

Plato's Later Life

Socrates' death, then, confirmed Plato's aristocratic biases and his judgment about the causes of Athens' defeat at the hands of Sparta. It convinced him that a bad state breeds only bad men; that a good man cannot live in such a state; and that a state ruled by the many is inevitably bad, because the many are ignorant, emotionally unstable, and narrowly self-centered. Hence he withdrew from active politics. But he did not abandon his interest in politics. On the contrary, he conceived it his highest duty to try to discover the basis for a good state, one in which a good man might be happy and live in peace. He began, he said in one of his letters, by studying every possible way in which the degeneration of public and private morals might be checked. As time went on, however, and as he came to realize that "modern" degeneracy was not just a peculiarity of defeated and democratic Athens but a widespread disease, his hopes for speedy reform diminished. Not until philosophers became kings or kings philosophers—not until supreme knowledge and supreme power were combined in the same person—would real improvement be possible. It seems likely, therefore, that when he was forced to abandon his plans for a positive reform of the Athenian constitution, Plato fell back on the hope of exercising a more indirect influence on politics through a process of education.

Meanwhile he had commenced writing on philosophical subjects. This production took the form, as has been said, of dialogues in which various theories are presented and criticized in conversations between Socrates and some other character, often a member of Plato's family or another well-known Athenian. The dialogues are not systematic; often they are inconclusive. Those that are conclusive usually reach only negative conclusions. For instance, the *Theaetetus*, which is concerned with theory of knowledge, rejects certain views as mistaken—"neither perception, nor true belief, nor the addition of an 'account' to true belief can be knowledge"—but fails to formulate a position that Plato himself regarded as acceptable.

But even negative conclusions are in a sense positive—insofar as they eliminate false views. In the dialogue mentioned above, *Theaetetus* says that Socrates' questions have enabled him to "give utterance to more than I had in me," and, characteristically, the party decides "tomorrow morning to meet again." The pursuit of truth has not run into a dead end but is an on-going affair.

We have to remember this conception of truth as involving a joint search when we find Plato criticizing in one dialogue views to which, in others, he seems to have committed himself. We have to remember also that these dialogues were written over a long period of time and in an order about which we cannot now be certain. Moreover, Plato was not writing for us but for a group of friends and pupils who could almost certainly rely on receiving a more detailed oral exposition of Plato's views.

Indeed, though he was a consummate literary artist, Plato was rather ambiv-

alent toward the written word⁷. Stating his criticism of written exposition in a perhaps exaggerated way, he once remarked in a letter that he had never attempted to put down in writing his views "about the subjects which I seriously study. . . . There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself."⁸

Thus, in one sense, Plato was a mystic. But he was also, as we shall see, a rationalist and a mathematician. Though he believed that the highest truths cannot be formulated in an explicit, rational language, he held that truths at a lower level can be and that their formulation is a necessary preparation for the experience of the vision that cannot be put into words.

Finally, he was an administrator and an executive with enough energy and ability to found a school that was not only the chief educational institution of its day but a training ground for statesmen. Through its alumni and through the work done by its staff in supplying constitutions and legal systems for Greek states, it exercised indirectly the kind of influence on politics and affairs that the young Plato had probably once hoped to exercise directly through a political career.

Plato, however, had at least one adventure in practical politics. When Dionysius, the ruler of Syracuse, died in 368 B.C. he left his brother-in-law, Dion, as regent for his young son and heir, Dionysius II. By this time Plato was well known as a writer on political subjects, and Dion (who had made Plato's acquaintance during a visit the latter had paid to Sicily some years earlier) conceived the idea of putting into practice the educational and political theories Plato had been working out in the Academy. If, as Plato argued, a really good state was unattainable until philosophers were kings or kings philosophers, here was an ideal opportunity to try to make a philosopher out of a king. Plato, apparently not altogether willingly, undertook the philosophical education of the young Dionysius. But theory shattered on the harsh rocks of *realpolitik* in Syracuse. Four months after Plato's arrival Dion's position had been undermined by rival groups around the throne and Dion was exiled; in 366 B.C. Plato himself returned to Athens. However, he seems to have maintained friendly relations with Dionysius, who apparently still cherished the hope of some day becoming a philosopher. In 362 B.C. Plato made another trip to Syracuse, this time at Dionysius' own request, but this visit, too, failed to achieve anything, and Plato returned to the Academy to remain its head until his death at the age of eighty in 347 B.C.

