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# PLATO<sup>1</sup>

(428–348 B.C.)

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Plato was born in 428 BC, towards the end of that extraordinary period in human history when the foundations of spiritual life were being formulated by Lao-Tse (at the turn of the sixth century), Confucius<sup>2</sup> (551–479), Buddha (c. 550–480) and Socrates (469–399) and the Upanishads were being written (at the turn of the fifth century).

He was born to a family that belonged to the top ranks of the Athenian aristocracy. His father was a descendant of Codrus, last king of Athens. The brother of one of his mother's ancestors was Solon, the great Athenian statesman and law-maker, and one of Plato's uncles, Critias, was to become a member of the Council of Thirty. Plato was thus predestined to play an active role in Athenian politics. In his seventh *Letter* he explains why he chose not to take that path. Instead, he formulated the most significant political theory of ancient times and with it founded the science of politics.

Plato was born soon after the death of Pericles, who had been a friend of the family and who had carried Athens to the heights of its power, prosperity and culture. Sophocles and Euripides were among the great playwrights of the time who delighted the public, and the young Plato must certainly have met them.

But Plato was also destined to witness the decline of that Athens to which he was so dearly attached. As a young man he endured, probably as a soldier, the defeat of his city in the Peloponnesian War and experienced the ensuing decline of the Athenian democracy. The twilight of the Classical Age of Greece was approaching and with it the demise of the independent Greek city-states, which were supplanted by the Alexandrian empire. Plato lived in the period of transition between classical Greece and the Hellenistic era that opened a new chapter in the history of the West.

## **Plato's life**

As a child, Plato undoubtedly received the education that was commonly given to boys of his age. He attended a private school in Athens accompanied by a slave, or 'tutor' (there were no public schools at that time). There he studied reading, writing and arithmetic, following which he committed to memory a considerable part of the corpus of Greek poetry, above all the works of Homer, whom the Greeks considered the educator par excellence. He also learned the songs of the lyrical poets and to play the lyre, two skills that, as he put it in his *Protagoras*, 'familiarize the minds of children with the rhythms and melodies' by which 'they become more civilized, more balanced, and better adjusted' (*Protagoras*, 326b).<sup>3</sup> Naturally, Plato also attended the gymnasium, for physical training: for 'they are sent to a trainer, so that a good mind may have a good body to serve it, and no one be forced by physical weakness to play the

coward in war...' (*Protagoras*, 326b-c). It may be added that Plato's sister did not go to school; she received her education, as was customary at the time, exclusively at home.

The decisive event in Plato's life was his meeting with Socrates. At the age of 20, this rich young aristocrat became the most faithful disciple of Socrates, son of a stonemason and a midwife. Plato stood by Socrates to the end, when his master was condemned to death and executed by the Athenian democracy (399 B.C.). It was a traumatic experience that marked Plato for life and reinforced his low opinion of democracy. The pages Plato wrote as Socrates's defence (*Apology*) and on the last hours of Socrates's life are among the most moving in world literature.

After Socrates's death Plato left Athens on a long voyage that took him first to Megara, where he visited Euclid (the philosopher, not the mathematician) and then almost certainly to Egypt and Cyrene, on the coast of present-day Libya. He also travelled to Magna Graecia, in southern Italy, where he frequented Pythagorean circles, spending time notably with Archytas in Tarentum. From there he went to Sicily to the court of Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse, who was fond of surrounding himself with the company of famous men in order to boost his own prestige. There Plato argued his view that kings should be philosophers and should devote their lives to the service of the highest moral values rather than to their personal and aggrandizement and interests, but to no avail. After twelve years of travel Plato returned to Athens, where he founded his Academy.

