

# INTRODUCTION

## *Plato*

Plato is traditionally thought to have been born in 428 B.C. and to have died in 348. His father, Ariston, was descended—or so legend has it—from Codrus, the last king of Athens; his mother, Perictione, was related to Solon, the first architect of the Athenian constitution. His family was aristocratic and well off. He had two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, both of whom appear in the *Republic*, and a sister, Potone, whose son, Speusippus, took over as head of the Academy<sup>1</sup> on Plato's death. While Plato was still a boy, his father died and his mother married Pyrilampes, a friend of the great Athenian statesman Pericles. Thus Plato was no stranger to Athenian political life even from childhood. Because he was eighteen in 409, when the Peloponnesian war with Sparta was still in progress, he almost certainly served in the military in that period. He may have served again around 395, when Athens was involved in the so-called Corinthian war.

Given his social class and family connections, it would have been natural for Plato to take a prominent role in Athenian political life. But he did not do this, and, in his *Seventh Letter*, written when he was himself over seventy, he explains why:<sup>2</sup>

As a young man I went through the same experiences as many others. I thought that as soon as I became my own master, I'd devote myself to public affairs. Now, it happened that the course of political events gave me the chance to do just that. The existing constitution came to be reviled by many people, so that a revolution occurred . . . and thirty rulers were set up with supreme powers. Some of these happened to be relatives and friends of mine,<sup>3</sup> and they immediately

called on me to join them, on the assumption that theirs was the sort of work appropriate for someone like me. It's no wonder, since I was a young man, that my feeling was that they would govern the city by leading it from an unjust way of life to a just one, and I was intensely interested to see what would happen. But after a short time, I saw that these men made the former constitution seem like a golden age by comparison. Among other things, they sent my aged friend, Socrates, whom I wouldn't hesitate to call the most just man of his time, along with some others to fetch one of their fellow citizens by force, so that he could be executed.<sup>4</sup> Their purpose was to involve Socrates in their activities, whether he wished it or not. He refused, however, and risked the most extreme penalties rather than take part in their unholy deeds. When I saw all this, and other similarly significant things, I withdrew in disgust from the evils then being practiced. Not long after that the Thirty and their entire constitution were overthrown. Then, once more, but this time more hesitantly, I was moved by the desire to take part in public affairs and politics. To be sure, many offenses continued to take place in those troublesome times as well, and it is hardly surprising that during these revolutions some people took excessive revenge on their enemies. But in general the restored democratic exiles exhibited considerable decency. As it chanced, however, some of those in control summoned our companion Socrates before the law courts and brought a most unholy charge against him, one that he least of all deserved, for they charged him with impiety and the people condemned and put to death the very man who, on the earlier occasion, when they themselves had the misfortune to be exiles, had refused to take part in the arrest of one of their friends. . . . The result was that I, who had at first been full of eagerness for public affairs, when I considered all this and saw how things were shifting about every which way, at last became dizzy. I didn't cease to consider ways of improving this particular situation, however, and, indeed, of reforming the whole constitution. But as far as action was concerned, I kept waiting for favorable moments and finally saw clearly that the constitutions of all actual cities are bad and that their laws are almost beyond redemption without extraordinary resources and luck as well. Hence I was compelled to say in praise of the true philosophy that it enables us to discern what is just for a city or an individual in every case and that the human race will have no respite from evils until those who are really and truly philosophers acquire political power or until, through some divine dispensation,

1. See p. xii below.

2. I assume that the *Seventh Letter* is genuine. But it may have been written by a disciple soon after Plato's death.

3. Plato's uncle Charmides and his cousin Critias were among these rulers, called "the Thirty" or "the Thirty Tyrants." Their reign lasted only about ninety days.

4. The citizen in question was Leon of Salamis. See Plato, *Apology* 32c–e.

those who rule and have political authority in cities become real philosophers (324b–326b).

Thus at the heart of Plato's refusal to participate actively in politics, at the heart of his turn from practical politics to political philosophy and education, we find the enigmatic figure of Socrates.

Philosophy for Socrates seems to have consisted almost entirely in examining people about justice, piety, courage, moderation, wisdom, friendship, and the other conventionally recognized virtues. He is always asking *Ti esti?* or What is it? about each of them. And he seems to presuppose that there are definite, unique answers to these questions, that justice, piety, courage, and the rest are each some definite property or universal—some definite *form*—whose nature can be captured in a unique definition or account (see Plato, *Euthyphro* 6d–e).

