

The Open Society and its Enemies

The Spell of Plato

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January 1-12, 2008

This book is a powerful indictment against Plato and the political theory he expounded in 'the Republic' complemented by the dialogs 'the Laws' and 'the Statesman'. As such Poppers indictment has had a wide and pervasive influence and after his work, no longer can anyone read and exult Plato with the same innocence as formerly. It is safe to say that Popper has in most liberal circles discredited Plato as a political thinker, branding him as an anti-democrat and a crypto-fascist, and consequently also given the notion of Platonism a bad name, associating it with ossification and naive idealism. As is often the case the general reputation of a work invariably involves simplification, reducing a nuanced argument into vulgar slogans, and by guilt of association, casting dispersions of matters only tenuously connected. In a sense the work is a work of parricide, as Plato has occupied the centerpiece of Western Philosophy for millennia, surviving through the Dark Ages and reviving during the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. In the famous words by Whitehead, Western Philosophy has been but a sequence of footnotes to Plato. The spell of Plato is something to which not even Popper has been immune, and he clearly states in the beginning that he is a great admirer of Plato, and even where he does not agree with him, he is often forced to acknowledge his sincerity and honesty, which, however, are not always in attendance Still love of Truth and reliance on Reason, two very Platonic virtues by the way, have forced him to face matters squarely and to disrobe an idol, who still keeps many of his interpreters spell-bound.

The first mystery that confronts Popper is why Plato has so many modern day supporters, in spite of the fact that so much of what he champions so obviously goes against the grain of any modern man. Who nowadays would openly advocate a caste system in which most people are condemned to slavery¹? One obvious explanation is that Plato is not taken literally, that he is assumed of being ironic, and indeed irony is indeed a running theme in most of Platos philosophy and does he not say in the end of the Republic, that this would be the kind of ideal state if philosophers would be Kings, implying that the whole dialog has been nothing but a long thought experiment? Now, it is strictly speaking

¹ Plato is obviously racist. Merit is something inherited, and although it can degenerate (thus necessitating infanticide even in the best of families) it can never regenerate, making upward social mobility impossible. Furthermore only the Greek are fit to rule, the Barbarians are condemned to servitude, which if taken literally would condemn most of Platos latter-day admirer to slavery. But on the other hand, one can also find Plato remarking that given the ancestors of any man, one would find a motley crowd of kings and beggars. This is clearly an anti-racist remark, going against the grain of inherited excellence. This inconsistency of Plato should not surprise us. Popper remarks repeatedly that the political stand of Plato is the result of a tortured rejection of his best instincts.

impossible to decide whether Plato is ironic or not. The written word, unlike the spoken, could be quite opaque when it comes to the intentions of the writer. Then one may ask to what extent Plato did exist as a person, the personal identity of Shakespeare is still very much in doubt, and Plato being of so much older vintage, the doubts naturally should be even more serious². But it is in human nature to be intensely interested in other humans, not only their actions, but even more so their thoughts and intentions. Popper is no exception and he has decided to take Plato seriously, to assume that he means what he writes and to give him the benefit of a sincere human thinker, looking for the logically coherent interpretation. Irony apart, Popper suspects that this is just a subterfuge for many of his supporters, who are secretly flattered by Platos talk about that the wise and truth-loving should rule, seeing in his recommendation an appreciation of their own perceived virtues, which are normally ignored in modern society. And more ominously, Plato does indeed address even darker held convictions, which are being sugar-coated by exalted references to beauty and truth, and to which many an intellectual may subscribe if only in secret. Indeed, Popper accuses Plato of being duplicitous and propagandist, something Plato has always accused the sophists of being. In fact Popper suspects that indeed Plato is arguing against his better instincts, that he is desperately trying to convince himself, and in the process also the hapless readers, of the truth of his solution. In short, Popper sees 'the Republic' to be the work by a tortured soul, a human tragedy of a man of superior gifts and intellect stooping to moral depravity, and this very fact, the fact that there is so much at stake, makes Plato into an enduringly fascinating character. Indeed, reading closer one is also touched by human weakness, the weakness of trying to be strong, to assume absolute powers, to subsume the world outside to the control of ones thoughts and decisions. A desperate phantasy, ridiculous not only in the weak and ineffectual, but making ridiculous also the strong and able. So what motivates Plato to disown everything that has been sacred to him, to betray the trust and ideals of his teacher - Socrates? Obviously this is not the case of pure evil, it is the case of a sincere effort to do good, but based, according to Popper on a fallacious principle, and thus, just as in any deduction, making an argument to collapse morally as well as rationally. Plato according to Popper sees a society in turmoil, ravaged by the mob, the powerful few, and worst of all by the single tyrant. Plato wants to get to the root of the problem and comes up with a solution, a solution so well thought-out that it deserves our full attention and serious contemplation, especially by admirers of Plato, who could do no greater homage to the sage than to take him at his words. And that Popper has set out to do.