During his stay in Syracuse, Plato had formed a friendship with Dionysius's brother-in-law Dion, who struck him as being a potential philosopher. When Dionysius the Elder died, Dion recalled Plato to Syracuse to tutor the young Dionysius. Once again Plato thought he would be able to have his ideas on the role of education and philosophy in politics put into practice. Accordingly, he went again to Syracuse, where he was very well received, and set himself to the task of educating Dionysius II, teaching him mathematics, which he regarded as the royal road to philosophy. Plutarch, in his biography of Dion, relates how the entire court at Syracuse took up geometry, covering every room in the tyrant's castle with sawdust, upon which they drew triangles, circles and other forms. The young Dionysius, however, was not a very bright pupil and tired quickly of the lessons of his demanding tutor. Furthermore, he was jealous of Dion, whom he sent into exile. Plato returned to Athens and founded the Academy. In 361 B.C. he succumbed for the third time to the temptation to go to Syracuse, but with no happier results: once again he encountered humiliation. It was only with the help of Archytas that he managed to get back to Athens, where in 348 B.C. he died, at the age of 80.

## Plato's works

The works of Plato have reached us virtually intact. They consist of twenty-eight *Dialogues* and thirteen others of variously uncertain authorship. There are also thirteen *Letters*, three of which (VI, VII and VIII) are generally recognized as having been written by Plato. Plato's *Dialogues* cover a wide range of subjects: duty, courage, virtue, justice, love, beauty, science, nature, rhetoric and the harmony of words with Being and with Ideas; the nature of humankind, wisdom, kingship, legislation, etc. With the single important exception of the *Laws*—Plato's last work and the one in which he set out in detail his ideas on education policy—Socrates is, directly or indirectly, cast as one of the protagonists of the *Dialogues*. It is the only time a disciple has ever identified himself so closely with his master as to put his own words into his master's mouth. It is extremely difficult to draw the demarcation line between the ideas of Socrates and those of Plato. Philologists have attempted to do so by sorting Plato's *Dialogues* into several groups, ranging from the more Socratic to those that clearly depart from the thought of the real Socrates and are considered to be distinctly Platonic. We cannot enter into the philological subtleties in this article and shall treat the

Socrates who appears so true to life in Plato's *Dialogues* as part of the latter's 'profile'.

In fact, it is as teacher that Plato most resembles his master. Socrates appears in the works of Plato as the archetypal teacher, even though he insists that he is not one. Accordingly, the object of most if not all of Plato's *Dialogues* is essentially educational: his whole work was written in the service of *paideia*.

Plato was an extremely serious, moralizing and austere thinker who disapproved of the most innocent pleasures, even the reflex of laughter (*Republic*, 388e and *Laws*, 732c). He was also a writer of exceptional literary skill, who drew his characters with a fine economy of detail in the manner of the great Chinese painters, creating in a few sentences a true-to-life atmosphere, and his works contain countless examples of superb subtlety and a flair for irony. On the other hand, his *Dialogues* contain long passages of laborious and sometimes formalistic, punctilious and, it must be admitted, frankly tiresome dialectics. Plato's writings have had a determining influence on all aspects of Western philosophy (and even perhaps on all aspects of its culture). In fact the European philosophical tradition can be characterized as a long series of dialogues with Plato or, as the great American philosopher A.N. Whitehead put it, as 'a series of footnotes to Plato'.

## Plato's philosophy

In order to understand Plato and to plumb the depths of his thought one must keep closely in mind the fact that his philosophy is not in any sense a doctrine. Plato did not set up a philosophical system in the manner of Hegel, for example. The distinguishing feature of Plato's philosophy is the progression or process by which his ideas are formed—his so-called dialectical method, which does not involve solitary, hence unilateral, reflection, but is rather a collective exercise by which friends, as in the *Symposium*, or adversaries, as in *Gorgias*, move forward in argument. Moreover, Plato's *Dialogues*, often dealing with the clarification of a concept—such as beauty, duty, love, justice or pleasure—do not usually come to a final conclusion on the subject or end on universal agreement. The initial question is left open. Thus *Protagoras* concludes with the following statement, 'Well, we will talk of these matters [which we have just been discussing] at some future meeting' (*Protagoras*, 361e).