Socrates' method of examining is the so-called *elenchus*—we see some examples of it in operation in *Republic* I. Polemarchus defines justice as giving to each the things he is owed (331e). Socrates shows him that this is inconsistent with other things he firmly believes. The result is that Polemarchus modifies his original definition, and again Socrates shows him that the new position is inconsistent with other beliefs he has. In the ideal situation, this process continues until a satisfactory definition emerges, one that is not inconsistent with other firmly held beliefs.

Most of the definitions Socrates encounters in the course of his elenctic examinations of others prove unsatisfactory, but a few doctrines do emerge unscathed. Among them is the quintessentially Socratic doctrine that no one ever does what he knows or believes to be other than the best, so that weakness of will, or acting against what one knows or believes to be best, is impossible (*Protagoras* 352b ff.).

The goal of an *elenchus* is not simply to reach adequate definitions of the virtues or strange doctrines about weakness of will, however; it also has a moral reformatory purpose, for Socrates believes that regular elenctic philosophizing makes people happier and more virtuous than anything else (see Plato, *Apology* 30a, 36c–e, 38a, 41b–c). Indeed, philosophizing is so important for human welfare, on his view, that he is willing to accept execution rather than give it up (29b–d).

It is obvious from the *Republic* that Plato shares Socrates' preoccupation with ethics and with definitions, but it also seems obvious that he soon abandons or significantly modifies Socrates' method of inquiry, as well as some of his specific doctrines. After Book I, for example, the *elenchus* is conspicuous by its absence. And in Book VII, Plato suggests that its use on or by young people may result in their becoming immoral sensualists

(538c ff.). That seems to be one reason why dialectic—which is a descendant of the Socratic *elenchus*—must be practiced only by mature people who have mastered the mathematical sciences (531d ff.). In Book IV, a subtle argument for the tripartition of the psyche or soul seems in part designed to allow for the possibility of some kinds of weakness of will, especially 439e ff. But despite these differences, Plato, like Socrates, is absolutely convinced that philosophy holds the key to human happiness and welfare (see 473c–e, 499a–c).

Socrates was one major influence on Plato, then, perhaps the most important influence of all. But there were others as well. Aristotle tells us, for example, that Plato was acquainted with the Heraclitean philosopher Cratylus “from his youth” (*Metaphysics* 987a32). Now, Cratylus, like his master Heraclitus, believed that “everything flows,” that everything is always changing, always in a state of flux. And a similar doctrine is found in *Republic* V, where sensible things and properties—things and properties perceived by the senses—are described as “rolling around as intermediates between what is not and what purely is” (*Republic* 478a–479d). But whether or not this doctrine is a legacy of Cratylus' tutelage, it left Plato with a difficult problem, for if sensible things and properties are always in flux, how can justice and the other virtues be stable forms? How can there be fixed answers to Socrates' questions? And if there are no fixed answers to them, how can there be such a thing as stable ethical knowledge? It was reflection on these questions, Aristotle tells us, that led Plato to “separate” the forms from sensible things and properties (*Metaphysics* 1078b12–32, 1086b7–11). The allegories of the Sun, Line, and Cave, which divide reality into the intelligible and the visible (sensible), seem to embody this separation. But just what it amounts to is a matter of dispute.

After the death of Socrates, Plato and some other Socratics seem to have taken refuge in Megara with the philosopher Eucleides, who was a follower of Parmenides of Elea. Parmenides' doctrines are notoriously difficult to understand, but he seems to have held that it is impossible to say that something *is not*, for if it really *is not*, how can it *be* there to think or talk about? If we cannot talk or think about what is not, however, then we cannot think or talk about a multiplicity of things, A, B, and C, for if A, B, and C are many, then they are *not* one and the same as each other, and we cannot say or think that. It follows that whatever is must be one. By the same token, what is cannot move or change, for something moves if it is *not* now at a place at which it was earlier (yesterday it was in Athens; today it is *not* in Athens), and something changes if it does *not* now have a property that it had earlier (yesterday it was white; today it is *not* white), and we cannot say or think either of these things. Eucleides seems to have

tried to combine these puzzling doctrines with Socrates' ethical teaching, arguing that the good, god, reason, justice, and the other virtues are all identical to the one unchanging being defended by Parmenides. The resulting metaphysical views find many echoes in Plato's writings, not the least of which is that Platonic forms seem at times to have some of the traits of Parmenidean being (see Plato, *Symposium* 211a–d).

