
On First Understanding Plato's Republic

Philip Allott*

A book can change a mind, but only if that mind is ready to be changed. The mind of a particular child formed, up to the age of reason, in a time of war, is liable to be ready to ask questions of a particular kind about the human condition – still more so, when, at the age of eight, that child sees, on the front-page of the newspaper, images of Belsen and Hiroshima, images that would never be forgotten. In the 1940s it was still possible to believe in childish innocence. Now even small children know too much about the worst that human beings can do.

Beyond the age of reason, social influences interact with the particular character of our own mind and our own personal experience to form an ever-evolving idea, an ever-denser idea, of the human condition, forcing us to live our lives in an uncomfortable reconciling of our own private worldview and the worldview imposed on us by society. Books intrude into that process of self-evolving in a unique way. The private activity of other minds reaches far into our own mind through the very private activity of reading.

Philosophy is an active presence in our minds, even in the minds of those who have never read a single sentence in a single book of philosophy. We enact philosophies in the ideas that form our consciousness, individual and social, even if we know nothing of the origin and history of those ideas. In my own case, in my mid-30s, I underwent a career change that was also a philosophy-shock.

I had been a more or less loyal servant of a hopelessly Aristotelian part of the public human world (diplomacy). I became an underpaid servant of an intellectual world (Cambridge) whose ambient mental climate is also relentlessly Aristotelian, but which had, in the 17th century, produced a brand of Puritan Platonism whose wider cultural significance was respectfully explored by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Was it possible to be a Cambridge Platonist in the 20th century?

I had already accepted my mission to act at the level of ideas to improve the tragic condition of international society and International Law. That self-assigned task now led me on an unexpectedly long and arduous intellectual journey. I had been aware of Plato and Aristotle in the way that well-educated and well-read people, as they used

* Emeritus Professor of International Public Law, University of Cambridge. Email: pja1001@cam.ac.uk.

to be called, were expected to be aware of them. When I returned to Cambridge and launched a lecture course called *Law and Philosophy*, I had to read Plato and Aristotle, their commentators and their countless variegated inheritors, with full concentration.

My lectures treated philosophy as a continuing story of an accumulating conglomerate (Gilbert Murray's geological metaphor) of the human mind's thinking about itself, a dramatic story in which Plato and his pupil, Aristotle, play the leading roles. In the words of Alfred North Whitehead, the European philosophical tradition is a series of footnotes to Plato.

The poet-philosopher Coleridge said that everyone is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian. A character in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* tells us that every child is born either a little Liberal or a little Conservative. I told my students that, very soon, they would discover which they themselves were. I now knew, and knew now that I had always known, that I myself was a Platonist (and a Conservative, of the better sort).

The 5th century BCE was a time of remarkable intellectual progress in several of the world's ancient cultures. The miraculous appearance of ancient Greek philosophy was a transforming mutation in the self-evolving of the human mind.

To speak of a miracle is not to speak merely metaphorically. No one knows what *caused* the immediate predecessors of Socrates, Socrates himself, his contemporaries, and his first disciples, to speak in this new way. The philosophical gene that had suddenly expressed itself in the Greek mind was a new kind of capacity of the human mind to study itself systematically, and to study systematically the mind's relationship to what seems to be non-mind, the reality that seems to be external to the mind.

The new philosophy was part of an Hellenic Enlightenment, as we may call it – a wide-ranging intellectual challenge to the mind-world of Homer, which for centuries had been a central feature of Greek consciousness. It was echoed in the tragic dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides, in which the familiar inhabitants of the Homeric world are brought on stage to serve a new purpose. Mythological forms could offer a royal road to a better understanding of humanity (echoing Freud in a related context, if mythology is seen as collective dreaming).

Humanity's self-transcending in Greek philosophy coincided also with a new way of representing an idealised humanity in the fine arts. And the new philosophical mentality expressed itself in what we now call natural science, that is to say, the effort to explain the natural world systematically, without the assistance of religion or mythology or philosophy.

It was now clear that a proper study for mankind is mankind (to echo Alexander Pope). But the birth of the new philosophy gave life to a powerfully creative tension that would persist through the whole history of philosophy, to the present day – the tension between the idea of the human being as *subject* and the idea of the human being as *object*. The spirit of Plato is the spirit of the subject. The spirit of Aristotle is the spirit of the object.

The crucial connexion among all the new intellectual enterprises is that the human mind had become conscious of its remarkable capacity to *universalize*. In Greece, as

in countless other cultures, mythology and religion were a natural education in universalism. Inspired by Pythagoras, the Greeks, like their contemporaries in some other cultures, had also found an ultimate form of universalizing in *mathematics*.

