

PLATO

PLATO was born around the year 428 BCE, the scion of a distinguished and Aristocratic Athenian family with known and pronounced anti-democratic sympathies and was expected eventually to play a part in oligarchic politics himself. However, as he himself tells it (in his *Seventh Letter*, reprinted here), his meeting with Socrates changed his life. Socrates, an artisan by birth, was an enormously charismatic figure, and quite clearly a teacher of genius, gathering around him some of the most brilliant men of his day. Plato became one of his most ardent admirers. The circle around Socrates was characterized by a dedication to the development of true knowledge (as they understood it) and this often took a broadly anti-democratic form: Socrates himself was a man who often criticized the Athenian democracy for its espousal of "mere" opinion over knowledge. It is therefore unsurprising that when Socrates was charged with worshipping false gods and corrupting Athenian youth by the democracy and then sentenced to death by means of ingesting hemlock, Plato should have developed a distaste for Greek democracy that emerges in most of his writings from his early middle age until his death. However, it is worth bearing in mind also that Socrates equally disputed the oligarchs (for example, refusing a direct order of Plato's relative Critias when the latter was one of the so-called "thirty tyrants" who briefly seized power in Athens in 404). Socrates was a prickly pear for *any* established political view, a point worth remembering when considering the claims that Plato was an anti-democrat. He was also an anti-oligarch! Almost all Plato's writings until his extreme old age feature Socrates as the protagonist and clearly one of his intentions in writing as he did was to vindicate his master's memory and methods (though there is much scholarly debate about how much of his own "doctrine," if any, Plato puts into the mouth of his Socrates). After Socrates' death, Plato abandoned any idea of "going into politics" as his family had expected and instead set up a school – we would call it a university – called the Academy which rapidly became the most famous in the Greek world. While head of the Academy, Plato published his "dialogues," his philosophical writings, which included a number directly concerned with politics, most especially the *Republic* (widely considered his masterpiece), the *Statesman*, and the *Laws*. In keeping with his philosophic precepts he (and the Academy) also acted in politics, usually working to sustain or establish "constitutional" regimes. Most famously, he intervened twice in the tangled politics and international relations of the city of Syracuse, an intervention

from which he barely escaped with his life, and of which he writes an account in the *Seventh Letter*. Still head of the Academy, still writing and thinking, he died in about 347 at the age of eighty-one.

From *The Epistles*

Seventh Letter, 324–326b

Plato to the friends and followers of Dion,

...

When I was a young man I had the same ambition as many others: I thought of entering public life as soon as I came of age. And certain happenings in public affairs favored me, as follows. The constitution we then had, being anathema to many, was overthrown; and a new government was set up consisting of fifty-one men, two groups – one of eleven and another of ten – to police the market place and perform other necessary duties in the city and the Piraeus respectively, and above them thirty other officers with absolute powers. Some of these men happened to be relatives and acquaintances of mine, and they invited me to join them at once in what seemed to be a proper undertaking. My attitude toward them is not surprising, because I was young. I thought that they were going to lead the city out of the unjust life she had been living and establish her in the path of justice, so that I watched them eagerly to see what they would do. But as I watched them they showed in a short time that the preceding constitution had been a precious thing. Among their other deeds they named Socrates, an older friend of mine whom I should not hesitate to call the wisest and justest man of that time, as one of a group sent to arrest a certain citizen who was to be put to death illegally, planning thereby to make Socrates willy-nilly a party to their actions. But he refused, risking the utmost danger rather than be an associate in their impious deeds. When I saw all this and other like things of no little consequence, I was appalled and drew back from that reign of injustice. Not long afterwards the rule of the Thirty was overthrown and with it the entire constitution; and once more I felt the desire, though this time less strongly, to take part in public and political affairs. Now many deplorable things occurred during those troubled days, and it is not surprising that under cover of the revolution too many old enmities were avenged; but in general those who returned from exile acted with great restraint. By some chance, however, certain powerful persons brought into court this same friend Socrates, preferring against him a most shameless accusation, and one which he, of all men, least deserved. For the prosecutors charged him with impiety, and the jury condemned and put to death the very

man who, at the time when his accusers were themselves in misfortune and exile, had refused to have a part in the unjust arrest of one of their friends.

