

Olympiodorus

The Life of Plato

Translated by George Burges in *The Works of Plato: a new and literal version* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1865), volume VI, pp. 232-240. Some of the translator's notes have been omitted and there are some changes to the text to facilitate easier reading.

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Come then, let us speak of the family of the philosopher, not for the sake of prolixity, but of benefit rather and instruction to those, who betake themselves to him. For he was not “a Nobody,” but rather—

To many of mankind he was a care.

For Plato is said to have been a son of his father Ariston, the son of Aristocles, from whom he carried up his family to Solon, the law-giver; and hence he wrote, in imitation of his ancestor, the *Laws* in twelve books, and a *Political Constitution* in eleven. He came into the world by his mother Perictione, who was descended from Neleus, the son of Codrus. For they say that Apollo in a vision had an intercourse with his mother Perictione, and, appearing in the night to Ariston, ordered him to have no connexion with Perictione until the time of her bringing forth. And so he acted. And his parents taking him after his birth, and when he was still an infant, placed him on Mount Hymettus, intending to make a sacrifice to the deities there, namely, Pan, and the Nymphs, and Apollo, who presides over shepherds. But while he was lying there, bees came and filled his mouth with honey from the comb, in order that it might be said truly of him—

From his mouth flow'd a voice than honey far more sweet.

And he calls himself on every side and a fellow-slave with the swans, as if he had proceeded from Apollo; for the bird belongs to Apollo. In early life he first went as a pupil to Dionysius the grammar-master, to learn the common course of instruction, of whom he has made mention in the *Rivals*, in order that Dionysius might not be without a share of remembrance on the part of Plato. After him he made use of Ariston the Argive, as his master in gymnastics, by whom, as they say, his name was changed into Plato, having been previously called Aristocles, after his grandfather; and he was called Plato, from his having two parts of his body very wide, namely, his breast and forehead, as his likeness proves, put up every where with such a representation. But others assert that it was not for this reason his name was changed, but on account of the breadth, diffuseness, and openness of the style adopted by him; just as they say that Theophrastus, who was previously called Tyrtamus, had his name changed to Theophrastus on account of the divine nature of his language. For his music-master he had Dracon, the pupil of Damon, of whom he has made mention in the *Republic*. These were the three things the boys at Athens were taught, I mean grammar, music, and wrestling, not simply for themselves; but grammar, to embellish the language

natural to them; music, to tame violent passions¹; and wrestling and gymnastics, to strengthen the relaxed state of desire. In these three points Alcibiades appears to have been instructed by him; and hence Socrates says to him, “But to play on the pipe you were not willing,” and what follows.² (Plato) went likewise to painters, from whom he derived some benefit in the mixing of colours, of which he has made mention in the *Timæus*. Subsequently he received instructions from the writers of tragedy likewise, who were considered to be the instructors of Greece; and he went to them for the sake of the moral and solemn style of tragedy, and the heroical nature of their subjects (selected by them); and he made an acquaintance with the dithyrambic poets, for the honour of Dionysus, who was said to be the superintendent of generation; for to that deity the Dithyramb is sacred, from whom likewise it had its name; for Dionysus is Dithyrambus, as having proceeded from two doors, namely, Semele and the thigh of Jupiter. For the ancients were wont to call things caused by the names of the causing; as they call Dionysus likewise³: and hence Proclus says on this subject—

Parents, from what they see (and know),
Upon their children names bestow.

Now that Plato exercised himself in Dithyrambics is evident from the *Phædrus*, a dialogue that breathes very much of a dithyrambic style; inasmuch as Plato wrote, as reported, that dialogue the first. He took likewise great delight in Aristophanes, the comic writer, and in Sophron; from whom he benefited in his imitation of the characters in his dialogues. And he is reported to have been so delighted, that, when he was dead, (copies of) Aristophanes and Sophron were found on his couch; and he made himself this epigram upon Aristophanes—

The Graces, when they wish'd to find
A shrine, that should for ever live,
Said, what they sought, alone the mind
Of Aristophanes could give.

And he made fun of Aristophanes in his dialogue (called) the *Banquet*, as having derived some benefit in the style of comedy. For after making him hymn the god of Love, he introduces him as seized during (the conversation) with hiccups, and unable to finish the hymn. He composed likewise Tragic and Dithyrambic poetry, and some other things; all of which he burnt, after he had made a trial of an intercourse with Socrates, and pronouncing a verse of this kind—

Come here, Hephæstus, Plato needs thy aid.

And a certain Anatolius, a grammarian, on speaking (again) the verse, was in some repute with Hephæstus, who had been appointed governor of the city; for he said to him—

Come here, Hephæstus, Pharus needs thy aid.

They say, moreover, that when Socrates was about to receive him (as a disciple), he saw, as a vision in a dream, that a swan without wings had settled on his knees; and, becoming fledged on the instant, flew up to the sky, and sung something so sweet, that he enchanted all who heard it; and this indicated the future fame of the man. But after the death of Socrates, he again made use of Cratylus, one of the sect of Heracleitus, as his teacher; on whom he composed the dialogue of that name, inscribing it *Cratylus, or On the Correctness of Names*. Afterwards he sailed to Italy; and finding that Archytas had established there a

1 Of the power of music to allay violent feelings the most facetious proof is given in the Epigram—
Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast;
And therefore fitted for a city feast.

