

Article "Plato" in Malti-Douglas, Fedwa, ed. *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007. Vol. 3, pp. 1160-1162.

Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), one of the most important figures in the history of Western philosophy, is the source of ideas and the locus of debates about assigned gender roles in society, male homosexuality, and the nature and role of erotic drive in human life.

Life and Works.

Although we have little secure data about his life, it is clear that, after 387, Plato founded a philosophical institution, called the Academy, and that in the 380s he began writing dialogues in which the Ideal Philosopher (Socrates) discusses moral, political, educational, and similar topics with a variety of serious and interesting opponents. The Platonic dialogue is a unique literary and philosophic form. Clearly designed to make discovering doctrines difficult, the dialogues are full of ideas and arguments, myths and metaphors, humor and irony. They mix the technical and simple, subtle and candid, playful and serious, concrete and abstract. Plato is notoriously inconsistent about technical vocabulary, but he probably invented philosophy as a distinct discipline or intellectual practice.

Philosophy.

The heart of Plato's philosophy is a two-level vision of reality. The lower level, material things that change, is sensed and derives its shadow of reality and value from the higher, unchanging level of immaterial Forms or Ideas that are truly real and known by thought. So Ideas are the proper focus of human pursuit and Platonism is thus the first and most influential of all forms of Idealism, the view that ideas are more real and more important than material things. It derives from a dramatic ethical and psychological story.

According to Plato, everyone by nature wants to be “happy” (the Greek *eudaimonia*, usually translated ‘happiness’ is not a feeling; it is a state or condition), but popular ideas about happiness – wealth, pleasure, status, or power – are false. So are popular assumptions about the ultimate reality and importance of material things and the derivation of knowledge from sensation. True happiness consists in wisdom and knowledge, which can only be attained by means of a special kind of rational thinking called dialectic. One must give up the false beliefs that the welfare of the body is more important than that of the soul and that material things are real and important. If thought and speech are to make sense, then, apart from material things, there must be eternal, unchanging, immaterial entities that are truly and permanently what their material copies are only partially and temporarily. These, usually called Platonic Forms or Ideas, we grasp with our intellects, not our senses. The human soul is by nature able to ascend from sensation to rational awareness of these Forms and philosophy is at once a daunting, private, educational journey to the happiness that is found only in rational knowledge and a heroic, public, religious mission to goad our fellow citizens into pursuit of these loftier pursuits.

Sex and Gender Themes.

Several of Plato’s dialogues have specific relevance to issues of sex and gender. In the *Timaeus* (50d–51c) a creation myth similar to that in *Genesis* and other creation myths envisages an active male, heavenly power impregnating a passive female power, called the receptacle. The gender role assignments in the *Timaeus* myth are consistent with disparaging attitudes toward women expressed in a few other dialogues but inconsistent with what is found elsewhere.

In the *Republic*, Socrates describes a city he says would be perfectly just. Run by a class of philosopher-rulers selected for character and intellectual ability in which women are included (Books 4 and 5), it violated the assigned gender roles in Greek society, providing equal opportunity for women in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom and in higher social functions (military service, including war, and public administration). Further provisions abolish families, and establish a community of wives and children, and strict control over sexual intercourse, reproduction, and child rearing. The ruling class also is denied wealth and personal property. Many of the same topics are discussed in the *Laws*, but from a less idealistic perspective.

Male homosexuality is a theme in the *Phaedrus*, *Lysis*, and *Symposium*. In the first, Phaedrus reads Socrates a speech written by Lysias arguing that a boy should grant sexual favors to an older man who doesn't love him rather than to a lover; love (*eros*) makes people crazy resulting in harm to the boy, whereas the non-lover, not being crazy, will help, not harm him. Socrates' explains *eros* as a form of divine madness, like that of poets and prophets, and not harmful if one understands the nature and destiny of the human soul. The soul is immortal and is like a chariot driven by a rational charioteer, pulled by a noble horse that tends toward right action and an ignoble one that tends toward immediate, physical gratification. The soul in its naturally good condition has seen truth and reality beyond the physical world, including true Beauty, the Form. Incarnated, fallen into the physical world, souls lose their natural wings and don't rise to this vision. But physical beauty reminds them of the Beauty previously experienced and stimulates the drive of *eros*, which, properly understood, leads the soul back to its native, divine, knowing state. Thus sexual attraction is the first step along the way to knowledge

of the Forms. True *eros* leads not to the physical act of sex but to the intellectual act of philosophic inquiry.

Dinner party participants in the *Symposium* give speeches in praise of *eros*. Several glorify the homoerotic relations between older and younger men that were not uncommon in upper-class Greek society at the time. Aristophanes says there were originally three sexes, male, female, and hermaphrodite. We were double beings, split in half by the gods for presumption. Now we go through life looking for our “other half,” and this is what the erotic love drive is. Some of us are halves of male-male beings, others of female-female beings, and still others of male-female beings of a sort of bisexual or androgynous nature. Socrates reports what a priestess, Diotima, taught him about “erotics.” *Eros* is the power that drives all human action. Its goal is “giving birth in the beautiful,” but since there are different levels of beauty from that of individual bodies to that of souls, knowledge, and the Forms, there is a “ladder of loves” that specifies the best life for human beings. The ultimate goal of *eros* and of human being is intellectual union with the Beautiful. The true erotic relationship – Platonic love – is between men who jointly pursue wisdom through dialectical conversation and knowledge of Forms, rather than pursuing physical pleasure through sexual activity.

Debates about Plato.

Plato’s devaluation of sensory experience and his transformation of the erotic drive into a universal power leading to intellectual creation and discovery rather than to physical pleasure or procreation has been praised for its idealistic inspiration and elevation of human life but also criticized as a falsification of human nature which can only be truly healthy when its animal needs are met. Aristophanes’s speech in the *Symposium* has been

a rich source of discussion about androgyny, and the frankness with which Plato seems to accept the homoeroticism of many of his characters has seemed a vindication of contemporary views about sexual difference. However, the idea that Platonic love is the highest form of *eros* might seem to support a rather different conclusion about the importance of sex altogether.

The gender role and family arrangements of the *Republic* suggest that Plato is ahead of his time, a proto-feminist, for recognizing that women are equally capable of learning and ruling. Others claim that absorbing women into the male training program amounts to an anti-feminist denial of difference. The reproductive lottery in *Republic* has seemed to encourage abhorrent programs of eugenics and the community of wives and children in *Republic* has been compared, for praise or blame, to communistic social experiments from early Christianity to the communes of the 1960s. Some scholars think the social and political arrangements envisaged in the more “idealistic” *Republic* are not retained in the more practical and “realistic” *Laws*; others disagree. In short, it is possible to find in Plato a misogynist, a sexist, or a forerunner of women’s liberation.

Plato’s Influence.

Plato is one of the three formative influences on the Western cultural tradition, the source of ancient, medieval, and modern Platonisms and Neoplatonisms, as well as modern “rationalism,” and the various forms of “idealism” that led to the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) as well as to American Pragmatism. The *Republic* has inspired utopias from the Platonopolis of Plotinus (third century C.E.) through Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1623) to utopian social experiments of the nineteenth century. The *Symposium*

theory of *eros* as the driving force behind all human action reappears in Sigmund Freud's discussions of *eros* and *thanatos* as primary psychic drives, and the *Phaedrus*' chariot image of the soul reappears in his theory of the id, ego, and superego.

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