

1 Plato's Utopia

It has been said that all subsequent philosophy is merely a footnote to Plato, and this is certainly true of political philosophy. Plato's Republic sketches out the fundamentals of political theory. The origins of society, it suggests, are in practical self-interest. But although the pursuit of wealth motivates all, it must not motivate the rulers – the Guardians. Plato sees two main threats to society, either external – requiring a military response, or internal – requiring a political response. Internal threats are minimised by ensuring the ruling class are there solely on merit, and receive no rewards other than satisfaction from performing their duty and achieving a well-ordered society.

The origins of human society may be, as they say, obscured in the mists of antiquity but they certainly lie outside Europe, probably with the ancient African cultures. The first theorising that left written records only seems to have been about 5,000 years ago. But these early cultures and records are by no means primitive. In China, the great sages, Confucius and Lao Tzu were teaching the virtues of the well-ordered, harmonious, society, whilst in the south west coastal strip of what is now modern Turkey, the trading ports that would later grow up into the city states of Asia Minor were founded, and with them an unparalleled period of innovation in art, literature, architecture, politics – and philosophy .

It was here, in the fifth century BC, that Democritus described the shadows cast by the mountains on the moon, and realised that the pool of celestial light in the night sky – the Milky Way – was in fact made up of thousands upon thousands of stars. And it was here too that Democritus observed that 'one should think it of greater moment than anything else that the affairs of state are conducted well', neither being 'contentious beyond what is proper' nor 'allotting strength to oneself beyond the common good'. For a state which is conducted well 'is the best means to success: everything depends on this, and if this is preserved, everything is preserved and if this is destroyed everything is destroyed'.

It was whilst Democritus was devising a theory of atoms in Mesopotamia that Socrates, in Athens, was holding the philosophical discussions that, through the *Republic*, and many other writings of Plato, have come not merely to influence but to determine much of western culture, education and society. Socrates' position in European thought, it has been said, is like that of a religious leader, who, although he himself wrote nothing, has had the kind of influence normally reserved only for messiahs, spread through the accounts of his followers, of whom Plato is only the most immediate and direct. And the style of Plato's political philosophy is also religious in tone, set out in the form of dialogues in the *Republic*. Socrates is portrayed there as the wise one, extolling the need to come to know the 'Good', or to be precise 'the Form of the Good'. This some see as indistinguishable from 'God', and it certainly has many similarities.

Plato was born about 40 years after Socrates, and knew him only in his last years. He grew up during the Peloponnesian wars, which ended in 401 BC with the defeat of Athens, followed by a putsch by a small group of aristocrats which, after only eight months, degenerated into a tyranny counting in due course among its victims Socrates himself, on charges of 'impiety' and 'corrupting the young'.

Plato writes as a member of a highly distinguished family, who had both the means and the inclination to be a member of the governing elite. That he never did govern, in fact, having to content himself with setting out his blueprint for society in the *Republic*, was due, he felt, to his inability to find others with whom to share the burden of government. Like the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who is reported to have once said that she needed just six men, good and true, to govern the United Kingdom, but could never find them all at the same time, Plato found human capital to be the critical factor lacking, and decided instead that education was the key to society. Rulers, in particular, would need special training, if there were ever to be enough of them.

On the other hand, as well as Socrates himself, there were many others around to influence Plato in the design of his 'republic'. As well as Democritus, there was Parmenides advising that 'truth must be eternal and unchanging', and Heraclitus, who conversely concluded (it is said after standing in the river) that 'all is flux'. The two views being reconciled and reflected in a tradition in which the earthly, visible world was seen as being illusory and impermanent, whilst the world of the intellect and truth was eternal and timeless.

For Plato, it followed, the ideal state would be designed not to continually adapt and evolve, but rather to have a fixed and unalterable structure controlling and directing changes.

The *Republic* then is a serious bid to sketch out the ideal society, an effort which partly reflects Plato's frustration at being unable to play a significant political role in his own society. Its main recommendation, coming from a philosopher, is that philosophers should be in charge of governments. The rule of philosophers had already been tried in other city states, and it was common practice to employ a sage to draw up laws. Plato would certainly have agreed with Marx, in believing that the point is not only to understand the world – but to change it.

