The Republic

Plato

November 3-10, 2007

It is an old Penguin edition, I must have bought it over thirty years ago around Harvard. The price was no doubt slashed down to half, judging from the disfiguring ink mark slashed against the top. It comes with a lengthy preface by the translator supplying some useful historical information to set Plato in context; but also with an explanation of what the book is about, something which could be left to the reader. Also inside the text there are insertions by the translator of an explanatory nature. Some of those are fully legitimate, as when considering some technical problems of translation, others are those of a busy-body trying to explain the philosophical aspects of the text itself.

Poetry is what famously gets lost in translation, and to some extent that might also apply to irony, one of the defining features of Platos prose. Ideally, when not knowing the original Classical Greek, one should partake of it in a variety of translations preferably also into different languages. This essay will be confined to the reading of just one, and maybe an indifferent one. Still the essential points should survive any kind of serious translation, even if followed by a slight rotation.

What is it all about? It is about what is meant by a 'just' man, i.e. a good and virtuous character. This is an essential problem of classical philosophy, namely how to live a good life. There are many senses in which one may conside a life good, an obvious one is one that satisfies an individuals desires. There are a variety of such desires, first and foremost the basic ones of survival, namely the satisfaction of the cravings of the body such as hunger and thirst and shelter, in addition to that one should also include sexual desire, as well as the desires of higher order so to speak, namely for wealth, the respect of ones peers, also known as reputation. A life that satisfies all of ones desires is rightly known as a succesful one? Clearly a good life should be the same thing as a succesful one. Not just one of bodily success but also the high order successes which come into existence through civilization. Or not?

In human intercourse there are acts that are clearly defined as just, namely those that accord with the interest not only of the individual but with those of his neighbours as well. Criminal acts, such as cheating, thieving, murdering are clearly unjust acts, although they can bring with them great advantage to those who perpetrate them. Such advantages are clearly neutralized if the perpetrator is found out, overwhelmed and brought to justice, forced to relinquish his unlawful gains. Such acts are not considered just by society at large, and social convention is of course the ultimate arbitrarer. Or is it? An unjust man who can perform his unjust acts without being found out and thus gain the admiration of his peers along with the material gains, is he not considered just, because he has after all succeeded in satisfying his desires? The argument that a just life should be equated with a succesful life seems overwhelming and immune to rebuttal. Of course leading a just life may accord the same kind of successes, but in the end there should be no real difference, because after all the ultimate judge is society as a whole. So a just man who gets the reputation of being

unjust suffers correspondingly and fails to achieve the satisfaction of his natural desires. This is a serious challenge to Socrates, the character who has been chosen by Plato to act as his mouth-piece, put up by Thrasymachus And thus in the entire book being the one true disputation of opposing view-points. The rest of the book is devoted to the attempts of Socrates (i.e. Plato) to counter this challenge, and to argue that the just life comes with its own intrinsic reward, that it is a pure phenomenon independant of material application. That the reason to be good and virtuous is not subjected to ulterior reasons. One is not good in order to reap rewards. This is something most people recognise, but why do they do so? It has to be shown that this goes beyond mere social convention. And Socrates then enters upon a lengthy soliloquy, in which he with very few exceptions, is allowed to hold forth without opposition, only eliciting murmurs of repeated assents from his admiring disciples. Of course in some sense this is out of character, because after all Socrates otherwise always presents himself as ignorant, in fact not knowing anything at all, except of course that does not know. Thus his role is always to put questions, never to give answers, and when he occasionally does so, his answers are supposed to be interpreted ironically as mere provocations. In fact one defining feature of the thought of Plato is irony, as already stressed above, that what he professes to say is never to be taken as face value. One natural reaction while reading the long soliloquy of Socrates is to suspect it being an argument tongue in cheek, not unlike the mathematicians arguing by contradiction, creating an intricate world only to have it annihilated by a final contradiction.

It is true that Plato is ironic, but also that irony stops somewhere, and exactly to draw the line of demarcation between irony and sincerty has been the traditional task of classical Plato scholars for centuries. It may be tempting to say that the less you think Plato ironic, the more naive you are; and conversely the more you appreciate his irony the more intelligent you are. But you can only be intelligent up to a limit, if you go beyond that limit, you miss the point and becomes just a cynical sophist. Somewhere sophistication and sincerity part ways.