Mathematics is a mysterious power of the human brain. Mathematics makes it possible for the mind to represent the reality of the physical world in numbers and symbols and concepts (Kepler's laws of planetary motion, Newtonian mechanics, Maxwell's laws of thermodynamics, quantum mechanics). It is a massive reconstructing of the physical world into a form that mirrors the functioning of the human brain-mind. In conjunction with natural science, another universalizing and reconstructing activity of the human mind, it can be put to use in the great human enterprise of modifying the physical world to human advantage.

Universalizing philosophy, in the form given to it by the Greek philosophers, is a cousin to mathematics. It allows the mind to represent a universal reality of our existence in the symbolism of *language*. Human beings could now universalize the infinite particularity of reality in the symbolism of language, in ways that we can use to change the world, in its infinite particularity. Language gives us an inexhaustible power over our own existence. Cassirer suggested that the human being should be defined, not as *animal rationale*, but as *animal symbolicum*.

There is nothing beyond the universalizing capacity of the human mind. And its achievements are universal also in the sense that they are available to all human beings, with no inherent limit of time or culture or geography.

It was immediately apparent to the Greek philosophers that the systematic study of human reality cannot be an innocent activity. You are liable to become what you think that you are. And, given that society is a product of human minds thinking collectively, society is liable to become what we think that it is. And the Greeks knew perfectly well that the human mind is profoundly ambivalent in the effects that it causes. The human being, situated at all points on a spectrum between angel and devil, is a source of unlimited good and unlimited evil.

Criticizing Sartre's *La Nausée*, Albert Camus said that the realization that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself, but only a beginning. In the same way, we may say that the realization that the human world is full of human evil – personal and collective – is not an end, but a beginning. Plato's *Republic* is the best possible beginning of such a beginning.

The English poet John Keats, familiar with Alexander Pope's translations of Homer, spent an evening with a friend reading George Chapman's more vigorous translation of the *Iliad* (1616). Overnight Keats composed a sonnet, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* (1816). The experience was, he said, like a Spanish conquistador first setting eyes on the Pacific Ocean, or an astronomer discovering a new planet.

Understanding for the first time the true significance of Plato's *Republic* can be such an experience. It can be an especially profound experience for anyone who is exceptionally sensitive to the most persistent and intractable forms of social evil, social evils that plague the whole of humanity.

It is a global pathology whose primary symptoms include the savage insanity of war (Erasmus). War, the price that we all pay for the failure of *diplomacy*, is a primitive

game of chance (Clausewitz) in which the stakes are the lives of whole nations. And diplomacy – a dissolute game of skill – is itself a secondary symptom of a diseased human world in which the grossest forms of human evil, social and economic and psychic, are explained and justified as structurally normal, in a system dominated by so-called states acting through so-called governments, many of which are no better than criminal gangs masquerading as governments (Augustine of Hippo).

The ancient Greeks were keenly aware of cultural diversity across cultural place and historical time – not only the patchwork diversity of social forms among the Greek states themselves, and their turbulent histories, but also the diversity of the social forms and histories of surrounding countries, especially Egypt and Persia. How could philosophy possibly *universalize* the social aspect of the human condition? How could philosophy possibly do anything to *improve* the social aspect of the human condition?

Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are universal religions in the sense that their doctrines are applicable, in principle, to all human beings, and also in the sense that, in principle, they can be practised in any society anywhere. However, the mere fact of their co-existence, and the fact that they themselves are riven internally by sects and competing traditions, means that none of them can be a religion for all human beings, capable of transcending and transforming the human condition at the level of all-humanity.

Also, these universal religions are all weak in what one may call the middle term of their cosmologies – the *We* between the *I* and the *All* – in other words, in their social aspect. The religions may tell us something about how to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and about how each of us should behave in relation to our fellow citizens as fellow human beings. They are not good at telling us much that is useful about Caesar's mind, that is, about the public mind of particular societies, when Caesar is not acting in specifically religious matters, that is to say, for most of Caesar's time. And it has to be said that the teaching-by-example of religion-dominated societies has been deplorable. Corrupt public power is bad. Corrupt religious power is worse.

The essence of such religions is that they are *total* in their significance. Their doctrine is a seamless web covering every conceivable aspect of human life, but human society has developed in ways which have involved the drawing of distinctions between the religious and the non-religious aspects of society, between public and private life, between Church and State. Religion's place in society is problematic in every human society.