His writings are in the form of conversations, or dialogues, between historical characters, the most important of whom is Socrates. The title is misleading – the *Republic* is really about any form of political organisation that a community the size of a Greek city could take. Similarly, Plato's preoccupation with 'justice' – *dikaiosyne* in the Greek – is not so much with the administration of the law, with seeing that criminals get their just deserts, but with the right way to behave. It is justice in a moral not a legal sense, and is closely linked to the idea of wisdom. Justice is to Plato the 'correct ordering' of the organism.

So Plato starts by making the equation, strange to modern eyes, of justice in the workings of the state with justice observed in the behaviour of the human individual. Indeed, Plato believes that because it is easier to see justice at work in the larger organism, we should look at the ordering of society in order to find the answer to the question of how to live ourselves.

We think of justice as a quality that may exist in a whole community as well as in an individual, and the community is the bigger of the two. Possibly, then, we may find justice there in larger proportions, easier to make out...

In this way, Plato's politics is based on the philosophical and ethical question, 'What should I do?' His concern at the deterioration of morals in Greek society is the wellspring of the *Republic*, and strengthens his conviction that there can be no escape from injustice and the many ills of society until it is guided by those who have come to a knowledge of the 'Good'.

Plato, like Marx, is actually a materialist in this, saying that a state comes into existence because no individual is self-sufficient. We all have many needs – for food and shelter, for heat and tools, for roads and paths, and for protection from attack. We call on one another's help to satisfy our various requests and when we have collected a number of others together to live in one place, helping and supporting each other, we call that settlement a state, he says. It is here that we find the origin of society, in the free exchange of goods and services between people. But this coming together of people is not a social contract, nor even an enlightened act. For 'one man gives a share of his produce to another, if he does, or accepts a share of the others produce, thinking it is better for himself to do so'. Economic need and self-interest comes first; this is the defining feature of Plato's society.

Let us build our imaginary state from the beginning. Apparently, it will owe its existence to our needs, the first and greatest need being the provision of food to keep us alive. Next we shall want a house; and thirdly, such things as clothing.

How can the state supply this? Plato suggests through the division of labour. 'We shall need at least one man to be a farmer, another a builder, and a third a weaver.' In fact, as Socrates and his audience then apparently realise, at least two more will be useful: namely a shoemaker and someone to provide for 'personal' wants, the like of which are not specified. This 'minimum state' works best when each member of it is making only the things for which he or she is best suited (Plato is very egalitarian, giving women the same employment opportunities as men, because, after all, the only important part of human beings, the soul, is neither male nor female). And that means specialisation. 'The work goes easier and is better done when everyone is set free from all other occupations to do, at the right time, the one thing for which they are naturally fitted.'

As Socrates goes on to say, at least according to Plato's dialogues, in fact, a bigger organisation encompassing carpenters and blacksmiths, shepherds and weavers, builders and masons, is more efficient and successful still. Indeed, Socrates even suggests a middle class of sorts, composed of shopkeepers and bankers, managing and selling goods. After all, as his companion puts it, perhaps rather unkindly: 'In well-ordered communities there are generally men not strong enough to be of use in any other occupation.' These middle

classes stay in the market place, whilst the farmers are out farming and the craftsmen crafting, to take money from those who wish to buy, and to purchase goods from those who wish to sell.

Both Plato and his pupil Aristotle, who would later categorise, rather obsessively, the natural world into the various species and genera that we use today, saw social life as a means to enable individuals with particular skills to achieve their proper 'function': the businessman to produce wealth, the doctor, health and the soldier, victory. The ruler's art of 'politics' is in turn fulfilled when the state is in balance and human happiness and the 'Good' is maximised. When, on the other hand, a ruler believes the nation should concentrate on generating wealth to the detriment of this, or tries to pursue power and military adventure, then the political art is perverted.

