

History 101



Plato

Plato (428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 BC) was an Athenian philosopher during the Classical period in Ancient Greece, founder of the Platonist school of thought, and the Academy, the first institution of higher learning in the Western world.

He is widely considered the pivotal figure in the history of Ancient Greek and Western philosophy, along with his teacher, Socrates, and his most famous student, Aristotle. Plato has also often been cited as one of the founders of Western religion and spirituality. The so-called Neoplatonism of philosophers like Plotinus and Porphyry influenced Saint Augustine and thus Christianity.

Plato was the innovator of the written dialogue and dialectic forms in philosophy. Plato is also considered the founder of Western political philosophy. His most famous contribution is the theory of Forms known by pure reason, in which Plato presents a solution to the problem of universals known as Platonism. He is also the namesake of Platonic love and the Platonic solids.

His own most decisive philosophical influences are usually thought to have been along with Socrates, the pre-Socratics Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Parmenides, although few of his predecessors' works remain extant and much of what we know about these figures today derives from Plato himself. Unlike the work of nearly all of his contemporaries, Plato's entire body of work is believed to have survived intact for over 2,400 years. Although their popularity has fluctuated over the years, the works of Plato have never been without readers since the time they were written.

Plato may have travelled in Italy, Sicily, Egypt and Cyrene. Said to have returned to Athens at the age of forty, Plato founded The Academy, which operated until it was destroyed by Lucius Cornelius Sulla in 84 BC.

Throughout his later life, Plato became entangled with the politics of the city of Syracuse. Dionysius's brother-in-law, Dion of Syracuse, became one of Plato's disciples, but the tyrant himself turned against Plato. Plato almost faced death, but he was sold into slavery. Then Anniceris bought Plato's freedom and sent him home. According to Seneca, Plato died at the age of 81 on the same day he was born. A variety of sources have given accounts of his death. One story suggests Plato died in his bed, whilst a young Thracian girl played the flute to him. Another tradition suggests Plato died at a wedding feast. According to Tertullian, Plato simply died in his sleep.