Plato sums up his approach in his seventh *Letter*:

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subject to which I devote myself [philosophy] [...] Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. (341b-d).

Attentive readers of Plato's *Dialogues* will find that they are participants on this sudden, vision-like dawning of knowledge. However, we must qualify this passage (which is rather discouraging for commentators on Plato!) with the observation that towards the end of the philosopher's life a touch of dogmatism crept into his work, which gives the sudden impression that one is attending an *ex cathedra* lecture by the Academy professor.

Plato was relentless in his analysis of the conditions and limitations to the acquisition of knowledge imposed by a world that was elusive because it was in constant movement. He believed that all human beings, with the exception of true philosophers, lived in a world of appearances. This is why the Socrates of his *Dialogues* incessantly demonstrates to his interlocutors how much their claims to knowledge are illusory because based on unfounded

opinions or on prejudices. In *Laches*, to cite but one example, two prominent generals are obliged to admit that they do not know the meaning of courage.

On the one hand, led by his certainty of the absolute, he explored the human condition as it related to the supreme values of beauty, truth and goodness. On the other hand, haunted by his experience of the decline of Athens and convinced that all change carried within itself the seeds of corruption, he looked to permanence as the sole guarantor of absolute values. He considered that he had discovered in the concept of 'Ideas', the incorruptible reality he regarded as the foundation of being, and he illustrated that concept by his fascinating and celebrated myth of the cave (*Republic*, 514a–517a).

It is only through a proper education and through the pursuit of philosophy that human beings can free themselves from the chains of their senses, desires, ambitions (such as wealth and power) and passions and that they can accede, progressively, passing from one level of enlightenment to the next, to true knowledge and, ultimately, to the vision of the *Agathon*, the Final Good. Plato's thought is centred on the human being and, more particularly, on the ethical problems the human being has to face. The questions of right, justice and the individual's place in society, that is in the *polis*, the Greek city-state, are among the ethical questions that concern him to the highest degree. Plato, like his pupil Aristotle after him, considered the human being a political animal. He devoted two of his most important works, *The Republic* and the *Laws* to politics, of which ethics is an essential dimension.

In the course of his examination of the human being, Plato developed a new 'science' of the soul. His psychology (another discipline he fathered) may seem to the modern reader to be somewhat naive and elementary. Nevertheless, it has some interesting features. For example, on the subject of young Charmides's headache, in the dialogue of the same name, Socrates states that 'all good and evil, whether in the body or in the whole man, originates [...] in the soul' (*Charmides*, 156e). The care of the soul is essential for a person's future. It is no accident that Socrates asks young Hippocrates, who intends to entrust his education to Protagoras the Sophist:

Do you understand that you are going to entrust the care of your soul to a man who is, in our own words, a Sophist, though I should be surprised if you know just what a Sophist is. And yet if you don't know that, you don't know to whom you are entrusting your soul, nor whether he represents something good or bad [*Protagoras*, 312c].

Lastly, with his theses concerning the immortality of the soul, Plato also broached the area of religion.

## Plato's anti-sophism

The ideal Platonic educator or teacher is the antithesis of the Sophist. The passages in Plato's works in which Socrates criticizes or disputes with the Sophists are legion. It was, as Karl Jaspers puts it, the battle of philosophy against non-philosophy. The Sophists in Plato's time were itinerant teachers of higher education. They rented rooms and there gave lessons for an often quite substantial fee to the scions of the aristocracy, who normally completed their elementary studies in private schools at or about the age of 16. Plato himself almost certainly attended the courses of eminent Sophists such as Gorgias and Protagoras.

