

*When
Philosophers Rule*

FICINO ON PLATO'S
REPUBLIC, LAWS, and EPINOMIS



ARTHUR FARNDSELL



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FOREWORD

FREEDOM, as the medieval English lawyer Sir John Fortescue once observed, is a thing with which the nature of man has been endowed by God. Therefore, he said, wherever it is oppressed it strives of its own energy always to return.

Living as we do in an age in which freedom seems relatively secure for many people in democratic states, it is easy to lose sight of the foundations upon which lasting freedom is built. Such foundations have long antecedents as this volume demonstrates, it being a translation of commentaries written more than five hundred years ago on works that were written over two thousand five hundred years ago. Yet Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, and these commentaries on them, remain as relevant today as they have ever been, examining as they do the necessary conditions for a successful society which offers civil freedom under the rule of law to all its citizens.

Central to Plato's view of civil society is *arete*, justice or righteousness. Our own age is full of calls for justice in all social and civil spheres, but what is common to these calls is an apparent view that justice is something that is dispensed by the state, its institutions and courts of law to otherwise deprived citizens. Justice has become a commodity which purports to right wrongs and compensate victims who have nothing to do themselves but register their complaint with the appropriate authorities.

Plato's view, endorsed by Ficino, is very different. For them justice is a state of the soul over which every man and woman has personal command. It is an orderly state of the inner being which is cultivated by good practice of other virtues: wisdom, temperance and courage, which combined in one person produce that state of being that is called just. There is nothing to be gained from looking for this from some external source.

The great value of Plato's works and these commentaries on them is that they require us to look again at the basis of the freedoms we enjoy in modern democratic societies. They warn us that democratic

freedoms are not attained, or maintained, without effort and that those efforts involve every citizen coming to an understanding of their own role in securing justice in the state to which they belong. It is clear from this view that the best form of government is self-government, and that such government involves the citizen in taking command of his or her own inner life, developing the personal strength to control, direct and restrain their own appetites while bringing their soul under the rule of wisdom or reason so that it becomes a thing of order and beauty reflecting the goodness of God and showing itself to be such in their conduct towards others and towards the state.

It was this idea of inner, personal government that lay behind the English common lawyers' idea of the reasonable man, the free and lawful man of the English common law. Such a person was presumed to know the law because the law was nothing else but reason, and reasonable conduct was sufficient to keep the individual within the law. This conception, which still informs the many common law jurisdictions that followed the British around the globe, is the key to the successful development of free democratic states. The lessons reflected in the pages of this volume offer a guide for modern statesmen and citizens alike.

For Plato, democracy as described by him is a dangerous and delicate form of government amounting at its worst to little more than mob rule based on the primacy of the pleasure-loving appetites in the souls of the citizens. When this becomes dominant in the majority of citizens, the very foundations of participatory forms of government are destroyed as fewer and fewer people develop in themselves the virtues necessary for the government of themselves or of states. New laws are passed on a whim to demonstrate to electorates that their governors are dealing with the latest crisis, but without any real regard to the effect of such laws on the body politic. There is an inevitable tendency for citizens to become ever more dependent on the state for the regulation of every aspect of life; regulations multiply and the people, far from becoming free citizens, become instead ever more dependent on the ever-increasing bounty of the state to provide for every aspect of life. In the end this cannot be sustained because the state has to appropriate more and more of the wealth of its citizens in order to pay for the services which the citizens demand in exchange for their votes.

Plato sees descent into tyranny as the inevitable outcome of such a state of affairs. However, he also writes: 'Until philosophers are kings,

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or the kings and princes amongst men have the spirit and power of philosophy, cities will have no rest from their evils, or so I believe.’

This is the opening that offers hope that the otherwise inevitable descent of democratic societies first into ungovernableness and then into tyranny can be avoided. In a democratic age, the kings and princes amongst men are the people themselves. The turning to philosophy that avoids the descent into tyranny is a revolution in personal values and an acceptance of personal responsibility. The free and lawful person acts reasonably and governs him or her self, not only because it is necessary for the good of the state and their neighbours, but also because such self-command offers greater happiness and fulfilment to the individual. Understanding this and making it a practical reality is necessary to the establishment and continuance of democratic governance based on freedom under law.

