

Plato, Truth and Conservatism Introduction It has been suggested that Plato is a conservative and antidemocratic thinker. However, Plato is not generally a conservative in at least one significant respect. I shall argue in this paper that his love of the truth and his love of the pursuit of truth is in fact progressive. At the time of writing of the present paper, there is some dispute over whether being concerned with the truth about things is a conservative viewpoint. Many of those who claim to be progressive also claim to hold extreme relativist views about truth. For the purposes of the present paper, I will take as given that these relativists are simply confused. In this paper I will argue that Plato views that (a) there are truths, (b) they are knowable albeit (perhaps) imperfectly and, finally (c) the pursuit of truth is desirable, individually suggest and jointly entail that he is not a complete conservative. Finally, note that I assume throughout that anything the character Socrates says is agreed to in some form by Plato, except where within the same dialogue there is a change of position by Excuse me, I said. It isn't his you liked that that you think at I want to examine, but you and me ourselves. What I mean is, I think the argument will be most fairly tested, if we take the out of it. Plato's desire to remove the is a desire to remove the opinion and get to the facts of the matter. Note that in this case the facts concern what someone's actual opinions on something are. If there were no (objective) truths about anything, making sure that a statement was held by someone would not make any sense, because there could be no agreement about whether someone actually held an opinion. (That is, there would be no way in general to agree on statements like X does not believe that Y just as SOCRATES: Then let us not leave it incomplete. There remains the question of dreams and disorders, especially madness and all the mistakes madness is said to make in seeing or hearing or otherwise misperceiving. You know, of course, that in all these cases the theory [that knowledge is perception -- the present author] we have just stated is supposed to be admittedly disproved, on the ground that in these conditions we certainly have false perceptions, and that so far from its being true that what appears to any man is, on the contrary none of these appearances is real. THEAETETUS: That is quite true, Socrates. SOCRATES: What argument, then, is left for one who maintains that perception is knowledge, and that what appears to each man is also for him to whom it appears. THEAETETUS: I hesitate to say that I have no reply, Socrates, because just now you rebuked me for saying that. Really, I cannot undertake to deny that madmen and dreams believe what is false, when madmen imagine they are gods or dreams think they have wings and are flying in their sleep. Here the characters are discussing whether knowledge is of perception (phenomena), rather than of the truths of things. Plato argues (through Socrates) that if that were the case, we could not say that madmen were delusional. This is slightly different from the last way in which truth is said to be important, for it tells us this time how we tell dreams and ravings of the delusional from the perceptions of normal people. The truth about things (in Plato's case, it is, to be sure, That is

the first duty of the juryman, just as it is the pleader's duty to speak the truth. Clearly if there was no way to know the truth about things, it could not be the duty of the defendant at a trial to speak it. This notion is elaborated upon later in the same dialogue. At Apology 29d, Plato writes as follows: Well then, said I, it has just the contrary effect. For, if I were confident that I was speaking with knowledge, it would be an excellent encouragement. For there are both safety and boldness in speaking the truth with knowledge about our greatest and dearest concerns to those who are both wise and dear. This points at the knowability (even in Plato's sense of the word) of truth in an interesting way. Plato has the Socrates character claim that unless, said I, either philosophers become kings in our states or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take on the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophical intelligence, while the motley horde of the natures who at present pursue either apart from the other are compulsorily excluded, there can be no cessation of troubles, dear Glaucon, for our states, nor I fancy, for the human race either. Philosophers are elsewhere described as those who pursue the truth. At Republic 5.475e: neither of us has any knowledge of anything grand [after E. Lewis]. This quest to seek the truth about the oracular pronouncement is one demonstration that philosophers can seek the truth. Socrates finds something about it, too, when he concludes that (at 23a) nothing grand in itself (because of the general opinions of most people) a pretty important discovery about the truth of things. But we also find Plato allowing other people than his beloved teacher to seek out the truth. At the end of the Cratylus, 440d-e: the masses not, he is hence conservative. **T h i s** interpretation is false, for it neglects to note the definition of philosopher that Plato provides at Republic 5.475e (we have already looked at this passage in another context above): select group mark above unfounded, as it defines true philosopher as ones who are enamoured of the truth, regardless of any other division. Many passages in the Republic are devoted to showing that women (for instance) and other lovers of sight and sound Conclusion Plato admits that there is truth about things, that this truth can be known, and that seeking it is desirable and possible to an (unusual for the time of his writing) large group of people. I have tried to show that each of these viewpoints individually demonstrates some progressiveness in Plato's thought and that taken together, Plato is not as complete a conservative as is traditionally thought.