For these reasons, humanity has been deprived of the possibility of using religion as the means of promoting the well-being of humanity at the universal level. The task passed, by default, to philosophy.

'Philosophy! The guide of our lives, the explorer of all that is good in us, exterminator of all evil! Had it not been for your guidance, what would I have ever amounted to – and what, indeed, would have become of all human life.' (Cicero, *Discussions at Tusculum*; tr., M. Grant.)

The form of philosophy resulting from what we have called the Hellenic Enlightenment is perfectly adapted to the study of all that the human mind is capable of universalizing. Such is the substance of Plato's *Republic*.

His book was known to the Greeks as *Politeia* – approximately, a general theory of well-ordered human life. Plato might better have called it *Eunomia*, if Solon had not invoked that benign mythological figure, two centuries earlier, in his poem in praise of the better ordering of human society.

Under the influence of Cicero, who was a fervent admirer of Plato, but not much of a disciple, Plato's dialogue was known to the Romans as *De re publica* (*On public affairs*), or even as *De republica*, titles which contaminate it with the image of the self-obsessed and law-obsessed Roman Republic, something very far from a Platonic conception of society. The fact that we call the book *The Republic* has succeeded in obscuring still further its true significance.

The first wonder of the book is that it is open to an infinite number of possible interpretations. Such is the dialectical nature of the timeless conversation that is philosophy. Each generation has understood Plato in its own way – from the Stoic philosophers and the early Christian theologians, through the Arab scholars and the Renaissance humanists and the Cambridge Platonists, to Rousseau and Kant and Hegel and Marx and Schopenhauer. Immanuel Kant expressed his warm admiration for Plato. But he said, charmingly and truly, that it may be that we understand Plato better than Plato understood himself. Plato is 'Plato'.

The second wonder of the book is that it is very different from the book that Plato's pupil, Aristotle, would have written – and did write, especially in his *Metaphysics* and *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Rational and ethical and social and economic forms of consciousness are natural characteristics of the human species. They have given us the significant phenomena of the human world – the *polis*, for example, or our ideas of the good life or of virtue – which rational and pragmatic human intelligence can usefully explore and understand, as it can usefully explore and understand the phenomena of the natural world.

Such is the spirit of Aristotle, and the source of his immense influence – philosophy as the systematic application of the mind's rational and pragmatic intelligence to the study of human phenomena as if they were natural phenomena. Aristotle saw no need for any quasi-mystical Platonic superstructure to understand the universe, and its natural and human phenomena.

The third wonder of Plato's *Republic* is that it is about three separable but inseparable things – the individual human being, human society, and the universe – I and We and All. We can think about these three things separately, but they are co-dependent and co-determining. Each is as it is, but none would be as it is, if the others were not as they are. Each is a separate world of order and value, but they all belong to a single world of order and value. Plato launches a philosophy of what we think that we know (epistemology) and a philosophy of what we choose to do (morality).

Plato begins the book in an ironical Aristotelian spirit, with Socrates asking his interlocutors to say how they would explain society. They give answers that have been given ever since, in one form or another, by people who have thought about these things in the Aristotelian spirit. Society is a system of power, organized to serve the self-interest of its most powerful members. Society is a historical inheritance, an accumulation of customary ideas, institutions, and practices. Society is a continuing

consensual arrangement, accepted and enacted by society-members for their mutual benefit.

We may hear, respectively, the echoing voices of Karl Marx, Edmund Burke, and John Locke, among countless others. Very much of subsequent social and political philosophy has consisted of variations on the answers given by the friends of Socrates. We may feel sorry, ashamed even, that there are rarely any new ideas under the sun. What has been will be, again and again, in philosophy, as in so much else (*Ecclesiastes*).

The three explanations elicited by Socrates are Aristotelian in spirit because they treat society as an object to be explained, like photosynthesis or the formation of planets. But, for Plato, society is not something natural. It is something made in the human mind. It is a projection of the activity of the mind, a sharing of that activity among human minds. For Plato, to understand human society you must first try to understand the way the human mind functions as the creator of its own reality within the reality of the universe.

By some miraculous chance in the course of its evolutionary history, the human mind became able to go much further than the minds of any other known animal species. The human animal uses its mind not only to adapt itself efficiently to its physical environment. It can also *create* its own environment, that is to say, a continuing world in which we have a second existence, beyond our participation in the physical universe. The human animal had evolved into a self-evolving animal.

