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Plato's Political Ideas

P. H. Frye

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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PLATO'S POLITICAL IDEAS

If we seek a rallying point, to begin with, for Plato's political conceptions, we shall find, I think, that they all centre about a single idea—the idea of justice. No other problem has given rise to more discussion, I suppose, than just this problem of the relation of justice to society and the individuals composing it; and in no age, perhaps, has it given rise to more discussion than it did in the age of Plato. The difficulty has to do partly with the nature of justice itself and partly with the discovery of a practical working definition. Abstractly it is easy enough to explain that justice consists in giving every one exactly what he deserves. But who in any conceivable state of society is able to determine exactly what any one deserves—least of all himself; and how is it possible to make sure that he gets it, neither more nor less? It is bad enough to administer the approximate, the rough and ready justice of the courts of law without undertaking to settle such questions as these with the fallible judgment at our disposal. And in default of the competence and method necessary to such an adjustment society has been obliged to muddle along as best it might, allowing the individual, within certain limits, to take what he can get, under the dubious pretence of legality, without considering too closely whether he deserves it or not, in accordance with the good old plan,

“That he should take who has the power
And he should keep who can.”

Under these circumstances there has gradually grown up a kind of discrepancy between men's professions and their practices,

between the sort of thing that they talk in public and the sort of thing that they confess only to themselves or acknowledge only by their actions. On the one hand they pretend to be animated, both as individuals and as citizens, by a single and unique pre-occupation with justice, upon which they assert their community and government are founded. On the other hand they seek their own advantage by any means in their power, regardless of their neighbours or of any particular ideal of right and wrong. Eulogising virtue and honesty with their lips, they recognise in their hearts that nine times out of ten such scruples are merely side-issues, that the main aim is success, and that success is not to the good, the virtuous, and the honest, but to the strong, the audacious, and the adroit. It is the latter sort of man who gets on in the world; he is honoured, flattered, respected without concern for his merits. He enjoys the esteem of the public, he unites their votes, he holds their offices, he rewards his friends and punishes his enemies. And what is more, he carries his point, he controls the administration of what he and every one else calls justice, he influences legislation and law in his own sense. In short, justice becomes merely his conveniency, the conveniency of the powerful. And in the meanwhile we go on, in our fatuity, calling the conveniency of the unjust justice and speaking as though justice were the foundation of our polity, when in reality its foundation is force or fraud in one form or another. Why not come out with it, then, flat-footed? Is anybody the dupe of our hypocrisy? Why not say that it is the smooth appearance, the plausible pretence of justice that we have in mind when we educate our children in the shams of honesty and virtue? Why not acknowledge that it is a mask for their actions with which we are providing them? That we are teaching them a vocabulary with which to impose upon the simple and credulous who accept phrases, like specie, at their face value? Why not confess among ourselves that our little speeches about justice are for business and politics, a mere diplomacy of language; but that for the practical affairs of life our incentives are success and self-advancement? In other words, why not define justice as the advantage of the reigning interests whatever they may happen to be at the time?

Modern as all these notions seem, though cloaked as a general thing with a decent reticence, they are all, as a matter of fact, to be found in Plato. They are to be found in the mouth of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*; they are to be found in the mouths of the

Sophists, of Calicles and Protagoras and Gorgias, the rationalists and utilitarians of the time, with whom they were as favourite doctrines as with Nietzsche. Indeed, it is as though the young men of Plato had been reading Nietzsche over night. They are full of the futility of virtue and honesty and justice, of the expediency of wickedness and the high hand, of the natural rights of the strong and the dexterous over the weak and the simple, of the excellence of success and the legitimacy of any means by which it may be attained.