Platonism is about the Truth, the unchanging and eternal. Only of the unchanging and eternal can we have real knowledge, of everything else but opinions. Platonism is ultimately

² It is true that Plato is of much older vintage, but historical documentation is by nature fragmentary and capricious, and indeed the personal documentation of Plato is far richer than that of the shadowy, not to say implied, scribe of the Shakespearean dramas, even if some of it must be in doubt. Generally characters of the distant past invariably become something of legends, not to say fictions. The case of Socrates is illustrative, he being known chiefly as a protagonist in many of Platos dialogs. Obviously the fictional character is based on a real model, but any author enjoys the liberty to interpret his characters according to his whims and the artistic demands of this work, so indeed Socrates as we know him is nothing but a fictional interpretation refracted through Platos imagination.

about abstraction, and Platonism itself can be interpreted at various levels of abstractions and literalness depending on how close you want to be to historical Platonism. As Popper struggles with the man Plato, he is also committed to a fairly literal interpretation in order to divine and reconstruct Platos thoughts. According to this, the phenomena of the real sensuous words are but descendants of their original forms, and the further removed from its ideal source, the more degenerate. Thus a Society is perfect to the extent it is being close to the original, and thus Plato sets himself the historical task of trying to reconstruct the nature of the original society in order to find a model worthy of emulation. Implicit in this quest is the understanding that a perfect society, being an ideal Form, is also unchanging. Thus the solution is to find the original society and thereby find something impervious to change, change being the root of all evil, an insight that Popper claims antedates that of Plato, and stems from Heraclitus³. Platos reconstruction of the original type of society is, according to Popper, remarkably insightful, proposing a tribal society, closer to Sparta than to his own Athens. Only an original tribal society would be stable, any other kind would foster dissension and hence chaos. There is indeed much to Platos views. Tribal human societies, involving only a limited number of members, have survived intact for millennia. Devoid of development and hence history, they are indeed manifestations of humans living close to nature, in fact according to the ways to which they have evolved as species. 'Back to Nature' is a call that has a lot of intrinsic appeal, maybe even more so in our modern age than earlier, at least in the theoretical sense. There is much talk about living close to Nature, of sustainable living, leaving light footprints. Indeed if the human population would be drastically reduced (and there are draconian measures for achieving this) and scattered into small family-tribes around the world, ecological dreams would come true⁴.

Indeed pre-history is the story of tribalism. A state of nature in which there was no distinction proper between the laws of nature and the laws of man, taboos being as binding as gravity. Civilization started with the slow realization that indeed there was a distinction, and once it becomes apparent to man that it is in his power to change his taboos, societal change becomes an option impossible to resist. It is indeed the great gift of the Greek to have effected the change from a closed society to an open, according to Popper. A closed society is a natural phenomenon, it is a herd, in principle not different

³ Heraclitus and Parmenides, two major Pre-Socratic thinkers, are usually opposed to each other. Heraclitus extolling change, while Parmenides claiming that there is none, because it would contradict the unity of the universe, where all is one, and nothing can come out of nothing, making change (logically) impossible. It is tempting to place Parmenides as a forerunner of Platonism, but Popper argues convincingly that Heraclitus, far from extolling the flux, was terrified by it, especially as regards its social aspects.

⁴ Nevertheless one needs to be careful. The human colonization of the New World is but recent, and for most of that time, the American continents were but sparsely roamed by hunters and gatherers, who nevertheless managed within 10'000 years or so totally extinguish the mega-fauna which had survived and thrived for tens of millions of years prior. Ten thousand years is but an eye-blink in geology, but to the individual human it is an eternity, probably none of the pre-historic hunters were aware of any serious depletion of game, human memory being short when relayed by word of mouth alone. Humans are indeed a strange species in the Garden of Eden, their tenure fluctuating widely, at one time flickering close to extinction, only to revive spectacularly and becoming dominant.

