PLATO

Plato is known today as one of the greatest philosophers of all time. He was born about 429 BC in Athens, to a very wealthy and aristocratic family. Many of his relatives were involved with Athenian politics, though Plato himself was not.

When Plato was a young man, he went to listen to Socrates, and learned a lot from Socrates about how to think, and what sort of questions to think about. When Socrates was killed in 399 BC, Plato was very upset (He was 30 years old when Socrates died) . Plato began to write down some of the conversations he had heard Socrates have. Practically everything we know about Socrates comes from what Plato wrote down.

After a while, though, Plato began to write down his own ideas about philosophy instead of just writing down Socrates' ideas. One of his earlier works is the Republic, which describes what Plato thought would be a better form of government than the government of Athens. Plato thought that most people were pretty stupid, and so they should not be voting about what to do. Instead, the best people should be chosen to be the Guardians of the rest. (Remember Plato was from a rich aristocratic family so he probably considered himself among the best people!).

Plato also thought a lot about the natural world and how it works. He thought that everything had a sort of ideal form, like the idea of a chair, and then an actual chair was a sort of poor imitation of the ideal chair that exists only in your mind. One of the ways Plato tried to explain his ideas, was with the famous metaphor of the cave. He said,

“Suppose there is a cave, and inside the cave there are some men chained up to a wall, so that they can only see the back wall of the cave and nothing else. These men can't see anything outside of the cave, or even see each other clearly, but they can see shadows of what is going on outside the cave. Wouldn't these prisoners come to think that the shadows were real, and that was what things really looked like?

Suppose now that one of the men escaped, and got out of the cave, and saw what real people looked like, and real trees and grass. If he went back to the cave and told the other men what he had seen, would they believe him, or would they think he was crazy?“

Plato says that we are like those men sitting in the cave: we think we understand the real world, but because we are trapped in our bodies we can see only the shadows on the wall. One of his goals is to help us understand the real world better, by finding ways to predict or understand the real world even without being able to see it.

But if chairs have ideal forms, then so do people. The ideal form of a man is his soul, according to Plato. The soul is made of three parts: our natural desires, our will, which lets us resist our natural desires, and our reason, which tells us when to resist our natural desires and when to obey them. For instance, when you are hungry, and you want to eat, that's a natural desire. If you are in the cafeteria at lunchtime, that's a good time to obey your natural desire and go ahead and eat. But if you are hungry in the middle of class, your reason will tell you to wait until lunch, and your will lets you control yourself. When these three parts of your soul are balanced, you will lead a virtuous life, says Plato.

But if the three parts of your soul are out of balance, that leads to badness. If your natural desires are too strong, you will be unable to control your urges and be always hitting people, crying, taking out your lunch in the middle of class, and falling asleep in the middle of lessons. If your will is too strong, it may keep you from listening to your natural desires, like people who use their will to stop eating entirely and become anorexic and starve themselves. And if your reason is not working right, it may tell you to control yourself at the wrong times: we call all of these a mental illness.

Plato's ideas on politics didn't get much attention in Athens, and soon after the death of Socrates he left for Sicily to be the tutor of a young prince there. He tried to bring the prince up to be a good Guardian for his people. But the prince didn't really pay any attention, and after twelve years, now in his mid-forties, Plato gave it up in despair and came back to Athens sadly.

Back in Athens, Plato started a school for philosophers, called the Academy. The Academy was a big success, and Plato stayed there for the rest of his life, another forty years. One of Plato's students at the Academy was Aristotle. Plato spent a lot of the last part of his life writing another political piece called the Laws, which is much more pessimistic than the Republic, and talks more about how corrupt politicians are, and how they have to be watched every minute.

Plato died at 82, in 347 BC. His students at the Academy preserved and copied all of his writings, so that we have a pretty complete record of everything Plato wrote.

Please answer the following questions after you do the reading:

1. What was Plato's family like?

2. How did Plato react to the death of his teacher, Socrates?

3. What topic did he cover in his book, The Republic?

4. What was his opinion about people?

5. What was the message he was trying to send with his metaphor of "the cave?"

6. Describe Plato's different parts of the soul.

7. Why is it important to keep these parts "in balance?"

8. After a long time away from Athens, Plato returned. What did he do?

9. How did he feel about politicians?