The notable feature of the Republic is that the answer to the introductory quandaray can be set out rather simply, but Socrates prefers to make a long digression, which in fact provides the bulk of the work, namely a discussion of what should constitute a just society. This by itself is a very interesting problem, and one to which Plato found more than one occasion in his life to devote himself to. The short answer, to some extent independant of the problem of a just society can be simply phrased as to knowing the Truth. Truth is not something that you can find in the confusing world of the senses, that world is temporal and shifting, and of that you cannot form any permanent knowledge, only opinion ($\delta o \xi \alpha$). Only in a higher eternal world, of which the world of senses is but a projetion, can knowledge be formed. By your organs of sense you apprehend the sensous world, but to make ultimate sense of that you need thought, i.e. knowledge of the eternal world of deeper reality. The good life is thus the life who seeks true knowledge. At this point we should not pursue further what is really meant by this, but only to point out the natural religious overtones. If we semantically exchange the word 'Truth' for 'God' we get intelligible interpretations of the religious injunctions to serve God, to seek him out, things we cannot not only ignore at our peril, but which actually bring their own rewards.

Although the famous simile of the men chained in a cave occurs in 'the Republic'

the main interest of this work is actually not Platonism per se, even if it is eloquently explained at the end of the work, but the opinions of Plato as to more mundande matters as how a society should be organised. With Truth you cannot argue, but with opinion you are invited to. Thus let us digress on the formation of a State, leaving aside for the moment whether Plato is serious or not. As already noted once we think of it as opinions not knowledge, we are invited to argue and keep in mind that opinion by its very nature changes with time, and that what may have happened to be the personal opinions of Plato at the time of writing, may have changed, would he have the opportunity to expound on them today.

The basic insight is that a society of men is in some sense a kind of superindividuals, and just as the different parts of an organism serve very specialized functions, the different members of a society should likewise be quite specialized and keep to their last. One may think of this as a vision of economic specialization to ensure the highest possible efficiency. First the vision of a society is one of the most primitive in which only the most basic necessities of life are attended to. With civilization the scope of human activity greatly increases as does the number of secondary and tertiary etc activities. What we are seeing take form in the imagination of the interlocurs is the kind of State fit to provide the kind of amenities to which they have grown used to. But such a civilization demands resources and by necessity encrouches on those of neighboring societies. Thus with the more ambitious scheme a cadre of guardians is a necessity whose task it is not only to protect but also, if the opportunity arises, conquer and enlarge. Now for some reason from now on the discussion centers on the guardians and how to make sure that they are trained properly in order to accomplish their functions most efficiently. One may think that the purpose of Plato is ironic, that he is making a caricature of an efficient society in terms of an antheap and hence how to fashion each members optimally for their purpose. What are the requirements we demand of a guardsman? Courage, physical valor and stamina, as well as coolness of judgement. Plato is quite aware that he is requiring characteristics which are seldom combined. Individuals who display physical bravery and spirit tend not to impress with their detachment and reserve. And those who are trustworthy and reliable, unmoved by fear also tend to be equally unmoved by instruction, shirking from any intellectual effort. But after all the whole thing is a kind of game, and as Socrates remarks, it is not unlike a daydream in which there is no pressure to justify your assumptions, but you are invited to take each as given and proceed from there.

As one cannot expect guardians to come ready formed by nature, the onus on forming them is on society, and hence Plato allows Socrates to digress on the issue of education. The idea of the government providing education is a novel, but in the context, logical one. Furthermore as women are supposed to enjoy equivalent rights and duties as men, with the caveat that they may not always be physically as strong, and that may in individual cases impose some restrictions[1] (as it does to this day), Plato is tempted to go even further. In his society, at least when it comes to the class of guardians, the idea of a core family should be abolished. Men and women should share quarters and in their sexual activity

[1] Plato lets Socrates say "All I have said about men applies equally to women, if they have the necessary qualifications"

not restrict themselves to one partner but share them indiscriminantly [2]. Consequently the rearing of the young would be done communally with no individuals identified as parents, instead all children born within a certain time-period in particular connected to a previous so called marriage-festivity, should be considered as siblings, and any adults active during that festival as their parents. Plato takes the view of a breeder of domestic stock, namely that progeny is like what begets it, and thus that the more superior guardians should be given more opportunity to take part in the festivals, and hence leave more of an issue. Such ideas clearly antedates Darwin, who in fact was inspired by them.

