Plato is often considered the first great philosopher in the history of Western philosophy. At the very least, he is the second great philosopher, following his teacher, Socrates.

Plato was born in the ancient Greek city of Athens, in or around 427 BCE. At that time, the larger Greek world was experiencing a "golden age," marked by many artistic, scientific, and cultural achievements. Athens was then a center of culture and learning, and it remained one for many centuries.

Plato's family were members of the Athenian upper class, so it is likely that Plato received a first rate education. Although little is recorded of his early life, we do know that, as a young man, Plato was a student and follower of Socrates, who taught philosophy in the streets of Athens. Eventually, Socrates annoyed the city's leaders so much that they put him on trial and later executed him for "corrupting the youth" through his teachings and ideas.

Socrates' execution occurred in 399 BCE, when Plato was about 28 years old. Plato attended Socrates' trial, but not his execution. Plato wrote about both events, though, and these writings, along with some of his other dialogues, provide the single best source of information we have about Socrates and his teachings. Socrates himself wrote nothing.

After Socrates' death, Plato left Athens to travel. It is likely that these travels broadened his intellectual interests by exposing him to different schools of philosophy. Eventually, Plato took a job as a tutor to the son of Dionysus I, a tyrant who ruled Syracuse (a city on the island of Sicily, in what is now Italy). In Syracuse, Plato became involved in some trouble that forced him to leave. The exact nature of the trouble is not known, but some sources suggest he might have been threatened with being sold into slavery.

After returning to Athens, Plato set up his own school, which was called the Academy. Philosophy and other subjects were taught there, and the Academy continued to produce scholars for many centuries after Plato died. The Academy's influence (and Plato's importance) is evident from the fact that we get the English words "academia" and "academic" from its name.

Plato died in or about 348 BCE. In his later life, he traveled, taught at the Academy, and wrote the works that made him famous. These writings are referred to as his "dialogues," because they present philosophical ideas as conversations between various people. This approach allowed Plato to show how he thought correct ideas should be discovered: through a process of asking questions and perfecting the answers.

A few of the dialogues that have been handed down to us were probably not written by Plato himself. Nonetheless, there is general agreement that the majority of the dialogues (about two dozen in number) are his work. Among the most famous are the "Apology," the "Phaedo," the "Timaeus," and the "Republic."

[Thought and Writings](http://web.ebscohost.com/scirc/detail?vid=4&hid=17&sid=56224b40-c622-4d46-b3ec-144284979b30%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9c2NpcmMtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d" \l "toc" \o "Thought and Writings  )

It is important to note that Plato's views changed over time, so what he claims in one work may be revised in another, later work. Thus, Plato's thought requires an understanding of how his philosophy grew from the early writings (which show the heavy influence of Socrates) to his mature works.

Plato wrote nearly all of his work in the form of dialogues, with different characters having a discussion about philosophical issues. Plato himself almost never appears in the dialogues. Instead, Socrates is usually the most important character in the dialogue. He is usually presented as the character with the correct ideas.

That leads scholars to a big question: when is Plato using the character of Socrates to tell us what he, Plato, thinks? And when is he just reporting what his teacher, Socrates, said? Most scholars believe that the dialogues Plato wrote first tend to give the opinions of Socrates, and that in the later dialogues we get Plato's views, even when it is the character of Socrates who gives them.

However, history doesn't tell us in what order Plato wrote his dialogues. Scholars have devoted a lot of time and effort to figuring out the correct order of Plato's dialogues, along with deciding which dialogues reflect the teachings of Socrates and which reflect the ideas of Plato.

Two other general comments can be made about Plato's writings. First, they reflect a shift that occurred within Greek philosophy. Before the time of Socrates, Greek philosophers were most interested in the natural world. They thought about topics that we now consider scientific. These "pre-Socratic philosophers" considered questions such as "what is the world made of?", "how do the seasons change?" and "where does life come from?" Around the time of Socrates, however, philosophers started to focus on human and social issues, such as "what is justice?" and "what is the best type of life?" Politics and ethics were major topics for Socrates and Plato. Science didn't disappear from philosophy, though. It just moved over and made room for questions about human life and society.

