Plato Quotes

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2025

Between May 9th, 2024 and April 10th, 2025 I read Plato: Complete Works *(ed. Cooper and Hutchinson 1997). Here are some of my favorite quotes, organized by dialogue.*

Apology

"To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know," (Apology 29a-b).

Phaedo

“I believe, as perhaps you do, that precise knowledge on that subject is impossible or extremely difficult in our present life, but that it surely shows a very poor spirit not to examine thoroughly what is said about it, and to desist before one is exhausted by an all-round investigation. One should achieve one of these things: learn the truth about these things or find it for oneself, or, if that is impossible, adopt the best and most irrefutable of men’s theories, and, borne upon this, sail through the dangers of life as upon a raft, unless someone should make that journey safer and less risky upon a firmer vessel of some divine doctrine,” (Phaedo 85c-d).

"When I was a young man I was wonderfully keen on that wisdom which they call natural science, for I thought it splendid to know the causes of everything, why it comes to be, why it perishes and why it exists," (Phaedo 96a-b).

“One should be of good cheer about their own soul if during life they have seriously concerned themselves with the pleasures of learning,” (Phaedo 114d).

Cratylus

"[Things] are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us," (Cratylus 386e).

"After all, as we saw at the beginning, the names of heroes are often given because they are the names of ancestors, and some of them are wholly inappropriate," (Cratylus 397b).

"Let's begin our investigation by first announcing to the gods that we will not be investigating them - since we do not regard ourselves as worthy to conduct such an investigation - but rather human beings, and the beliefs they had in giving the gods their names," (Cratylus 401a).

"'Opinion' (doxa) derives from the pursuit the soul engages in when it hunts for the knowledge of how things are," (Cratylus 420b).

"Nothing I've said is set in stone. I have simply been saying what seems right to me as a result of my investigations [...] So, don't hesitate to speak and if your views are better than mine, I'll gladly accept them. And it wouldn't surprise me if they were better, for you've both investigated these matters for yourself and learned about them from others," (Cratylus 428a-b).

"Self-deception is the worst thing of all. How could it not be terrible, indeed, when the deceiver never deserts you even for an instant but is always right there with you?" (Cratylus 428d).

Theaetetus

"I hope my love of argument is not making me forget my manners," (Theaetetus 146a).

"Wonder is where philosophy begins," (Theaetetus 155d).

"Yes, because you are young, dear lad; and so you lend a ready ear to mob-oratory and let it convince you," (Theaetetus 162d).

"Take care to keep controversy distinct from discussion," (Theaetetus 167e).

"It is in those other questions I am talking about - just and unjust, pious and impious - that men are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own; in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems" (Theaetetus 172b).

"Think now. Is it more correct to say that the eyes are that with which we see, or that through which we see? Do we hear with the ears or through the ears?" (Theaetetus 184c).

“It is better to accomplish a little well than a great deal unsatisfactorily,” (Theaetetus 187e).

Sophist

“It’s impossible to say, speak, or think ‘that which is not’” (Sophist 238c).

“To dissociate each thing from everything else is to destroy totally everything there is to say. The weaving together of forms is what makes speech possible for us,” (Sophist 259e).

Statesman

“Many cities from time to time sink like ships, and perish, and have perished, and will perish in the future through the depravity of their steersmen and sailors, who have acquired the greatest ignorance about the greatest things,” (Statesmen 302a).

Parmenides

“Yet the whole of which the parts are to be parts must be one thing composed of many, because each of the parts must be part, not of many, but of a whole,” (Parmenides 157c).

Philebus

“The boundless multitude, however, in any and every kind of subject leaves you in boundless ignorance,” (Philebus 17e).

“We stand like cup-bears before the fountains - the fountain of pleasure, comparable to honey, and the sobering fountain of intelligence, free of wine, like sober, healthy water - and we have to see how the make a perfect mixture of the two,” (Philebus 61c).

Symposium

"The mind’s sight becomes sharp only when the body’s eyes go past their prime," (Symposium 219a).

Phaedrus

“When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat

or drink; so they died without even realizing it. It is from them that the race of cicadas came into being; and, as a gift from the Muses, they have no need of nourishment once they are born," (Phaedrus 259b-c).

