

Athenian democracy had only been restored in 401 BC, after a period of over thirty years that had seen humiliating defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War and the imposition of rule by the Spartan-backed 'Thirty Tyrants', who murdered so many Athenian citizens that they lasted in power for just a year. Perhaps understandably, the city's new leaders were not too kindly disposed towards someone who seemed to take such delight in pointing out where they were going wrong, especially as that someone had formerly been the teacher of one of the leading tyrants.

When it came to his trial, Socrates was not to be deflected from his objective intellectual stance. He was given the option of paying a fine instead of facing the death sentence, but turned it down; he was then offered the chance to escape from prison through bribery, but rejected it. His reasoning was that, no matter what the outcome, a citizen should always obey the laws of the state. And so, having lived uncompromisingly for philosophy, in the end he drank hemlock and died for it.

#### THE ACADEMY AWARDS

Plato set up his school for philosophers in a grove dedicated to the hero Akademos, which explains why it came to be known as the Academy, which in turn explains why scholarly types are known as academics.



## Plato

(427–347 BC)

#### WISE WORDS:

'Philosophy begins in wonder.'

— *Theaetetus*

Born in Athens into an aristocratic family, Plato seems to have been destined for a life in politics before he became a student of Socrates, about whose trial and subsequent death he later wrote. Disillusioned by these events, Plato left Athens in 399 BC and travelled in Greece and Egypt, southern Italy and Sicily. By around 387 BC he was back in Athens, however, and it is here that he established the Academy, which some have called the first university. It was a place for philosophical, mathematical and scientific study with the aim of improving political life in Greek cities, and Plato presided over it for the rest of his life. Most of his works have come down to us in the form of conversations, referred to as dialogues, between Socrates and a range of other people. Since Plato himself never features, we can quite safely assume that he shared the opinions of his teacher.

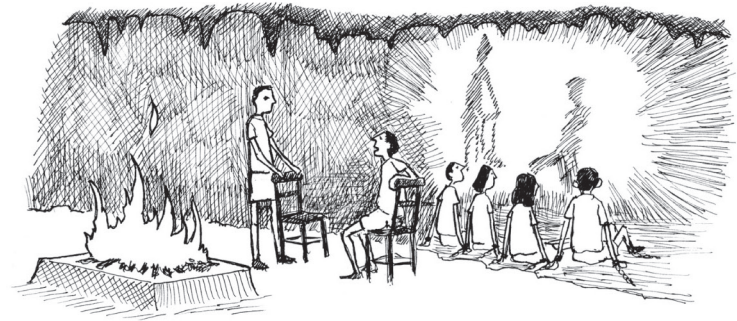
In the early dialogues, Socrates attempts to tease out definitions of moral virtues by grilling individuals about their beliefs: so, for example, he discusses piety with Euthyphro, an expert on religion, and courage with Laches, a general, in the dialogues that bear their names. And he goes at his task in such a rigorous, relentless way that their initially confident assertions are disman-

tled step by step, revealed as being riddled with inconsistencies, and everyone, Socrates included, ends up bamboozled. Which might have been a satisfying intellectual exercise for Socrates, but no doubt drove everyone else mad.

The middle dialogues – among them *Phaedo* (a discussion of Socrates' death, which leads on to talk of immortality) and *The Republic* (considerations of justice as regards the individual and the state) – display a more positive, constructive approach. Here Plato outlines a number of important ideas: that the soul is immortal and consists of three parts (one that seeks to satisfy basic appetites, one that responds to active qualities such as courage, and one that is represented by the intellect); that knowledge is actually recollection of a time before our immortal soul was imprisoned in our body; and that the changing material world of objects (pale shadows we recognize only by perception, opinion or belief) masks the eternal reality of forms, which exist beyond most people's understanding. Perfect and ideal, these forms are the ultimate goal of knowledge.

The famous allegory of the cave is to be found in *The Republic*. Here Socrates (via Plato) describes humans as prisoners who have been chained all their life in a cave, able to perceive the world only via shadows cast on the wall in front of them by the light of a fire behind them. In other words, they see shadows rather than reality; indeed, the shadows *are* their reality. The philosopher's role in society is to leave the cave and finally see the world for what it is.

As for the soul, again, the philosopher will be able to keep all three parts in harmony, not allowing any one to dominate. And the same can be said of society, for Plato equates the three parts of



the soul with the three classes of society: rulers, soldiers and the common people. For there to be a just society, each class must keep to its own sphere, with the ruler immersing himself in philosophy to aid him in his task – though when Plato twice attempted to put his theories into practice in Syracuse in the 360s BC, instructing Dionysius II on how to become a philosopher-king, he became entangled in a political feud and was soon back in Athens.

The later dialogues backtrack on the business of forms and instead delve more deeply into concepts of knowledge, revisit the ideal republic and explore the natural world via physics and chemistry, physiology and medicine.

Plato's Academy continued to exist until AD 529, when it was closed by the Emperor Justinian in an attempt to suppress pagan Hellenistic culture, but his ideas did not disappear. Plato is certainly still seen as the person who introduced the philosophical argument as we think of it today, while the range and depth of his interests have never been surpassed. As Alfred North Whitehead pointed out in *Process and Reality*, 'The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.'