It is against these thinkers that Plato undertakes to vindicate the desirability of a genuine and absolute justice, and it is in opposition to their notions of government that he attempts to rear an ideal republic upon the corner stone which they have rejected as unfit for the purpose. And what concerns him most, to begin with, is less justice as a foundation of government than justice as a foundation of character. At the outset it is the individual to whom his gaze is directed and not the community. In one sense his *Republic* is less interesting as a plan of society than as a kind of symbol of the human spirit. It is the inner city, the city of the soul, the spiritual city, upon which he has his mind's eye; and he constructs his ideal polity for the sake of comparison. The justice which it is so difficult to study in the small letters of the individual, he hopes to read to better advantage in the capital letters of the city. For after all the just man and the just city are counterparts one of the other, and what is justice in the individual is justice also in the community or contrariwise.

With this idea in mind, then, his first care is to re-establish the cause of justice and virtue as the basis of human character. And to do so he proceeds to argue that man is happy just because he is virtuous. To declare that virtue insures success and that honesty is the best policy is absurd and mischievous. The upright man may be successful or not—it makes no difference; in any case he can dispense with success, his satisfaction is in his own merit. Strip him of the goods of existence; refuse him the respect due to his qualities; worse than that, let him have the reputation of an ill doer; and last of all, let his righteousness escape the recognition of the gods themselves—even then, as compared with the wicked flourishing in prosperity, surrounded with admiring followers and flatterers, and blest in spite of reality with the name and character of virtue; even then, says Plato, will the just man

be happy and the unjust wretched. Yes, it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it. And if the wicked understood his own best interest, he ought to desire nothing so much as to be brought to justice, to expiate his misdeeds, and by so doing regain his innocency.

But this justice which forms the basis of character and which, properly understood, insures the only genuine happiness, what is it? Who is the just man? It must be confessed that Plato's definition strikes the modern as rather peculiar, mainly, I think, because it lays no particular stress upon the rewards accruing. At the same time it seems to me that it has one advantage over other definitions in being the only one which furnishes in any sense a working formula for the regulation and adjustment of human affairs. And it does so by indicating the conditions under which alone justice can work itself out. It indicates as nearly as can be done, I fancy, the manner in which some sort of relative justice can be attained. It has its difficulties too, but as a definition it has this advantage.

Justice, then, in the individual consists in a kind of balance or equilibrium among the faculties by virtue of which each is enabled to do its proper work and to contribute in its proper degree to the welfare of the entire being. In other words, justice is defined by its obligations rather than by its privileges, one reason evidently why the definition is bound to be distasteful to us nowadays. In Plato's mind there existed a sort of hierarchy among the faculties. At the top stood the mind, the νοῦς, what the Germans call *Vernunft*; at the bottom lay the appetites and passions; and midway between was situated the courage or mettle, the kind of thing we think of when we speak of a man of spirit. In the just man the mind or reason should rule. And by mind or reason Plato understood not merely the discursive or syllogistic reason or ratiocination but something akin as well to divination, intuition, or insight. Of the perception of higher truth he always speaks as an ὄψις or θέα, a seeing or vision. To this principle the passions and appetites are to be kept in subordination by means of the animation or courage, which in a correct balance of the faculties allies itself with the mind or νοῦς. Such is the just man; he is the man who has harmonised and ordered his spirit in this wise.

In this respect, it will be noticed, Plato stands at the antipodes from the Bergsonians, who seem in some obscure manner to

divorce the intuition as an organ of truth from the reason and to associate it with the instincts, so making of it a servant or confederate of the third estate. In this interpretation the mind is left in isolation with no direct and instant perception of reality, while the sole reality immediately appreciable becomes that of the desires and impulses—a sense of eternal mobility and flux, in which the foundations of character are submerged and finally swept away, and truth itself loses all stability and degenerates into an exclusive regard for the many as the sole reliable data of consciousness.

