

PLATO, PRINCE OF THINKERS

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PLATO is perhaps the best known of all the philosophers, both ancient and modern. Those who know little or nothing of philosophical systems can usually associate him with the geometry lesson in the *Meno*; and nearly everyone can recall him as the pupil of Socrates. There are many reasons why this is so. The clarity and brilliance of style with which Plato succeeded in setting forth his theories have rarely been equalled. Many who find the works of other writers difficult and obscure, discover in the great Athenian an author on an intricate subject, who is not only interesting and understandable, but even entertaining. The highly dramatic qualities of the Platonic style have created in some of the dialogues scenes which rank with the masterpieces of all time. The scene in the *Phaedo*, depicting the death of Socrates, possesses force and power and emotion such as could be produced only by one with supreme dramatic talent.

A second circumstance which has focused attention on Plato for ages is the fact that he was both a culmination of all in philosophy that had gone before him, and a starting point for nearly everything that came after. It would be inaccurate to regard him either as the founder or perfecter of Greek philosophy. Living as he did, about four hundred years before Christ, there had been great philosophers before him and were to be great ones after him. But the particular work of Plato was to examine and purify the work of the thinkers before him, rejecting all that was unessential, and to recognize clearly for the first time, many of the great philosophical problems which have engaged the attention of the human mind ever since.

Plato lived and wrote at a critical period in Greek history. Faith in the old religion was rapidly breaking up. Even the great body of the people had begun to follow the lead of the educated in doubting, ridiculing and denying the gods who had served the simple

faith of an earlier generation. Greece was faced with a situation but rarely paralleled in history. While the national religion disintegrated, no new one appeared to take its place. Four centuries were yet to elapse before the birth of Christ, and Athens bade fair to soon become a city without a faith. The philosophy of Plato might have been substituted for the old religion had it not been for its highly intellectual quality. In Plato the appeal is never primarily to the emotion, but rather to the reason; the great Athenian is always coldly, if sometimes fallaciously, logical. The Platonic philosophy never made a wide appeal or a serious bid for acceptance as the religion of the people, but among the learned it exerted a profound influence in Plato's day and for centuries afterward.

The theories of Plato are found in a series of dialogues, of which the *Republic* is the most widely known and the one most generally read. No one dialogue, however, is sufficient to give one even the most superficial conception of Plato. Like the plays of Shakespeare, the dialogues are a constant source of revelation—always pregnant with some new meaning, no matter how frequently they are read.

One of the first things which impresses a reader of the dialogues is the characteristic Socratic question method. Apparently it is always primarily Plato's object to criticize and destroy the beliefs of others. This has been sometimes criticized as being purely destructive criticism. It is true that Plato rarely arrived at truth after demolishing the theories of an opponent; but he performed nevertheless a genuine constructive function by detecting and destroying false methods and bases in the thinking of others. Plato was always the enemy of error; wherever he found it he sought it out and destroyed it, without ever making any claims of having arrived at absolute truth himself.

If it can be said that any one thing is dominant in Plato's writings, most authorities would probably agree that it is dualism, the division of things into the spiritual and the material. The spiritual world is an abstract one of absolute truths which give form and meaning to the objects of the material world. Correspondingly, though man lives in the material world, there is a spiritual side to his nature, which it should be his constant object to cultivate in preparation for the life to come. This side of the Platonic philosophy is a constantly reoccurring note in the dialogues.

The insistence on the cultivation of the spiritual, naturally led Plato into a consideration of the nature of good and evil. In the *Gorgias* he rejects pain and pleasure as criteria on the ground that

a thing can be both pleasurable and painful at the same time, but that it cannot be both good and evil. He then tells us that those things are good which have the good as their ultimate object and which tend to promote harmony and order in the world. Plato viewed the world as one thing made up of many parts existing together in harmonious relationships to one another. Hence, whatever tends to keep the harmony of things perfect is good, while that which introduces disorder is evil.

Plato also speculated in a number of the dialogues on the immortality of the soul. The ancient Greeks regarded life after death as a miserable sort of semi-existence in Hades. Plato, going centuries ahead of his time, believed that the evil of this world were punished, in proportion to their offenses, in the next; while the good, who had constantly endeavored to cultivate and purify the spiritual side of their nature, were received into the Isles of the Blest. The similarities and points of comparison between Platonism and Christianity, particularly in the matter of immortality and in the emphasis of both on things spiritual, rather than material, have been frequently remarked.

Taken all in all, it would be difficult to estimate the extent of Plato's influence on the course of human thought. Many things in his writings impress a reader, even today, as strikingly modern. The wide range of his speculations led him into the most diverse fields. The economic cause of war, the science of education and speculations which anticipated the great geographical discoveries by several hundred years, were only a few of the fields explored by this extraordinary man.