



Biographical Briefing on Plato

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Plato and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Plato was born into a wealthy family in Athens, Greece in 428 B.C. When he was 23, he witnessed Sparta's defeat of Athens and the end of the Athenian empire. After seeing a great deal of violence, he decided that all wars are fought over money. During his youth, Plato became a close friend of Socrates, a Greek philosopher, and was influenced by Socrates' search for the meaning of life. Plato planned to become a politician but decided against it when the Athenian democracy put Socrates on trial and executed him. Thereafter, Plato focused his energy on the search for how society could be structured so as to bring out the best in people. Plato was very interested in promoting the study of mathematics, philosophy, and government. In 387 B.C. he founded the Academy in Athens, the first university, where Aristotle, another famous Greek philosopher, became one of his students. Plato died in 347 B.C.

Stop here
and discuss

- 1 • What was happening in Athens during Plato's childhood?
- 2 • Why did Plato decide not to become a politician?
- 3 • What institution did Plato found?



In his book *The Republic*, Plato discussed his ideal form of government, in which a society could be constructed to bring out the best behavior of its citizens. Plato believed that different people have different strengths and weaknesses, and that the ideal society is one in which each member understands and performs her or his proper role. Talent—not wealth, gender, or noble birthright—determines a citizen's proper role. The strong and courageous should become soldiers, those skilled with their hands should become artisans and laborers, and those with wisdom and virtue should become leaders. Plato believed this assigning of appropriate roles encourages citizens to lead a good and just life and to serve the society as a whole. Not surprisingly, he believed that education is absolutely essential for good government, since it is important to teach people how to be good citizens. As president of the first university, he hoped to instill (put in) the kind of values in future leaders that would influence them to seek wisdom and justice rather than wealth and power.

Stop here
and discuss

- 4 • What are some different roles in Plato's ideal society?
- 5 • How are different roles determined for citizens?
- 6 • What did Plato believe is essential for good government?



After witnessing his friend Socrates be condemned to death by a democratic government, Plato decided that democracy (rule by the people) is “tragically inadequate” as a form of government. He criticized democracy as “mob rule” where the ignorant and uneducated majority govern, rather than the wise and virtuous. But he also recognized the dangers of a state ruled by autocracy (unlimited power by one person over others), where a single ruler is tempted to make decisions based on his or her own greed and self-interest rather than on the good of the people. Tyranny (cruel and unjust government) results, he thought, when the three most powerful drives—ambition, fear, and greed—become stronger motivations than reason and humanity. In order for the state to maintain its focus on caring for the people, the rulers must not be allowed to pursue personal ambitions for power and wealth. Plato wrote that the evil of existing governments is present because power and wisdom are not united in the same person. Evil governments will only end, Plato thought, when philosophers are kings. By “philosopher-kings” Plato meant that the smartest—the lover of knowledge, wisdom, and virtue—should govern. In *The Republic*, he wrote, “unless philosophers are kings, or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely philosophize...there is no rest from ills for cities...nor, I think, for human kind.”

Stop here
and discuss

- 7 • What did Plato believe were the dangers of democracy and autocracy?
- 8 • Under Plato’s ideal form of government, who should rule?
- 9 • Based on Plato’s earlier discussion of proper roles in society, how would philosopher-kings be chosen?



Plato rejected both democracy and autocracy in favor of creating his own ideal society, which he describes in *The Republic*. In Plato’s republic, the state would be unified and self-sufficient. Each person would be put to the best use for which nature prepared him or her. All children would be the property of the government and would owe primary loyalty to the state rather than to their mother and father. In this way, power would never be hereditary; and each person would be educated and judged suitable for a certain role based only on her or his own skills and merits. There would be a careful division of labor so that the rulers would never also be warriors, and vice versa. Philosopher-kings would make the laws, and those skilled in administration would enforce them. The philosopher-kings would be chosen for their intelligence. All rulers would live communally; they would receive no pay and would not be allowed to own property—this rule would prevent them from making decisions based on greed and thus guard against the possibility of tyranny. Another group in Plato’s republic was the populace (people). Although the state was supposed to exist based on their consent and to act in their interests, Plato assigned to the populace the primary duty of obedience.

Stop here
and discuss

- 10 • What were three groups in Plato’s ideal republic?
- 11 • What role did the philosopher-king fill?
- 12 • What was the duty of the populace?