Now it is in just the contrary sense, for the sake of making his idea of the hegemony of reason clearer, that Plato undertakes to construct an ideal polity, where it will be easier to recognise the qualities of justice in accordance with his conception of the parallelism between individual and state. To take this structure of Plato's quite literally, as has been done so often, would be to make a grave mistake and to prove oneself more of a Platonist than Plato himself. As a matter of fact Plato is not wholly serious about his republic. He is led to introduce the subject in the first place as an illustration of his general theory of justice. Such, he says, would be the perfect state, where justice may be studied to the best advantage. Once embarked, however, he becomes interested in the undertaking for its own sake and dwells complacently upon its details; occasionally he is quite carried away by it. But on the whole, the plan itself remains a *jeu d'esprit*, a play of the imagination, which he never expects or hopes to see realised in anything like the shape in which he proposes it, as is evident from a comparison with his *Laws*. It is, then, a species of allegory or parable—or better, perhaps, a metaphor; it is seriously meant, not as a practical project, but as an illustration of Plato's general ideas of government, and it is full of penetrating *aperçus* with regard to human nature and society.

Ideally, then, such a city as he proposes as a paradigm of the just man, is composed of three definite and distinct classes or orders analogous to the three faculties of the individual. At the bottom there are the workers of all kinds—tillers of the soil, labourers, handicraftsmen, merchants—all who contribute to the support of the community. Just above are the warriors, the protectors and guardians of the commonwealth, answering to the courageous or spirited principle in man. From the latter are

chosen the rulers, who in the perfect city are philosophers prepared for their work by a long and arduous discipline and selected by successive eliminations from the mass of the warriors. As philosophers they are naturally unwilling to undertake the task of government and are moved to do so only by a sense of their responsibilities as the sole members of the city competent for the business. They descend into politics as a man who had been used to the light of day would descend into a den or cavern. But then, no man who wishes to rule is fit, in Plato's opinion, to do so. In a state so constituted justice will consist, as before, in a balance or equilibrium of forces under the direction of these philosopher-rulers, who make up the $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ or mind of the community. They will be assisted in their labours by the class of warriors or guardians, who, like the courageous part of the individual, are intrusted with the preservation of order as well from sedition within as from hostility without. Of the workmen Plato has little to say; they fail to interest him particularly as long as they do their work in subservience to their superiors and provide for the subsistence of themselves and others. At the same time it would be a mistake to suppose that he contemplates their condition as one of serfdom or slavery, though to such a condition he has no great objection in the abstract. In this instance, however, his city exists as a whole for the benefit of its inhabitants—or rather, it would express his meaning better to say that the inhabitants exist for the benefit of the city. It is not for the sake of the well-being of such and such a person, he declares, that the state exists, but for the well-being of the whole. In this way the working class has its share of the advantages resulting from the organisation—a share proportionate to its abilities and importance. As in the case of the purely physical principle in the individual, however, its predominance over the other orders would mean confusion and disaster. It has neither the wisdom of the lawgiver nor the mettle of the warrior. It is, therefore, as though Plato took it for granted or assumed it rather than despised it. As its functions are perfectly familiar already, he sees no need to dwell upon them.

Of the warriors, on the contrary, he has much to say that is curious and interesting. In this connection it must be remembered that the rulers are originally members of this class, being selected from it in accordance with certain standards so that up to a given point the conditions of both are alike. It is evident that these two classes taken together form an aristocracy; there

is no doubt about it, they are the superiors of the third estate in every respect. Distinction of classes is a postulate of the system; it is a part of the conception of justice, for without distinction justice becomes unthinkable and the acme of injustice resides in the socialistic conception of an equal participation by unequal participants. And this distinction he purposes further to strengthen by means of a gross convention such as necessarily underlies every government, whether it happens to be that of the divine right of kings or that of the divinity of the people's voice and the sacredness of the will of the majority. Pure convention in either case and equally preposterous on examination. But so it is and so it is indispensable. And in like manner Plato proposes the necessary convention at the root of his polity. We will teach the people, he advises, that while they are all of the earth and brothers, yet they are made of different materials—some of gold and some of silver and some of bronze; and the nobler the metal, the nobler the creature. This is pretty gross, to be sure—pretty nearly as gross as the infallibility of majorities; not quite, perhaps, but still gross enough in all conscience—and yet admirably adapted to the purpose—to safeguard the distinction and hierarchy of the several classes and orders. At the same time its crudity was tempered in practice by the circumstance that Plato provided for a rectification of the errors of birth. If a gold or silver child should be born in the brazen class, he was promptly to be promoted as soon as he manifested his quality; on the other hand, if a bronze child should be born of gold or silver parents, he was liable to degradation in like manner.

