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## PLATO

MORTIMER ADLER

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If the pendulum of political thought swings between the position that the aim of government is to regulate all aspects of our social life by law and official administration, and the position that that government governs best which governs least, Plato's *Laws* marks one extreme point of its orbit. There is no dictator who reigns in Europe today who has yet been able to put into practice the detail of legal and administrative regulation which Plato advocates and outlines in the *Laws*. There is no apology for the complete restriction or utter abandonment of individual freedom. Not only must the state determine the canons of art and prescribe their conventions in detail; even the games of very young children are to be officially outlined and directed, and the prohibition of intoxicating liquors is minutely specific to the extent of determining in what situations what quantities of wine may be drunk. The only distinction between the policy of the *Laws* and that of contemporary European fascism is not in the policy itself, but in the character of the dictator or law-maker.

Plato held up Egypt and Sparta as models with respect to the political supervision of the arts. The Egyptians are to be praised for having canonized by law the kind of music which has an intrinsic rightness. Plato goes on to say that if we can detect the intrinsically right in the matter of any art, we should reduce that art to law and system without misgiving, and without yielding to the perpetual human craving for novelty in the arts. He has not forgotten the point in the *Republic*, that the arts may be a source of delight, and that the pleasure to be derived from them may, in part, rest upon such novelty. But he does not concur with the popular opinion that the standard by which artists and other providers of entertainment are to be judged, is the amount of pleasure they give. It is not the pleasure given to every and any person, but that which delights the best men, the properly educated. He who is to judge the arts and regulate them must take his seat, not to learn from the audience, but to teach them, and to set himself against performers who give an audience pleasure in wrong and improper ways. Plato is against the prevailing freedom which leaves the merit of amusements to be decided by the majority of the audience. This practice, he says, has corrupted the poets themselves, "since their standard in composition is the debased taste of their judges, with the result that it is actually the audience who educates them, and it has equally corrupted the tastes of the audience." Only in Sparta have the full duties of the statesman as an educator of the people been recognized, and there the arts are as completely regulated as they were in ancient Egypt.

It should be noted that this discussion of the political supervision of musical and poetical entertainments occurs in the context of a discussion of the prohibition and regulation of wine-drinking. The arts as public amusements are like wine; they provide the populace with pleasure. While pleasure is not in itself condemned, pleasure cannot be used as the standard by which to measure the political worth of things. The lawgiver must consider only what is morally right, or in other words, he must consult the pleasures of the good man. It should be noted also that Sparta, praised by Plato, was conspicuously deficient in the arts, and particularly in literature. One wonders whether their treatment of the poets, which Plato holds up as a model, was the cause of this deficiency; or, if not, what is the significance of the Spartan example? For if, as Milton says of them, "museless and unbookish they were, minding nought but the feats of war," there could have been no problem about poetry in Sparta. "There needed no licensing of books among them, for they disliked all but their own laconic apothegms, and took slight occasion to chase Archolochus out of their city, perhaps for composing in a higher strain than their own soldierly ballads and roundels

could reach to; or if it were for his broad verses, they were not therein so cautious, but they were as dissolute in their promiscuous conversing; whence Euripides affirms, in *Andromache*, that their women were all unchaste.”

The *Laws* follows the *Republic* in its essential point of discriminating between drama and the arts of the theatre, on the one hand, and music, lyric poetry, the dance, painting, and all other arts, on the other. The latter are to be subjected to close supervision by the Minister of Education, who is at once the official curator of public morals and censor of the arts; but stage productions of dramatic literature are to be prohibited without qualification. The reason Plato gives for this in the *Laws* is simple and direct. If the dramatists ask for permission to produce their plays, the ruler or law-maker must answer in the following vein: “Respected visitors, we are ourselves author of a tragedy, and that the finest and the best we know how to make. In fact, our whole polity has been constructed as a dramatization of a noble and perfect life; that is what we hold to be in truth the most real of tragedies. Thus you are poets, and we also are poets in the same style, rival artists and rival actors, and that in the finest of all dramas, one which indeed can be produced only by a code of true laws or at least that is our faith. So you must not expect that we shall light-heartedly permit you to pitch your booths in our market-square with a troupe of actors whose melodious voices will drown our own, and let you deliver your public tirades before our boys and women and the populace at large let you address them on the same issues as ourselves, not to the same effect, but commonly, and for the most part, to the very contrary.”