from a herd of other egregious mammals such as sheep and horses, and it is no coincidence that the few extant species of herding mammals contemporary with human tenure have become domesticated, and thereby rendering the distinction between subservient slaves and cattle fine. As a natural phenomenon one may consider it as a super-organism, just as most organisms we know are conglomeration of separate cells, specialized so as to only being viable in context. In fact in biology there is a hierarchy of levels, an ant heap consisting of genetically identical workers, and with the more sophisticated versions, with an incipient degree of specialization, being one of the more loosely types of super-organism, to more and more tightly organized entities. Now in terms of complexity, an individual ant is far more sophisticated in terms of its constituents, than the society to which it belongs. It is a reasonable guess that the same also holds for humans, *visa vi* the highly sophisticated civilization we belong to, whether we want to or not. The crucial question to ask is whether a society has an intrinsic value as such, in particular whether its members should be subservient to its interests, just as we consider our own cells to be subservient to our bodies as wholes. This question has at least been implicitly addressed by Plato and his contention is that it is indeed so. And from this assumption Plato is forced to draw many conclusions, most of them quite unpalatable to our sensitivities.

Man is indeed an egregious animal, not just by convention and tradition, but by evolutionary development. Without a society he is but helpless, and thus the health of a society is crucial to his happiness and well-being. Social laws and taboos may be social conventions, but they serve a crucial cohesive purpose, and without them society would founder and its members perish. Thus one may claim that conventional as they may be, this convention may be founded on something less arbitrary, namely human nature. According to this theory, laws and taboos that are not congruent with human nature, or in more modern formulations, biologically innate as a result of evolutionary pressures, are in fact non-enforceable and hence non-viable. However, with the same kind of theory one can also argue that laws and taboos congruent with our biological nature, need not be enforced and are thus automatically adhered to and thus superfluous⁵ and in effect becoming almost natural laws. Truth and Morality are the two main themes of Platonist philosophy. We would tend to make a basic distinction between the two, arguing that Truth is independent of Man and makes sense without him, but Morality as such is but a Human construct and would not make sense abstractly. To Plato the Absolute also pertained to Morals, giving to his philosophy a strong Religious tenor. On the other hand

⁵ I used to think that there were two types of laws, injunctions and regulations. The former involved strong taboos such as not to kill, while the latter were technicalities, such that the very act of transgression was the transgression in fact, and not what it transgressed against, as the latter could be changed over time. One example of the latter is the regulation to drive on a certain side of the street. Obviously it does not matter which one, and different societies have devised different solutions, the countries of the world being divided into left and right; the crucial thing is to stick to one convention consistently, what convention is immaterial, it is the very consistency that counts, a regulation on a slightly higher level of abstraction. Thus it is often argued that it is good to oppose conventions, but such exhortations should be taken with a grain of salt. Is it good to oppose the convention of say left-hand driving on your own? There are of course specific situations when it would be temporarily necessary, but the convention as such can only be replaced by a similar convention, and then only after a sustained collective effort.

our prevailing materialistic point of view would ultimately on ontological grounds discredit such a Dualistic view, arguing that Moral questions can ultimately be reduced to Biology, thus in a sense reverting to the unification of Plato. The question strikes a very sore nerve. When Wilson in the 70's actually tried to do so by launching his Sociobiology he attracted so much fire from his colleagues that he was forced to cut a much lower profile although, as far as I know, he was careful not to recant his views⁶. Poppers stand on the question is very clear and very radical. He holds that no moral decisions can be based on facts⁷. Moral decisions are decisions based on individual responsibility (in particular it presupposes a free will). By taking this stand he also more or less intentionally declares himself a Dualist, be it on epistemological grounds rather than ontological, and in fact without such a stand that Popper elegantly articulates, Humanism would not exist. What we are discussing is a crucial philosophical question pertaining to the idealistic or realistic approach of philosophy, with the former acknowledging the basic fundamental nature of thought⁸. Popper and Plato thus differ on the fundamental issue, Plato arguing that the State should be considered as an organism to which the individual interests would be secondary, and that the actions of individuals, rather than following individual consciences, should be biologically determined, or in the conception of Plato, adhering to rules and regulations, designed for the perfection and well-being of the collective.

The difference may at this level be likened to hair-splitting but as we systematically unravel the consequences, then the two approaches widely diverge. Let us take the concept of 'justice'. As Popper points out justice pertains to the individual if it pertains to anything at all, and that it is strongly tinged with egalitarianism, i.e. that everybody should essentially be treated as equals. This is a view that was purported by Socrates, and one that was recognized by Aristotle, and also one to which Plato initially held, no doubt instinctively as well as influenced by Socrates. But in the Republic, he gives a very long, and according to Popper, ingenious and dishonest account. His aim is to obfuscate issues, to lead away from the instinctive notion of egalitarianism intrinsic to justice, and instead to redefine it in terms of justice in a collective sense. Plato manages to set individualism against collectivism, making the former egotistic, and the latter altruistic, and so

⁶ The social climate of recent decades have been far more tolerant to such speculations, in fact a sub-discipline of so called evolutionary psychology has developed, doing in earnest what Kipling did in jest.

