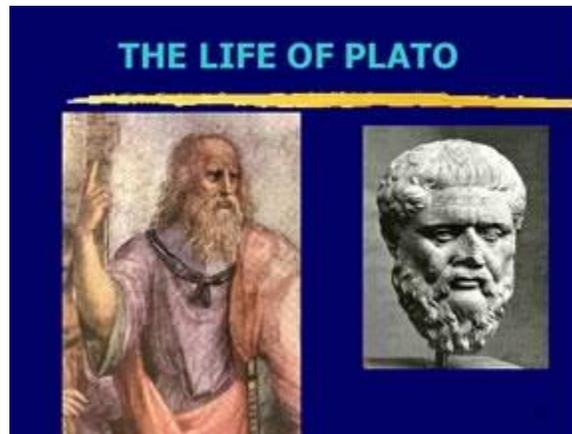


# The lives of Plato and Socrates

## The Lives of Plato & Socrates

By Russell Bosworth



Plato is considered by many to be the greatest of all Western philosophers. The eminent modern philosopher Alfred North Whitehead concluded that: *“The safest general characterization of the Western philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”*

And Ralph Waldo Emerson agreed saying: “Out of Plato come all things still written and debated by men of thought—Plato is philosophy and philosophy Plato.”

Plato was born 428 BC and had distinguished lineage on both sides of his family. Little is known about his childhood other than he would have met Socrates early in life and by his late youth was a dedicated follower. However, unlike most ancient philosophers, there are a number of existent letters written by Plato that provide us with real insights into some periods of his adult life.

In one of these he indicates that as a young man he was very interested in a political career. For him a golden opportunity arose at the age of 24 when his Uncle Critias played a key role in overthrowing a democratic government, establishing an oligarchy called the Rule of 30. They asked Plato to join the leadership, but, perhaps showing his true philosophic nature, he declined; feeling it best to observe the quality of governance before committing.

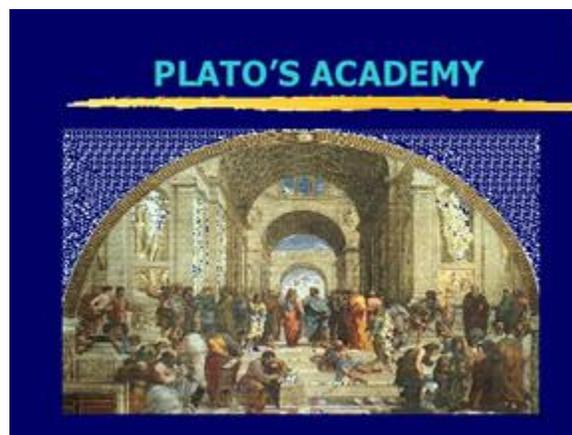
And it was a good thing he did. The injustices which unfolded, including the execution of 1500 prominent citizens, completely appalled Plato. He was not alone in his reaction and within a year the Rule of 30 came to its own violent end being replaced by another democratic government. However, four years later it was this democratic government that condemned and executed his teacher Socrates.

All the violence and turmoil he observed during these formative years of his life, led Plato to this important conclusion about the proper relationship between philosophy and government:

Finally it became clear that all existing communities were misgoverned and their laws so incurable that only by true philosophy could justice prevail.

Thus, I saw that the evils of mankind would never end until those pursuing true philosophy received sovereign power, or those in power, by some dispensation of providence, became true philosophers.

Right after Socrates death, Plato fled to Megara to allow time for things to cool down. Over the next decade, there is little hard evidence as to his exact whereabouts; but most scholars believe he spent most of this time in and around Athens.



When he was forty, Plato founded his Academy, one of the most important events in history of Western civilization. It was the first ongoing institution dedicated to study of science through original research, and the pursuit of truth for its own sake. It was the direct precursor of modern university, lasted almost 1000 years.