When Plato was around forty, he may have made another journey away from Athens, this time to Italy and Sicily. It seems likely that he did so in order to visit the Pythagorean philosophers living there, especially the philosopher-statesman Archytas of Tarentum, who is mentioned in friendly terms in the *Seventh Letter*. In any case, the dialogues clearly show the influence of Pythagorean doctrine, with its near-obsessive focus on number and ratio as the key to reality. Archytas himself, for example, among many other significant achievements in mathematics and mechanics, discovered the ratios that underlie the relations between the successive notes in the enharmonic, harmonic, and chromatic scales. One can easily imagine Plato seeing in such achievements the possibility of giving precise definitions in wholly mathematical terms of such apparently vague and evaluative notions as harmony and disharmony, beauty and ugliness, maybe even justice and injustice, good and evil, and the other things of which Socrates sought definitions. In any case, the *Republic* itself provides strong evidence that Plato thought that forms could be satisfactorily defined, not in terms of sensible properties, but only in terms of numbers, ratios, and other precise mathematical notions (see 530d–533e).

Plato may have left Italy somewhat intoxicated with the possibilities of using mathematics to help solve philosophical and political problems, but in another way he was sobered by his Italian journey, for he recoiled in horror at the luxury and sensuality of the life there (*Seventh Letter* 326b–d), and, again, the effects of this recoil are palpable in the *Republic* and in many other of Plato's writings.

From Italy Plato travelled to Sicily, where he made ardent friends with Dion, brother-in-law of the ruling tyrant Dionysius I. Dion became, in effect, Plato's pupil and under his influence came to prefer goodness to the pleasure and luxury with which he was surrounded. Exactly what subsequently transpired in Sicily is unclear, as is the precise length of Plato's stay. There is some reason to believe, however, that Plato was expelled by Dionysius and perhaps even sold into slavery by him, only to be rescued from the slave market by a benevolent stranger.

But whatever exactly happened, Plato returned to Athens, bought some land in the precinct of the hero Academus, and there around 385 founded his famous school, the Academy, which lasted until A.D. 529. With some significant interruptions, to which we shall return, Plato spent the remain-

der of his life as director of studies in the Academy (see 528b–c). He is thought to have written the *Republic* there in around 380 B.C.

It is not clear that Plato's school was the first European university—a distinction that some would award to schools supposed to predate it on the Ionian coast of Asia Minor (the birthplace of Heraclitus and Herodotus, among others)—but it is the first of which we have any real knowledge, although that knowledge is far from extensive or detailed. Nonetheless, what evidence we do have makes it clear that the Academy was a center of research both in theoretical subjects and also in more practical ones. Metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics all grew and developed there, as did mathematical science. Eudoxus, who gave a geometrical explanation of the revolutions of the sun, moon, and planets, and developed a general theory of proportion applicable to commensurable and incommensurable magnitudes, studied and taught in the Academy, as did Theaetetus, who developed solid geometry, and Heraclides Ponticus, who discovered the revolution of Venus and Mercury around the sun. But members of the Academy were also invited by a variety of cities—Arcadia, Pyrrha, Cidus, and Stagira are all mentioned—to help them develop new political constitutions. Thus it would be quite wrong to think that Plato and the other academicians perpetually had their heads in the clouds. If this were so, they would hardly have been much use to politicians confronting practical constitutional problems.

One further series of events from Plato's life bears relating. In 368, Dionysius I died, and Dion persuaded his son, Dionysius II, to send for Plato to get his advice on how to run the state. What followed was by all accounts a shambles, for Dionysius II did not want to study mathematics and philosophy in order to become a better ruler. Plato remained in Sicily until 366, when he was allowed to return home. But in 362, to fulfill a promise, he returned to Sicily, where he was kept until 360, at which time he was rescued by ambassadors from Tarentum sent by his friend Archytas.

Plato did not go to Sicily to found a heaven on earth; he was much too hardheaded for that. But he surely thought that he had something to teach Dionysius that would prove of real political significance. Throughout the *Republic*, indeed, he insists that the ideal city he describes is a real possibility that would most easily be realized if a king became a philosopher or a philosopher became a king.<sup>5</sup>

5. For further details about Plato's life and writings see W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 8–66, and G. C. Field, *Plato and His Contemporaries* (New York: Dutton, 1930): 1–48.