

Chapter 3

The Return of the Self

Alternatives

The *Republic*, as we now have it, does not end at 445b5. Perhaps at one time it did. At this point Plato had completed the task he set himself in Book II in exactly the terms there laid down, and he may well have issued *Republic* I-IV as a complete work, and then in a later edition added on more either to meet criticisms, or because he himself felt that his arguments in Book IV were not as watertight as he would have liked. As we have the text now, after Socrates has elucidated the nature of integrity, *δικαιοσύνη* (*dikaíosune*), and identified it with psychological health, which it would be ridiculous—*Γελοῖον γάρ ἦν δ' ἐγώ*—not to regard as the greatest good, he goes on, 'but all the same—*ἀλλ' ὅμως*—since we have come so far, we ought not to stop now in our attempt to see how matters lie as clearly as possible (IV 445b5-7)': he suggests we should look at less good arrangements to make sure they really are less good; and begins the theme of the deterioration of the constitution, both of society and of the individual personality. He is then immediately interrupted by Polemarchus and Adeimantus, and starts on a long digression comprising Books V, VI and VII. He resumes the discussion at the beginning of Book VIII, and continues through the first third of Book IX, describing the deterioration of the constitution, both of individuals and of societies, at the end of which it becomes clear that the alternative forms of organization of society and of the personality are much less desirable than the one Plato has sketched, leading to the verdict at 580b8-c4 that the best constitution is much better, both for individuals and for societies, than the alternatives.

to uton

Let us hire a herald, or let me say it myself, that the son of Ariston adjudges meritocracy and the meritocrat to be not only the most moral but the happiest and in every way the best, and dictatorship and the dictatorial personality to be the most immoral, the most miserable and altogether the worst.

The Decline of the Constitution

In Books VIII and IX(i) four forms of constitution are considered:

547c-550c *τιμοκρατία*, aristocracy

550c-555b *ὀλιγαρχία*, plutocracy

555b-562a *δημοκρατία*, permissiveness

562a-580a *τυραννίς*, dictatorship

The reader should note that the Greek words do not have in the *Republic* the same sense as their derivatives in modern English. Many translators transliterate these Greek words into English, and then complain that what

Plato is talking about does not fit these English words. Greek does not have a word for meritocracy. Plato describes it here as *βασιλικώτατον*, most royal, and elsewhere as *ἀριστοκρατία* (*aristokratia*).¹ But ‘royal’ and ‘aristocracy’ in English have connotations of hereditary nobility: Plato, while acknowledging the importance of genetic inheritance, is adamant that selection must be on the basis of ability alone. His ideal society is a meritocracy. His *ὀλιγαρχία* is plutocracy. The Greek word *πλουτοκρατία* first appears in Xenophon,² and was probably made up by him. Plato, somewhat diffidently, makes up the words *τιμοκρατία* and *τιμαρχία* for the least bad of the suboptimal constitutions, which are governed by the ideal of honour *τιμή*. Although he was, indeed, a severe critic of Athenian democracy as a political institution, and draws on some elements of contemporary Athenian society for his picture of *δημοκρατία*, he is not concerned with democracy in either its ancient or its modern sense, but with permissiveness. And permissiveness, he suggests, leads finally to obsessive self-centredness, exemplified in the dictatorship of the autistic autocrat. Our word ‘tyranny’ comes closer to what Plato had in mind than the original Greek *τυραννίς*, since often, as critics of Plato like to point out, the Greek tyrants were benign—indeed sometimes populist leaders accomplishing the transition from a traditional aristocracy to a more democratic form of government. In modern English ‘dictator’ has the pejorative force required, although ‘autocrat’, and the adjective ‘autistic’ are closest to Plato’s sense of obsessional self-centredness.