The Sophists taught the widest range of subjects; but they were best known as teachers of rhetoric, the art of manipulating the masses. The oratorical art, explains Gorgias in the dialogue which bears his name, is 'The power to convince by your words the judges in court, the senators in Council, the people in the Assembly, or in any other gathering of a citizen body' (*Gorgias*, 452e). The eminent Protagoras asserts with great pride: 'From me [the

student] will learn [...] the proper care of his personal affairs, so that he may best manage his own household, and also of the State's affairs, so as to become a real power in the city, both as speaker and man of action' (*Protagoras*, 319a). Plato's grand indictment of the Sophists is contained in the dialogue of the same name. His critique is presented as a sort of counterpoint to an authoritative lecture on Being, highlighting the abyss that divides true philosophy from non-philosophy. Here is the hardly complimentary portrait he draws of the Sophist: 'The hired hunter of rich young men, [...] a sort of merchant of knowledge about the soul, [...] A retail dealer in the same wares, [...] an athlete in debate, [...] a controversialist', one who instils in young people the opinion that he is, personally and in all matters, the wisest of men; he is a magician and a mimic who has appropriated the 'shadow play of words' as an art (*Sophist*, 231d, 232b and 268c).

On the other hand, 'the philosopher, whose thoughts constantly dwell upon the nature of reality, is difficult to see because his region is so bright, for the eye of the vulgar soul cannot endure to keep its gaze fixed on the divine' (*Sophist*, 254a-b).

These passages on the Sophists show that Plato demanded a deep sense of moral responsibility on the part of the true teacher, on whom lay responsibility for the sound health and fate of his pupil's soul. It was his duty to protect his disciples against false knowledge and guide them on the path to truth and virtue. He must never be a mere peddler of materials for study and of recipes for winning disputes, nor yet for promoting a career.

Is it not a terrible historical irony that by democratic vote the citizens of Athens sentenced Socrates to death on the charge that he was, of all things, a Sophist and that he was corrupting the city's youth?

## The Socratic teaching method

Socrates is presented as the archetypal educator. This is already apparent in *Laches*, which is about two eminent generals who are looking for a tutor for their sons; and Werner Jaeger, in his *Paideia*, a classical work on education in the ancient world, calls Socrates the most influential teacher in all European history.

Only Socrates asserts the contrary, as for example, in *The Apology*: '[Some people are saying] that I try to educate people and charge a fee, [but] there is no truth in that either [...] I think that it is a fine thing if a man is qualified to teach, as in the case of Gorgias of Leontini and Prodicos of Ceos and Hippias of Elis' (*Apology*, 19c, 19e). What is the cause of this apparent contradiction?

Socrates refuses to be taken for a teacher of the Sophist sort. He believed that in order to be qualified to teach one must know the subject taught. One must know how to make shoes before teaching another the shoemaking art, and to be able to train a physician one must be acquainted with the various diseases and their cures. As a true philosopher, Socrates makes no claim to know anything; indeed, he is conscious of all that he does not know and, consequently, is always searching for knowledge, whereas the others—both the Sophists and the people in the street with whom he converses and whom he 'examines'—live in the illusion that they possess knowledge. In fact, exposing that illusion is the first step in the process of learning to live a good life represented as a harmonious relationship between a person and his or her final destiny, which is moral and political in nature.

In the prologue to the *Symposium* there is a delightful episode that serves as a good illustration of the Socratic method. Socrates is late in arriving because, as he occasionally did he has paused on the way, caught up in his own thoughts (*Symposium*, 174c). Agathon, the host, invites Socrates to sit next to him because 'I want to share this great thought that's just struck you in the porch next door'. At which Socrates replies to Agathon, 'I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing one could share by sitting next to someone—if it flowed, for

instance, from the one that was full to the one that was empty, like the water in two cups finding its level through a piece of worsted' (*Symposium*, 175d). The Socratic method is to be distinguished therefore from the traditional method of teaching, in which teachers seek to transmit their knowledge to their pupils, who are expected to assimilate it on the whole passively. The Socratic method is an interactive method in which teacher and pupil co-operate in the pursuit of knowledge through dialogue. A series of questions and answers involve the two parties in the same cognitive pursuit (Plato occasionally uses images taken from the hunt). This is yet another reason—a methodological one—why Socrates does not want to be described as one who possessed knowledge.