It has to be remembered here, as elsewhere, that in the *Republic* there is always that slight, but vital, distinction to be drawn between the views of its main character, Socrates, and its author, Plato. For the historical Socrates, the only sort of happiness that counts is that which comes through wisdom. Specifically, the realisation that the only thing worthwhile is knowledge of the 'Good'. It could quite easily be suffering that brings about this discovery and illumination. However, for Plato himself, the 'Good' is a slightly broader notion, rooted in the social and political context, although still not solely the materialist concept it is often taken for today.

Let us begin, then, with a picture of our citizens' manner of life, with the provision that we have made for them. They will be producing corn and wine, and making clothes and shoes. When they have built their houses, they will mostly work without their coats or shoes in summer, and in winter be well shod and clothed. For their food, they will prepare flour and barley-meal for kneading and baking, and set out a grand spread of loaves and cakes on rushes or fresh leaves. They will lie on beds of myrtle-boughs and bryony and make merry with their children, drinking their wine after the feast with garlands on their heads and singing the praises of the gods. So they will live pleasantly together and a prudent fear of poverty or war will keep them from begetting children beyond their means.

If we recognise the material impulse, Plato argues that we must also recognise that, 'in time, the desire for a life of idle luxury will

inevitably lead to conflict', and the land which was once large enough to support the original inhabitants will now be too small. 'If we are to have enough pasture and plough land, we shall have to cut off a slice of our neighbour's territory; and if they too are not content with necessities, but give themselves up to getting unlimited wealth, they will want a slice of ours.'

This will mean a considerable addition to the community – a whole army – 'to go out to battle with any invader, in defence of all this property and of the citizens we have been describing'. For as Plato records in another dialogue, the *Phaedo*, 'All wars are made for the sake of getting money.'

By now the state has become unable to manage itself. Who will run the new society? Who will be in charge? A small group of philosophers known as the 'Guardians' are Plato's (self-serving) choice. The Guardians are indeed appointed primarily to protect the state, and are specialists in the arts of war, but are also skilled in the arts of ruling, and in management. They must be 'gentle to their own people yet dangerous to others', like a well-trained guard dog. Dogs, says Plato, extending the metaphor (presumably humorously), are philosophic creatures. They distinguish friend from enemy by the simple test of deciding whether they know the person or not. The dog, like the philosopher, likes only that which he knows.

In Plato's republic, the bringing up of the 'guard dogs' is the key to sound government. The young are selected for aptitude, and brought up in a tightly controlled environment by older Guardians. It is a community of Spartan simplicity, free of the distractions of family ties and bonds. Goods are held in common, unlike the situation for lowly industrious classes of the republic, who are allowed to accumulate private property. But the Guardians will step in to prevent extremes of either great wealth or great poverty from occurring, as such extremes set rich against poor, disturbing the equilibrium of society. For unity is all important, and the Guardians must further protect it by ensuring that the state does not grow too large, and by preserving the principle of promotion only on merit – there must be no hereditary governing class. Generally the balance of the state is akin to the need for balance in the individual.

When a man surrenders himself to music, allowing his soul to be flooded through the channels of his ears with those sweet and soft and mournful airs we spoke of, and gives up all his time to the delights of song and melody, then at first he tempers the high-

spirited part of his nature, like iron whose brittleness is softened to make it serviceable; but if he persists in subduing to such an incantation, he will end by melting away altogether.

He will have 'cut the sinews of his soul'. Likewise, if there is no attempt to cultivate the mind, but an overemphasis on training the body, it leads to a soul that is 'blind and deaf because the darkness that clouds perception is never cleared away' and the man becomes a dull beast 'in a stupor of ignorance without harmony or grace'. Balance, says Socrates, mirroring the conclusions of the Eastern philosophers and mystics, is the key for the individual, and equally, for the state.

In many ways, Plato is more progressive than he gets credit for. Plato believes that, at least in relation to education and philosophy, men and women are equal. He says that they must share the same education and practice the same occupations 'both in peace and war', and that they should be governed by 'those of their number who are best'. As in Athens, at the time, women lived in seclusion and took no part in politics or most of social life, Plato's suggestion that they should have equal opportunities to become Guardians was quite revolutionary. However, it made sense for Plato, as he believed the physical person was not important (as mentioned above), that it was the soul in which morality resided, and souls have no gender.