Plato discusses these four types of constitution in turn. In each case he follows the pattern of his *πόλις* analogy in Books II-IV, and describes first the organization of society and then the character of the typical individual. As with Books II-IV, there is dispute whether Plato’s prime interest is in the social systems—his choice of names certainly suggests that—with the constitution of the individual *psyche* being explained by its social environment, or *vice versa*. Certainly Plato is deeply interested in society, and some of his insights are very shrewd. But it is the individual he is most of all concerned about. It is the autistic autocrat who exemplifies *ἀδικία*, wickedness, to the highest degree. and whose life is the most miserable. Although sometimes it does indeed seem that the argument about society is making the running, Plato’s own words

You realise that there must be as many types of individual as there are of society. Or do you think that societies come out of a tree somewhere or out of a rock, and not from that behaviour of their members which predominates and sets the tone for everything else. (VIII 544d-e)

are decisive here, even more so than for Books II-IV.³

¹ Book VIII, 544e7, 545c9, 547c6; see also *Politicus* 301a1.

² *Mem.* 4.6.12

³ For Greek, see above, ch.2, p.26.

Plato's description is compelling, but in the way a novel is, rather than as an argument. He carries the same sort of conviction as Dostoevski does, and we can read Books VIII and IX(i) as we do *The Possessed*. But Plato's account has been much criticized.⁴ While acknowledging the literary brilliance of his depictions, critics complain that there is not much real argument, that the parallel between the individual and society is inexact, that the account of social decline is not borne out by the historical course of events in the development of the Greek city state, that the development is neither as inevitable nor as malign as Plato makes out. Why must we all rush headlong to our destruction? Is all our public and private life lived on the brink of a Gadarene precipice? Could not a dictator be a rationally self-controlled egoist?

The criticisms are misconceived—some arise from mistranslations, as we have noted. Admittedly, Greek city-states mostly had dictators before, not after, they became democracies, but it does not follow that Plato was offering an *a priori* scheme of historical change which fails to fit the facts. Plato is not offering a philosophy of history. His primary concern is with the individual, and in so far as he is discussing society, he is revealing certain sociological tendencies rather than propounding hard-and-fast historical laws. He is offering stereotypes. Actual societies and actual individuals may fail to instantiate any one of them perfectly, combining features from two or more. Empiricists, who believe that all our knowledge must be founded only on observation, object, and condemn Plato for his high-handed a-priori-ism; Aristotle assembled a large number of studies of the political arrangements of different city states, and his *Politics* is based much more on careful observation of what actually goes on. But important though empirical evidence is, insight is also important. Observations need to be interpreted, and interpretative schemata derive much of their value from the inner rationale of the systems they portray. Plato classifies individuals and societies by reference to the ideals that underlie them. In an actual example there may be no single one ideal that is always dominant, but in many cases we can identify one as generally predominant, and can understand how this shapes the other features there.

Plato believes that these different ideals have an inherent tendency to deteriorate. His classification is not only a logical one, in order of (de)merit, but, he fears, a chronological one, a degeneration that is likely actually to take place. The underlying theme is The Return of the Self. The ideal constitution is one in which each individual, ruled by reason, is selflessly devoted to the common good, and society is organized on the assumption that this is so. If this should begin to be no longer the case—and Plato is significantly shaky in his account of how and why this could come about—the self, no longer ruled by reason, will re-assert its ancient sway over individuals and the societies

⁴ K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London, 1945; Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford, 1981, pp.295-305.

they govern. The different degrees of contamination by the non-rational self give the key to the order in which Plato places the different ideas of the good that motivate the individual and society in Books VIII and IX(i).

Power and Glory

In the ideal society the Guardians want only what is good for society as a whole, and are untouched, Plato hopes, by any tincture of self-concern. They are self-effacing civil servants, who exercise the power entrusted to them in a responsible fashion, and seek no other reward than the knowledge that they have done the job well. But I could want that knowledge to be shared. Having exercised power selflessly, I might wish for it to be known that I had done so. If mine is the power, mine is the responsibility for its use, and so mine should be the glory for its being used well. Although civil servants in Britain are trained to allow their minister to take all the glory for what they themselves have done, it is natural to yearn for some public recognition of good work, and to seek the *kudos* that is their deserved due.

