constitution would provide a means of discovering and giving effect to the popular will. But it was also intended as a means for selecting the wisest and best persons to govern the nation.

The difficulty in assessing Plato's importance is that his influence through the ages, while broad and pervasive, has been subtle and indirect. In addition to his political theories, his discussions of ethics and metaphysics have influenced many subsequent philosophers. If Plato has been ranked considerably lower than Aristotle on the present list, it is principally because Aristotle was an important scientist as well as a philosopher. On the other hand, Plato has been ranked higher than such thinkers as Thomas Jefferson and Voltaire, because their political writings have so far affected the world for only two or three centuries, while the influence of Plato has endured for over twenty-three centuries.