Of course, this might cause some practical problems, as the *Republic* notes in one of its regular whimsical asides.

'Possibly, if these proposals were carried out, they might be ridiculed as involving a good many breaches of custom.'

'Indeed, Socrates, they might.'

'The most ridiculous being the notion of women exercising naked along with the men in the wrestling schools; some of them elderly women too, like the old men who still have a passion for exercise when they are wrinkled and not very agreeable to look at ...'

Only relevant differences, such as the slighter build of women, should be allowed to influence their treatment.

However, far from being considered a progressive, Plato is sometimes accused of being an early advocate of totalitarianism,

particularly censured for his approach to the arts and education, with children being brought up by the state rather than by parents.

Actually, the abolition of private property for the Guardians includes the breaking of parental bonds with children, as part of the general scheme. Offspring were instead to be reared collectively by everyone, using the guiding principles of eugenics to sort the good from the not-so-promising. By destroying family ties, Plato believed it would be possible to create a more united governing class, and avoid the dangers of rivalry and oligarchy. Inferior children would be demoted to the appropriate class. In the perfect state, women too would be 'held in common' producing the children for the state, and there would be no permanent marriage or pair-bonding. As for the upbringing of the children, his aim is primarily to get people to think for themselves, rather than to put thoughts into their heads. Education is too important to be left to parents in any case, and so all children would essentially be brought up by the state. But the child is not to be passive, but active in the learning process. It is not indoctrination, Plato imagines, as the teacher can only try to show the 'source of the light'. As Plato says at one point: 'A free man ought not to learn anything under duress. Compulsory physical exercise does no harm to the body, but compulsory learning never sticks in the mind.' And he advises: 'Don't use compulsion, but let your children's lessons take the appearance of play.'

However, Plato is insistent on the need to control the influences on developing minds, and does advocate strict censorship of poetry and literature.

Our first business is to supervise the production of stories and choose only those we think suitable and reject the rest ... Nor shall any young audience be told that anyone who commits horrible crimes, or punishes his father unmercifully is doing nothing our of the ordinary but merely what the first and greatest of the gods have done before.

Because, as Socrates explains, 'Children cannot distinguish between what is allegory and what isn't' and opinions formed at that age are usually difficult to eradicate or change. It is therefore 'of the utmost importance' that the first stories they hear aim at producing 'the right moral effect'. In general:

... ugliness of form and disharmony are akin to bad art and bad character, and their opposites are akin to and represent good character and discipline ... Our artists and craftsmen must be capable of perceiving the real nature of what is beautiful, and then our young men, living as it were in a good climate, will benefit because all the works of art they see and hear influence them for the good, like the breezes from some healthy country, insensibly moulding them into sympathy and conformity with what is rational and right.

This is a striking passage, both for a message which is becoming more, not less, relevant with the creation of high-tech, densely populated societies, with weakened family structures and bonds, and stronger media and peer-group ones, and for its more sinister, totalitarian undertones.

It is not just bad theatre and poetry that corrupt. Indeed, Plato holds that 'wealth and poverty have a bad effect on the quality of work and on the workman himself'. Wealth produces 'luxury and idleness and a passion for novelty', whilst poverty produces 'meanness and bad workmanship and revolution into the bargain'. That is why the upbringing of the ruling class, the Guardians, has to be so closely prescribed and detailed.

All Guardians follow the same basic education, and undertake years of military training. At this point, some will become just 'auxiliaries', charged with defending the state, whilst a minority progress to studying philosophy and take on the burden of actually ruling.

The rest of the citizenry are also sorted into their correct, humbler but perhaps more lucrative, roles. Physicians look after physically sound citizens, physically unsound ones are left to die – although not actually killed). That is reserved for 'those who are incurably corrupt in mind'. This, all agree, is the 'best thing for them [!] as well as the community'.

