



# **Lectures on the History of Philosophy**

## **Plato and the Platonists**

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Translated by E. S. Haldane  
and Frances H. Simson

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## SECTION ONE

### Chapter III—

#### First Period, Third Division:

#### Plato and Aristotle

The development of philosophic science as science, and, further, the progress from the Socratic point of view to the scientific, begins with Plato and is completed by Aristotle. They of all others deserve to be called teachers of the human race.

A—

#### Plato

Plato, who must be numbered among the Socratics, was the most renowned of the friends and disciples of Socrates, and he it was who grasped in all its truth Socrates' great principle that ultimate reality lies in consciousness, since, according to him, the absolute is in thought, and all reality is Thought. He does not understand by this a one-sided thought, nor what is understood by the false idealism which makes thought once more step aside and contemplate itself as conscious thought, and as in opposition to reality; it is the thought which embraces in an absolute unity reality as well as thinking, the Notion and its reality in the movement of science, as the Idea of a scientific whole. While Socrates had comprehended the thought which is existent in and for itself, only as an object for self-conscious will, Plato forsook this narrow point of view, and brought the merely abstract right of self-conscious thought, which Socrates had

raised to a principle, into the sphere of science. By so doing he rendered it possible to interpret and apply the principle, though his manner of representation may not be altogether scientific.

Plato is one of those world-famed individuals, his philosophy one of those world-renowned creations, whose influence, as regards the culture and development of the mind, has from its commencement down to the present time been all-important. For what is peculiar in the philosophy of Plato is its application to the intellectual and supersensuous world, and its elevation of consciousness into the realm of spirit. Thus the spiritual element which belongs to thought obtains in this form an importance for consciousness, and is brought into consciousness; just as, on the other hand, consciousness obtains a foothold on the soil of the other. The Christian religion has certainly adopted the lofty principle that man's inner and spiritual nature is his true nature, and takes it as its universal principle, though interpreting it in its own way as man's inclination for holiness; but Plato and his philosophy had the greatest share in obtaining for Christianity its rational organization, and in bringing it into the kingdom of the supernatural, for it was Plato who made the first advance in this direction.

We must begin by mentioning the facts of Plato's life. Plato was an Athenian, born in the third year of the 87th Olympiad, or, according to Dodwell, Ol. 87, 4 (B.C. 429), at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, in the year in which Pericles died. He was, according to this, thirty-nine or forty years younger than Socrates. His father, Ariston, traced his lineage from Cadrus; his mother, Perictione, was descended from Solon. The paternal uncle of his mother was the celebrated Critias, who was for a time among the associates of Socrates, and who was the most talented and brilliant, but also the most dangerous and obnoxious, of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens (*supra*, Vol. I. p.

421). Critias is usually represented by the ancients as an atheist, with the Cyrenaic Theodorus and Diagoras of Melos; Sextus Empiricus (adv. Math. IX. 51-54) has preserved to us a fine fragment from one of his poems. Sprung from this noble race, and with no lack of means for his culture, Plato received from the most highly esteemed of the Sophists an education in all the arts which were then thought to befit an Athenian. In his family he was called Aristocles; it was only later that he received from his teacher the name of Plato. Some say that he was so styled because of the breadth of his forehead; others, because of the richness and breadth of his discourse; others again, because of his well-built form.<sup>1</sup>

In his youth he cultivated poetry, and wrote tragedies—very much like young poets in our day—also dithyrambs and songs. Various specimens of the last are still preserved to us in the Greek anthology, and have as subject his various loves; we have amongst others a well-known epigram on a certain Aster, one of his best friends, which contains a pretty fancy, found also in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

"To the stars thou look'st, mine Aster,  
O would that I were Heaven,  
With eyes so many thus to gaze on thee."<sup>2</sup>

In his youth he had every intention of devoting himself to politics. He was brought by his father to Socrates when in his twentieth year, and enjoyed intimate friendship with him for eight years. It is related that Socrates dreamt on the preceding night that he had a young swan perched on his knees, whose wings quickly developed, and which then flew up to heaven, singing the sweetest songs. Many such incidents are mentioned by the ancients, and they bear witness to the deep reverence and love with which

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<sup>1</sup> Diog. Laërt. III. 1–4 (Tennemann, Vol. I. p. 416; II. p. 190).