The human world – inhabited by human individuals and human societies – is where we recreate ourselves, as a species. It is a new self-ordering, within the limits set by the natural order of the universe. The human mind is able to cause human beings to act not merely in accordance with the inescapable *causation* of the physical world but also in fulfilment of their own self-determined *purposes*. The human world is an unnatural world made in the form of *ideas* by the human *will* (to echo Schopenhauer).

Plato's universe is the universe seen in the form of ideas. Our ideas are inherently universalizing. We recognize the universal in the particular (for medieval philosophers, the *quidditas* in the *haecceitas*). We see a *tree*, using a universal category of the *tree*. We are *happy*, using a universal category of *happiness*. We know ourselves as members of *society*, using a universal category of *society*.

Human self-creating and self-ordering are a continuous creation, a continuous re-making of reality to serve our purposes. We can attach human energy to our ideas, including the energy of our feelings. (Ideas and feelings are the ways in which the human brain communicates with itself.) A purpose leads us to act in a particular way to achieve a particular new state of reality.

This requires us to *choose* among possible purposes. To make choices among possible purposes requires us to make *judgments*. To make judgments requires us to have *values* that can be assigned differentially to different possible purposes.

The ideas that cause us to cause new states of reality, the values that act as the motive force of our purposes – our *motives* – may be pragmatic, utilitarian, self-interested, rational, irrational, emotional, mistaken, evil, good, benevolent, creative, progressive, altruistic. But we have the capacity to *judge* our motives, to *judge* the judgments that we make in furtherance of our purposes.

What Plato sees – his personal enlightenment, as it were – is that there is a particular kind of idea, an idea that is a universalized category of *value*, a form of idea that enables us to discriminate among our potential purposes, to select those purposes that are most favourable to our self-creating and self-ordering and self-perfecting, and to pursue those purposes with special energy, including the energy of a very special form of feeling, an *ideal desire*, leading to a very special form of reward, *ideal happiness*. These overriding dynamic values are *ideals*.

Ideas in the form of ideals make the human being into a wonder of the natural universe – not only an animal that can re-create the world to suit its own purposes but also an animal that can perfect itself by the activity of its own mind.

So where do they come from, these self-perfecting ideas? A central Platonic insight is that we do not invent them *ad hoc*. We do not invent them to suit our purposes. We do not invent them privately as individuals. We do not invent them collectively as societies. We *recognize* ideals and *invoke* them and *apply* them.

A universal idea of the good is particularized in every deed that we judge to be a good deed. A universal idea of the beautiful is particularized in every work of art that we judge to be a beautiful work of art. A universal idea of the true is particularized in every proposition that we judge to be a true proposition. A universal idea of justice is particularized in every law that we judge to be a just law.

We also recognize and invoke and apply what seems to be a universal ideal that transcends all these specific ideals – an ideal of all ideals – which we may refer to, inadequately, as *absolute justice* or *absolute good*. It is an all-embracing and all-transcending and non-specific impulse of human self-perfecting.

Given that human societies are projections and externalizations of the functioning of the human mind, it follows that human societies play a central part in our self-creating and self-perfecting. Society, in its collective consciousness (its *public mind*, as I call it in my work), *recognizes* and *invokes* and *applies* ideal values.

A society is the scene of a permanent struggle about the application of society-transcending ideal values. Politics, government, law-making, but also the morality-making of the public mind, are the particular forms that the struggle takes. Society retains its past existential judgments in symbolic form in its institutions, laws, traditions, and customs – in its culture, in the most general sense of that term. Plato's dialogues known as *The Statesman* and *The Laws* are concerned with these matters.

Our judgments are the materials from which the future is made. And we judge our judgments, so that the future may be a better future. The human animal is not only *animal rationale* and *animal symbolicum* but also *animal recreator omnium*.

Aristotle himself raises the obvious objections. Plato, he says, is asking us to believe in the real existence of superhuman and supernatural entities – the ideals – figments of the imagination with a flavour of the mythological about them. (It is Aristotle who speaks! – the begetter of a fantasy cosmology which survived for 2,000 years.) And the spirit of Aristotle says that, logically and empirically, we must surely also recognize negative ideals – universal and transcending ideas of the evil, the false, the irrational, the ugly, and so on.

But, for Plato, the self-transcending ideal values are not ghostly presences in the empyrean. They are inherent in the functioning of the human mind, inherent in the human person and the human condition. They reflect the general order of the universe that contains also the general order of our human existence. The dynamic effect of our ideals is a participation in the dynamic self-unifying and self-ordering of the universe of which we are an integral part. Plato sometimes uses the idea of the *soul* to express the total order of the self-creating and self-unifying human being. He sometimes uses the idea of *God* to express the total order of the universe. And he sometimes suggests an inherent link between the two.