Though an aristocracy, then, in the most distinctive sense, the two upper classes were an aristocracy of merit. As a result they were not simply an aristocracy of privilege but an aristocracy of responsibility. They were carefully educated and trained; their life was a severe and strenuous drill in the form of a rigid communism. They had no right to property of any kind save their clothes and their arms. They were without homes; the houses in which they lived, when they lived in houses rather than in camp, were not their own. They received their support from the community. They ate in messes. They held their wives and their children in common. Their marriages were temporary; and the offspring of their transient unions were taken possession of by the state and cared for in public nurseries. No man was supposed to be able to recognise his own child or

identify it. Woman, as having the same faculties as man only weaker, was to bear her part in the same affairs and occupations. Like him she was to exercise in the palæstra; like him she was to bear arms and fight the battles of her country; like him she was to eat in her mess and live homeless and free of permanent ties save her duty to the state and society.

By such ways and by such means did Plato dream of founding and preserving an efficient and uncorrupted aristocracy. Shocking as some of these notions are to the modern consciousness, there is still something to be said for them in theory if not in practice. It was in some such manner that the monastic orders were managed; and no more powerful and effective organisations ever existed. But then they were pledged to chastity as well as to poverty; and there are but two ways to be chaste—either to have no wife or to have only one, of which the former is doubtless the better if it were not for the difficulty of perpetuating the caste. At the same time it must be acknowledged that Plato has recognised one important truth: that an aristocracy, to be worthy of the name, must be free from individual self-seeking and from the distracting influence of feminine frivolity. Let the order be as wealthy as you please—the wealthier, the better as an order; but see that its members remain unmoved by hopes of personal enrichment, if they are to devote themselves heart and soul to the furtherance of the object for which their body as a whole exists. And see too that they are removed from the insinuations of the sex with its vanities and caprices and irrelevances, if they are to amount to anything as public officials. Even as it is, there is nothing more egotistic than the father of a family, who is obliged to prefer the welfare of his wife and children before that of his neighbours; there is nothing more disheartening in the pursuit of a disinterested aim than the reproaches of a family which imagines its own interests to be neglected and is piqued at the prosperity of acquaintances and associates. Even at the present day there is nothing more exigent than the claims of a family. How much greater must have been its distractions at the time of Plato, when wives were ignorant as well as idle and luxurious! Consider the confusion introduced into Socrates's final interview with his friends by the irruption of Xantippe. All this Plato saw; he had probably some knowledge of Xantippe himself and the kind of house she kept for her husband. And against this sort of thing he tried to provide by breaking up the home in the

interests of disinterestedness and by abrogating the importunities of wife and children at the same time that he removed the children from the timid and selfish instruction of their parents. And for his day, too, he would have accomplished not a little in giving woman something to do, in supplying her with a mission, or to employ the modern cant, in making her an instrument of social service. But after all, he reckoned without his host; he failed to count with human nature, and he proposes as a remedy for human weakness what is bound to seem to the average man something little short of a monstrosity.

But after all, in this vision of things as they might be one must not take Plato too seriously. Nobody was ever more conscious of the difficulties and paradoxes of his plan than he himself. Even in his own eyes it is hardly more than a castle in the air, to which he attaches only a relative importance save in as far as it helps him to realise his idea and principle of justice. Evidently in such a city as this, where everything is properly disposed and where every man is in the right place, justice will consist in every one's minding his own business. The well-being of the community will depend upon every individual's and every class's doing its own work and fulfilling its own function in its proper station in life. In other words, justice in the large as in the small is simply order. This is the reason why it seems to me that Plato's definition has a certain experimental—I hesitate to say practical—value which is wanting to most definitions of justice. It specifies the actual conditions under which justice is possible; there are no nice appraisements and delicate assessments of awards and emoluments to be made. Provided every member of the community does the work for which he is fitted in the scale of his relative ability, he will automatically receive his deserts. And here is, of course, the crux of the system—the accurate direction of the citizens' proclivities; and though it is probably easier to determine what a man is fit for than what he is worth, still the former task is hard enough. And it is complicated by the not infrequent occurrence of the exceptional case, who would have fared worse under Plato's authority than he does in the present scheme of things. Such persons are not seldom of great value to society, although that value may not be capable of exact computation. Of these exceptions the hardships are often extreme; they are suited for none of the usual employments, their services to the public are seldom recognised by their contemporaries, they