The other unique aspect of Plato's thought and writings is that he believed the world was "rational." For Plato, things made sense and could be understood by thinking logically and carefully about them. In fact, this sort of thinking is what he considered the essence of philosophy. Because the world is rational, humans can understand it through the study of philosophy, according to Plato.

[The Forms and the Soul](http://web.ebscohost.com/scirc/detail?vid=4&hid=17&sid=56224b40-c622-4d46-b3ec-144284979b30%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9c2NpcmMtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d" \l "toc" \o "The Forms and the Soul  )

Related to Plato's belief that the world was rational and could be understood by philosophical thinking was his theory of the "Forms." This theory is one of his most famous. It states that there are "perfect Forms" (or "Ideas") of the things we find in the world.

A Form is like a perfect version of something. While the world contains, for example, many beautiful things, there is one perfect Form of "Beauty" that all beautiful things are related to. Plato believed that each Form creates or controls all the specific examples. For this reason, Plato actually believed that the Forms were more real than the things we have around us in the world.

Plato's Forms are not material and cannot be experienced in the physical world. They are abstract ideas that exist separate from time, space, and matter. We can know them only by studying the examples of the Form in the world around us and using our minds (and philosophy) to figure out what these Forms are like.

It is important to contrast this approach with knowledge that comes from our five senses. Plato believed that knowledge of particular things, which comes from our physical experience of them, is incomplete and inferior to knowledge of the Forms, which comes from philosophy.

A related idea is Plato's claim that knowledge is remembering. In other words, when we know something, we are really just remembering what we knew before we were born. Plato believed that our souls know the Forms before birth and after death. When we are born, however, we forget this knowledge of the Forms and have to study philosophy to regain it.

This makes Plato a "mind-body dualist," which means he considered the mind and body to be separate things, although closely connected. Plato believed the soul exists before birth (without the body). He also believed it exists after death (again, without the body). For Plato, souls undergo a type of reincarnation, passing from body to body over time.

[Plato's Legacy](http://web.ebscohost.com/scirc/detail?vid=4&hid=17&sid=56224b40-c622-4d46-b3ec-144284979b30%40sessionmgr4&bdata=JnNpdGU9c2NpcmMtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d" \l "toc" \o "Plato's Legacy )

It is probably impossible to overestimate the importance of Plato's writings to Western philosophy. In fact, his work has been highly influential in much of Western culture for the last 2,400 years. Plato wrote so much, on so many subjects, that he influenced fields of study as varied as science, religion, math, literature, art, and politics, in addition to philosophy.

One of Plato's most important legacies is the philosophical writings of Aristotle, who was one of his students at the Academy. Together, these two Greek philosophers gave the Western world an intellectual foundation up to the Renaissance. Although Aristotle had a very different view of the world, and created a very different philosophy, much of his philosophy is a response to the work of his teacher.

Plato's legacy also spread into the major Western religions. Important figures in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have incorporated his ideas in their writings throughout history. In Plato's favorite field, philosophy, the influence of his ideas is still enormous. Philosophers continue to refer to his writings and to address the problems and arguments he wrote about, even as they carry out their own investigations.

Downey, Ed. "Plato." *Plato* (2006): 1. *Science Reference Center*. EBSCO. Web. 12 Apr. 2011.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

**Whew! Interested in a Philosophy course in university? You have just met one of the heroes. I can imagine that your notation took a bit of a different turn with this one. How did you fare with an understanding of the Forms? After discerning what you could, please refer back to the section marked “Thought and Writings.” At this point in your life, do you consider YOURSELF to fall more along the lines of “pre-Socratic philosophers” OR with the “around the time of Socrates” philosophers? What are the questions that dog you? Which questions do you feel are more valid? Why? Remember, we’re constantly readjusting our moral compass, right? Where is yours pointing on this one? Also, try to offer evaluation, not just opinion. What thinking or learning has led you to hold this particular view?**