As to education it should combine physical training with mental, and from this dialogue there are tantalizing glimpses of the actual tenor of the society in which Plato lived. Physical fitness certainly was very important, and the obsession with it often survived into old age, when wrinkled men disgusting to look at it, still had a go at exercising. It is hard not to note parallels with modern affluent society and its desperate denial of ageing and death. When it comes to mental exercise it should not be too demanding at an early stage, instead Plato emphasizes that play should be paramount[3], and I guess many modern educators find this congenial. As a consequence of this, something modern educators on the other hand fail to fully appreciate, maturity comes late. In fact full adulthood is not reached until the age of thirty, and the prime of man is thought to extend to the age of fifty-five or thereabouts[4]

So what should the pupils study? Much of poetry is off limit, as much of it concerns itself with tragedy and baser human instincts. Plato presents a long list of quotations, mostly from the works of Homer (which as the translator rightly remarks played a similar role to that of the Bible in more modern societies), which he finds not conducieve to mould the kind of characters he has in mind. The very extensiveness of his list inplants in the reader a suspicion that he himself - Plato, has a rather soft spot for the poetry he purports to condemn. But on the other hand, his proposed point of view is deliberately narrow. Nevertheless those sections, supplemented by a subsequent section on the inferiority of art, persuades many commentators that Plato in fact had a low view of poetry. As noted repeatedly, one should always be leary of taking Plato on face value, and I will return to

[2] Clearly an idea that inspired certain communal living in the 60's, but which also had antedecents further back in time, especially among certain religious sects.

[3] Plato remarks that compulsory physical exercise does no harm to the body, but compulsory learning never sticks in the mind. Something which is clearly debatable

[4] It is often argued on the basis of life expectancy figures of the past as well as of the Third World, that people age more quickly in such contexts. This is blatantly false, the natural lifespan of a human seems to be rather invariant, and from a biological point of view this is hardly surprising, but what cuts down the life-spans is not premature ageing, but high infant mortalities as well as nowadays to some extent preventable diseases. One may on the contrary argue that middle-aged people of the past were probably healthier than those of today. It is also noteworthy the importance placed on doctors and their skill, which by hindsight must have been rather rudimentary. Of course survival was based on what wa sknown as a strong constitution, and Plato suggests that only those with a strong constitution should be given medical attention, while those whose constitutions are weak, should take a more fatalistic attitude. This might strike us as callous, on the other hand it is but an expression of the logic of triage, and as a anti-dote to hyperchondria and excessive attention to your health it is probably rather sound.

his more principled arguments, supposedly against art, later on.

Somehow Plato makes, at least what seems so to the modern reader, a sudden shift in emphasis. Originally one thinks that he will treat guardians as some kind of inferior class, doing the dirty work of necessary force, before embarking on a systematic survey of all the different classes and their special skills and needs. Instead it dawns upn the innocent reader than far from being the lowly servants of the State, the guardians constitute the elite, the highest caste so to speak, and out of this elite are the real rulers to be found, those in fact that show their mettle during their long tenure. Thus the education he sketches is not meant to form and to some extent distort, but to enhance those best suited for edification. What he has in mind is the philosopher as ruler. And what characterizes the philosopher is his love of Truth, everything else being secondary, and as a lover and seeker of Truth he is far more suited than anybody else to guide and rule, even if he assumes authority reluctantly[5]. As he lets Socrates argue in the translation of H.D.P.Lee

> *"The next question is this. If philosophers have the ability to grasp eternal and immutable truth, and those who are not philosophers are lost in multiplicity and change, which of the two should be in charge of the state?"*

Plato claims that the philosopher will rule only out of a sense of duty to share his insights to society at large, never in order to seek personal gain, because most of all he is in love of Truth, and reluctantly consents to be deprived of just an insignificant fragment of it. It is here he elaborates on the metaphor of the cave, in fact by doing so, actually weakens it. He envisions a few of those chained beings in the cave to actually be released and brought into daylight and be allowed to observe what the world is really like, and with that knowledge they are bound to assist those still chained and ignorant. Still, apart from the metaphors he wields, Plato is judiciously inexplicit as to what practical insights such eternal truths can bestow on the management of governmental affairs, the most explicit he gets is when he refers to wisdom involving a sense of proportions, and that the different elements, be they in an organism or in a state, should be in harmony with each other.