⁷ as Popper points out biological explanations can cut both ways, they can as easily buttress anti-egalitarian and repressive laws as well as progressive and liberal

⁸ The issues are contentious and also very confusing. Chomsky argues e.g. in opposition to Lockean empiricists, that most features of humanity are hard-wired in the brain, especially the language capacity. At the same time he argues for individual human responsibility in taking political stands. Dawkins presents a very reductive view of evolution, reducing it to algorithms and game-theory, and yet at the very end of his 'The Selfish Gene' he exhorts mankind to rise against the tyranny of this very 'selfishness' (admittedly a metaphor not to be taken too literally) which has been driving evolution all along. But how to explain not only our ability but our willingness to transcend our evolutionary history in evolutionary historical terms? The solutions to this is of course to admit a large gap between ontology and epistemology. It is this gap that makes philosophy such a thorny subject, and allows such a latitude of views and interpretations, as well as a conglomerate of inconsistent views. But this is of course typical of any social intercourse.

successfully that this opposition has been accepted until this day. On the contrary, Popper argues. Individualism does not necessarily mean focusing on the well-being of yourself, but could as well be concerned with the well-being of others, as individuals, and he somewhat eccentrically brings up the case of Dickens as an illuminating example of a non-egotistical individualist. Thus there is no sense of collective justice, justice pertains to the individual, just as happiness is an individual notion, not a collective one. Probably Plato feels that on some basic level as well, but he is committed to his solution, and is only able to present some rather weak arguments, the strongest pertaining to the conviction of the superior interest of the collective above that of the individual. Plato must be aware of the weakness and hence he tries to cover it up with brilliant rhetoric but intellectual dishonesty⁹. The argument is stretched out in order to become long and tedious and thus sending the reader to sleep (I can myself testify to this as I read through the Republic a few months ago), while at the same time he allows Glaucon to ask Socrates (who has been condemned to deliver the argument in order to further buttress its moral underpinnings) probing but irrelevant questions thus giving the comforting illusion that the reader can sleep secure in the convictions that Glaucon is awake and keeps Socrates on his toes. A masterpiece of deception, and singularly successful.

Still the question is how much weight we should really give to Platos influence. The idea of the individual sacrificing himself for a greater good is a very powerful idea, and although Plato is great and his influence pervasive, one should be sceptical of crediting him with one of the leading ideas of human history that has marked its course irrevocably. The idea is of course not dead, Popper killing Plato many times over, will leave very little dent on it, and it is clear that it will become a major theme in this second volume when Popper will discuss modern manifestations of totalitarianism¹⁰. In fact, if one feels committed to a purely ironic interpretation of Plato, one can think of the entire dialog as an extended proof by contradiction. Ultimately neither interpretation is subject to proof, and in the end, either makes as about much sense once one realize that the historical question of Platos character is of no practical consequence, but as noted above, of intensely human interest¹¹.

⁹ A crucial argument is that justice relates to possession. This seems of course a good beginning, when we consider material possession as well as your possession of your life and health. To be deprived of those through theft or murder is of course to suffer great personal injustice. But as Popper points out when the notion of possession is extended also to include those of more abstract entities, such as your work. Then justice becomes equivalent with sticking to your last, of being content and secure in your position in society and not to be deprived of it. As Popper argues, you may be in possession of a tendency to rob people, justice would then be for you to keep that possession, in other words to go ahead and rob people. This slippery way of letting definitions deform through analogy is a common trick of sophists, accused by Socrates of misology. Disdainful as Plato may have been of the sophists tricks, he was not above to exploit them for his own purposes. Human all too human.

¹⁰ Hegel is of course the philosopher who *par excellence* extols the virtues of the State (and as such exhibiting the virtues of an exemplary Prussian official). Hegel has clearly been influenced by Plato, just as he himself has been an influence on Marx.