In due course (Plato suggests at about the age of 50) the Guardians are ready for public office and taking up their burden of guiding the community. The lives of the Guardians must be as simple as possible, with their only pleasures being the pursuit of philosophy, although, perhaps, they can be allowed some pleasure from serving the community. Property, certainly, is forbidden. 'They shall eat together in messes and live together like soldiers in camp. They must be told

that they have no need of moral and material gold and silver as they have in their hearts the heavenly gold and silver ... ’

If this can be done, then Plato’s republic, the justly ordered state, will exemplify the following virtues:

- wisdom – in the manner of its ruling;
- courage – in the manner of its defending;
- temperance – in the acceptance of all of the system of government.

Wisdom, we have seen, stems from the Guardians themselves. ‘Courage’ is passed over quickly by Plato, but assumed to be part of a professional army. But ‘temperance’ is more subtle, and comes about only by ensuring that there is a balance between the various parts of the state – the governing part or rulers, the administering part or executive, and the productive part or the working classes.

Critics of Plato have seen a parallel in modern times between Plato’s political approach and that which, for over half a century, was being applied in the Soviet Union (Karl Popper, for example, has done so, of which more in the concluding chapters). This was ‘neo-Platonism’ in the key respects that there was a governing elite – the Communist Party – rigorous attention to education and moral influences, equality of the sexes and weakening of family ties, and, last but not least, a general disapproval of private property and wealth. However, the system failed to produce the wise and beneficent society that Plato imagined.

But Plato not only described the ideal state, where justice flourishes: he also tried to show how such a state could decline, examining the various forms of the degenerate state – unjust societies where evil permeates throughout. In these societies, the basest elements of human nature are allowed to predominate and warp the whole.

There is the ‘timocratic state’ (Greek *timé*: honour), where ambition has become the motivating force of the rulers. In Plato’s republic, the danger is that of a divided ruling class of Guardians beginning to compete amongst each other. (Timocracy was often an element in the competition amongst the aristocracy in the Middle Ages in Europe, for example.)

Once civil strife is born, the two parties will begin to pull different ways: the breed of iron and brass towards moneymaking and the

possession of house and land, silver and gold; while the other two, wanting no other wealth than the gold and silver in the composition of their souls, try to draw them towards virtue and the ancient ways. But the violence of their contention ends in a compromise: they agree to distribute land and houses for private ownership; they enslave their own people who formerly lived as free men under their guardianship and gave them maintenance; and holding them as serfs and menials, devote themselves to war and to keeping these subjects under watch and ward.

Plato specifically suggests that the usurpers will fear merit and tend towards authoritarianism. They will become greedy, avaricious and secretive, 'cultivating the body in preference to the mind and saving nothing for the spirit'.

In time, an elite emerges, defined by wealth. This is 'oligarchy', or rule of a clique.

As the rich rise in esteem, the virtuous sink... the competitive spirit of ambition in these people turns into mere passion for gain; they despise the poor and promote the rich, who win all the prizes and receive all the adulation.

Oligarchy, by making wealth the sole purpose of life and at the same time arranging that only a few have that wealth, sows the seeds of its own destruction in the masses' eventual demand for more. The resolution of this, says Plato, is democracy. Not that he thinks very much of it, considering it a close relation of anarchy.

'What is the character of this new regime? Obviously the way they govern themselves will throw light on the democratic type of man.'

'No doubt, Socrates.'

'First of all, they are free. Liberty and free speech are rife everywhere; anyone is allowed to do what he likes... every man will arrange his manner of life to suit his own pleasure.'

The kind of democracy the city states practised was significantly different from more recent versions. Decisions were not delegated to representatives, who would, we might like to suppose, have special expertise and training, but were decided upon at mass

meetings of all citizens, that is citizens with no particular knowledge or claim to qualification.

So democracy was, in this sense, 'an agreeable form of anarchy with plenty of variety', liberty 'its noblest possession'. But, worse still, the democratic state was vulnerable to sinking into tyranny. This at least was Plato's objection to democracy, and it has a certain plausibility, even piquancy, being presented in the dialogues as coming from Socrates, who was one of that system's first victims. Because it is almost anarchic in form, it must gradually settle into three classes: the capitalists (not that Plato uses the term), gradually accumulating wealth; the common people, disinterested in politics but just working steadily away, and the sharks and demagogues, perpetually looking for a way to usurp the system for quick personal gain. Inevitably, one such will succeed and seize control, which he then can only maintain by despotism. Although, in

the early days he has a smile and a greeting for everyone he meets; disclaims any absolute power; makes large promises to his friends and to the public; sets about the relief of debtors and the distribution of land to the people and to his supporters; and assumes a mild and gracious air...