When the governors of a state understand this, following Plato, they are more likely to direct their lawmaking powers to establishing and maintaining virtue in the souls of the citizens and the citizens will appreciate and applaud their efforts to do so.

This volume is the first translation into English of Ficino’s *Commentaries* on Plato’s two greatest works on this topic. The *Commentaries* are themselves full of additional insights which expand and elucidate Plato’s thought. They provide the modern reader with a route into an art and science of government which can offer both personal development and also the peace, freedom and stability to which modern democracies aspire. Perhaps the appearance of this translation at this time is a part of that volition described by Fortescue by which the real freedom of the human condition re-asserts itself from age to age.

Ian Mason

Principal, School of Economic Science

The Theme of the First Book of the *Republic*

AS THE EYE surpasses the hand, the head the feet, reason the senses, the soul the body, the end all that is directed towards the end, stillness movement, and eternity time, so the contemplative life is seen to surpass the active life. For contemplation is the beginning and end of action: it directs action as it wills and it brings action to a stop, commanding the lesser movements and external action to cease, so that the inner, steadfast and freer action may at length be controlled. Thus, from the very contemplation of God all the movements and actions of the heavens and of nature are guided as if from their inception to their end.

It is for this reason that our Plato surpasses all other founders of States and lawgivers in this respect at least, that while all the others, as human beings, have organised the State mainly for action, Plato, as if divine, guides the entire activity – both public and private – of the State mainly towards contemplation and establishes his State as the mistress of the world, not that it may be feared by many but rather that it may be revered by all peoples as the heavenly Jerusalem fully manifest on earth, a State from which all disputes concerning possession have been removed and all things are common to all in accordance with the law of nature. Abundance is universal, harmony is firmly established, the will of all is single, and thus the tranquillity needed for contemplation is always readily available.

Now he assembles the entire form of the ideal Republic within ten books, the number which is the most wholesome of all numbers, for it contains other numbers within itself and it reproduces other numbers endlessly from itself. And, as he frequently declares in these books, especially in the second, he prefers us to record the entire discussion as a discussion about justice rather than about a Republic, teaching thereby, as I judge, that every situation and every action, both public and private, should be related not to abundance, not to power, and not to victory, but to justice herself. For once all disturbances have been removed and all hindrances caused by disputes have been banished,

justice herself renders the citizens fully prepared for the investigation of truth and the worship of God.

It is this kind of contemplation and worship that our Plato considers to be the specific aim of the Republic; so that, just as no one, whether living alone or in a community, can act without the law, in the same way many citizens, gathered together into the single body of the State by a common law, may fulfil this aim. *Timaeus* and *Critias* teach us, moreover, that before the great flooding of the lands Athens existed in a different form; and according to the Greeks and the Egyptians it was governed by laws similar to theirs.

It was the goddess Pallas who founded Athens, nurtured it and taught it and gave it the form of a Republic which Plato describes in his books. But in the books of the *Laws* he composes the State on the model of the government of Crete, Sparta, and the new Attica, and he begins the work with God, the author of all laws.

But let us return to what is in hand: he begins this State, too, with favourable auspices, the holy ceremonies of divine wisdom, the traditions and counsels of the elders, and the justice and holiness of religion. For after saying that to God should be rendered prayers and to every man his own, he begins with a discussion of private justice and will thus move, when it is appropriate, to public justice in its turn. Yet you are to remember that what is meant by Plato in these considerations is that without justice, divine and human, without the counsel of the elders, and without the grace of divine wisdom, no State can be happily established or, if established, be happily governed.