The scientific study of the human brain is progressing rapidly. It is probable that it will soon demonstrate that the human mind's amazing capacity of self-ordering through universalizing is a very-high-level integrating function of the brain itself, and is thus a participation of the human brain-mind in the general self-ordering of the natural universe of which the human brain is an integral part. Plato would be pleased.

The way in which we explain the nature of the ideals is not important. And it is impossible to deny that human history bears agonizing witness to the overwhelming attraction of evil values. What matters is that we recognize, as Aristotle himself also recognized, that human beings and human society are capable of self-perfecting.

Ideas and ideals. Epistemological idealism + moral idealism = Platonic idealism. What the human mind has made the human mind can change, and can change for the better.

It is not surprising that these ideas caused a philosophy-shock in the mind of one who had been exceptionally distressed by the tragedy of the human condition at the level of all-humanity.

The spirit of Plato is encouraging and empowering. The spirit of Aristotle is relaxing and disempowering. It makes the human present seem inevitable and justifiable because it is made by the past that could not have been other than it was, and the human future will be an extrapolation of the present. That is what happens when you apply the idea of causation to human affairs. The spirit of Aristotle has inspired a series of philosophies that encourage an attitude of resignation, or hope of the most modest kind, in the face of what is seen as essentially unredeemable human reality.

Materialism, scepticism, empiricism, utilitarianism, naturalism, social positivism, historicism, philosophical pragmatism, philosophical positivism, existentialism – naming cheerless heirs of Aristotle in the order of their appearance. (British so-called empiricism – Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, Hume – is epistemological idealism (the mind re-constructing reality), as Immanuel Kant recognized.)

Highly developed national societies were slow to achieve sustained self-development, that is to say, the means of their possible self-perfecting. Eventually they found ways in which they could institutionalize the actualizing of their ideal purposes. They made kings (or their various modern equivalents) into philosophers, within their own realms. A modern society is a self-perfecting machine.

The Prince. Utopia. Sovereignty. Leviathan. Social Contract. General Will. Invisible Hand. New Science. Wisdom without Reflection. Third Estate. The Rights of Man. Political Justice. Nation (*Volk*). Religion of Humanity. New Moral World. Two Nations.

Ideology. Social Physics. New Human Being (*Übermensch*). The Crowd. Collective Consciousness. Collective Unconscious.

Machiavelli, More, Bodin, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Smith, Vico, Burke, Sieyès, the French (Revolutionary) National Assembly, Godwin, Fichte, Comte, Owen, Disraeli, Marx, Spencer, Nietzsche, Le Bon, Durkheim, Jung.

All of them knew perfectly well that, in launching these ideas about society, they were not offering an objective explanatory description of anything at all. They are offering new complexes of ideas that exploit a particular epistemological possibility, the possibility that it has been the purpose of the present essay to identify. They reconstruct a part of human reality in the form of *ideas*, in order to help us (as each of them supposes) to make *judgments* that allow us to achieve our *purposes* in fulfilment of our *ideals*. They have powerfully invigorated social consciousness at the national level.

The human condition at the level of all-humanity has not been so fortunate. The epistemology of supranational relations is archaic, self-harming and potentially self-destroying. The idealism of the Spanish authors (Vitoria, Las Casas, Suárez) and of the German authors (Pufendorf, Wolff) was simply ignored.

We were left with the barren idea that a 'state' is an inhuman quasi-person with a will and interests, interacting with other such imaginary entities through 'governments'. Government is externalized into a political and moral wasteland, detached from the internal society that causes a government to exist, and conditions its behaviour politically and morally.

Most of my academic work has been devoted to creating and disseminating a new complex of ideas. INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY. The society of all human beings and the society of all societies, the society that generates a true International Law. My Social Idealism is a philosophy, in the spirit of Plato, exploring the epistemological and moral basis of International Society. This new complex of ideas is designed to enable *all human beings* to make judgments that will allow them to achieve their ideal purposes with a view to human self-perfecting.

Could this be a long-delayed fulfilment of the revolution in our self-evolving that began in ancient Greece – after the Age of Aristotle, the coming of the Age of Plato? The better sort of Socialist revolutionary wants to get rid of the worst of the past in order to make a better future. The better sort of Conservative revolutionary wants to use the best of the past to make a better future.