¹¹ The problem is of course that when you engage in virtual debate with an opponent no longer alive, the latter too easily turns into a man of straw to be handled at will. It is a testimony to the subtlety of

Central to the idea of a sound collective, is the idea of stratification, namely that individual members have their assigned positions, and that there is a concomitant hierarchy, all for the benefit of the whole. Plato does extol the virtues of economic specialization in a discussion that seems to anticipate 18th century economic theory with two thousand years¹². Now economic specialization is also an empirical fact which has evolved in human societies. With it also a fossilization making the divisions rigid. That the children inherit the occupations of their parents is a natural one, and in many ways a non-objectionable one, and similar tendencies can be viewed in modern societies, when the progeny of doctors are strongly advised to follow in the same footsteps¹³. The objections are due to the prevention of the occasional exception. The Indian caste system is basically not a hierarchal system but a system of division of labour. But it seems inevitable that any rigid class system sooner or later develops into a hierarchy, even if it may not have started out as some. The Afrikaans apartheid system was formally just a division into two classes to have no social nor sexual relation with each other but to be apart and equal. In practice there was pronounced inequality. We are now watching in front of our very eyes an apartheid system developing in Israel. It illustrates that the rationale for such systems may not primarily be one of superiority but on apartness. But once apartness has developed, the one is invariably going to suppress the other if they are locked into the same system. In short class-divisions is a natural tendency in human societies, and the need for large enslaved classes was in many ancient societies an economic necessity. Class divisions, although politically disowned by modern democratic societies, still prevails very much in all social intercourse. Some people are considered to be better than others, and social status to a large extent a question of belonging to certain social groups. There might be much lip-service to egalitarianism, but in practice people maintain social divisions and hierarchies. Thus the notion of intrinsic merit and the need to rise to the top is very prevalent, now as well as in ancient times (human nature, whatever that is, supposedly having changed but little). Popper suggests ingeniously that many an academic commentator on Plato has been in secret sympathy with the views expressed in the Republic. The idea of belonging to an elite is a very seductive one, appealing to the vanity of intellectuals (and intellectual vanity is a very strong emotion, probably stronger than most other kinds of vanity, because few things are more intimate to you than the power of your intellect, in fact so strong that unlike other more vulgar and hence more innocent kinds it is rarely acknowledged by those who benefit from it). After all the main idea of the Republic is after all that the wise (and hence good) should rule, and by their very nature such rule must be beneficent, and the intellectual themselves would, as we noted, be appropriately appreciated. In fact,

Plato (as well as the honesty of Popper ?) that he keeps Popper engaged through over two hundred pages (and almost as many footnotes) and still one feels that Plato if severely bruised still can walk away with an erect head.

¹² Popper is impressed, and rightly so in my opinion, by the acuity of Platos thought even in matters sociological.

¹³ In certain circles the disproportionate number of children of academics following academic careers, or rather the disproportionate failure of working class children to pursue academic careers is of great concern, and active measures such as affirmative actions, trumping traditional criteria of qualification, are often proposed.

despotism or not being a detail, has any more enlightened view of political rule ever been designed? A pity, the frustrated intellectual may wine, that it was never put to practice. (And Plato wined, at least according to the speculations of Popper.)

Once again to repeat. A closed society is built on the idea of a society, a state, being an organism of intrinsic worth, in fact a worth transcending that of its individual constituents. A society structured according to nature is as a consequence a society most likely to bestow happiness on their members, although this is not necessarily its main purpose. A perfect society, incidentally would not change, and thus in fact provide, in modern notion, a sustainable society¹⁴. If you hold the view that human morality is ultimately reducible to biology, a caste society does not present any moral quandary. If it is good for the health of the society it should be encouraged¹⁵. Although there are certain constraints on public discourse on moral and political matters, such ideas are still very strong and there to be tapped for future potential movements. The underlying assumptions may be assumed rather reasonable, and thus it is somewhat hypocritical to censure those thinkers who draw the ultimate consequences, be it ironically or not.

As opposed to the closed society, Popper contrasts the Open Society. It is a society geared towards the individual. Only with respect to the individual does morality and justice make sense. The purpose of the society is not necessarily to make people happy, that is beyond its powers, but to protect people against the caprices of others (especially their violence) and to limit suffering, i.e. a negative way of promoting happiness. Inherent in such a view of society is the belief in dualism, i.e. that moral and political views and decisions cannot be reduced to biology. Thus in an open society, people have responsibilities, they are in fact responsible for their decisions. This is admittedly a heavy burden, but this is what is to be human, and as such inescapable. The notion of responsibility presupposes democracy in the sense that as responsible citizens you are obliged to take an active interest in the affairs of the state. Democracy is much more than the election of rulers, this is just one detail ensuring that a change of rule can be effected peacefully without bloodshed or disruption of the everyday working of society. It is in the nature of democracy that a ruler need not be a good one, in fact the institutions of a democratic society should be so designed as to limit the damage caused by incompetent rule. Now the notion of democracy is of course self-contradictory, something that Plato was quick to point out. If you think of democracy as the rule of the mass (or the people, if you want to take a more exalted view) there is nothing that prevents the people to elect a tyrant (and tyranny Plato considers the worst of all possible political evil¹⁶). Likewise freedom is a self-contradictory term, because the full exercise of your freedom to act, invariably restricts

¹⁴ Plato is very much aware, as were the authorities of Sparta, that a stable society cannot grow indefinitely, in particular it has to keep its population in check. Population checks in ancient times were done both inadvertently through war and pestilence as well as deliberately through infanticide, a procedure we find abhorrent, although many sincere opponents to abortion may view our liberal policies on that score with equal abhorrence, especially when practiced as a means of not only population control but eugenics.