This dialectical method runs through the entire work of Plato. The reader is drawn into the discussion as an active observer. Plato the educator takes his readers, entangled in their desires and illusions, and leads them, patiently and through a critique suffused with irony, to the point of reflection and independence.

In the *Apology*, Socrates insists that he has been entrusted with his teaching role by Apollo himself: 'God appointed me [...] to the duty of leading a philosophical life, examining myself and others' (*Apology*, 28e). As to whether he would renounce his role of 'examiner' should he be acquitted, he declares:

Gentlemen [...] I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practising philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, 'My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?' (*Apology*, 29d-e).

Accordingly, in Plato's mind, philosophy and education are one and the same discipline. The Socratic method of teaching has often been characterized as a 'maieutic' method, or one in which the teacher assumes the role of a midwife. A deciphering of this method is contained in *Meno*. There, Plato's Socrates argues that 'there is no such thing as teaching, only recollection' (*Meno*, 82a) and maintains that teachers should play the role of midwife in order to deliver their pupils of the knowledge they unconsciously possess. To illustrate this original method, Socrates conducts an educational experiment: by questioning a young slave, he leads him to self-discovery of the solution to a relatively complicated problem in geometry (*Meno*, 82b–85b). From this experiment Socrates concludes as follows:

So a man who does not know has in himself true opinions on a subject without having knowledge [...] This knowledge will not come from teaching but from questioning. He will recover it for himself [...] And the spontaneous recovery of knowledge that is in him is recollection [...] If then there are going to exist in him, both while he is and while he is not a man, true opinions which can be aroused by questioning and turned into knowledge, may we say that his soul has been forever in a state of knowledge? Clearly he always either is or is not a man (*Meno*, 85c-d; 86a).

Maieutics is based on a concept of the immortality of the soul and of metempsychosis, which of course goes beyond the thought of the historical Socrates.

This doctrine of knowledge acquired before birth is also developed in *Phaedo* (72b *et seq.*), while the maieutic method described in detail, but less speculatively, in *Theaetetus* (148e–151d) is perhaps that of the historical Socrates.

## The academy

When Plato founded the Academy around 385 B.C. he was just over 40 years old. He set up

his establishment on gardened premises not far from Athens. The Academy is often described as the first university in history—which is not exactly true. It resembled the medieval *universitas* more than the modern university. It was a centre of study and research, but nothing is known of the details of its organization. It was more of a scientific community than a school. The Academy was probably modelled after the Pythagorean communities Plato had visited in Magna Graecia. Legally, it was established in the form of a *thiasos*, or religious confraternity. It was dedicated to the Muses. Teachers and pupils lived there in a community atmosphere that was enhanced by a dialectical method of teaching, in which doctrinal presentations are followed by discussion.

Plato remained head of the Academy for the rest of his life. This meant that for some 40 years he was the driving force and principal teacher of this intellectual centre of Ancient Greece. The Academy remained open until A.D. 529, that is, for almost 900 years after Plato's death.

According to an old tradition, there was an inscription over the portal of the Academy proclaiming that a knowledge of geometry was a requirement for entry. Plato probably developed a passion for mathematics during his encounters with the Pythagoreans—especially Archytas of Tarentum, who was a brilliant mathematician. Plato, himself a seasoned mathematician, invited other scholars accomplished in this discipline to teach at the Academy. These included Eudoxas, who was a mathematician, astronomer, geographer and physician.