seem hardly to belong to the world into which they have been brought—their livelihood is as problematic as their utility. Such a character was Blake or Coleridge, to mention only poets. And yet the development of moral types of the sort is as important for civilisation as the production of Rothschilds or Bismarcks. In human society, as it is actually constituted by a free play of more or less spontaneous forces working elastically to approximate results, such characters are able, as a rule, to find some kind of place and existence, even though with difficulty. But in Plato's republic with its strict suppression of individualism they would have had no footing; contributing in no wise to the support or the protection of the government of the city, falling properly into none of his classes, they could expect no other fate than repudiation and banishment. Such, as a matter of fact, is the sentence to which he condemns the poets; much as he loves them personally, his polity has no room for Homer or Hesiod or Sophocles. They are but fabulists and makers of falsehood. At most they can be tolerated only as they will consent to teach useful and salutary truths; that is, as far as they cease to be variations and conform to the normal type of society.

But however this may be, whatever the difficulties and inconsistencies even of an ideal constitution, one thing is clear—Plato's conception of justice as an order or balance of forces in an individual and a community. Such has been his objective from the first, much as he may have loitered by the way attracted by the scenery along the roadside. Once he has reached this conclusion, however, he proceeds, with his conception as a criterion, to the more practical part of his work—the criticism of actual forms and types of government and the search for the best and most advantageous one possible.

Since justice consists in a delicate equilibrium of powers, in the formation of a perfect harmony out of a number of divers elements, it is evident that the task of insuring it is an exceedingly difficult and problematic one, requiring the highest kind of ability on the part of the ruler or justiciar. In fact, government is an art or a science demanding both natural aptitude and acquired skill. As such it is entirely out of the power of the crowd, which is bungling and foolish—the government of the many is a contradiction in terms; it is not a government at all but an anarchy. It boasts that it is a government of the people, by the people, for the people; and so it may be. But none the less is it a government

of the masses, of quantity, not of quality. As such it means the suppression of the minority by the majority. And since merit is always in the minority, it is the government of the better by the worse. Further, as it knows itself to be inferior and to have usurped a position which does not belong to it, it rapidly develops a distrust and a hatred for any sort of distinction whatever. Under these circumstances there are only two careers open to men of ability, who in happier conditions might become philosophers or lovers of wisdom. On the one hand they grow into demagogues; for being debarred by their talents from ruling, they can only learn to truckle to the multitude and to echo its whims and caprices, falsely pretending that these opinions constitute a system or philosophy of government—or, as we should say, a platform. In Plato's words such persons might be compared to "a man who should study the tempers and desires of a big beast . . . he would learn how to approach and handle it and at what times and from what causes it is dangerous or the reverse, and what is the meaning of its various cries, and by what sounds it is soothed or infuriated; and . . . when by constantly waiting upon it, he has become perfect in all this lore, he calls what he has learned by the name of wisdom and makes a method or art of it . . . calling this honourable and that dishonourable, good and evil, just and unjust, all in accordance with the tastes and moods of the big beast." Or, on the other hand, the man of ability who has no other opening for his activities and who is revolted by the role of demagogue, may engage in the single pursuit which the mob are capable of respecting; namely, the making of money. Hence the growth of a plutocracy along with every democracy. At the same time, as the accumulation of great wealth in the hands of a few tends to recruit the ranks of the needy, the rise of a plutocracy serves to reinforce the democracy which breeds it. In this way the proper balance of powers is broken up and destroyed; intelligence and courage cease to rule and the passions and appetites assume the ascendancy; intuition is degraded from the reason to the desires. In a word, justice is not the controlling principle of such a community, but license, or, as the people delight to call it, liberty.