"Grant that I may be beautiful inside. Let all my external possessions be in friendly harmony with what is within. May I consider the wise person rich. As for gold, let me have as much as a moderate person could bear," (Phaedrus 279b-c).

Alcibiades

"I think we can be pretty sure that someone understands something when he can show that he has made someone else understand it," (Alcibiades 118d).

Second Alcibiades

"Thus saith Ammon to the Athenians: I prefer the terse Laconic utterance to all the sacrifices of the Greeks," (Second Alcibiades 149b).

Laches

"It is difficult to maintain of any study whatsoever that it ought not to be learned, because it seems to be a good idea to learn everything," (Laches 182d-e).

Protagoras

"And you, Protagoras, must not let out full sail in the wind and leave the land behind to disappear into the Sea of Rhetoric," (Protagoras 338a).

"While the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the art of measurement in contrast, would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life," (Protagoras 356d-e).

Gorgias

"If human beings didn't share common experiences, some sharing one, others sharing another, but one of us had some unique experience not shared by others, it wouldn't be easy for him to communicate what he experienced to the other," (Gorgias 481c-d).

“Callicles: I don’t know what in the world you mean, Socrates. Ask somebody else,” (Gorgias 505c).

Meno

“We will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know,” (Meno 86b).

“True opinions...are not worth much until one ties them down by an account of the reasons why,” (Meno 98a).

“Virtue would be neither an inborn quality nor taught, but comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding,” (Meno 99e).

Greater Hippias

“Socrates: Then it’s not entirely necessary, as you said it was a moment ago, that whatever is true of both is also true of each, and that whatever is true of each is also true of both,” (Greater Hippias 302b).

Republic

“How are you as far as sex goes, Sophocles? Can you still make love with a woman?" "Quiet, man," the poet replied, "I am very glad to have escaped from all that, like a slave who has escaped from a savage and tyrannical master." (Republic I 329b-c).

“Now, the greatest punishment, if one isn’t willing to rule, is to be ruled by someone worse than oneself,” (Republic I 347c).

“No one is willing to tell falsehoods to the most important part of himself about the most important things, but of all places he is most afraid to have falsehoods there,” (Republic II 382a).

“To be false to one’s soul about the things that are, to be ignorant and to have and hold falsehood there, is what everyone would least of all accept,” (Republic II 382b).

“Rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace,” (Republic III 401d).

“I bow myself down before Adrasteia, Glaucon, because of what I am about to say. You see, I really do suppose it a lesser misdemeanor to become the involuntary murderer of someone than to lead people astray about principles of what is fine and good and just,” (Republic V 451a).

"And as for the one who's choosy about what he learns, especially if he's young and can't yet give an account of what is useful and what isn't, we won't say that he is a lover of learning or a philosopher, for we wouldn't say that someone who's choosy about his food is hungry or has an appetite for food or is a lover of food—instead, we'd say that he is a bad eater," (Republic V 475c).

"In the same way, whenever someone tries through argument and apart from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing and doesn't give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself, he reaches the end of the intelligible, just as the other reached the end of the visible," (Republic VII 532a-b).

"People's souls give up much more easily in hard study than in physical training, since the pain — being peculiar to them and not shared with their body — is more their own," (Republic VII 535b).

"[The sick say that] nothing gives more pleasure than being healthy, but that they hadn't realized that it was most pleasant until they fell ill," (Republic IX 583d).

"The part that puts its trust in measurement and calculation is the best part of the soul," (Republic X 603a).

"Isn't the time from childhood to old age short when compared to the whole of time?" (Republic X 608c).

"From the extremities hangs the spindle of Necessity, by means of which all the revolutions [of the heavens] are turned," (Republic X 616c).

"We must always know how to choose the mean in such lives and how to avoid either of the extremes, as far as possible, both in this life and in all those beyond it. This is the way that a human being becomes happiest," (Republic X 619a-b).

Timaeus

"For this ordered world is of mixed birth: it is the offspring of a union of Necessity and Intellect," (Timaeus 48a).