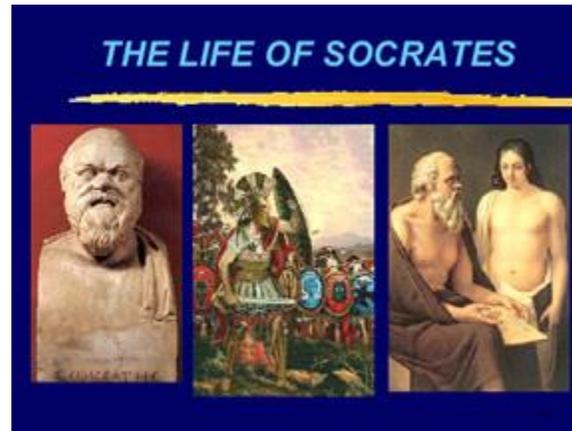
The aim of Academy was twofold: conversion of the soul to Truth, and use of knowledge in service of humanity. And it also had a primary underlying premise-- 'man is a soul using a body as an instrument'-- a theme that resounds through all of Plato's works. The Academy attracted the best and the brightest from all over Greece and its early graduates included many important lawmakers and mathematicians.

Other than a seven year adventure which brought Plato to Syracuse in Sicily in a risky, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to train the young ruler Dionysios as to how to rule like a philosopher king, Plato lived out the rest of his life in Athens, directing the Academy, continuing his writing, and giving lectures, always spontaneously without notes.

He died in his sleep at the age of 80. And, in concluding our remarks on P, it is important to note how fully he understood that real philosophy was discovered in living the truth, not in reading about it; and for that reason he adamantly proclaimed he had never written down his ultimate teaching.

I have never written nor ever will write a treatise on this subject. For it cannot be written down like other branches of knowledge.

Rather, after much conversation about the matter itself and a life lived together, suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself.



Socrates was Plato's teacher and key influence. Born fifty years before Plato; his father was a stonemason and mother a midwife. He was rather strange looking with a snub nose and protruding eyes. He always walked barefoot and was extremely devoted to Athens, only leaving the city for military duty, in which he consistently distinguished himself.

Thus, in Plato's Symposium, Alcibiades, a noted warrior lauds Socrates' fortitude and heroism. First he tells how Socrates saved Alcibiades' own life at the Battle of Potidaea; and then describes Socrates' courage during the disastrous Athenian retreat at the battle of Delium where fear and death were all around.

And there was Socrates, just as he is in the streets of Athens, stalking like a Pelican, rolling his eyes, calmly contemplating enemies as well as friends.

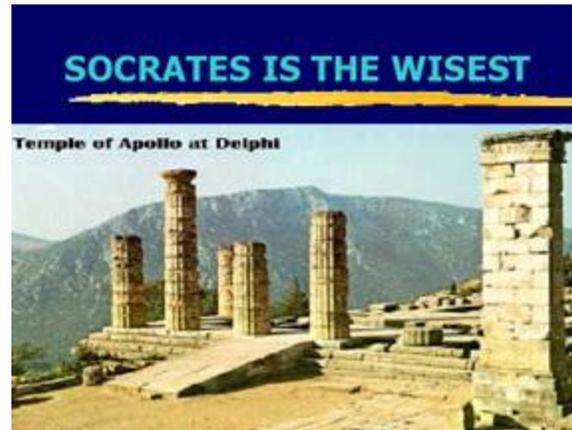
He was making it very intelligible that whoever attacked him would meet a stout resistance and, in this way, he and his companion escaped; for this is the sort of man who is never touched by war.

However, Socrates first love was not fighting but learning. As a young man he was a great student of science, religion, and philosophy; attracting the attention of the best thinkers of the age, including the philosopher Zeno who introduced him to dialectic—a method of using questions and answers to remove ignorance and that followed strict rules like having to answer any question exactly as presented and in the fewest possible words. This was a technique Socrates fully perfected using it to lead conversations from specific details to universal principles and discovery of Truth.

Socrates also had a strong mystical side, being capable of deep meditative states, one of which lasted for a full twenty-four hours. And he experienced profound beatific visions such as occurred during his inquiry into the true meaning of beauty with his female teacher Diotima described in Plato's Symposium. Most

famously, he had a divine sign, an inner oracle that always told him what not to do', but never told him to do anything'. Are we familiar with that voice? It was a voice he always obeyed.

On top of it all, Socrates had an engaging personality and a great sense of humor. He loved life and was full of happiness. In fact, as one admiring contemporary remarked, despite his practice of austerities: "Yet, at a festival Socrates was the only one who had any real powers of enjoyment."