Next, touching on the theme of the first book, I shall select, from a host of weighty precepts, a few essential ones. Restrained youth makes for an easy old age, unrestrained youth for a difficult old age. He who complies with the lusts of the body is undoubtedly a slave to frenzied tyrants. In old age, now that the disturbances which youth brings in its train have abated, the soul, being separated from the body, looks more closely and more openly upon things divine. Blamelessness alone offers the soul the best hope for the future, the only solace of life. The man of sound mind will deem that money is useful for this above all, that he may discharge whatever he has vowed to God or promised to man or owes in any other way, and that he may not be led, on account of poverty, to lie to anyone or to be deceitful in any matter. For money should be related to justice, while justice should be related to the reward of another life.

But before we pursue the discussion about justice, my advice is to consider individual matters that are dealt with allegorically by Plato. Firstly, the old man Cephalus, the ‘head’, provides the starting-point for the discussion. Secondly, Polemarchus is the chief, which is what his name means: that is, he is the first to enter the fray in a restrained manner. Thirdly, Thrasymachus, the ‘fierce fighter’, acts harshly. Socrates, however, the ‘powerful saviour’, rescues everyone everywhere from error and from injustice.

But leaving allegory for the commentaries, let us now proceed to the definition of justice. Simonides, Pittacus, and Bias are reported to have said that justice is speaking the truth and rendering to each his due. Some interpret this to mean simply disclosing the truth to anyone and restoring what you have taken. But Socrates rejects this on the grounds that the full truth should not be revealed to a madman, or weapons returned to him which he had left in your keeping while he was of sound mind.

Others expound justice as giving to each what is meet for him: benefit to friends, but deprivation to enemies; assistance to the good, but harm to the wicked. Socrates rejects this definition, too, on the grounds that it is never right to harm anyone. For whoever harms anything makes it weaker and less fitting for its own work and detracts from its specific excellence, just as someone who harms a dog makes it unable to achieve canine excellence. But justice is the excellence of man, and so whoever harms a man makes him weaker in relation to justice. Yet justice never detracts from justice, just as music never destroys the work of music. This is why it is not just to harm anyone.

At this point Thrasymachus raises an objection against Socrates, as many others do at other times, because he will never answer but always wishes to ask. However, you cannot be unaware that there are many reasons why Socrates is always in the habit of asking questions rather than giving instruction.

The first reason is to remind the presumptuous that, whatever one’s age, it is better to learn than to teach.

The second reason is to show that, by divine inspiration, truth is immediately showered upon minds which through appropriate questioning have been detached from the body and from errors, a situation which meets with the full approval of Avicenna.

The third reason is to make it clear that the forms of things have been implanted in our souls, and it is through these forms that the

truth of things always suffuses souls which are turned towards them through the process of questioning.

The fourth reason is to make it clear that human knowledge consists in negating what is false rather than in affirming what is true.

The next definition of justice to be brought forward, similar to that of Callicles in *Gorgias*, is the one given by Thrasymachus, that what is just is what is advantageous to the more powerful; for those who are more powerful always exercise sovereignty, bring in laws that are advantageous to themselves, and rule over those that are subject to them; indeed, their subjects act justly when they obey those laws which have been established for the advantage of the rulers. Socrates opposes Thrasymachus, for how can a leader, through ignorance, prescribe those laws which will be to his own detriment? If a subject keeps those laws he will be just because he is obeying his lord, but he will also be unjust because he is acting to the disadvantage of his lord.

He adds that when any art which is fully fledged and therefore without defect is dealing with objects or people it looks not to its own advantage but to the advantage of whatever has been entrusted to it, as can be seen with a tutor and his pupils, a doctor and those who are sick, or a helmsman and the sailors; and in the same way a rightful magistrate looks to the advantage of those who are subject. But if any art, such as the art of medicine, exacts a payment, it is not medicine (whose end is the healing of disease) insofar as it makes a profit, but it is entangled with gain and prostitution. The art of civil government, therefore, being the most complete of all the arts and thus suffering from no defect or meanness, undoubtedly governs without seeking any advantage for itself.