"Is not this, indeed, a delightful state of affairs!" exclaims Plato with sardonic enthusiasm, "where a man may say and do just what he likes" and "where the individual is able to order his own life for himself just as he pleases," "where there is no

necessity for you to govern . . . or to be governed, unless you like" and "where, because some law forbids you to hold office, there is no necessity . . . that you should not hold office"—"a charming form of government indeed, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike." And finally, "when a democracy which is thirsting for freedom . . . has drunk too deeply of the wine of liberty, then, unless her rulers are very amenable . . . she calls them to account and punishes them"—is Plato prognosticating the recall? What she wants are "subjects who are like rulers and rulers who are like subjects; these are men after her own heart, whom she praises and honours both in private and public," until "the anarchy finds by degrees a way into private houses and ends by getting among the animals and infecting them." "The father grows accustomed to descending to the level of his sons and to fearing them, and the son is on a level with his father—for neither of his parents has he any respect or reverence." "The teacher fears and wheedles his pupils, and the pupils despise their masters and tutors; young and old are all alike—the young man is on an equality with the old and is ready to compete with him in word and deed; and the old men condescend to the young and are full of jocularly and pleasantry, they are loath to be thought morose and authoritative and therefore they adopt the manners of the youth." "Even the she-dogs are as good as their mistresses; and the horses and the asses have a way of marching along with all the rights and dignities of citizens; they will jostle a body if he does not get out of their way—and all things are full to bursting with liberty." "Above all, see how touchy the citizens themselves become; they chafe impatiently at the least hint of authority, and at last, as you know, they cease to care even for the laws; they will have no one over them."

Such is Plato's diagnosis of democracy; and though relieved by touches of humour, it is serious enough. Whatever we may think of it, it is necessary to remember one thing. Plato is not now theorising; he is speaking from experience, he had seen democracy distinctly and close at hand. He had never run for office, I believe; but he had relatives who had stood within its danger and he had followed the trial and condemnation of his friend and master, Socrates. But his objections to democracy went even deeper. It was not only opposed to his principles by its disorderliness or essential injustice, its pretension to distribute

a kind of equality among equals and unequals alike, its tacit denial of the fundamental facts of nature in the creation of better and worse, its confusion of higher and lower; but what was worse, it was antipathetic to his own character and disposition, which were finely aristocratic and distinguished. To such a person democracy has a way, it must be acknowledged, of making itself peculiarly detestable. Where the blame lies, I do not pretend to say—on both sides, I fancy. On the one side democracy itself has a hatred of distinction, which it makes no effort to conceal. As a matter of fact distinction is inimical to its existence. For that reason it likes to see pretenders to its favours on all fours at its feet. But at the same time it can not be denied that the man of distinction frequently displays a superciliousness with respect to the masses which is as galling as it is in one sense undeserved. Every man is respectable as a human being whatever he may be as a constituent of the mob. It is worth noticing that Shakespeare, who speaks so slightly of the populace as such, modulates his voice when he addresses its individual members and treats even his fools with a kind of human sympathy. But, at all events, that Plato detested his democracy as well as disapproved of it, seems pretty certain. He detested its vulgarity, its cant, its rough and ready judgment, its self-complacency; and he held himself aloof from it by prejudice, perhaps, as much as by principle. Nor were the conditions of demoralisation under which he beheld it such as to elicit a favourable criticism even from a more unprejudiced observer. Nevertheless, with all allowance made for the circumstances, there is still something in what he says to make the thoughtful pause before pushing to an extreme a form of government which is so particularly liable to extremity and whose virtue consists so largely in moderation. Other governments are likely to fall by deficiency of their own principle, democracy alone by its excess.