Here we see the ruins of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, over the entrance of which were inscribed the famous precepts—know thyself and measure is all. The temple had a resident prophetess and, for more than a 1000 years royalty and regular citizens came from all over the ancient world seeking guidance from the Oracle on important matters.

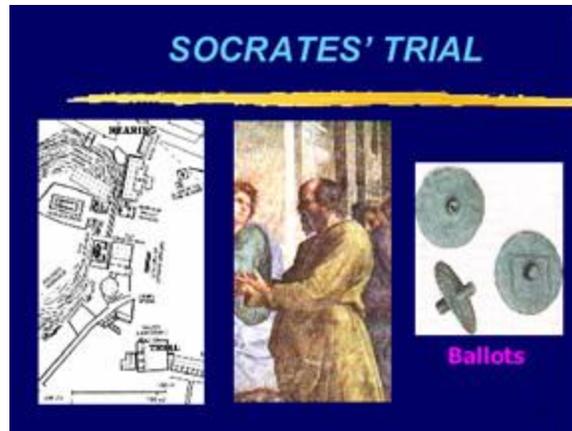
When Socrates was thirty-five a friend of his asked the prophetess who was the wisest Athenian. Her answer was that 'no one was wiser than Socrates'. Socrates was completely astounded by this response, but took it as a message from God sending him on a lifelong mission to discover the truth.

Fully believing that the unexamined life was not worth living, he spent his days seeking out those who claimed wisdom; conversing with them on life's most important matters. All along he was hoping to find someone truly wise. However, at the end of his lifelong search, he concluded:

The truth is that only God is wise. The wisdom of men is worth little or nothing. The Oracle is only using my name as an illustration, as if she said: He is wisest who, like Socrates, knows that in truth his wisdom is worth nothing.

Considering himself a Gadfly, he challenged old and young alike to care more about virtue and improving their souls than about status, property and popularity. Socrates himself said that he was 'very happy to be proven wrong because it removed ignorance from his soul'. Thus, he was not interested in convincing others of his beliefs but in having conversations lead to the discovery of Truth.

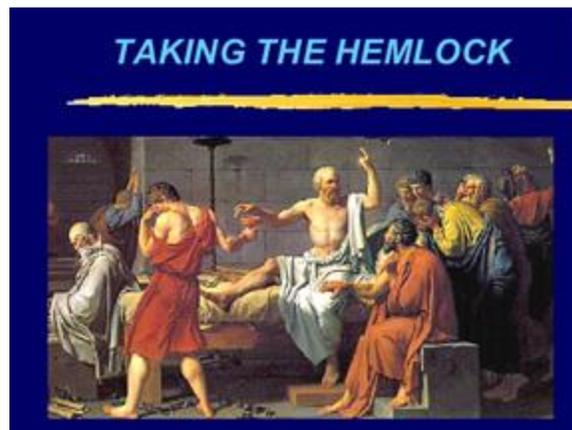
Since not too many of us are like S in being happy to be proven wrong, he made more than a few enemies; culminating in his being brought to trial at the age of 70—accused of believing in false gods and corrupting the youth'.



The trial took place before 500 jurors, and Plato's *Apology* eloquently describes Socrates' defense. In fact, his defense is no apology at all, but rather a stirring presentation of the merits of a life consciously dedicated to the care of the soul, discovery of wisdom, and fidelity to truth.

By a very close vote Socrates was convicted and sentenced to death by hemlock poisoning. However, he was completely unperturbed as shown by his final remarks to his supporters:

Be of good cheer about death, and know that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. But, I have a favor to ask of you. When my sons are grown up, if they seem to care about riches more than virtue, then punish and trouble them as I have troubled you. If you do this, my sons and I will have received justice at your hands. The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways--I to die and you to live, which is better only God knows.



Socrates last day on earth came about a month after the Trial and he spent that day teaching his followers right to the very end. By word and example he sought to both cure them of any fear of death, and show them how to lead the truly good life. And, as the day nears its end, and he is about to take the hemlock, Socrates expressed great optimism as to the joy to be experienced both in this life and in the hereafter, as long as one's soul is arrayed in its own proper jewels—temperance, justice, courage, nobility and truth.