The more I reflected upon what was happening, upon what kind of men were active in politics, and upon the state of our laws and customs, and the older I grew, the more I realized how difficult it is to manage a city's affairs d rightly. For I saw it was impossible to do anything without friends and loyal followers; and to find such men ready to hand would be a piece of sheer good luck, since our city was no longer guided by the customs and practices of our fathers, while to train up new ones was anything but easy. And the corruption of our written laws and our customs was proceeding at such e amazing speed that whereas at first I had been full of zeal for public life, when I noted these changes and saw how unstable everything was, I became in the end quite dizzy; and though I did not cease to reflect how an improvement 326 could be brought about in our laws and in the whole constitution, yet I refrained from action, waiting for the proper time. At last I came to the conclusion that all existing states are badly governed and the condition of their laws practically incurable, without some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune; and I was forced to say, in praise of true philosophy, that from her height alone was it possible to discern what the nature of justice is, either in the state or in the individual, and that the ills of the human b race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy.

...

Seventh Letter, 330c–331d

I will first advise what is to be done in the present circumstances. This, then, is what I have to say.

When one is advising a sick man who is living in a way injurious to his d health, must one not first of all tell him to change his way of life and give him further counsel only if he is willing to obey? If he is not, I think any manly and self-respecting physician would break off counseling such a man, whereas anyone who would put up with him is without spirit or skill. So too with respect to a city: whether it be governed by one man or many, if its constitution is properly ordered and rightly directed, it would be sensible to give advice e to its citizens concerning what would be to the city's advantage. But if it is a people who have wandered completely away from right government and resolutely refuse to come back upon its track and instruct their counselor to 331 leave the constitution strictly alone, threatening him with death if he changes it, and order him instead to serve their interests and desires and show them

in misfortune and
of their friends.
what kind of men
customs, and the
manage a city's affairs
friends and loyal
a piece of sheer
customs and practices
but easy. And the
proceeding at such
or public life, when
as, I became in the
an improvement
constitution, yet I
last I came to the
d the condition of
as remedy and the
ue philosophy, that
e nature of justice
ills of the human
y and truly lovers of
ties, by the grace of

how they can henceforth satisfy them in the quickest and easiest way – any man, I think, who would accept such a role as adviser is without spirit, and he who refuses is the true man. These are my principles; and whenever anyone consults me on a question of importance in his life, such as the making of money, or the care of his body or soul, if it appears to me that he follows some plan in his daily life or is willing to listen to reason on the matters he lays before me, I advise him gladly and don't stop with merely discharging my duty. But a man who does not consult me at all, or makes it clear that he will not follow advice that is given him – to such a man I do not take it upon myself to offer counsel; nor would I use constraint upon him, not even if he were my own son. Upon a slave I might force my advice, compelling him to follow it against his will; but to use compulsion upon a father or mother is to me an impious act, unless their judgment has been impaired by disease. If they are fixed in a way of life that pleases them, though it may not please me, I should not antagonize them by useless admonitions, nor yet by flattery and complaisance encourage them in the satisfaction of desires that I would die rather than embrace. This is the principle which a wise man must follow in his relations towards his own city. Let him warm her, if he thinks her constitution is corrupt and there is a prospect that his words will be listened to and not put him in danger of his life; but let him not use violence upon his fatherland to bring about a change of constitution. If what he thinks is best can only be accomplished by the exile and slaughter of men, let him keep his peace and pray for the welfare of himself and his city.

stances. This, then,

way injurious to his
of life and give him
think any manly and
such a man, whereas
or skill. So too with
ny, if its constitution
nsible to give advice
dvantage. But if it is
ght government and
ct their counselor to
h death if he changes
sires and show them