At the opposite pole from the democratic type of government is the monarchical. With Plato's sympathies and ideas it is not surprising that he should more incline to the latter than the former terminal, although he can not approve of it unreservedly. Nevertheless, in the actual state of things, of all systems that seem to be possible he appears to believe that the best chance of securing something like justice is by the instrumentality of a benevolent despot—a single arbitrary ruler of good parts and disposition, neither weak nor violent, uniting in his own person

the three attributes of the perfect governor—wisdom, courage, and steadiness. Such a character would appear to be best equipped for weaving a harmonious design from the diverse elements of society; above all he would seem to have the best opportunity of carrying out a consistent policy. In this characterisation may possibly be detected a regret for Dionysus of Syracuse, of whom he had hoped so much and in whom he had been so bitterly disappointed. At all events, as he acknowledges, the happy conjunction of circumstances necessary to unite these qualities in a single individual and to bring this individual into power is so rare as to be wellnigh miraculous. And in default of such a ruler he declares for a kind of limited or constitutional monarchy, whose master is restrained and controlled by law. As for the other forms of government by the few as opposed to the many—namely, oligarchy and tyranny—he has for them no toleration of any kind whatever.

In following Plato's discussion, as I have tried to do, with an eye to what seems most pertinent to our particular occasions, I have implicitly taken account of the most important tenets of his political creed as far as they have any modern interest or significance. It remains to indicate what is positive rather than negative in his conception. In the first place, that his theory of government is aristocratic, is perfectly clear. The two systems that he reprobates the most severely are democracy and plutocracy. The symbolic or metaphoric republic that he constructs for the purpose of illustrating the city of the soul, is ruled over by an aristocracy and an aristocracy pretty much unhampered by laws except of its own making. The will of the aristocracy is the law. And not only is it a government by an aristocracy which is the ideal but a government for the aristocracy. The purpose and *raison d'être* of a state is to be sought not in mediocrity but in excellence. It is not by its average that a nation is justified but by its genius. And to the production and preservation of genius should its efforts be directed. Not that the remainder of society is non-essential and negligible, but it takes its value from above; and the cultivation of an industrial community merely for its own sake would have struck him as absurdly as the attempt to develop a stomach independent of the body.

As far as these conclusions are a matter of terms, an affair of logic pure and simple, it is difficult to see that Plato is very far wrong in them. That the best are alone the natural rulers of a

state and that the ruling should be done in the interests of the best is so obvious on statement that it has taken any amount of sophistication and any number of centuries to make it appear otherwise. Even then the contrary opinion has succeeded in gaining a footing only by means of an indoctrinated convention as gross as Plato's parable of the gold, the silver, and the bronze men—a convention so at odds with the facts that its falsity is patent to the most superficial. That convention consists in the denial of the aristocratic principle—in the denial, that is, of any such natural distinction as better and worse. Or positively, it consists in the assertion of the romantic doctrine of equality—a doctrine that we are obliged to deny in deed a dozen or more times a day. In fact, so contrary is it to our actual convictions that even the candidate for office is revolted when he is compelled to act consistently in accord with it and to abase himself to the level of those whom for the occasion he delicately designates as his equals. Nor is such a distinction between better and worse a practical impossibility. For the rough and ready purposes of government it is easy enough to make a partition of the kind. Education, property, nativity, even sex constitute tests sufficient for practical politics. And yet, as usual in human affairs, there is in reality one obstacle in the way of applying the theory. The world is full of people who have come into it more or less accidentally and unintentionally. As they are here by no fault of their own and in fact would gladly be almost anywhere else if they could, and as in the gaiety of their hearts they will in all probability proceed to bring others like them into a place to which they find themselves so admirably adapted; the theoretical legislator like Plato finds himself at any given time with a collection of odds and ends on his hands, which it is extremely difficult to dispose of. To be sure, there may be no great harm in this folk. To adapt Plato's own figure, they are like the amiable but incapable owner of a vessel, who is a little hard of hearing and short of sight, and is indifferently acquainted with navigation, and who is coaxed and bullied by various members of the crew who hope to get the job of pilot. At the same time it is just this sort of gentry that complicates the legislator's problem. Ideally Plato begins by making a clean sweep of them. He dumps the rubbish somewhere outside of his boundaries and retains only such material as suits his own designs. But the solution seems hardly practicable at present. And under the