It does not last for long. Soon he will be provoking wars and conflict as a means of ensuring power at home, and purging his followers as well as his enemies.

Plato's aversion to tyranny was shared by Aristotle, for 20 years one of his pupils in the Greek forums, and one of three candidates for Plato's post as Head of the Academy. However, like many job candidates since, he was to be disappointed – the job went to Plato's nephew, Speusippus. Aristotle left Athens after this, but writing later, in his description of the rule of the tyrant he seems to speak of a very modern age: '... the forbidding of common meals, clubs, education and anything of a like character... the adoption of every means for making every subject as much of a stranger as possible to every other'.

All citizens, Aristotle warned, would be constantly on view, and a secret police 'like the female spies employed at Syracuse, or the eavesdroppers sent by the tyrant Hiero to all social gatherings' would be employed to sow fear and distrust. For these are the essential and characteristic hallmarks of tyrants.

Aristotle was more of a scientist than Socrates and Plato, and had a resolutely practical – 'rational' – approach to most matters, which

served well in the fields of logic, biology and so on, albeit less so in ethics and psychology. As part of his practical bent, he was naturally particularly concerned at the fractious nature of the Greek city states in his time (the fourth century BC). The states were small, but that did not stop them continually splitting into factions that fought amongst themselves. A whole book of Aristotle's political theory is devoted to this problem. But let us step back a moment to put Aristotle into perspective.

Aristotle was born 15 years after the execution of Socrates, in 384 BC, and, as we have seen, studied at the Academy in Athens under Plato until Plato died peacefully in 347 BC. After this, Aristotle went out of favour with the mathematicians of the academy, and left Greece for Asia Minor where he concentrated for the next five years on developing his philosophy and biology. He returned to Macedonia to be tutor to the future Alexander the Great, which might have been an opportunity for him to inculcate his political views, but if he did try to do so, there is little evidence of him succeeding. In any case Aristotle seems to have been largely oblivious to the social and geopolitical changes that were already making his *Politics* largely irrelevant.

For even whilst Aristotle was teaching about the *polis* in the Lyceum, Alexander was already planning an empire in which he would rule the whole of Greece and Persia, producing a new society in which both Greeks and barbarians would become, as Plutarch later put it, 'one flock on a common pasture' feeding under one law. For almost two millennia, the area was to see no more city states, but instead a succession of empires. The rule of Macedonia, of Rome, and of Charlemagne came and went. It would only be in the Middle Ages that Aristotle's ideas would be rediscovered by St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas and, through the eventual marriage of the Catholic Church with the state, become at all influential.

Aristotle sees the origin of the state differently from Plato, stating explicitly that 'a State is not a sharing of a locality for the purpose of preventing mutual harm and promoting trade'. True to his being a keen biologist first, a metaphysician second, he believed the state should be understood as an organism with a purpose, in this case, to promote happiness, or *eudaimonia*. Of course, this is only a particular type of happiness, quintessentially that of philosophical contemplation, that the Greeks – or at least the philosophers! – valued most. But in this basic assumption, Aristotle's theory of human society is actually fundamentally different from Socrates' and Plato's.

For Aristotle, society is a means to ensure that the social nature of people – in forming families, in forming friendships and equally in trying to rule and control others – is channelled away from the negative attributes of human beings – greed and cruelty – towards the positive aspects – love of truth and knowledge – those of what he classed misleadingly as ‘the rational animal’. Misleading, because, after all, any animal is rational to the extent that it takes decisions to obtain food or to preserve its life. (The Chinese sages instead defined humans as ‘moral animals’.) Certainly, rationality pursued as a philosophical venture remained only available to an aristocratic leisured few.