This passage echoes the point made in the *Republic* that there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. The rivalry between the poet, especially the dramatist, and the states man, the enmity between the poet and the philosopher, which we have found running throughout the Platonic discussion, and which Plato himself clearly recognizes, can be given many interpretations. The poets are subversive, or at least they arrogate to themselves the privilege of commenting on law and morals and government, and in such a way that their comment is more effective than the frank opposition of political partisans. Did not Shelley boast that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”? The legislator is a teacher, and to the extent that he teaches by law, he must use the sanction of force. The poet is a rival teacher; he teaches by means of pleasure and persuasion. It is no wonder, then, that the politician fears him and distrusts him. In a state in which free political debate is either not encouraged or not permitted, it would be an inconsis-

tent policy not to silence the poet; if suffered at all, he must speak lines which the rulers, or their ministers of propaganda and public enlightenment, write for him. But even in a state devoted to the political principle of freedom of debate for all public questions, the poet is still feared by those socially-minded groups which claim to have the interests of the community at heart. He is their rival, and the freedom which they are zealous to guard for themselves, they are reluctant to grant him. The fear of the poet as subversive is, however, not a rational ground for censoring or exiling him; although the fact of his being subversive of public morals, law and order, might justify the political remedy. But this fact cannot be assumed. It must be established that imaginative literature, the stage, and the motion picture, do have the effects upon the populace which their opponents ascribe to them.

The rivalry between the poet and the philosopher has another significance which is illuminating. It is the dissonance of great similarity. Human wisdom, both speculative and practical, is expressed alike in the writings of poets and philosophers; the poet moves freely in all philosophical realms, in metaphysics and morals, in theology and politics. Poetry, said Aristotle, is not only more philosophical than history, but it satisfies, as philosophy does, the human desire for learning. It provides both the matter and the means of contemplation; the similarity between poetry and philosophy is in the matter, the difference in the means. The enmity between the poet and the philosopher is thus to be understood; it is the antagonism between different techniques for achieving substantially similar ends. But whereas Plato felt that such competition was unwholesome in a state to be governed by philosophers, we shall find that Aristotle makes the similarity of poetry and philosophy one of the chief political justifications for the arts of literature. The common roots of art and religion in ritual explain the statement that it is the same impulse which sends a man to church and to theatre. The common roots of poetry and philosophy in the intellectual imagination explain their service to the contemplative mind; and contemplation is a good which the community should seek to conserve in any form. We shall return to this point later in the Aristotelian analysis of the problem of poetry.

Plato must be protected from his followers, who are many, eminent, and influential, as well as from his opponents. His disciples as frequently misunderstand him as his critics. This is particularly true in regard to his doctrine about poetry and politics. Here his host of followers includes many who are not genuinely Platonists, and who unscrupulously cite him as authority for their own condemnation of poetry, without sharing the intellectual presupposi-

tions which support his position, without really understanding the position itself. We are, therefore, obligated to make an independent analysis of his doctrine before turning to its critics, of whom Aristotle is both first and foremost. In no other way can we determine whether Aristotle understands, as well as disagrees with, Plato. We shall do this, perhaps too briefly, first by stating the assumptions upon which his position with respect to poetry rests, and then by turning the light of other parts of Plato's philosophy upon this striking point in it.

It is not enough to say that Plato's political philosophy is directed toward the definition of political ideals. Even if the *Republic* is treated as presenting the conception of an ideal commonwealth, and the *Laws*, the description of the best state practically achievable, it does not follow that the exclusion of the poets and the strict censorship of the other arts is entirely Utopian in its significance. Actual societies are to be judged as having degrees of perfection in proportion as they approximate the ideal. Plato assumes that statesmen or rulers can perform the tasks of government better or worse in proportion as they are more or less philosophers, men having speculative principles and knowledge, the more speculative the more practical. He further assumes that it is the state, rather than the home or any other agency, such as the church, which must undertake the moral training as well as the intellectual education of its citizens; and that the arts in their political aspect have only one function, the didactic, directed primarily to forming moral character, though they may also instruct the mind.