"We need to keep in mind three types of things: that which comes to be, that in which it comes to be, and that after which the thing coming to be is modeled," (Timaeus 50d).

"While understanding remains unmoved by persuasion, true belief gives in to persuasion. And of true belief, it must be said, all persons have a share, but of understanding, only the gods and a small group of people do," (Timaeus 51e).

"If a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself above all, then there is absolutely no way that

his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp," (Timaeus 90b-c).

Critias

"It is easier, Timaeus, for someone to give the impression that he is a successful speaker when he speaks of gods to an audience of mortals. The audience's lack of experience and sheer ignorance concerning a subject they can never know for certain provide the would-be speaker with great eloquence. We know how we stand when it comes to our knowledge of the gods," (Critias 107b).

Laws

"Truth is a fine thing, and it is sure to prevail, but to persuade men of it certainly seems no easy task," (Laws II, 663e).

"In the first place, men's isolation prompted them to cherish and love one another," (Laws III, 678e).

"This lack of sophistication precluded the cynicism you find today: they accepted as the truth the doctrine they heard about gods and men, and lived their lives in accordance with it," (Laws III, 679c).

"I maintain that, if you lack wisdom, praying is a risky business, because you get the opposite of what you want," (Laws III, 688b-c).

"Consequently they [Athens] gave the ordinary man not only a taste for breaking the laws of music but the arrogance to set himself up as a capable judge," (Laws III, 700e).

"However, music proved to be the starting point of everyone's conviction that he was an authority on everything, and of a general disregard for the law," (Laws III, 701a).

"Accidents and calamities occur in a thousand different ways, and it is they that are the universal legislators of the world," (Laws IV, 709).

"We should run our public and private life, our homes and our cities, in obedience to what little spark of immortality lies in us, and dignify these edicts of reason with the name of 'law'," (Laws IV, 713e-714a).

"...lusts in its heart for pleasure and demands to have its fill of everything it wants—the perpetually unsatisfied victim of an evil greed that attacks it like the plague..." (Laws IV, 714a).

"He must consider that all he has and holds belongs to those who bore and bred him...repayment of all that anxious care and attention they lavished on him, the longstanding 'loan' they

made him as a child," (Laws IV, 717c).

"The jealous man, who thinks he has to get the better of others by being rude about them, makes less effort himself to attain true virtue and discourages his competitors by unfair criticism. In this way he hinders the whole state's struggle to achieve virtue and diminishes its reputation, in so far as it depends on him," (Laws V, 731a-b).

"Indiscriminate equality for all amounts to inequality, and both fill a state with quarrels between its citizens," (Laws VI, 757a).

"Man is a 'tame' animal, as we put it, and of course if he enjoys a good education and happens to have the right natural disposition, he's apt to be a most heavenly and gentle creature; but his upbringing has only to be inadequate or misguided and he'll become the wildest animal on the face of the earth," (Laws VI, 766a).

"The right way of life is neither a single-minded pursuit of pleasure nor an absolute avoidance of pain, but a genial contentment with the state between those extremes," (Laws VII, 792c-d).

"The younger generation never enthuses over the same thing for two days running. They have no permanent agreed standard of what is becoming or unbecoming either in deportment or their possessions in general; they worship anyone who is always introducing some novelty or doing something unconventional to shapes and colors and all that sort of thing," (Laws VII, 797b-c).

"When the laws under which people are brought up have by some heaven-sent good fortune remained unchanged over a very long period, so that no one remembers or has heard of things every being any different, the soul is filled with such respect for tradition that it shrinks from meddling with it in any way," (Laws VII, 798b).

"It is a very serious matter indeed to keep changing the criteria for praising or censuring a man's moral character, and we must take great care to avoid doing so," (Laws VII 798d).

"Almost every state, under present conditions, is only half a state and develops only half its potentialities," (Laws VII, 805a).

"In education and everything else, the female sex should be on the same footing as the male," (Laws VII, 805 c-d).

"Inessential business must never stop you taking proper food and exercise, or hinder your mental and moral training. To follow this regimen and to get the maximum benefit from it, the whole day and the whole night is scarcely time enough. In view of this, every gentleman must have a timetable prescribing what he is to do every minute of his life, which he should follow at all times from the dawn of one day until the sun comes up at the dawn of the next," (Laws VII, 807d-e).