2 The passage alluded to is in Alcib. I. §7.

3 This I confess I cannot understand. The sense seems to require “as they call wine Dionysus” ...

school of Pythagoreans, he again had as a teacher the Pythagorean of the same name; there he has made mention of Archytas.

But since it is requisite for a philosopher to be fond of seeing the works of Nature, he sailed to Sicily likewise, to view the craters of fire that are in Ætna, and not for the sake of a Sicilian table, as thou, noble Aristides, sayest. And, when he was at Syracuse with Dionysius the Great, he endeavoured to change the tyranny there into an aristocracy; for which purpose he had gone to him (Dionysius); and on the latter inquiring of him – Whom do you think amongst men is happy? fancying forsooth that the philosopher would, out of flattery, say that he was, Plato answered that (he thought) Socrates was. (And when) Dionysius asked him again – What do you consider as the business of a statesman? Plato replied – To make the citizens better. (And when) he asked a third time – What then? Does it seem to you a little thing to act the judge correctly? – for Dionysius had a reputation for acting the judge correctly – Plato replied, not lowering his sail a jot – It is indeed a little thing, and of a statesman the farthest portion; for they, who act the judge correctly, are like the menders of cloth, who weave up again torn garments. (And when) he asked a fourth time – What is it, think you, to be a tyrant? Is it not a brave thing? Plato replied – Of all the most cowardly; since he fears even the razor of the barber, lest he should lose his life by it. Whereupon Dionysius, being greatly annoyed, ordered him, while the sun was still above the earth, to take himself off from Syracuse; and thus was Plato with dishonour driven out of Syracuse.

Of his second journey to Sicily the reason was this. After the death of Dionysius the Great, Dionysius, the son of Dionysius, succeeded to the kingdom, having Dion for his uncle, who had been a familiar acquaintance of Plato during his first journey. Dion therefore writes to him (saying) that – “If you were now present, there would be a hope of changing the tyranny into an aristocracy.” For this purpose then, when he had made a second journey, he was falsely accused by the spear-bearing attendants upon Dionysius, how that he was plotting to make over the government to Dion, and to depose Dionysius; when being overpowered, he was by Dionysius delivered over to Pollis of Ægina, who was then trading with Sicily, to be sold. And he carrying Plato to Ægina, found there Anniceris, the Libyan, who was about to sail to Elis for the purpose of entering the contest with a four-horsed car; and meeting with Pollis, he purchased Plato from him, having bought this glory, superior to all the victory of a four-horsed car; respecting whom Aristides says that no one would have known Anniceris, if he had not purchased Plato.

Of his third journey to Sicily this was the motive. Dion, after being proscribed by Dionysius and deprived of his property, was thrown into prison. He writes therefore to Plato, that Dionysius had promised to release him, if Plato would come to him again; when he readily undertook this third journey to assist his friend. And thus much on the travels of the philosopher to Sicily.

It should be known likewise that he went to Egypt to the men of the priesthood there, and learnt from them the science of a priest. Hence he says in the *Gorgias* – “No, by the dog,” which was a god in Egypt. For that, which statues mean amongst the Greek, animals do amongst the Egyptians, through being the symbols of each of the gods to whom they are dedicated. Being desirous, moreover, to meet with the Magi, but unable to reach them in consequence of a war raging at that time in Persia, he departed for Phoenicia; and meeting there with the Magi, he obtained the science of the Magi; and hence he appears in the *Timæus* to be skilled in the art of sacrificing, while speaking of the signs of the liver and entrails, and such like matters. But this ought to have been told previous to the statement of the causes of his journeys to Sicily.

On his return to Athens he established a school in the Academia, by separating a portion of the Gymnasium for a grove sacred to the Muses; and there Timon, the man-hater, associated with Plato alone. Very many persons did he attract to learning, both men and women in male attire, by preparing them to hear him, and showing them that his philosophy was superior to all love of business. For he freed himself from the irony of Socrates, and from passing his time in the place of public meeting, and at

work-shops, and from composing discourses to catch young persons. He freed himself likewise from the Pythagorean oath, about keeping their doors closed, and the-“He said it,” and exhibited himself more like a citizen to all. After making many his admirers, and benefiting the most of them, when he was about to die, he had a dream, how that having become a swan, he went from tree to tree, and caused the greatest trouble to bird-limers. This Simmias, the Socratic philosopher, expounded (by saying) that he would be not caught by those, who after him wished to interpret him; for the interpreters who wanted to catch the meaning of the ancients were like bird-limers; and not caught he is; since one may take his words, like those of Homer, in a sense physical, moral, ethical, theological, and, (to speak) simply, in a variety of senses. For these two souls are said to be altogether in harmony; and hence one may take them both in various senses.

After his decease the Athenians buried him in an expensive manner, and they inscribed upon his tomb—

These two, Æsculapius and Plato, did Apollo beget;
One, that he might save the soul; the other, the body.

And thus much respecting the family of the philosopher.