At the point of elevating the philosopher, Socrates experiences a rare moment of temporary opposition during his extended soliloquy. The philosopher of that day usually cuts a rather sorrow figure, vain maybe, impractical definitely, and much concerned with petty details. Socrates explains that philosophers are delicate plants and can only thrive in societies geared towards their welfare, if circumstances are not right, the true philosophers will wilt, and in their stead, various impostors will claim the high ground[6]. In a passage strangely reminiscent of Jesus pessimistic appraisals of the rich making it into heaven, Plato claims that the seductions of the world are particularly destructive as to the pursuit of knowledge. By those Plato does not only include good looks, well connectedness, physical strength and of course wealth, but also ostensibly positive character traits such as courage and self-discipline as amenable to distraction. Once again we are reminded that the vision expounded on by Socrates is in the nature of a Utopia, and only a utopian society would be so conducieve to philosophical inquiry as to produce the kind of philosophers truly fit to rule.

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[5] This ties up beautifully with the standard dilemma in academics. Those willing to accept positions of authority are seldom if ever the ones suitable to do so.

[6] In the words of Plato, like a crowd of criminals seeking refuge in a temple.

Thus one should view the education as one to foster true philosophers, and to be confined to those who can truly benefit from it. Education bestowed on the undeserving produces nothing but sophistry[7]. With such an ambition the study of mathematics, especially geometry[8] will take pride of place. The reason for this are two-fold. First, and one would hope foremost, to acquaint the student with the eternal and allow him to reason with such entities. Here it becomes interesting to make an aside. Plato makes a distinction between knowledge, that can only be about the time-less eternal world, and opinion which concern the fluctuating immanent world of the senses. Opinion can be about belief and illusion, i.e. knowledge about nothing. While intelligence allows the mind to perceive the eternal world, reasoning about it is a lower kind of intelligence [9]. To a mathematician this makes perfect sense. Intelligence is to grasp something as a whole, to see how things fit together; while reasoning is more of a mechanical procedure, not unlike calculation, the most primitive aspect of it, which proceeds stepwise, and although solid never really illuminating. Reasoning is a procedure to get access to Truth, not a means of grasping it fully. The second reason for the study of mathematics, arithmetic[10] as well as geometry, is to aid the military commander. So here we have scientific application at an early, but all to well-known aspect. One may wonder as to the exalted status Plato holds the military. Clearly military excellence was incredibly important in the ancient world, as it has been in the modern. Not only was it necessary for elemental survival but also, as pointed out above, for expansion and the pursuit of excellence. Plato must have had an ambivalent attitude towards it. By upbringing he cannot been indifferent to its charms, and as a mature thinker he cannot have afforded to be ignorant of its importance. In a sense force is the ultimate arbitrer. Quite but not really. Plato does of course hold the supremacy of Truth, but in order to do so, the mind have to take control over force, and this is exactly what the military commander does. In a sense he is a chessplayer wielding forces superior to him in brute physical strength, but by the strength of his mind, his pure thinking, he is able to control them, and make them do his bidding. Throughout history military exploits have been sung by poets and historians alike. To give the military pride of place Plato is simply accomodating himself to the realities of his times (as well as ours?), however unpalatable to our present sensibilities[11]. Thus we are forced to conclude that the ultimate hero is the one who combines physical force with mental force, the former subservient to the latter,

[7] anticipating the well-known quip that nothing is as conducieve to superficiality as matters only half grasped.

[8] in fact plane geometry, in a rather touching section Plato regrets the immature state of solid geometry, such a prerequisite for the study of astronomy

[9] in fact at one point Plato describes it as being intermediate between opinion and intelligence, which is slightly misleading until made more precise as above.

[10] Plato ventures the opinion that those naturally good at calculation are nearly always quick at learning anything else, which is often corraborated in modern primary education as well. Plato also notes that the capacity for learning diminishes with age, just as the ability to run.