<sup>2</sup> Diog. Laërt. III. 5, 29.



both contemporaries and those of later times regarded the calm dignity of Plato, and that loftiness of demeanour which he combined with extreme simplicity and lovableness, traits of character which won for him the name of "the divine." Plato did not content himself with the society and wisdom of Socrates, but studied in addition the older philosophers, particularly Heraclitus. Aristotle (Met. I. 6) states that Plato, before he ever came to Socrates, associated with Cratylus, and had been initiated into the doctrines of Heraclitus. He also studied the Eleatics, and very particularly the Pythagoreans, and he frequented the society of the most noted Sophists. Thus deeply immersed in Philosophy, he lost his interest in poetry and politics, and gave them up altogether, that he might devote himself entirely to scientific pursuits. He fulfilled, like Socrates, his term of military service as an Athenian citizen, and is said to have taken part in three campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

We have already mentioned (Vol. I. p. 448) that, after Socrates was put to death, Plato, like many other philosophers, fled from Athens, and betook himself to Euclides at Megara. Leaving Megara before long, he travelled first to Cyrene in Africa, where he turned his attention specially to mathematics, under the guidance of the celebrated mathematician Theodorus, whom he introduces as taking part in several of his dialogues. Plato himself soon attained to high proficiency in mathematics. To him is attributed the solution of the Delian or Delphic problem, which was proposed by the oracle, and, like the Pythagorean dogma, has reference to the cube. The problem is, to draw a line the cube of which will be equal to the sum of two given cubes. This requires a construction through two curves. The nature of the tasks then set by the oracles is very curious; on this particular occasion application had been made to the oracle

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<sup>1</sup> Plat. Epist. VII., p. 324–326 (p. 428–431); Diog. Laërt. III., 5, 6, 8.

in a time of pestilence, and it responded by proposing an entirely scientific problem; the change indicated in the spirit of the oracle is highly significant. From Cyrene Plato went to Italy and Egypt. In Magna Græcia he made the acquaintance of the Pythagoreans of that day, Archytas of Tarentum, the celebrated mathematician, Philolaus and others; and he also bought the writings of the older Pythagoreans at a high price. In Sicily he made friends with Dion. Returning to Athens, he opened a school of Philosophy in the Academy, a grove or promenade in which stood a gymnasium, and there he discoursed to his disciples.<sup>1</sup> This pleasure-ground had been laid out in honour of the hero Academus, but Plato was the true hero of the Academy who did away with the old significance of the name, and overshadowed the fame of the original hero, whose place he so completely took that the latter comes down to after ages only as connected with Plato.

Plato's busy life in Athens was twice interrupted by a journey to Sicily, to the Court of Dionysius the younger, ruler of Syracuse and Sicily. This connection with Dionysius was the most important, if not the only external relation into which Plato entered; it had, however, no lasting result. Dion, the nearest relative of Dionysius, and other respected Syracusans, his friends, deluded themselves with vain hopes regarding Dionysius. He had been allowed by his father to grow up almost without education, but his friends had instilled into him some notion of and respect for Philosophy, and had roused in him a desire to make acquaintance with Plato. They hoped that Dionysius would profit greatly by his intimacy with Plato, and that his character, which was still unformed, and to all appearance far from unpromising, would be so influenced by Plato's idea of the constitution of a true state, that this might, through him, come to be realized in Sicily. It was partly

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<sup>1</sup> Diog. Laërt. III., 6, 7, 9, 18–21; Plat. Epist. VII., p. 326, 327 (p. 431–433).