Science also had its place at the Academy. This fact tends to be forgotten, so firmly implanted in tradition is Plato's image as the great master of ethics and metaphysics. *Timaeus*, his great dialogue concerning Nature, testifies to the scientific work done at the Academy and the encyclopaedic scope of the scientific knowledge it housed. An amusing fragment of a comedy by Epicrates has survived, in which one of the characters tells what he had heard while passing by the Academy garden: 'They were trying to define the differences between the life processes of animals and the growth of trees and vegetables. Among other matters they were trying to determine to what species pumpkins belonged.'

Politics, the main subject of the Academy, was studied and taught on a regular basis. The Academy owned a collection of the written constitutions of a large number of states. Politicians, statesmen and specialists in constitutional law were educated at the Academy; and the long list of its disciples who were called upon to act as political and legal consultants in the Greek states is a good indicator of the extent of its influence.

Plato's dream was to educate in his Academy those 'philosopher kings' about whom he wrote so copiously in his two works, the *Republic* and the *Statesman*, which, together with the *Laws*, contained the cream of the results of the Academy's studies and research in political science.

Philosophy, of course, took pride of place in the Academy's curriculum. The founding of the Academy opened a new period in Plato's thought. It marked his departure from the philosophical approach of Socrates. The Pythagorean doctrines began to rival the example of his former and still venerated master as his source of inspiration. This shift was already noticeable in *Meno* (as mentioned above) and in *Gorgias*, and became more pronounced right up to the *Laws*. With the exception of this last (posthumous) work, Socrates remained a central character of Plato's *Dialogues*. However, his works became more doctrinal in tone. This, it would seem, was not only a natural consequence of his daily life as a teacher at the Academy but also the sign of a conscious affirmation of his philosophical conclusions.

The educational issues with which he dealt also changed in emphasis. They had first been primarily didactic, if not methodological in emphasis, strongly inspired by the personality of Socrates—the educator—but with the Academy the emphasis became almost exclusively social and political. The focus of interest moved towards educational policy.

## Educational policy in the ideal state

Plato developed his concept of educational policy in his two largest works, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In the *Republic* Plato developed his concept of the ideal state, which embodied justice. It was a sort of Utopia. (For Plato, however, the world of ideas, because permanent, is more 'real' than the world of facts, which is in a state of constant flux!) Rousseau believed that 'Plato's *Republic* [...] is the best treatise on education ever written' (*Émile*, Book I). In the *Laws* Plato drew up a highly detailed system of laws for a proposed colonial city-state. While the themes of these two *Dialogues* would seem to be almost identical, there are considerable differences between them. The differences, however, do not touch upon educational issues. The *Republic* is a pure theory of the ideal state, whereas the *Laws* is a practical application to a hypothetical concrete case.

In the *Republic* the inhabitants are divided into three distinct classes: slaves who are the subjects of special provisions in the *Laws*, craftsmen and merchants (generally alien without rights of citizenship) and, lastly, 'guardians', who are responsible for the security and administration of the state. The guardian class is itself divided into two groups: the 'auxiliaries' and the 'perfect' guardians, or regents—the first, in principle the youngest, having responsibility for internal and external security (including the police and the army), while the second group, the 'sages', watch over the smooth functioning and harmony of the state. At the head of the state is a 'philosopher-king' (such as Archytas of Tarentum)—an idea that is taken up again in *The statesman* but is abandoned in the *Laws*, in which a 'nocturnal council' assumes the responsibilities of the highest authority.

The ideal society for Plato is as immutable as a Doric temple; for, in an ideal State, change can bring about only decadence and corruption (*Laws*, 797d). Society must therefore be protected from all that could upset the civic order and induce change. The guardians must devote themselves entirely to the service of the state. They may not possess material riches (which give rise to jealousy and conflict); they may not indulge in frivolities (which could compromise their integrity); nor may they entertain private ambitions. All they have must be held in common: room, board, wives and children.

One of the tasks of education in the Platonic state is to preserve the status quo. All innovation is taboo. Contrary to most modern educational principles, education must stand guard against all change and all forms of subversion.