I pass over what Thrasymachus rashly, and with some inconsistency, brings forward against justice. But you should note that it is not right for anyone to seek leadership or to solicit the magistracy. Again, if a State of good men ever exists, they will vie for the position of not ruling, in the same way that men nowadays strive out of a desire to rule.

But there are three things to note now. The first is that evil men are not to be admitted to the magistracy. The second is that citizens who are not evil are not to be encouraged, by the inducement of some reward or honour, to shoulder the heavy burden of governing. The third is that upright men, who are not moved by greed or ambition, must not be summoned to the State merely at a time of danger or

fear, lest they themselves be subjected to the unjust government of worse men.

The divine Plato understands that at any time the duty of governing the country must be undertaken voluntarily if it is to be just. But by the example of the most upright citizen he wishes to reprove the unjust arrogance of those who in any way seek the magistracy from ambition or go hunting for honours. But men become worthy of honours by having not the least care for them.

He therefore wishes such an office to be undertaken voluntarily and at the same time to be necessary, so that the most upright man will most willingly take the helm of State, but he will do so only when necessity demands, and in the meantime he will prefer contemplation to action. Yet whenever the situation is urgent he will, to suit the occasion, put action on behalf of the public good before his personal contemplation. All of this can be very clearly understood from Plato's letter to Archytas of Tarentum.

After this comes the refutation of the tyrannical statement made by Thrasymachus, which allocates justice to the category of foolishness and evil, while allocating injustice to the category of wisdom and goodness. His statement is shown to be false on the grounds that every art is a sort of wisdom and that, in relation to those things concerning which it is wise, it is also good. However, a man who is skilled in any art does not seek more than another who is skilled in this art, but he seeks to obtain something equal or similar. Yet although he does not wish to rival the skilled man, he does wish to rise above the unskilled. But the unskilled man sometimes tries recklessly to arrogate to himself more than the skilled and the unskilled have together.

Very similar to the skilled man is the just man, who wishes to have nothing more than another just man, but something – namely, virtue – more than the unjust man. On the other hand, the unjust man, like the unskilled man, strives to have more than the just and the wicked have together.

The conclusion against Thrasymachus is that justice is to be referred to the category of wisdom and goodness, while injustice is to be referred to the category of folly and evil. Added to this is the fact that injustice is the cause of weakness for all people, since, in any society, injustice, begetting hatred and discord, completely undermines the society and finally destroys it.

A society can hold together only to the extent that some just distribution is maintained. It therefore stands by justice and is

destroyed by injustice. Through justice it is a friend to itself and to others; through injustice it is an enemy to all. But the effects of justice and injustice upon a society are the same as their effects upon the soul: the just man is at harmony with himself, and he is a friend to himself, to all men, and to the gods; for the gods are most just, and thus it is not surprising that the just man is like them and is their friend. The unjust man, however, finds that his situation is the opposite in all respects.

Moreover, everything has its specific way of working and needs a specific talent or faculty which allows it to function at its best and without which it cannot be effective. Therefore, since the soul has something specific to care for and govern, and much more importantly to keep alive, she requires her own specific power to fulfil these functions most efficiently; and if this be removed, she struggles. Now the virtue of the soul is justice, and injustice is her vice. And so it is through justice that she gives perfect care and government, and that she lives, and lives happily. But if justice be taken away, the reverse is true.

Once these points have been stated, the first book concludes with a mild rebuke: although the definition and nature of justice should, of course, have been propounded earlier, what has happened so far is the opposite, as Socrates has followed those participating in the discussion and has, at the same time, while pursuing the debate according to well-known principles, taken into account the aptitude of those listening and has given due consideration to their capacity.



The Theme of the Second Book of the *Republic*

THE SECOND BOOK begins with the threefold division of good things. The Good is unchanging and should be sought. Now we seek something for its own sake when we look for pleasures and happiness. We seek something for the sake of something else when we look for anything that is toilsome. We seek something for its own sake and for something other when we look for knowledge and good health.