[11] And reason as well, because with the advent of the thermonuclear weapon, fullscale war is no longer a viable option, thus making a mockery of traditional military valor, although, which is not nowadays appropriately appreciated, the threat of the nuclear option is the ultimate force in contemporary world politics, to which everything else has to bow

but yet being an inevitable manifestion of the same. The philosopher king has been an ideal to which many have strived. Alexander the Great is of course a most obvious example, closely linked to Plato himself through the intermediary of Aristotle[12]. The Mughal emperor Babur is a less familiar example to most people, an individual combining military excellence with refined culture. Fredrick the Great, although only somewhat of a strutting player in the 18th century operetta of continental powergames, is a more recent example, as well as, goes without saying, Napoleon. Obviously Hitler had similar ambitions, his eventual defeat sparing us the ignomity of exulting his exploits. Nevertheless the emphasis on military pursuit is an embarrasment to most modern commentators on Plato. Yet one should never lose sight of Plato as a man, a child of his time, and the Utopian vision of his State is just a manifestation of this, and does not in fact really infringe on the philosophical merits of his ultimate concerns, something many modern commentators seem to miss.

When all is said and done what Plato is advocating is what in modern garb would be refered to as a meritocracy. Power should be in the hands not of the wealthy, nor in those of the illiterate and ignorant rabble, and definitely not in those of the megalomaniac, although the line between the enlightened despot and the tyrant often can be quite fine; but in those who know the Truth and have the competence to act on it[13] Tongue in cheek or not, and as we have observed Plato seems to treat the whole discourse as an exercise in utopian thinking, a kind of mental experiment, the ideas of Plato have nevertheless been influential, no doubt because of the almost tautological injunction that only those best fitted to rule should rule. Platos status as an aristocrat is misleading, his ideas belong as much to the left as to the right. Marxist thinking, say as expressed by the marxist historian Hobsbawm, is that a few elect should properly interpret the desires of the masses in order to advance them. In this way one can in one go combine an identification with the low and down-trodden with an aristocratic elitism. I suspect that Poppers criticism (which I have not yet read) of Platos political utopian speculatations is focused exactly on that aspect[14].

Historians tend to explain Platos political ideas by his frustration at the mismanagement of society during his life. He certainly had to suffer through a great varieties of chaos, and did make some ineffectual attempts to set things right. Such explanations tend to reinforce the view that Plato is not just playing a game, seeing what it might lead him, but that he is actually trying to be practical. Now Plato, true to temperament, does keep it on a sufficient abstract level in order to allow a great variety of practical interpretations, and hence ensure its lasting influence, because after all much of its tenor is, as noted, almost tautological, to which probably his prospensity to treat it as an extended piece of reasoning, proceeding by small steps each incontestable, to eventually arrive at indisputable conclusions however startling (as in mathematics)[15]. The most amusing part of his section concerns a survey of imperfect societies, which he classifies into Timarchy, Oli-

[12] in modern academic jargong, Alexander the Great would count as a grandchild of Plato

[13] which I guess should be inseparable from knowledge itself.

[14] To which one may observe that Platos injunction that the philosopher ruler should just like an artist insist to start on a clean canvas; which just as the vision of the clean slate is a leftist idea of repudiating tradition. On the other hand such an approach is integral to any thought-experiment.

[15] In fact Thrasymachus at one point objects to Socrates step-wide reasoning, giving the opponent to

garchy, Democracy and Tyranny, and which he choses to view as succesive degenerations. Timarchy arises from the ideal state when there is dissension among the ruling class, and this of course can only happen when they stray from Truth, because about Truth there can be no argument. Going further the wealthy oligarchs amass political power, and although they are of course not as exalted as the philosopher, yet they possess some indubitable competence in view of their wealth. Democracy is a further degeneration, the life in which is truly pleasant due to the excessive freedom that is enjoyed. But freedom itself is riddled by contradictions and in the end law and order is imposed by a rising tyrant, leading to the worst of all possible scenarioes. Platos low opinion of democracy has rankled many modern readers, because in a secularized world, the mantle of the sacred has now been imposed on political systems, a process starting in the 19th, maybe even the 18th century, but which a most people of the time would nevertheless have found rather puzzling. Democracy have many shortcomings, already elucidated by Aristotle, the most obvious being what is often refered to as the tyranny of the majority. Consequently in spite of valiant efforts, the presentation of the blessings of democracy are often distorted. Democracy is not so much about everyone making the decisions, or suitably interpreting the public opinion in polls and referendums, whatever is meant by that, but more subtle through the working of institutions. To Plato democracy clearly means what was widely experimented with in the 60's, i.e. mass-meetings and unruly procedures, often highjacked by ruthless operators, as well as triumphs of populists, catering to the lowest common denominator. Still in a philosophical work one should not try to delve too deeply into the motivations and opinions of its author, such insights are of ephemeral, if human, interest[16]