So much for Plato's life. As for his views, we shall first consider his attempt to work out a theory of knowledge that would meet the sceptical arguments

of the Sophists. This will occupy the rest of the book. The next part of the book is a study of the special sciences, as politics, art, and religion. In a final section we shall consider some criticisms of the theory of form by Plato himself, and Plato's answers to them.

Theory of Knowledge

It has already been stated that Plato's theory of knowledge was developed for a good state, one in which a good ruler would set forth his answers to such questions as "What is justice?" "What is morality?" "What is the good?" "What are the truths that do have answers. For the Sophists, the answers to these questions in the spheres of morality and politics were not answers at all. Plato devoted a great deal of attention to the theory of knowledge before him.

Like Democritus, Plato saw that to the various apparently insoluble problems that suggested the hopeless inadequacy of the sceptical position, the answer was that the complete scepticism of a Sophist was not the answer until one could resolve the dilemmas and could justify the claims of reason. The sceptical position was hardly hope to halt the descent into scepticism viewed with so much alarm.

THE PUZZLE ABOUT CHANGE

Like Democritus again, Plato realized that the one and the many, the problem of change—grew out of the questions asked. The tricky problems were implied in Thales' theory. What is the one out of which everything comes? Everything is really one, say, water, it is what they are: What is *really* water and kings. Thus we get the "problem of change" to be different from what it is? Again, say, in the problem of the one and the many, (water) is a plurality (ships, cabbages,

Suppose we try to get around this problem by saying that reality undergoes some sort of change, it becomes appearance. This is not helpful.

⁷ See p. 194.

of the Sophists. This will occupy the rest of the present chapter. The next chapter is a study of the special sciences, as Plato understood them—physics, ethics, politics, art, and religion. In a final section, as preparation for a study of Aristotle, some criticisms of the theory of forms, including a number of criticisms raised by Plato himself, and Plato's answers to these criticisms will be examined.

Theory of Knowledge

It has already been stated that Plato's primary concern was to discover the basis for a good state, one in which a good man might be happy. But before he could set forth his answers to such questions as, "What is the best type of political organization?" "What is morality?" he had to demonstrate that these are questions that do have answers. For the Sophists had claimed that there is no truth in the spheres of morality and politics, but only private prejudice. Plato thus devoted a great deal of attention to epistemology—more than had any philosopher before him.

Like Democritus, Plato saw that to answer the Sophists he had to find solutions to the various apparently insoluble dilemmas, growing out of earlier theories, that suggested the hopeless inadequacy of human reason. It was easy to point out that the complete scepticism of a Gorgias was self-defeating and absurd, but until one could resolve the dilemmas that had led Gorgias to this conclusion and could justify the claims of reason as an instrument of knowledge, one could hardly hope to halt the descent into scepticism about moral standards that Plato viewed with so much alarm.

THE PUZZLE ABOUT CHANGE

Like Democritus again, Plato realized that these dilemmas—the problem of the one and the many, the problem of appearance and reality, the problem of change—grew out of the questions asked by the earliest philosophers. All of these tricky problems were implied in Thales' apparently innocent question, "What is the one out of which everything comes?" For instance, on the assumption that everything is really one, say, water, it is obvious that things look different from what they are: What is *really* water *appears* to be ships, sealing wax, cabbages, and kings. Thus we get the "problem of appearance": How can reality appear to be different from what it is? Again, saying that everything is really one involves us in the problem of the one and the many, for we are saying that what is one (water) is a plurality (ships, cabbages, kings), which sounds like a contradiction.

Suppose we try to get around this by saying that the one changes into the many, that reality undergoes some sort of transformation in the course of which it becomes appearance. This is not helpful because change itself is a puzzle. For