These assumptions are somewhat qualified by two points of unclarity in the discussion. (1) At some places, Plato seems to be considering the problem of education only with respect to "the young"; at other places, he views the arts in their possible effects upon citizens of all ages. We are forced to ask, therefore, whether Plato holds that the state is responsible only for the moral training of its youth or whether, in extreme paternalism, it treats all its citizens as if they were children to be guided and guarded. (2) At some places, Plato limits the problem to the education of the governing classes and ignores what he would call the artisans and slaves, what we would call the proletariat and the masses; at other places, he seems to extend his view to the populace as a whole, regardless of these class distinctions. Again we must ask whether he intends his position concerning poetry to be understood in the wider or narrower frame in which the problem of education is considered. Ignoring these difficult questions for the moment, we can summarize his argument as follows: If the indicated assumptions are granted, and if Plato knows, first, that the philosopher-

statesman is able to direct the moral training of his citizens; second, that the arts will be obstacles in the way of such training unless they are closely supervised by the philosopher-statesman; and third, that the philosopher-statesman is able to direct the arts to good rather than bad results; then in the light of these assumptions and such knowledge, Plato is practically wise in recommending strict censorship of most of the arts and the total exclusion of the drama, which Plato singles out for such drastic treatment because the ruler must himself become his people's poet. But are all these assumptions unavoidable, and does Plato have knowledge rather than opinion in terms of his own clear standards with respect to the points upon which his conclusion rests?

The Platonic dialogues help to answer these questions, though not fully. Let us concede that Plato knows what virtue is and what the virtues are, that he knows the nature of a good man and the conditions of a good life. So much may be clear philosophical knowledge, and not mere opinion. But does he know how men acquire the virtues or, on the other hand, lose them? Are the virtues taught as geometry is taught? Are they learned by imitation of the examples set by virtuous men? Are they elements of our natural endowment, rather than products of nurture? These questions are part of the more general question: How does one form or corrupt the moral character of others? Unless Plato as a philosopher knows the answer to this question, the statesman who is a philosopher is not likely to be better able than the poet he replaces to alter the souls of men for either good or evil; what either actually succeeds in doing will be as if by chance; certainly the ruler will not be able so to direct the artist or the poet that his work creates the virtues rather than corrupts them. But this question, in general and in all its parts, is one which the Platonic writings most conspicuously leave unanswered; or, what is even more significant, the dialogues reveal many answers to the question, but dictate no clear choice among them. They are so many opinions to be clarified, but not to be accepted as knowledge. Thus, in the *Meno*, it is first assumed that virtue is knowledge, or includes knowledge as an integral part; in which case, it should be teachable as geometry is teachable, but there are no teachers and students of virtue as there are of geometry. Hence it is not merely knowledge, and although it includes knowledge as a part, it includes other parts which differentiate it from geometry and make it unteachable. It is suggested next that the leaders of the state are the teachers of virtue by the examples they set; but it is offered, on the contrary, that virtuous fathers do not produce virtuous sons; hence the proximate example of virtue is insufficient to explain the formation of character. The dialogue ends with the proposition that the virtues are either a gift of nature

or of the gods. Whatever this means positively, it means, negatively, that men do not *know* how to proceed in the moral training of others.


The *Protagoras* is a dialogue in which Socrates and Protagoras debate the question whether virtue can be taught. At the end Socrates recognizes the paradox that he has been maintaining that virtue is knowledge, but that it cannot be taught, while Protagoras has been denying that it is knowledge, but insisting that it can be taught. This conclusion is hardly a resolution of the question, and the dialogue as a whole is even less instructive with regard to how virtue can be taught or trained. But in the course of it Protagoras makes one long speech that is significant. He says that the fact that Socrates finds no special teachers of virtue in Greece is no more surprising than that he finds no special teachers of Greek in Greece; it does not follow from this that men are not taught and do not learn virtue, any more than that they are not taught and do not learn to speak their native language. Just as, in a sense, every person in the community, and particularly those with whom one is intimately in contact, teaches one how to speak its language, and just as everyone is a student of that language and is learning it on all social occasions, so every citizen is both a teacher and a student of virtue with respect to every other citizen. That is what a city is: it is a community of men who can teach virtue to and learn it from each other. This still does not explain *how* any man teaches or learns virtue. Plato, however, does not agree with Protagoras. In the *Republic* he defends the sophists against the charge that they have a corrupting moral influence upon young men, by saying that the sophists do no more than express current popular opinions, and that it is, therefore, prevailing public sentiments which corrupt the youth. It is the public, he says, which "educates young and old, men and women alike, and fashions them after their own hearts." So far Plato seems to agree with Protagoras, but he goes on to insist that the unwelcome and unpopular task of the philosopher is to counteract the corrupting effects of public opinion. Only the philosopher can do this; that is why the philosopher must rule if society is to improve. But how is he to do it? If by legislation, what force will laws have if they are contrary to custom and prevailing opinion? If he must change opinion and custom to give laws their proper force, he must use persuasion and education rather than force to achieve this end. But what are the means of persuasion, what are the factors in education, or, in short, how can the populace be made virtuous? Thus we return to the question which, to the extent that it is not answerable by knowledge, weakens the conclusion that political leaders, whether or not they are philosophers, should supervise the arts as means of moral training.

