

CHAPTER 23

66 PLATO AND
ARISTOTLE

TWO PHILOSOPHERS

PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

The philosopher Socrates didn't write down any of the question-and-answer sessions for which he was well known. Almost everything we know about him comes from his pupil, Plato. Plato carried on his great teacher's tradition and extended parts of it. He believed that souls were immortal and once had known all the truths. But somehow, in the process of getting born and growing up, people forget all the truths they once knew. So it is the teacher's job to help the students recall the things that they have forgotten.



Socrates rubs his chin thoughtfully as his student Plato leans against a tree during a discussion. Plato carried on the teaching tradition of Socrates and was Aristotle's teacher.

Plato carried on another practice of Socrates: he also taught young men. His best-known pupil was Aristotle. Aristotle moved to Athens just so he could study with this famous man. He was Plato's student for twenty years. Try to imagine having the same teacher for that long. Plato called him "the intellect of the school."

Aristotle and Plato had very different ideas about the nature of reality and how people could learn about it. Aristotle believed in the importance of direct observation and was interested in every branch of science. He wrote a lot about animals and was very happy when he was living by the sea because it gave him a good opportunity to observe fish.

Plato, on the other hand, based his view of the world on reason and logic. But both he and Aristotle must have been very open-minded about each others' ideas, since they stayed together at the school Plato founded, the Academy, for so long.

After Plato died, Aristotle wandered around the Greek world, teaching and doing research. King Philip of Macedon heard about this great thinker and had him come to his court to be the private teacher of his son Alexander. Alexander appreciated his teacher's interest in science and later on, as he led his armies across Asia, he ordered newly discovered animals and plants to be sent to Aristotle.

Aristotle eventually returned to Athens and started his own school, known as the Lyceum. There he assigned his pupils to write the histories of the constitutions of 158 Greek states. (The only one that survives is the one for Athens.) This is exactly the way Aristotle liked to investigate the world. You want to know how states should be run? Go out and do as much research as you can.

Plato was different. For Plato, reason (not research) was the guide. So instead of examining the governments of societies around him, he decided to use his imagination to leave the real world and come up with an ideal state.

Think about inventing your own country, with its own laws (made up by you) and its own rulers. You could decide how cities are laid out, what the schools are like, how families

SYLLOGISMS

Just because Aristotle was firmly committed to the importance of research doesn't mean that he rejected using logic to figure out how things work. One of Aristotle's main contributions to philosophy was a form of reasoning called the syllogism. His definition is: "A syllogism is an argument in which certain things being assumed, something different from the things assumed follows from necessity by the fact that they are held."

Perfectly clear, right? Maybe not. An example will help.

Tweety is a bird. All birds have feathers. Therefore Tweety must have feathers.

Or: Paris is in France. France is in Europe. Therefore Paris is in Europe.

So if you combine two facts that you know, you may come up with a third statement that tells you new information or confirms an idea.



In 1509 the great Italian painter Raphael united the most famous Greek philosophers in his huge painting *The School of Athens*. Plato and Aristotle stand in the middle—Plato points to the heavens to symbolize his ideas about the ideal; Aristotle, with his hand stretched out, indicates the earth.

are regulated, how children are raised, how much people get paid for different jobs, what is the right punishment for each crime—you name it, you decide it.

What would you name your country? You might name it after yourself. Or, since it exists only in your mind, you could call it “nowhere-land.” An English writer in the 16th century did just that when he called his imaginary country “Utopia,” from the Greek *ou*, meaning “not,” and *topos*, meaning “place.” Ever since then, many people have called an imaginary ideal place “a Utopia.”

Plato wrote a book called the *Republic* to describe his Utopia. His ideal state has many similarities to the Athenian

polis. It's also not surprising that a man born in Athens at the height of its powers should think of the *polis* as the best thing going. He just needed to perfect it.

The *Republic* is a long dialogue. Its main character is named Socrates, but many of the arguments and thoughts are Plato's own.

Plato discusses all sorts of ideas in the *Republic*, starting with the idea of justice. The different characters come up with different definitions of the word, and each time Socrates points out something wrong with it.

For instance, one man says that helping your friends and harming your enemies is always just. Socrates points out three flaws with this argument: First, it's sometimes hard to tell who is really your friend and who is your enemy. Second, you're going to have to live with your enemies after you harm them. In any kind of society, and especially in a democracy where people are supposed to work together, being surrounded by people who have been harmed is not as good as being surrounded by people who haven't, enemies or not. And lastly, hurting other people damages your soul.

Eventually, the speakers decide that this issue is too complex to settle. Socrates suggests that in order to understand such a huge question as the nature of justice, it would be best to imagine an ideal, perfectly just state and see how that would work. Maybe that would lead them to a better understanding of the term "justice."

Socrates finally gets general agreement that a just state is one where each individual fills the role for which nature intended him or her. And that is the basis of the ideal state described in the *Republic*.

The people of the ideal state would be divided into three classes: the Guardians (who govern), the Auxiliaries (basically, the military), and everybody else.