¹⁵ and in fact would the authorities try to forcefully dismantle the caste society in India it would no doubt lead to social unrest and much bloodshed comparable to or even exceeding that caused by the partition in 1947

¹⁶ Plato makes clear that suppression should never be an end in itself, but a means towards happiness,

the freedom of others. A democratic society is a tolerant society, but should it be tolerant against intolerance? Popper thinks not, he finds it perfectly reasonable that intolerance should never be tolerated, at least as far as it threatens the existence of a democratic state. Thus a democratic state is entitled to suppress its enemies, just as the legal state has the right to punish and constrain their criminals. The kind of logical paradoxes involved are the well-known ones of self-reference, known as the 'Liar paradoxes'. The traditional solution is to introduce a hierarchy, in which the notion of tolerance and democracy are similar to the notions of infinity in classical pre-Cantorian mathematics, idealizations that are not themselves object of study. A democracy achieves its legitimacy through consensus and rational persuasion, while tyranny is based on the power of force. Where there is good-will and rational thinking, democracy is strong and viable, where there is none, it becomes very vulnerable and is likely to crumble, just as Plato prophesied. There are no safeguards against failure, the democratic spirit is not to take a millennial view but to make decisions here and now. And its power rests ultimately on optimism and faith in the ability of man.

An important feature of democracy is given by its institutions¹⁷. Institutions are like machines, Popper tells the reader, i.e. deliberate constructions by men, not naturally given. Institutions are also like fortresses, fortresses to safeguard democracy itself, and as such they need to be both well-built and well-manned. Institutions that are maintained by poorly equipped people will invariably founder, no matter how well-designed they may have initially been. Popper does not spend too much time on concrete examples of institutions, except one, namely that of education, which is a key institution in any democratic society. Plato also spends a lot of time in his 'the Republic' on the education of the citizens. The difference is, Popper reminds the reader, that in the Republic, education is not open to everyone, but only to the elite. Furthermore the purpose of education is not to foster a critical attitude not to instill a love of learning, but to indoctrinate. It is characteristic, Popper writes, that Plato prohibits the young to engage in intellectual pursuits and reserving this privilege to those advanced in years to prevent too much imagination and criticism, as those are likely to be already somewhat enfeebled of mind. The ultimate purpose of Platos education is to weed out those unfit to rule, and to extract an elite to continue the tradition¹⁸. As the tradition is supposed to be unchanging, as it is assumed to be perfect, the point of education is not to encourage new thoughts but simply to acquire knowledge and of that making a possession. In the Republic Plato envisions the wise

admittedly an argument finding favour with most tyrants

¹⁷ One, somewhat counter-intuitive aspect of an Open society (or maybe rather of Civilization) with its emphasis on individuality is its impersonality. In an organic closed society everything depends so much on the vicissitudes of social relations. In fact Popper conjures up already in the 40's a vision of an impersonalized society strangely reminiscent of the one we are moving to, with face-to-face relations increasingly being replaced by electronic messages (although of course the electronic media was still in the unforeseeable future at his time of writing). Similar ideas have been proposed earlier by among others Weber championing the formal aloofness of bureaucracy as a safeguard against caprice and injustice.

¹⁸ Popper remarks that this has always been the purpose of so called 'higher-education' to bestow upon its graduates a mark of distinction. Still as a means of achieving an aristocratic status independent of birth, it does have its good points, and cannot be dismissed out of hand, as Popper appears tempted to do.

philosophers to contemplate the eternal truths. Popper contrasts the attitude of Socrates to that of Plato. Both profess to a love of truth, that being the etymology of philosophy. The difference is that to Plato, the love of truth is exclusive, only possible to the select. And the love of truth is the same thing as a possession of truth. While to Socrates, the love of truth is in principle open to everyone willing to submit to the strains of its pursuit. Furthermore the purpose of such a pursuit is not to possess truth but to keep alive the fire of curiosity, and always to remind oneself that the only thing one really possesses in terms of knowledge is the realization of ones own ignorance. This is, Popper points out approvingly, the true spirit of any scientific mind. Science, being an important feature of an Open society, fostered by the same sense of human responsibility to change and to explore. Although Popper does not bring up his famous criteria of falsification, one may remind the reader that this notion has an important consequence, stated by Popper in another context, namely that not everyone may formulate proposals, but everyone is entitled and expected to judge them. In the same way it is very hard to come up with scientific hypotheses, but the action of trying to falsify them is to put them to a general judging, reducing their consequences to a context that can be understood also by the non-expert¹⁹.