It is to Plato that we owe the first clear distinction between knowledge and opinion. We cannot here discuss it fully, but the basic point can be made. Knowledge has completeness and clarity. It is whatever the reason must assent to in terms of the matter known or in the light of relevant evidence. Opinion is fragmentary and unclear in the sense that its verbal expression is more or less ambiguous. What is asserted as opinion involves willful rather than rational assent. Opinion is prejudice, and must be analyzed in terms of ignorance and the passions. If Plato could be asked whether the propositions upon which his program of regulation for the arts and his treatment of the poets rested were knowledge or opinion, he would answer I think the dialogues show opinion. Not only do we not know how the good in men is created and the evil avoided; he would admit further that we do not know the effects of the arts in general, and of poetry in particular, upon their audience, young or old, and of whatever class of men. We do not know, therefore, that the arts are impediments to the course of moral training and that the philosopher-statesman, or any other ruler, is able to regulate the arts so as to reduce or eliminate them as impediments. Faced by a practical dilemma, and lacking the relevant knowledge, I doubt whether Plato would recommend that action be taken, even though he seems to do precisely the opposite with respect to the poets. I think he would have agreed with a recent statement of Professor Charles Beard, historian and political scientist, "that the failure to distinguish between knowledge and opinion is responsible for a large part of the tragedy, suffering, insecurity, conflict and poverty in public and private life. If mere personal and class opinions were separated from facts known and established, and were presented in their true guise, a new tone of humility might enter into our public and private discussions." But I do not think Plato would agree with the contemporaries of Professor Beard about the significance of the answers to such difficult questions of fact, which are offered as knowledge in the name of science because they have been obtained by the prevailing methods of empirical research in psychology and the social sciences. We shall return to this point later.

That Plato would admit either ignorance or conflicting opinion on these questions of fact seems to me to be indicated clearly at one place in the *Republic*. Although he has just decided to exclude the dramatists, he challenges them "to prove their right to exist in a well-ordered state." If the question is thus open to dispute and unless it were, the proof the poets are challenged to make would be impossible the knowledge which would make the question indisputable does not exist. Our criticism so far has been in terms of the



knowledge which Plato needs and lacks to support his position on the poets. If we turn now to his basic assumptions, we shall see that all of them are not unavoidable and that some of them raise questions which Aristotle answers differently. One of these assumptions is peculiarly useful in providing a transition to Aristotle, because Plato himself has questioned it and Aristotle so clearly answers his question. For the most part, Plato seems to assume that the arts in their political aspect are either good or bad as didactic, and that there is no other criterion by which to judge their political merit. He concedes that they provide pleasure, but this is not enough to outweigh his opinion that, unregulated, they fail as instruments of moral instruction. But, in the context of his challenge to the poets to prove themselves worthy, he asks them to show that they are not merely pleasant, but also useful to the state.

Aristotle undertakes the defense of literature, and the other arts as well, by doing precisely this, by showing the variety of respects in which they are politically useful. The superiority of the Aristotelian analysis at this point, as at others, is its greater detail and balance, its greater analytical fullness. Basic questions become more polygonal, and out of their many sides and angles, the lines of action which solve difficult practical problems are drawn more temperately, and hence less definitely. Still, Plato may have the gift of wisdom and insight which goes directly to the undeniable point. The issue between Aristotle and Plato must not be begged here. It can be properly reviewed and decided only after Aristotle has been heard. 

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