Honour is assigned to selves. Someone, some particular person or persons, must be honoured if honour is to be conferred. The success of a collaborative enterprise may be attributed to everyone's having pulled his weight, but as soon as we pick out some individuals and mention them in dispatches, we are differentiating between one individual and another, and may cause some of those not mentioned to repine at their contribution being overlooked. Honour, glory, *kudos*, are assignable goods, which each individual could naturally want for himself, and could, therefore, compete for. He will be *αἰθαδέστερος*, more self-willed, not only *φιλότιμος*, but *φιλόνεικος*, *φιλόουκος*, (*philoneikos*, *philonikos*), loving strife, seeking victory.

The man whose great aim in life is to secure *kudos* will be self-assertive, and a society whose members all seek honour will be a competitive one. In both the dominant aspect of motivation will be *θυμοειδής*. But self, though assertive, will not be supreme. If I want to be honoured, I want to be thought well of, and if I want to be thought well of, I want other people to think that what I have done was done well. There is a necessary connexion between honour and well-doing. Only under the description of having done deeds worthy of honour can I be honoured. Although people may be mistaken about what I have actually done and in their judgments about its worth, the necessary connexion in their thinking exerts a powerful pressure on my ambitions. If I am ambitious, my aims are constituted by values not of my own choosing: I shall succeed only if what I do is generally reckoned well worth doing. Though sometimes it might be possible to cheat, and always it is possible to have ideals that are different from the idols of the market place, success is anchored to doing well. Ambition may be, as Plato avers, an infirmity: but, as Milton pleads, it is the last infirmity of a noble mind.

Plato's *φιλότιμος*, may have strayed from the path of absolute selflessness, but his self-concern is less bad than the other alternatives that Plato portrays.

The success that ambition seeks resides largely in the estimation of others. Of course, I may succeed in achieving some private aim; I may carve replicas of famous statues on cherry stones, or collect tickets of pre-war railway companies: but these are hobbies, and not the achievements an ambitious man yearns for. He wants to be recognised as having got somewhere that others would like to get to too; and not only to have got there but to continue to enjoy the plaudits of the public. Such success is inherently vulnerable. The good opinion of others is something I may lose, perhaps through my own fault, perhaps quite unfairly. However well I have done in the past, I may through some lapse forfeit public respect; and even if I have done nothing wrong, I may find the public fickle in its approbation—some new canon of correctness may emerge, and my past actions, however well justified at the time, may with hindsight be deemed unacceptable. History is constantly being rewritten, and my glorious deed may get re-assessed or airbrushed out.

The Sovereignty of Wealth

Money is more secure than reputation. It cannot be blown away by a change in other men's minds. What I have I hold until such time I choose to part with it. And money speaks. If I enjoy a good reputation, some people may be somewhat inclined to do some things I want them to do, but few are likely to put themselves out all that much or all that often, whereas if I can offer financial incentives, most people will be prepared to listen, and many will do my bidding whenever I pay them to, and as often as I want. We find convincing Plato's account of how the son of the *φιλότιμος*,, seeing the fragility of the fame his father had been seeking, sets his sights on a less transient good. Wealth is a good. Like fame, it is assignable, but it is more securely possessed by him who has it. It is a more self-sufficient good, more independent of others. But by the same token, it is less closely connected with real values. Whereas the good opinion of others has to be earned by doing good, and is forfeited on the discovery of anything underhand, wealth is often acquired by shady dealing or through the capricious choices of others. There need be no merit in money, whereas an unmeritorious honour is a contradiction in terms.

Nevertheless, money is mostly earned. Although I may make money by ripping people off, or may just be given it, most money is earned by providing others with what they want. If wealth is my great goal in life, I shall have to discipline myself. I shall have to work for others, and curb my own expenditure. Industry and thrift will be my watchwords. A society dedicated to the pursuit of wealth will be correspondingly disciplined, efficient and eschewing extravagance. It may lack the finer flowers of civilisation, but will be noticeably un-bad.

But money is an unstable good, though less so than honour. Although it is not constituted by the changeable opinions of others, it is vulnerable to their actions, and is subject to an internal erosion with the passage of time. Money is not only an assignable good, but a necessarily privative one. The money I have is money you do not have. Honour, though often competed for, is not necessarily privative: it can be shared without being diminished thereby; you can shine in my reflected glory, and we both feel enhanced by public recognition of the contribution each made to great success. Money, being necessarily privative, is divisive. My great wealth is wealth that you and others do not possess, and may be envious of. Although I may have earned it in time past by serving the needs of others, perhaps even of you yourself, its very permanence makes that connexion less immediate to the onlooker, who only sees someone enjoying wealth which he would like to have in his stead. Hence the tension between the haves and the have-nots, and the perpetual possibility of forcible redistribution of wealth.

