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Plato

Over two millennia after Plato's death, his masterfully written philosophical and ethical texts ensure that his fame continues. Born in 427 BC in Athens, Plato was the youngest son of well-to-do, aristocratic parents. As a youth, he studied under some of the most famous astronomers and philosophers of the time, including the philosopher Socrates.

Plato's thinking was greatly shaped by the teachings of Socrates, whose philosophical work was almost entirely concerned with questions of ethics and morality. Charged with impiety and corrupting the Athenian youth, Socrates was executed by the state in 399 BC. Plato was very upset by this event, and promptly left Athens to travel for a number of years.

Although his reputation was made as a philosopher and thinker, Plato was also active in the military. Between 431 and 404 BC, Athens was engaged in a conflict against Sparta known as the Peloponnesian War. Plato enlisted in the Athenian army in 409 BC, and served until the end of the war. He retired to civilian life after this, but several years later he joined the army again, and was decorated for bravery in battle.

It is during his time in the army that Plato is thought to have begun writing his famed dialogs. Over the course of his life he wrote 42 texts, each of which is arranged as the script of a conversation between two or more people. The dialogs deal with questions concerning a range of topics—from the ethics of the *Meno* to the formation of the universe discussed in *Timaeus*, from the political ideals shown in the *Republic* to the subtleties of human love and friendship dealt with in the *Phaedrus*.

Many of the Platonic dialogs, as they are known, feature Socrates as a main character who guides the other characters in the dialog to deeper and better understandings of the issues being discussed. In the *Meno*, Socrates shows a young slave boy how things such as geometry are 'absolute truths', and can be understood by anyone, given the proper chance. In the *Crito*, set in the prison where Socrates was executed, Socrates explains to his friends why it would be immoral to accept their offers to help him escape from prison, and why he is morally obliged to stay and accept his sentence.

Plato's writings provide a fascinating window into the Greek intellectual world of the 5th century BC. All 42 of his dialogs have survived, probably due to their continued popularity. Through reading his dialogs many thought-provoking and interesting ideas are introduced, and much about the ancient Greek mindset is made clear.

In 387 BC, Plato decided to turn to education. In his hometown of Athens, he founded a school known as the Academy. The Academy was intended to educate young men in philosophy and the sciences, training their minds to think clearly and molding them into outstanding citizens. Plato directed this Academy until his death in 347 BC. After his death, the Academy's success and ongoing popularity led it to continue on for almost 900 years, until being shut down in 529 AD.

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Comprehension

Read the following questions based on the text, and select the best answer.

1. Which of the following is NOT a true statement about Plato's childhood?
 - a. He was born in Athens.
 - b. He was born to famous astronomers and philosophers.
 - c. He was born into an aristocratic family.
 - d. He was born in 427 BC.

2. Which of the following best describes Plato's relationship with Socrates?
 - a. Plato was Socrates' teacher.
 - b. Socrates wrote many dialogs about Plato's philosophical views.
 - c. Socrates was Plato's teacher.
 - d. Plato admired Socrates' writing very much.

3. How long did Plato fight in the Peloponnesian War?
 - a. nine years
 - b. five years
 - c. four years
 - d. thirteen years

4. Which of the following best describes the style of writing preferred by Plato?
 - a. informative texts, arranged like lectures
 - b. humorously scripted dialogs, intended to provoke laughter
 - c. serious philosophical explorations, arranged like conversations
 - d. philosophical texts, written in verse

5. According to the text, which of these is NOT a subject that Plato wrote about?
 - a. war
 - b. mathematics
 - c. politics
 - d. love

6. According to the text, why have all 42 of Plato's dialogs survived until today?
 - a. They provide a fascinating view of the ancient Greek mindset.
 - b. They are very thought-provoking.
 - c. There were 42 of them.
 - d. They have stayed very popular for the past 2,000 years.

7. Why did Plato found the Academy?
 - a. He was the director of the Academy until his death in 347 BC.
 - b. It was incredibly successful, and survived for almost 900 years.
 - c. Athens was his hometown.
 - d. He wanted to train young men to be good citizens.

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Answer Key for Plato

1. b
2. c
3. b
4. c
5. a
6. d
7. d