"Of all wild things, the child is the most unmanageable: an unusually powerful spring

of reason, whose waters are not yet canalized in the right direction, makes them sharp and sly, the most unruly animal there is," (Laws VII, 808d-e).

"Now, what's our complain against the instructions you were given? It's simply that you've not yet been told whether a complete mastery of the subject is necessary before one can become a decent citizen or whether one shouldn't attempt it at all," (Laws VII, 809e).

"Similarly, the rhythms of the music of the lyre must not be tricked out with all sorts of frills and adornments," (Laws VII, 812e).

"...and covered the human race with the disgrace of being by nature the most lily-livered creatures under the sun?" (Laws VII, 814b).

"When the legislator wants to tame one of the desires that dominate mankind so cruelly, it's easy for him to see his method of attack. He must try to make everyone — slave and free, women and children, and the entire state without any exception — believe that this common opinion has the backing of religion. He couldn't put his law on a securer foundation than that," (Laws VIII 838d-e).

"But no matter how states or individuals think they can achieve the good, it is a conception of what the good is that should govern every man and hold sway in his soul, even if he is a little mistaken," (Laws IX, 864a).

"In gratifying his ugly emotion, anger, and in thus disgracefully stoking the fires of his fury, the speaker drives back into primitive savagery a side of his character that was once civilized by education, and such a splenetic life makes him no better than a wild beast; bitter indeed, he finds, are the pleasures of anger," (Laws XI, 935a).

Epinomis

"Anyone who is happy began by being struck with awe at this cosmos, and then conceived a passion for learning all that a mortal can, believing that this is how to live the best and most fortunate life," (Epinomis 486c-d).

Letters

"The more I reflected upon what was happening, upon what kind of men were active in politics, and upon the state of our laws and customs, and the older I grew, the more I realized how difficult it is to manage a city's affairs rightly," (Letter VII, 325c).

"And the corruption of our written laws and our customs was proceeding at such amazing speed that whereas at first I had been full of zeal for public life, when I noted these changes and saw how unstable everything was, I became in the end quite dizzy," (Letter VII, 325e).

“Above all I was ashamed lest I appear to myself as a pure theorist, unwilling to touch any practical task,” (Letter VII, 338c).

“But now some daemon or avenging deity has fallen upon us, and through disrespect for law and the gods, and worst of all, through the audacity of ignorance — that soil in which all ills are rooted and grow, to produce in the end a bitter fruit for those who have planted them — such ignorance has a second time overturned all our plans and brought them to naught,” (Letter VII, 336b).

Eryxias

“Although you sometimes hurry to the Acropolis and pray to the gods and beg them to give you good things, you don’t know that they can give you what you’re begging for. It’s the same as if you were to go to the doors of a schoolteacher and implore him to give you skill in letters without any effort on your part, so that after you had received it you too would immediately be able to do the work that a schoolteacher does.’” (Eryxias 398e).

Axiochus

"And so, Axiochus, you pass away, not into death, but into immortality, nor will you have good things taken from you, but a purer enjoyment of them, nor pleasures mixed with the mortal body, but entirely undiluted by pains. For once you are released from this prison cell, you will set forth yonder, to a place free from all struggle, grief, and old age, a tranquil life untroubled by anything bad, resting in undisturbed peace, surveying Nature and practicing philosophy, not for a crowd of spectators, but in the bountiful midst of Truth." (Axiochus 370c-d).

"As well as many other fine arguments for the immortality of the soul, a mortal nature would surely not have risen to such lofty accomplishments that it disdains the physical superiority of wild animals, traverses the seas, builds cities, establishes governments, and looks up at the heavens and sees the revolutions of the stars, the courses of sun and moon, their risings and settings, their eclipses and swift restorations, the twin equinoxes and solstices, and Pleiades storms, summer winds, torrential downpours, and the violent course of tornadoes, and establishes for all eternity a calendar of the states of the universe, unless there really were some divine spirit in the soul which gives it comprehension and insight into such vast subjects,” (Axiochus 370b-c).