circumstances it is this matter which destroys the regularity and symmetry of many a very pretty social theory. It is itself one of the forces or factors which go to shape the final result as it exists in fact and nature. It is a part of the destiny of nations. In short, if you have a population of a certain type, what else can you make of it than the kind of thing it lends itself to? At the same time, to rescue as much of Plato's aristocracy as is feasible, it is worth while trying to make the best of your materials.

In the second place, innovator as Plato seems at first sight, it is clear, on second thoughts, that he is all for conservatism, as for aristocracy. Perhaps the two ideas are in reality correlatives. At all events, once his ideal republic established, he would preserve it, if possible, in much the same shape forever. Indeed, rigidity is of its very essence. As its partitions are inflexible and inelastic, allowing only for a few sorts of vocation; so in itself it forms a more or less motionless and inalterable structure, incapable of any great modification or adaptation. For the cultivation of that wide variety of individual character which we esteem one of the merits of civilisation, it had no care. In its essence it was thoroughly socialistic—a kind of higher organism in which the citizen had pretty well lost his personality. Like modern socialism it guaranteed his existence at the cost of his liberty. Further, as the best state conceivable, there naturally remained nothing more to do for it except to conserve it in accordance with the principles laid down for its institution. On the whole, this seems to me one of the instances in which Plato is carried away by his project; and, as so often happens in such cases, it is necessary to go a little deeper to get the steady bearing of his thought. Obviously enough the motive that moves him in this particular instance is a care for the permanency of political institutions. And in this respect he agrees with Burke. He recognises as true what is too patent to be insisted upon—that the life of a nation is a slow development, that its present rests upon its past, and that any change should be made slowly and carefully in the direction of its growth. He sees that a state which breaks with its tradition is adrift and that innovation is especially dangerous in a matter of government, whose adjustments are so delicate and complicated as frequently to escape the scrutiny of a single lawgiver or even of an entire generation.

"All other errors but disturb a state,
But innovation is the blow of fate."

Not that he denies the value of a legislator who is thoroughly advised; such a person with the adaptability to meet any emergency with intelligence, is better than any set of mechanical laws or provisions that can be devised in advance. But with the difficulty of obtaining such a director at any given time before his eyes—a difficulty that amounts to a virtual impossibility—he recommends a prudential respect for antiquity and tradition.

In the third place and finally, Plato's ideas are as moral as they are aristocratic and conservative. The model of the just city is the just man. And as the just man exists for virtue, as he finds his happiness and good in virtue alone, so the just community exists for the same end and prospers accordingly. That Plato overworks the similitude between the two cases, must be granted. The main purpose, the higher justification of the *Republic* resides in demonstrating that the happiness of the just is the sole real and permanent good. The institution of the state is in one sense a side issue, undertaken for that purpose. Hence Plato is continually forcing the analogy. But in any case his constant insistence upon the necessity of virtue as a part of the very being of government, may at least lead us to ask whether the modern divorce between morality and public policy is altogether justified, whether it is not in some sense parallel with the attempt to separate morality from literature and art. That our civil government might be a little healthier for an infiltration of morality, I suppose, no one will dispute. And that international affairs should be conducted with some eye to moral considerations, would not be entirely out of the way either. And yet this is not just the point. By considering government from this point of view, Plato, like Burke at a much later day, was saved from making of politics a mere technology removed from other concerns and artificially isolated as a wholly independent and self-sufficient study like physics or dynamics. On the contrary, he was able by this means to keep it in constant touch with human nature. In consequence he succeeded in reducing some of the eternal principles of the subject to their very root in the moral consciousness. And as a result, while many of his shifts and expedients seem little better than ridiculous, his general discussion has always commanded the attention and respect of statesmen of all nationalities and all ages.