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Plato

Edward Moore

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A Note on the Author

Edward Moore is Executive Editor of *Theandros: An Online Journal of Orthodox Christian Theology and Philosophy* (www.theandros.com), and serves as Dean of the Philosophy Department, St. Elias School of Orthodox Theology (Nebraska). His published works include studies of Origen of Alexandria, St. Maximus the Confessor, Plotinus, Gnosticism, and Plato.

Chapter 1: Life and Times

Plato (427-347 B.C.), whose original name was Aristocles,¹ was born into one of the most distinguished aristocratic families of Athens. His father, Ariston, was a descendant of Codrus and the old kings of Attica. Perictione, his mother, traced her lineage to a relative of Solon, and was a sister of Charmides and cousin of Critias (both of whom appear in Plato's *Dialogues*).² Charmides and Critias were conservative politicians and members of the oligarchic "Thirty" who opposed the democratic movement in Athens. Charmides, the more controversial of the two, roused the ire of the democrats by reportedly taking part in the mutilation of the sacred statues of Hermes, and by parodying the "Olympian mysteries" in his home (these were considered acts of political provocation, for which Charmides was officially accused).³ Critias rose to prominence among the oligarchic faction, and became a leader of the Thirty Tyrants, which eventually overthrew democratic leadership and, by way of a bloody revolt in which some fifteen hundred Athenians were put to death and even more expelled,⁴ ushered in a brief period of dictatorship in Athens. After nearly eight months, and with help from Sparta, democratic leadership was restored. In the aftermath, Plato's beloved teacher Socrates, who had associated himself with Critias, Charmides and others of the oligarchic faction, was 'tried and convicted, under the new democracy, of not recognising the gods of the city and of corrupting the young men.'⁵ This event, perhaps more than any other, made an indelible impression on Plato's life and thought.

1 He acquired the nickname Plato (*Platôn*) due to the 'breadth (*platutês*) of his eloquence, or else because he was very wide (*platus*) across the forehead, as Neanthes affirms' (Diogenes Laertius 3.4.8–9, tr. Yonge).

2 Diogenes Laertius, 3.1 ff.

3 Andocides, *De mysteriis* 16.

4 Aeschines, *De falsa legatione* 77; Xenophon, *Hellenica* 2.4.1.

5 T. H. Irwin (1992), 60.

Plato had two brothers, Adeimantus and Glaucon, who figure prominently in his dialogue the *Republic*. From that work, we get the impression that Adeimantus was a rather restrained and quiet young man, lacking any real zeal for philosophical investigations. Glaucon, on the other hand, is portrayed as an aspiring young politician, idealistic, of keen intelligence, and skilled in debate. Ariston, his father, died when Plato was still quite young; Perictione, his mother, re-married, this time to her uncle Ppyrilampes, who led a rather tumultuous life as a young man. At one point he was placed on trial for murder, with no less than Pericles as his accuser (indicating that this alleged murder had political implications).¹ He was acquitted of the charge, later befriended Pericles, and eventually settled down to the quiet life of a gentleman on his country estate, where he spent his time raising prize peacocks – a pursuit for which he gained some distinction.²

Plato spent his early years amidst the trappings of aristocratic elegance, ‘in a house where interest in literature and philosophy was a matter of tradition.’³ It is likely that he received the customary training in gymnastics, and that he was expected to pursue a political career. However, as a youth Plato was more interested in poetry than politics, composing epigrams and even a tragedy, which he reportedly consigned to the flames after hearing Socrates for the first time.⁴ ‘His description in the *Republic* (VI. 493c–494e) of the talented young man, brought up in a rich and distinguished circle and who resists the inducements of his relatives and rejects the career which they propose in order to devote himself to philosophy, is obviously autobiographical.’⁵ We know that Plato was acquainted with the earlier philosophical tradition collectively called the Pre-Socratic, and that he studied with the Heraclitean philosopher Cratylus, after whom he titled one of his most important dialogues. However, it is by far the teaching and example of Socrates that had the most influence on Plato as a philosopher.

Through Socrates, Plato came to focus his thought on moral and ethical issues – virtue (*aretê*) – especially as these came to bear upon the political situ-

1 Alban D. Winspear (1956), 162.

2 Plutarch, *Pericles* 13.15.

3 Eduard Zeller (1955), 133.

4 Some fragments of Plato’s epigrams and his attempted tragic play survive. E. Diehl, ed., *Anthologia Lyrica Graeca*, third edition (Leipzig: 1949) 102–110; B. Snell, ed., *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: 1971) 186.