Despite his extreme conservatism, however, Plato had some highly innovative ideas. For example, he espoused equality of the sexes at a time when women, with the exception of courtesans, were relegated to the household. In the Platonic state girls, like boys, do their gymnastics in the nude and are expected to go to war clad in the same armour as the men. They share the boys' education, with no discrimination between them. Moreover, Plato prescribes compulsory education for all, that is for all members of the guardian class. This idea, however, was not to receive application until much later, at the time of the French Revolution. Compulsory schooling goes far beyond an elementary education; yet Plato has very little to say about the education of craftsmen and merchants, which consists of no more than a simple apprenticeship, and slaves received no mention at all.

Plato, indeed, was the first to formulate a complete education system, covering every aspect from its administration to a detailed curriculum. In the *Laws* Plato describes how education should be organized and administered. The whole education system should be headed by a 'Supervisor of Education', 'far the most important of the highest offices in the State', who would supervise all aspects of education for children of both sexes. He should be 'a man of not less than 50 years, and the father of a legitimate family, preferably of both sexes' (*Laws*, 765d-e). He will have working under him 'superintendents of gymnasiums and schools in charge of their seemly maintenance as well as of the education given and the [...]

supervision of attendances and accommodation for children of both sexes, together with judges of performers contending in both musical and athletic competitions' (*Laws*, 764c-d). These competitions are important because the careers of the guardians are determined by their results.

The education of the guardians—a lifelong education that stretches from before birth to retirement age—is described in detail in the *Republic* (especially Books II-V and VII) and in the *Laws* (especially Books I, II and VII). In the *Laws*, however, the programme of studies is abbreviated. Having abandoned the idea of the philosopher-king, Plato did not dwell any further on the teaching of philosophy, as he had done in the *Republic*. After introducing the concept of 'guardians', he goes on to say: 'But the rearing of these men and their education, how shall we manage that? And will the consideration of this topic advance us in any way toward discerning what is the object of our entire enquiry—the origin of justice and injustice in a State ...?' (*Republic*, 376c-d). The object of Platonic education is therefore moral and political; it is not an apprenticeship for know-how but an education in life skills.

Since the health and beauty of both body and mind are essential goals of Platonic education (see *Laws*, 788c), education, in keeping with Greek custom, is divided into two parts: gymnastics and music (i.e. culture).

Physical education begins before birth. Pregnant women are advised to walk around and move about as much as possible, for 'every sort of shaking and stirring [communicates] health and beauty, to say nothing of robustness' to the unborn infant (*Laws*, 789d).

Pre-school education is the responsibility of parents (whereas in the *Republic* infants are raised collectively and do not know who their parents are!), who are enjoined to treat them with measured discipline, for 'while spoiling of children makes their tempers fretful, peevish and easily upset by mere trifles, the contrary treatment, the severe and unqualified tyranny which makes its victims spiritless, servile, and sullen, renders them unfit for the intercourse of domestic and civic life' (*Laws*, 791c).

The teaching of culture begins very early on, through the stories parents tell their children. Plato attaches the greatest importance to the content of these stories, for first impressions shape the still malleable minds of children and determine their character. Consequently, such stories must pass the censors' scrutiny. Plato places a strong and oft-repeated stress on censorship, not sparing even Homer.

Next to stories, games should contribute to the education of children. 'He who is to be good at anything as a man must practise that thing from early childhood, in play as well as in earnest [...] Thus, if a boy is to be a good [...] builder, he should play [...] at building toy houses ...' (*Laws*, 643b) From the ages of 3 to 6 children should play together under the supervision of women assigned to that task.