So once again how seriously should one take Platos ideas of the perfect State? He is fully aware that it is a utopy, and that it most likely never will exist on earth. But whether this will ever be true or not is of secondary importance, the main point is that he believes (or professes to believe) that it is only in this kind of State a true philosopher can take part in politics.

And finally, what about art as an inferior activity, to which Plato devotes one of his final appendices, and the discussion of which was promised above? Plato in this essay conceives of art as basically one of mimesis, i.e. that of more or less straightforward representation, with its emphasis on mere mimicry. This implants the suspicion that the notion of Art that Plato has in mind is unnecessarily restrictive for our concerns. As the basis of his argument, he likens the relation of representation of the sensual world, to the

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purchase to oppose, and finding himself in the end check-mated, no matter how strong his arguments may have been. Socrates is strongly opposed to the sophistry of the sophists, but it is hard not to suspect that he has been influenced to some extent by their methods of rhetorics

[16] To each imperfect society there is also a corresponding personality. The democratic character is not altogether unsympathetic. Plato describes him as '...living for the pleasure of the moment. One day it is wine, women and song, the next day bread and water; one day it is hard physical training, the next indolence and ease, and then a period of philosophical study'. Does this not strike a chord? Furthermore '...he takes to politics.. saying and doing whatever comes into his head. Sometimes all his ambitions are military, sometimes they are all directed to success in business'. Charming we would say, and maybe Plato also thought so to some extent. Anyway it is the kind of life we might all be tempted to lead would we heed the injunction to live as if every day might be our last.

representation of the deeper reality to that world itself. If the latter is inferior and less real, this should hold in even higher degree of a visual representation itself, which consequently is once more removed from ulterior reality. Plato remarks, more or less correctly, that in order to visually represent a thing, we only need to look at the surface of if, we need to have no knowledge of the thing itself. A painter can make a perfect copy of say a cobbler, without having the slightest clue as to what a cobbler does and thinks. But of course visual art is more than just mimeses, and his remarks should lose all its meaning when applied to non-representational art such as music. When Plato turns to the art of the ear, he refers to poetry, and as such not to its musical candence but to its contents, thus I think, missing the point altogether. (Although of course he might be very ironic again, pulling our legs.) He faults Homer and the tragedians of putting too much emphasis on human feebleness, such as grief, warning that indulging in the sorrows of others may make us more liable to indulge our own. Thus in effect he cautions emphathy as being on the slippery slope towards self-pity. The psychic make-ups of the Greeks were indeed strange, or whatever interpretation we are to make of it.

The final appendix about the immortality of the soul and his cosmological pictures somehow falls out of the frame of this essay, except as being an indication of how much Platonic thought might have influenced Christianity. I am in particular thinking of the notion of the last judgement, which so terrified me as a child. Of course such ideas have been rampant long before Plato, even if the form he gives them here are surprisingly close to that of the New Testament. Probably the real influence of Platonism on Christianity was on its medieval theology through Aristotle, and theology at that time was more in the nature of cosmology and meta-physics than ordinary religion, to the extent a meaningful distinction can be made.

In toto, The Republic is not concerned with the core of Platonistic philosophy, and much of its charm, apart from many of its clever suggestions and ideas, still having some currency as of today, lies in the window it intermittently alllows into the mind and the society of the ancient Greeks. In this dialogue Plato is not concerned with the eternal but with the practical affairs of politics and how it can be squared with the former. Judging by the parting words of Plato on the subject, one is tempted to conclude that they cannot.

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