Now Popper in-weighs against the education of his days, in a familiar form of diatribe that has been repeated and parroted by generations of educators. Namely that education should not strive for the accumulation of knowledge, but to foster creativity and critical thinking. That the elements of contemporary education seem designed to thwart the spirit of thinking and exploration in its students, and consequently that the only ones who prosper from it, are those that chose to follow the leads of their teachers and as quickly as possible assimilate received wisdom, and that this is as disastrous to the development of thought, as the tradition of obedience to the selection of independent and courageous military commanders. There is of course much to be said for such an attitude, but of course the very inability to find faults with it without compromising yourself, should make you pause. Popper expresses surprise that so few people seem to have sustained permanent damage from an educational tradition which seems bound to cripple anyone caught in its vice. Now, this might be a clue. Educational matters are counter-intuitive just as much as many other things in life. One wonders what Popper would make out of contemporary progressive education, and whether he would not find himself praising what he formerly has resented, such as discipline and the accumulation of seemingly useless facts and skills. It is true that inspiration is the ultimate purpose of a liberal education, that it should in fact stimulate creativity and critical thinking, but maybe this is done best by making school not necessarily an ally but to force upon yourself a sense of individual responsibility. Many important things in life are presented through ostensibly quite different goals²⁰.

Education pertains to another important thing in a democratic society, namely equali-

¹⁹ It is always much harder to come up with solutions than to test whether they are solutions. In mathematics this is illustrated by the difficulty of finding solution to Diophantine's equations, but the testing of which can in principle be done by anyone who knows nothing more than addition and multiplication. Also most students can appreciate a clever trick when it is pointed out to them, but that they reasonably protest that the real difficulty is how to come up with those tricks in the first place, and without that knack, they are lost anyway.

²⁰ You invite people to a dinner-party not primarily to feed them, that they are perfectly capable of

tarianism. The democratic and open society treats everybody the same and is based upon a conviction that everybody has the same worth and that no one should be privileged. In fact it is a common misconception that this is what democracy is all about - egalitarianism. This idea has also permeated educational thinking combined with the contradicting view that everyone should be given the opportunity to develop its particular talents. If we do admit that people are in fact different and that some are better equipped to assume offices of trust than others, or to perform certain tasks, and thus be more amply rewarded, do we not reintroduce the very caste system we have previously condemned? And in fact making it much more cruel as it will be based on merit and personal responsibility, rather than luck (or better - fate)? The objection is a valid one, and in fact there is to democracy a cruelty and a burden that is absent for more natural and tribal societies in which everyone is born into their place. Personal initiative and responsibility are taxing, and most of us would be much more comfortable off if the onerous burden of decision would be relieved from us. In fact most of the parameters with which you are saddled at birth are beyond your control, such as your parents, your gender, your mother tongue and nationality, most of which would be cause for agony would it be within your power to chose them. The blessings of a Closed Society are indeed very real, if not always presentable and correct, and thus such reactionary impulses of rescinding most of your humanity, exercise to most of us a very powerful pull, but it might take a deep philosopher to make this clear.

Historicism is the red waving cloth which rouses the untempered ire of Popper. It is incompatible with an Open Society, as it presupposes the existence of historical forces beyond the control of man. Not even Plato is a historicist as he clearly indicates that the fate of society is within the power of man to change, and in effect the whole of 'the Republic' and associated dialogs is to provide a blueprint for so doing. In short engaging in so called social engineering. Social engineering is the tampering with political and social institutions. The revolutionary believes in cleaning the slate and to impress fully his vision on society. The problem with such a radical attitude is yet again one of self-reference. If it would be possible to find a fixed point outside society, the ambition to move it as a whole, as Archimedes proposed to disturb the earth, might have been a credible one; but as it is, the very basis on which the revolutionary rests in order to change the society, is also part of that society, and if society is sent into turmoil, so is the revolutionary, with chaotic results to predictably follow. Science is about making experiments and learning from mistakes. In fact in any scientific exploration mistakes are not only legion but necessary, without which there would indeed be nothing to learn from. But the experiments of science are controlled, and their mistakes localized and contained. You cannot learn from mistakes if they kill you. In order to make social experiments you likewise have to control and localize them. Large experiments may have such sweeping consequences as to make learning from them impossible, just too many things have changed, and besides they might have killed you in the process. Revolutions are wide experiments, exciting to your imagination, not your critical one but your aesthetic, from which you consequently may learn nothing at all, and in fact rather than resulting from approaching a distant goal, it might as well set

doing by themselves, but to give opportunities for contact and interesting conversation. Take away the food and other distractions and admonish people to get to know each other and say brilliant things, and the result may not be what you have in mind.