Money is an unstable good not only as between different sections of society, but over time. Why is money a good thing to have? Only because other people want it too, and are willing to do things in exchange for it. Take away the possibility of spending it, and it ceases to be seriously worth having—I might collect Confederate dollar bills as a hobby, but they could never make me rich. But if spendability is the point of money, thrift cannot be an all-life virtue. It may make sense to save now in order to be able to spend later, but the man who has sacrificed the best years of his life to making money, and then when he has made his pile, continues to go to the City every day, because he has allowed all his other activities and interests to atrophy, is an object of pity. His son will avoid that mistake, and having come into money will use it. The transition from money-grubbing to permissiveness is a consequence of the value of money being constituted by its enabling its possessor to do what he wants.

Free for All

Plato's account of *δημοκρατία*, has been much misunderstood. He was not in this passage primarily concerned with politics. Although elsewhere critical of many features of Athenian democracy,⁵ his concern in Book VIII is with a pattern of society and the individual *psyche* in which there is no over-arching conception of the good, but each goes his own way doing whatever he feels like doing. It is a natural resort of the sceptical mind (although some liberal principles can be defended on quite other grounds), and has often been put forward as an ideal in both the ancient and the modern world. Ontologically it is cheap. We do not have to posit a world of Forms, or the existence of

⁵ See below, ch.9.

God, or objective values, or anything like that. All we need is the evident fact that people sometimes want to do things. With no shared idea of the Good, the object of society is to accommodate different people wanting to do different things, enabling each to go his own way with as little impingement on others as possible.

Plato believes such a recipe to be incoherent in principle and unfeasible in practice. It is based on a false picture of people as atoms with no common bond between them, and of the springs of action in the *psyche* as disparate inclinations which just happen to be uppermost at some particular time. The absence of a unifying theme, whether in society or in the individual personality leaves a void which, sooner or later, will be filled by some overmastering passion. We cannot, either collectively or individually, be nothingarians for long. If no vision of the Good is rationally acceptable, then some irrational enthusiasm will take over. We were asked *ὅτινα τρόπον χρὴ ζῆν*, 'how should one live?': if we answer 'do what you like', we have failed to answer, and the inquirer will go elsewhere with his question.

Plato claims that when we have purged our habitation of all commitment to objective values, a demonic self-obsession will take its place. Others have said the same, but sceptical philosophers remain unconvinced: allowing the literary force of Plato's depiction, they protest that it does not have to be like that. And in one sense they are right. There are plenty of happy-go-lucky individuals who drift through life from one attachment to another without running *amok*; and relaxed pleasure-loving societies have survived over several generations without degenerating into dictatorships. Equally, the less bad exemplars did not have to decay. Sparta did not become a plutocracy in spite of many Spartans secretly amassing dishonourable wealth. But Plato, as we have argued earlier,⁶ is not dealing with rigid historical inevitabilities. Rather, he is concerned first to show us what *could* happen, and then to suggest that it *would* so happen in default of some effective countervailing tendency. His modalities are internal tendencies, not external necessities. He is exploring the human *psyche* in its relation to values, and claiming that it needs values, and will always be ill at ease without them, and restless until it has found something really worthy of its respect. Others—Augustine, Pascal and Dostoevsky—have made similar claims. We may define philosophy so as to exclude discourse seeking to plumb the depths of the self,⁷ and reckon that Augustine, Pascal and Dostoevsky are not proper philosophers, but only, poets or prophets, or perhaps, *philosophes*. But it is not clear that such a redefinition would be to the credit of philosophy. However we classify Plato's discussion in Books VIII and IX(i), its acknowledged imaginative power argues for its having something to teach us.

⁶ pp.38f.

⁷ See further below, chs.6 and 12.