Who would be at the top? Plato said that people who choose not to participate in government pay a price: living under the rule of people who are worse than they. Naturally, people would prefer to live under the best rulers. But how do you figure out who those best rulers are? Not surprisingly, Plato thought philosophers would do the best job, saying,

ATLANTIS: FACT OR FICTION

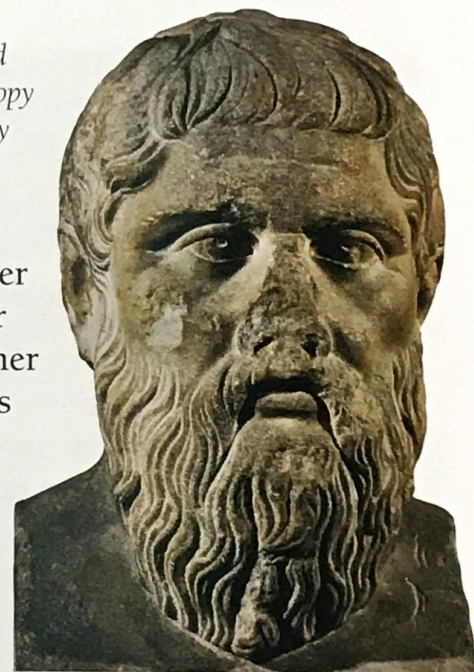
The *Republic* wasn't Plato's only Utopia. He also wrote about an island-kingdom called Atlantis. This land, he says, was beautiful and prosperous. It was ruled by the descendants of Poseidon, who married its princess. The islanders dug precious metals out of the ground with ease and were surrounded by both domestic and wild animals for food. Crops grew practically on their own.

The Atlanteans ruled wisely, dividing the island into easily-governed sections. They had, says Plato, control of the whole Mediterranean area. The ten kings supplied soldiers for the army. Their cities were filled with glittering temples and beautiful public buildings.

But "in a single day and night," Plato says in *Timaeus*, "there occurred violent earthquakes and floods; . . . and the island of Atlantis . . . disappeared in the depths of the sea."

Some people think that Atlantis actually existed, but most scholars and historians look on it as another Utopia.

People all over the Mediterranean world were fascinated by Plato. This Roman copy of a Greek bust was found (and probably made) in Turkey.



“ Plato, *Republic*, early fourth century BCE

There can be no hope either for our *poleis* or indeed for the human race unless either philosophers become kings in our *poleis* or the people we now call kings and rulers start taking the pursuit of philosophy seriously.

The Guardians were to be trained in philosophy. So their education was obviously very important. In their childhood, their caregivers should be cautious about which stories they tell them so as not to upset them or harm their minds. Socrates explains to Plato's brother Glaucon:

“ Plato, *Republic*, early fourth century BCE

IT'S ALL ACADEMIC

Aristotle's Lyceum was very famous. In fact, “lyceum” became the word that some cultures use when they talk about high school. The French word for high school is *lycée* and the Italian word is *liceo*. And Plato's school was located in groves sacred to legendary Greek hero named Academus, which has given us the word “academy.”

“Well, then,” I said, “are we going to just go ahead and let our children listen to any stories their teachers may tell them, given that this means they run the risk of absorbing ideas opposite to those we think it desirable for them to have when they grow up?”

“We certainly won't allow that.”

“We'll have to begin then by monitoring the people who make up stories, giving the stamp of approval to the stories we like and withholding it from the ones we reject. And we'll encourage nannies and mothers to tell the children the stories that make the cut, and we'll try to persuade them to focus on the advantages these stories bring to the soul more on those that the rubbing of the limbs brings to the body. . . . We shall never mention the battles of the giants . . . and we'll keep quiet about all those other quarrels between the gods and heroes and their friends and relations. We want them to believe us when we say that quarreling is unholy, and that never up

to this time have there been any quarrels between citizens.”

The Guardians would, of course, investigate the nature of beauty, truth, wisdom, and the other things the philosophers found so intriguing.

Since the Guardians were not elected, but were born into their roles, obviously the ideal state in the *Republic* wasn't a democracy. It was a brand new kind of state. For one thing, Plato thought that both men and women could be Guardians. Aristotle thought that the family structure had the man at the top and that women (and slaves and children) couldn't think very clearly. He was shocked by Plato's revolutionary idea.

Plato dismissed democracy as “an agreeable kind of disorder, full of variety and handing out a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.” Some people think that Plato was so angry with the way the democratic process had killed his beloved teacher Socrates that he became anti-democratic, despite Socrates' belief that by accepting his punishment, he was supporting democracy.



Aristotle appears lost in thought, as befits a philosopher.

A Man of Strong Opinions

In his Politics, Aristotle was very critical of his teacher's ideas about the joint rule of men and women. He makes a point of saying that Plato and Socrates were

Wrong to say that excellence was the same for a woman as for a man. Excellence in men, for example, is shown in connection with ruling, but excellence in a woman is shown in connection with obeying.