you back. Thus Popper advocates what he calls piecemeal social engineering. To set up not distant goals but modest ones. To make small changes and evaluate the consequences. This might not be so exciting, but at least it will entail progress. Solid and consolidated progress which is possible to access.

According to Popper the great contribution of the Greeks was that of the Open Society, or in a deeper sense the Civilized society. This was something that had never before appeared in history. What fostered it was expansion and trade²¹, which incidentally made of the city state of Athens an imperialistic power. But imperialism is not necessarily a bad thing Popper argues. Imperialism does not necessarily mean to oppress your neighbours, but to engage them in common enterprises²². This is a mixed blessing, as we have noted, and as Freud observes, most people still do not feel at home in civilization. Concomitant with this alienation, which can take a variety of forms, is the strong pull of nostalgia, wanting us to revert to the past. But this return to the past is impossible, once innocence is lost, it cannot be regained, we have for ever been expelled from the Garden of Eden, providing our natural abode as species, and assumed the greater responsibility of humanhood²³.

Popper especially singles out a Great Generation just preceding that of Platos, including Socrates and Pericles. Those were true democrats with progressive ideas which would stand up well to modern scrutiny, and thus, Poppers rubs in, one cannot exonerate the anti-democratic sentiments of Plato as being part of the tenor of his times. In fact the democratic elements of Athens were advocating a more lenient and human treatment of the slaves, slavery being an undeniable feature in even the most progressive democratic states, but of an economic necessity, which should prevent us from judging it too anachronistically and hence too harshly. But the democratic forces were a threat to the privileged power of the oligarchs, and the war against tribal Sparta (or at least the city most tribal of the Greek and hence extolled by Plato) and Athens²⁴, in which the leading men of Athens conspired with the enemies to further their own parochial interests. Athens were militarily defeated, but, Popper reminds us, not vanquished. In fact the oligarchs proved themselves

²¹ Popper sets great store by trade, seeing it as an opportunity to rise above the tribe and to confront the conventions of others, and thereby to question ones own taboos, forcing an insight into a distinction between rational and magical thinking.

²² The parallelism with modern globalization is striking, a phenomenon lauded by established economists and politicians and decried as imperialistic by alternatives. Popper clearly would have been on the side of the globalists, rejecting its opponents as obfuscatory and nostalgic reactionaries. With the same kind of logic one would expect Plato to oppose the unifying economic forces as vulgar and barbarous.

²³ Although most people would find it rather inconvenient to return to a state of savagery, the more sentimental kind of nostalgia is for the recent past, the past of parents and grandparents. But say that we wanted to return to the late 19th century. A defining feature of that time was its optimism for the future. But it is exactly this optimism for the future which we have lost, at least if we look upon the past so longingly, and without it, we would not be able to recreate the tenor of the times, which we so desire. In fact if we want to return, Popper notes acidly, we have to go all the way, shedding all vestiges of civilization, and become beasts again.

²⁴ the so called Peloponnesian war, admirably reported on by the Greek historian Thucydides, although he was biased towards the reaction and the traitors

incapable of rule, and chaos followed, but in the end the democratic tendencies of Athens prevailed. and extended overseas commerce revived²⁵

This political turmoil greatly troubled Plato, just as Heraclitus had earlier been troubled by political change making him lose his bearings. Plato must have wavered, Popper speculates, but in the end he chose to be loyal to his family and his class, two of his uncles having been involved in the betrayal and also in the disastrous regime that followed. Such family loyalties permanently perverted Platos political philosophy, and although he deserves great admiration for what he did outside the political arena, his political commitments blight his reputation indelibly. Plato being born into a ruling class felt it incumbent upon him to engage in politics, although a more contemplative existence was clearly far more congenial to his temperament and gifts. This seems at least to be Poppers conclusion.

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²⁵ Popper points out that a hated symbol of the democratic rule was the wall that protected the Athenian port of Piraeus, somewhat ironic as walls in modern society are associated with totalitarianism.