5 Zeller, 133.

ation affecting Athens at that time. '[Plato] grew to manhood in the twilight of a democratic experiment, at a time when even democracy's own adherents were falling away and finding ever less hope in the system.'¹ In the midst of the chaos, Socrates called for a government led by men who were virtuous and competent, i.e., self-reflective individuals who knew and governed their own souls properly before attempting to govern others. Socrates attempted to force his listeners to call into question their own beliefs, often firmly held and well-nigh unshakeable, while himself professing only that he knew nothing. The method he employed was a style of questioning aimed at revealing the inner inconsistencies and contradictions of many traditional beliefs, for example, about the nature of the gods, justice, happiness, etc. Since this style of questioning involved a give-and-take between two conversants (ideally without the questioner leading, in any way, the one being questioned), it was called in Greek *dialektikê*, dialectic.

The famous motto of the Socratic philosophy is: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'² Plato, however, was not content with simply questioning our basic morality and finding the key to living a virtuous life (as noble as such a quest is); he was also interested in discovering the very foundations of existence, not only of human beings, but of the cosmos, indeed, of *Being*. His early interest in poetry inspired in him an indefatigable love of unity, harmony and proportion, and he sought to understand the universe and all things in it based upon the human soul's natural attraction to beauty. As Winspear has aptly observed: 'Much of Plato's insight is due to the artist in him rather than the logician. It is the artist which gives him a sense of the artistic whole, of unity, harmony, and proportion. In short, an appreciation of the aesthetic side of Plato is vital to a grasp of both him and his work.'³

After the execution of Socrates, and likely out of concern for his own safety, Plato travelled to Megara, where he associated with a group of Pythagorean philosophers headed by Euclides. From there, he broadened his intellectual horizons with trips to Cyrene to visit the mathematician Theodorus; he travelled to southern Italy and Sicily to spend time with the Pythagoreans there, notably Philolaus; and finally to Egypt. If the account of Diogenes Laertius is accurate,

1 Winspear (1956), 163.
 2 Plato, *Apology* 38a.
 3 Winspear, 171.

Plato made the acquaintance of Egyptian priests, from whom he learned much of the antiquities and traditions of that ancient culture.¹ Diogenes also tells us that Plato desired to visit the Magi, but was unable to do so because of the wars in Asia at the time.²

While in Sicily, Plato befriended Dion, the son-in-law of Dionysius I, ruler of Syracuse. It was at this time that Plato made the first of his ill-fated attempts to reform the government of that city, which at the time was a flourishing commercial centre on par with Athens. The presence of other followers of Socrates, specifically Aeschines and Aristippus, in the Syracusan court, coupled with Dion's openness to Plato's political ideas, led Plato to believe that he could effect a change in the style of rule of the "tyrant" Dionysius I.³ To no avail: Plato succeeded only in angering the ruler, who responded by arranging for his demise. One account is that Dionysius had Plato sold into slavery,⁴ the other, that the tyrant arranged for his capture at sea.⁵ In any event, Plato found himself in the slave market in Aegina, where he was rescued by his friend Anniceris of Cyrene. Upon his return to Athens in 387, Plato began to teach philosophy in the sacred grove of the legendary hero Academus, for which his school came to be known as the Academy.

After the death of Dionysius I, Plato travelled again to Sicily, in the hope of leading the young Dionysius II, with the aid of Dion, to the philosophical life, and thereby bring about the political reforms that he had failed to enact under the young man's father. After some initial success in introducing Dionysius II to philosophy and mathematics, the situation soon deteriorated, and Plato beat a retreat to Athens. It was likely at this time that he began his longest work, the *Laws*. Plato never succeeded in putting his political theories into practice. He did return once more to Sicily, but only to help in bringing about the recall of his friend Dion from exile. The remainder of his life was spent in Athens, teaching and developing his philosophy in speech and written word until his death.

1 See, for example, Plato, *Timaeus* 21e–25d.

2 Diogenes Laertius 3.6–3.7.

3 Plato, *Letter VII*. 326b ff.

4 Diogenes Laertius 3.18–21; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 15.7.

5 Plutarch, *Dion* 5.