The Depths of Degradation

In Book IV Plato rejects the view of the self as a rational maximiser, because the self it describes is a maimed one: I cannot flower except in society, and I cannot flourish unless I identify with my fellow men, and take their existence as a necessary concomitant of my being a self, and their views of me as largely constitutive of who I actually am. In Books VIII and IX(i) he is delving deeper, and is led to consider not only myself in relation to other selves, but ourselves generally in relation to the values we espouse. The final fate of the self-obsessed self is to be an autistic autocrat, surrounded by sycophants but with no friends, rationally afraid of his servants, believing that they would get rid of him in if they could, because he knows that he himself would have no compunction in killing them if it suited him to do so. We need human company. And human company is not just a matter of there being human beings around—the autistic autocrat can have lots of eunuchs and concubines to minister to his physical needs, but they cannot be friends because they are not allowed to have wills of their own which they can make up differently from hwo he makes up his.

All this we can see. Most people would agree that the extreme of selfishness was self defeating; many would also concede that dictators can become obsessive, and that absolute power can make you mad. What is less clear is that this should be inherent in self-concern so long as it is rational. Having seen what happened to Stalin and Hitler, should not I settle for a lower content, abridging my power and being nice to people in order that they may be genuinely nice to me in return? But though many in a muddle-headed way adopt this position, it depends on their remaining muddle-headed and not being troubled by its incoherence. I cannot be genuinely nice to others in order that they should be nice to me in return: if it is just in order that they should act in ways I want, I am not being genuinely nice to them, but only manipulating them. And the same holds for them too. We can agree that a self that loves only itself is an unlovable self, and will not be able to love even itself for long, but then, if we are clear-sighted, we begin to see through other selves too, and wonder whether they could be worthy objects of our love. Neither I individually nor we collectively are self-sufficiently valuable. We need something other than ourselves, making for good, if we are to be whole, with a clear-sighted, single-minded commitment to a worthy object of worship.

Plato can meet this demand. In the metaphysical books of the *Republic*, Books V, VI and VII, he grounds values in the Form of the Good. If some such objective value exists, it is reasonable that the soul should yearn for it, and that the human *psyche* should have a natural need for commitment which subjectivism does not fulfil. Against that background the thoughts of Augustine, Pascal and Dostoievsky make sense.

Modern readers are surprised at Plato's devoting the central books of the *Republic* to metaphysics. We can now see why. Traditional morality was being challenged by philosophical sceptics, who denied the objectivity of morals. Man was the measure of all things, and if men thought *δικαιοσύνη* was the interest of the stronger, or that being moral was a mug's game, then that was it. Plato was convinced that morality, though possibly different from what it had been traditionally supposed to be, was objective. Our thinking something to be right did not make it so. You may be wrong in your moral opinions. So may I. So may we all. Just as we all thought at one time that the sun went round the earth, which was flat, our present moral opinions, although generally accepted now, may turn out to be misguided.⁸ It is, in his view, a matter of great difficulty, requiring great intellectual ability and prolonged intellectual effort, to reach genuine knowledge, knowledge of moral truth. If such truth exists and knowledge of it is possible, then it is sensible to entrust the guidance of our society to guardians, who are best able to discern where the truth lies. But if no such truth exists, or if it cannot be discovered by rational thought, then there is no hope of our ever achieving a good society, not even if the intellectually *serieux* put themselves forward and exercise power, and those in power are committed intellectuals. For this reason at the end of Book V, Plato, having introduced the 'philosopher king', the intellectually committed holder of power, sets out to distinguish his knowledge of moral and political truth from the un-thought-out opinions of the fashionable opinion-formers.

Plato needed to have the argument of the metaphysical books both to defend himself against moral subjectivism generally, and in particular to ground the values of the ideal society. Moreover, Books V, VI and VII are not only about metaphysics. They also depict in further detail the ideal society, encouraging each one of us to identify with it, and subsuming our individual identities in the communal whole, to replace individual selfishness by a selfless devotion to the common good. It thus makes sense that Plato needed to have the argument of the metaphysical books before that of the decline of the constitution, to provide a better setting for the return of the self. But he might well have only come to realise this after he had written Books VIII and IX(i) as a foil to Book IV.

⁸ We consider this question further in ch.4, pp.53-54.