In other ways, too, Aristotle’s *Politics* strikes a discordant note. He defined the state as a collection of a certain size of citizens participating in the judicial and political processes of the city. But the term ‘citizens’ was not to include many inhabitants of the city. He did not include slaves, nor (unlike Plato) women, nor yet those who worked for a living. ‘For some men’, Aristotle wrote, ‘belong by nature to others’ and so should properly be either slaves or chattels.

For the lucky citizens, though, what would life be like? The exact nature of their duties depended on the constitution of the state, of which Aristotle identified three *genera*: monarchy, aristocracy and constitutional government, or *polity*. These represented respectively, power of the one, power of the few – and power of the many. (In fact, with characteristic and often tiresome taxonomical zeal, Aristotle also identified various ‘perverted’ forms and mixed systems, with the guiding principle that arbitrary forms of government are bad, and those regulated by laws are good, but these are the most important types.) In his system, democracy is actually a perverted form of constitutional government. And, although armed for their defence, states should not be either militaristic or expansionary. After all, they would rapidly then get too big.

For Aristotle, liberty is fundamental for citizens – but it is a peculiar kind of liberty even for these privileged members of society. The state reserves the right to ensure efficient use of property, for its own advantage, and Aristotle agrees with Plato that the production of children should be controlled to ensure the new citizens have ‘the best physique’. (In Plato, it is put more generally as to ‘improve on nature’.) And, again like Plato, naturally they will have to be educated in the manner determined by the state. ‘Public matters should be publicly managed; and we should not think that each of the citizens belongs to himself, but that they all belong to the State.’

Aristotle even produces a long list of ways in which the lives of citizens should be controlled. For the state is like the father in a well-regulated household: the children (the citizens) 'start with a natural affection and disposition to obey'.

The best form of this paternalistic state is, it follows, the rule of a king. As ever, Aristotle offers a tidy arrangement. When 'either a whole family or a particular individual is so remarkable in point of excellence that his excellence exceeds that of everyone else, then it is just that that family or that individual should be king and sovereign over all matters'. If there were really no suitable candidates available, democracies might suffice, for sometimes it is better that 'the view of the multitude ... should be sovereign'. Even though the views of any one individual might not be so wise, it was still possible that when they all come together, the opinions might be better. Just as, Aristotle adds (presumably from bitter personal experience), communal dinners are better than those supplied at one person's expense.

Can the ideal state ever be brought into existence? Plato certainly thought so. The first stage would be to put a philosopher into power. This has happened, and not been particularly successful. Plato himself had a spell at advising the rulers of Syracuse, in Sicily, and several times philosophers have established small-scale radical communities, most of which seem to have been highly unpleasant. After the Berlin Wall came down at the end of the twentieth century, the modern Czechoslovakian state was even able to have a professional philosopher, Vaclav Havel, take over – for a while. But Plato has in mind the philosophical virtues – commitment to truth, justice and beauty – rather than any more formal training or qualification. And even if his ideal can never be achieved, and must remain just theory, the example it offers may still be valuable, informing the actions of earthly rulers in the light of what might be.

In a letter written from prison, Socrates is described by Plato awaiting execution at the hands of the Athenian democracy. Plato recalls Socrates saying:

I came to the conclusion that all existing states were badly governed, and that their constitutions were incapable of reform without drastic treatment and a great deal of good luck. I was forced, in fact, to the belief that the only hope of finding justice for society or for the individual lay in true philosophy, and that

mankind will have no respite from trouble until either real philosophers gain political power or politicians become by some miracle true philosophers.

This is the theme of the *Republic*.

Key Ideas

Plato's version of the origins of political society is Marx's 'materialist conception of history'; his picture of self-interest governing economic relations is both Hobbes' social contract and Smith's hidden hand; there is liberalism in the strategy of mitigating the effects of either extreme wealth or extreme poverty; and there is even a type of utilitarianism at work in ascribing to the ruler the task of maximising happiness (and the 'Good').

But Plato's most important influence comes from the suggestion that the natural and most 'efficient' form of social organisation is one in which individuals and classes have different roles and specialisations. Plato justifies using this to create both an educational and a social hierarchy. That hierarchy is the factor that, above all others, determines the practical reality of society.