Children enter school at the age of 6. They first learn to read, write and count. 'For reading and writing three years or so, from the age of 10, are a fair allowance of a boy's time, and if the handling of the lyre is begun at 13, the three following years are long enough to spend on it. No boy, no parent shall be permitted to extend or curtail this period from fondness or distaste for the subjects [...]' (*Laws*, 809e–810a)

Together with this literary and musical education, students of the Platonic state engage in all sorts of sports, including horse-riding and weapons training. The balance between culture and gymnastics should be maintained as perfectly as possible (*Republic*, 411c *et seq.*).

At the age of 18, at the end of this basic education period during which they will have undergone many contests and examinations of all sorts, young people—both boys and girls—are required to devote themselves exclusively for a period of two to three years to physical and military training, as the traditional *ephebe* did.

At the age of 21 pupils selected on the basis of their past performance go on to higher studies. It is here that Plato's curriculum differs fundamentally from the tradition of employing

Sophists for the purpose. It is this level of studies, which leads to philosophy and, at the same time, to the highest offices in the state, that concerned Plato the most. In fact, they formed the subject of the teaching at his Academy. Education, then, was compulsory until the age of 20. Plato recommended that ‘all this study [...] must be presented [...] not in the form of compulsory instruction [...] because [...] a free soul ought not to pursue any study slavishly’. Moreover ‘nothing that is learned under compulsion stays with the mind’ (*Republic*, 536d-e).

These higher studies, which stretch over a period of ten years, consist of a systematic assemblage and arrangement of the knowledge acquired in past studies: ‘They will be required to gather the studies which they disconnectedly pursued as children in their former education into a comprehensive survey of their affinities with one another and with the nature of things’ (*Republic*, 537c). This is essential for an understanding of dialectics, ‘for he who can view things in their connection is a dialectician’ (*Republic*, 537c). It is probably also at this stage that the *Laws* would be studied as a manual of politics, social sciences and comparative law (*Laws*, 811c-d).

Special stress is next placed on the study of the four disciplines that prepare the student for philosophy: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and harmony. These disciplines lift the soul to the level of the immutable. Mathematics—arithmetic and geometry—liberate the mind from sensation, familiarize it with the world of pure thought and turn the soul towards the heights of the world of ideas. ‘Geometry is the knowledge of the eternally existent’ (*Republic*, 527b). It is through geometry that one learns how to manipulate concepts (*Republic*, 510–511). Astronomy initiates the soul to the order and immutable harmony of the cosmos. Harmony, a sister science of astronomy’s, focuses on the search for and knowledge of the laws of, and the order in, the world of sound. The influence of the Pythagoreans here is obvious. Plato repeated with insistence that we must ‘prevent our fosterlings from attempting to learn anything that does not conduce to the end we have in view’ (*Republic*, 530e).

At the age of 30, and not before, Plato’s students finally begin to study philosophy or dialectics. After pursuing this course for five years they must then ‘return once again to the cave’ and serve for 15 years in the army and the civil service, where they are constantly put to the test. ‘At the age of 50 those who have [...] approved [*sic*] themselves altogether the best in every task and form of knowledge’ will be able to behold the good; ‘and when they have thus beheld the good itself they shall use it as a pattern for the right ordering of the State’ (*Republic*, 540a). They will then devote the rest of their lives alternately to philosophy and public life.

When they retire, these state officials will have the leisure time to devote themselves entirely to the delights of philosophy—this being their sole reward.

Plato’s *polis* is essentially an educational community. It is created by education. It can survive only on condition that all its citizens receive an education that enables them to make rational political decisions. It is up to education to preserve the state intact and to defend it against all harmful innovations. The aim of education is not personal growth but service of the state, which is the guarantor of the happiness of its citizens for as long as they allow it to be the embodiment of justice.

## Notes

1. This text was first published in *Prospects*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1992.
2. A profile of Confucius appears in this series of ‘100 thinkers on education’.
3. Quotations are from the *collected dialogues of plato*, edited by E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1973. The line numbers, as is customary, are those established by the Stephanus edition (1578).
4. A profile of Aristotle appears in this series of ‘100 thinkers on education’.

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