

PLATO'S REPUBLIC¹

“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” (A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947), *Process and Reality* (1929) part 2, chapter 1) In *The Republic*, written c.375 B.C., Plato addresses virtually all the main problems of philosophy.

“Plato derived his idea of God from the Pentateuch. Plato is Moses translated into the language of the Athenians.” (Numenius in Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel* (tr. Gifford), XIII, 12)

Plato presents a non-religious route to God: cf. Hebrew Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (= Sirach)).

So he aims to teach us to *Think* (rather than pray). He looks to the reign of *philosophers* (thinkers, eg Alfred the Great?), where the Bible looks to that of the *saints* (Revelation 20:4-6). His ultimate reality is not heaven but the world of abstract *forms* - the true essences of things in their pure and perfect state - from which all other (visible) things derive their characteristics.

Highest is the Form of the Good (Absolute Goodness), depicted as the Sun, from which “things that are just and so on derive their usefulness and value” (505a p.229). It “gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the knower’s mind the power of knowing” (508e p.234). It is the source of their reality, yet “is not itself that reality, but is beyond it” (509b p.234). It is “responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything,...and being in the intelligible region itself controlling source of truth and intelligence” (517c p.244). It is “a pattern for ordering [the philosopher’s] own life as well as that of society and the individual” (540a-b p.273).

To reach this the would-be philosopher is to climb a sort of intellectual ladder, depicted most clearly in the Myth of the Cave (513e-521b pp.240-248), which forms the core of the book. Upon finally beholding the Sun he can reorder the whole of his understanding on a sound and unshakeable basis with a proper perspective. This qualifies him, however unwillingly, to become a ruler.

The fourth and highest step of this ladder is “dialectic” or philosophy, which leads directly

¹ Page numbers refer to the Penguin Classics second edition (1987) , translated by Desmond Lee. Section numbers, as 500c, are common to all editions.

Plato's Republic

upwards to the Good (532a-b p.264), enabling the student to “take account of the essential nature of each thing” (534b p.266), and to take a “comprehensive view” of knowledge and of the nature of reality (537c p.270).

Can this abstract world of the forms be made good? Plato lived in an age when mathematics was being ordered for the first time in history as a reasoned discipline, and seems to have played a part in this. He specified mathematics as the third step in the progression towards knowledge (522-30 pp.251-63), believing that maths has a special power to draw the soul upwards towards the forms (eg 526b, d-e pp.256-7). The mathematical disciplines, such as arithmetic (525d p.255) and geometry (510d-e p.239, 527b p.257), present us with an abstract world of their own, accessible to the mind, in which their abstract objects - abstract numbers, the absolute square and absolute diagonal - actually *exist*.

This view of mathematical reality, ‘out there’, is still adhered to by the majority of mathematicians today most of the time.

‘For me, and I suppose for most mathematicians, there is another reality, which I will call “mathematical reality”....I believe that mathematical reality lies outside us, that our function is to discover or *observe* it, and that the theorems which we prove, and which we describe grandiloquently as our “creations”, are simply the notes of our observations. This view has been held, in one form or another, by many philosophers of high reputation from Plato onwards.’ - G.H. Hardy, *A Mathematician's Apology* (1940; Cambridge: CUP 1992) pp.123-4; emphasis original.

That a strong case can still be made out for this, and that it is held by so many highly intelligent men and women, many of whom profess no religion or (like Hardy himself) are actually hostile to faith, is startling in an age which professes to believe in nothing which is not scientifically observable.

Have there ever been such wise men with a deep knowledge of God outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition? The Bible itself suggests Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20 cf. Hebrews 7), Job?, and Epimenides the Greek “prophet” (Titus 1:12 cf. Acts 17:28). Clearly Plato has in mind the historical Socrates himself, who undoubtedly had a deep mystical experience of God and a vocation to the Athenians of his day, for which he was martyred in 399. His defence speech is reported in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* (in the Penguin Classic, *The Last Days of Socrates*). He is noted for the personal “divine sign” to which he looked for instruction (mentioned at 496c p.219 as well as in the *Apology* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*). Plato seems to have his trial and death in mind particularly at 526b,e pp.256-7.

SUMMARY OF TEACHINGS

(1) The belief in absolutes (forms, ideas, abstracts), the crown of which is Absolute Goodness.

(2) The absolutes give meaning and reality to all else.

(3) By comparison, the visible everyday world is unreal and illusory.

(4) All things can be known only with a level of certainty which is commensurate with their level of reality. So only the absolutes are fully knowable; the visible world is only the subject of opinion.

(5) The ideal just state needs to have wise men and women (philosophers) in charge of it.

(6) These philosopher rulers can be taught wisdom by acquainting them with the absolutes.

(7) This is achieved by a long and detailed education in which the mind learns the principles of abstraction, starting with everyday objects and proceeding upwards through mathematics and the simpler abstract concepts.

(8) There is a parallelism between the threefold state and the threefold human soul. In both cases justice consists in a harmony between its three components.

(9) The human soul is immortal.

(10) Ultimately we are responsible for choosing our own destiny.

Besides these, the fine details - on the nature of the state, the soul, education and so forth - are but padding.

Martin Mosse,

Revised 28 March 2010.