

Plato: The Theory of Forms

Life and Times

Whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, we are all more or less Platonists. Even if we reject Plato's conclusions, our views are shaped by the way in which he stated his problems. This applies to poets, politicians, and proles, as well as to technical philosophers. It will be worthwhile, therefore, to study his views; in doing so, we shall better our understanding of ourselves. But in order to understand his theories we must understand the problems that seemed to him important and that he sought to solve. To do this it is necessary to examine the facts that are known about his life.

One of the most significant things about Plato (as indeed about anybody) was the time in which he lived. Born in Athens in 427 B.C., Plato was old enough

to have fought through the last four years of the Peloponnesian War, which grew up in those years of defeat and of that have been described. He must have had the difficulty of "making an adjustment" to face—exaggerated when, as in Plato's case, it was a victorious, home.

Another matter of importance in Plato's family he was born into. Plato could not have been born into a family where on his mother's side he was descended from a family of reformers; on his father's side, from the family of distinguished Athenians. His uncle, Critias, was one of the prominent nobles of the day and leader of the oligarchy.

Political leadership was traditional in Athens. Plato will be seen, was deeply affected by this. In the good old days, a leading political role was played by the nobles. But even by the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, of course," and, during the years of strife, the nobles found themselves at ever greater disadvantage. By the time Plato had reached manhood, the man might begin to think of his political role to him—he could give himself over to the oligarchy or he could join in a plot to overthrow it. The former course involved a compromise which an overscrupulous moral sense rejected. It came at the end of the war, when a group of nobles, the Charmides, set themselves up in power. Plato had a hopeful change from rule by the nobles, but it had led Athens to defeat. But the execution of the oligarchy (called) showed him that the will of the many was stronger. And the savagery of the revolution which overthrew the oligarchy, did nothing to teach him a lesson.

Socrates

What made more impression on Plato was the example of his fate. Something about the extraordinary man, Socrates was over 70 when Plato, who reached manhood in a time of Athens' greatest power and glory, was born. Socrates' victories over the Persians. Socrates

to have fought through the last four or five years of the war with Sparta; he grew up in those years of defeat and of economic, social, and moral dissolution that have been described. He must have experienced the dissatisfaction and the difficulty of "making an adjustment" that the returning veteran seems always to face—exaggerated when, as in Plato's case, it is a return to a defeated, rather than a victorious, home.

Another matter of importance in Plato's life (as in everyone else's) was the family he was born into. Plato could hardly have been "better" born. On his mother's side he was descended from Solon, the great Athenian statesman and reformer; on his father's side, from the god Poseidon, via (naturally) a long line of distinguished Athenians. His uncle, Charmides, and his cousin, Critias, were prominent nobles of the day and leaders of the oligarchical faction.

Political leadership was traditional in his family, and Plato's whole life, as will be seen, was deeply affected by this background of ambition and service. In the good old days, a leading political role would have been his as a matter of course. But even by the beginning of the Peloponnesian War it was no longer a "matter of course," and, during the years of strain and defeat, members of noble families found themselves at ever greater disadvantage in the competition for the electorate's favor. By the time Plato had reached the age when an ambitious young man might begin to think of his political career, only two courses were open to him—he could give himself over to flattery and cajolery of the people, or he could join in a plot to overthrow the democratic regime by a *coup d'état*. The former course involved a compromise of principles that Plato's perhaps overscrupulous moral sense rejected. An opportunity for the latter alternative came at the end of the war, when a number of nobles, including Critias and Charmides, set themselves up in power. This must have seemed to the young Plato a hopeful change from rule by the venal and bungling demagogues who had led Athens to defeat. But the excesses of The Thirty (as the oligarchs were called) showed him that the will of the few is no better per se than the will of the many. And the savagery of the revived democracy, which shortly afterwards overthrew the oligarchy, did nothing to convince him that *it*, for its part, had learned a lesson.

Socrates

What made more impression on Plato than anything else, however, was Socrates and the example of his fate. Something therefore should be said about this extraordinary man. Socrates was over forty years old when Plato was born. Unlike Plato, who reached manhood in a time of defeat, he had grown up during the period of Athens' greatest power and success—the half-century following the victories over the Persians. Socrates was a contemporary of Thucydides and a