- People come together naturally and start to specialise.
- The state is like an individual – with a head, a heart and a body. It is most successful when the parts can fulfil their different functions.

Key Text

Plato's *Republic*

Socrates' Question about Justice

Plato

The Oracle at Delphi said that Socrates was the wisest of men. If that is so, Socrates thought, it can only be because I alone realize how ignorant people are. In the following passages from Book I of the *Republic*, we find Socrates asking his companions about the nature of justice and then demonstrating that none of them really know what justice is. The passage ends with Thrasymachus proclaiming that justice is the advantage of the stronger.

I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, the son of Ariston. I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess, and I was also curious to see how they would manage the festival, since they were holding it for the first time. I thought the procession of the local residents was a fine one and that the one conducted by the Thracians was no less outstanding. After we had said our prayer and seen the procession, we started back towards Athens. Polemarchus saw us from a distance as we were setting off for home and told his slave to run and ask us to wait for him. The slave caught hold of my cloak from behind: Polemarchus wants you to wait, he said. I turned around and asked

Source: These selections are from Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 2nd edition, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). Reprinted by permission of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved.

where Polemarchus was. He's coming up behind you, he said, please wait for him. And Glaucon replied: All right, we will. . . .

. . . What's the greatest good you've [Cephalus] received from being very wealthy?

What I have to say probably wouldn't persuade most people. But you know, Socrates, that when someone thinks his end is near, he becomes frightened and concerned about things he didn't fear before. It's then that the stories we're told about Hades, about how people who've been unjust here must pay the penalty there—stories he used to make fun of—twist his soul this way and that for fear they're true. And whether because of the weakness of old age or because he is now closer to what happens in Hades and has a clearer view of it, or whatever it is, he is filled with foreboding and fear, and he examines himself to see whether he has been unjust to anyone. If he finds many injustices in his life, he awakes from sleep in terror, as children do, and lives in anticipation of bad things to come. But someone who knows that he hasn't been unjust has sweet good hope as his constant companion—a nurse to his old age, as Pindar says, for he puts it charmingly, Socrates, when he says that when someone lives a just and pious life

*Sweet hope is in his heart,
Nurse and companion to his age.
Hope, captain of the ever-twisting
Minds of mortal men.*

How wonderfully well he puts that. It's in this connection that wealth is most valuable, I'd say, not for every man but for a decent and orderly one. Wealth can do a lot to save us from having to cheat or deceive someone against our will and from having to depart for that other place in fear because we owe sacrifice to a god or money to a person. It has many other uses, but, benefit for benefit, I'd say that this is how it is most useful to a man of any understanding.

A fine sentiment, Cephalus, but, speaking of this very thing itself, namely, justice, are we to say unconditionally that it is speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred? Or is doing these things sometimes just, sometimes unjust? I mean this sort of thing, for example: Everyone would surely agree that if a sane man lends weapons to a friend and then asks for them back when he is out of his mind, the friend shouldn't return them, and wouldn't be acting justly if he did. Nor should anyone be willing to tell the whole truth to someone who is out of his mind.

That's true.

Then the definition of justice isn't speaking the truth and repaying what one has borrowed.

It certainly is, Socrates, said Polemarchus, interrupting, if indeed we're to trust Simonides at all.

Well, then, Cephalus said, I'll hand over the argument to you, as I have to look after the sacrifice.

So, Polemarchus said, am I then to be your heir in everything?

You certainly are, Cephalus said, laughing, and off he went to the sacrifice.

Then tell us, heir to the argument, I said, just what Simonides stated about justice that you consider correct.

He stated that it is just to give to each what is owed to him. And it's a fine saying, in my view.

Well, now, it isn't easy to doubt Simonides, for he's a wise and godlike man. But what exactly does he mean? Perhaps you know, Polemarchus, but I don't understand him. Clearly, he doesn't mean what we said a moment ago, that it is just to give back whatever a person has lent to you, even if he's out of his mind when he asks for it. And yet what he has lent to you is surely something that's owed to him, isn't it?

Yes.

But it is absolutely not to be given to him when he's out of his mind?

That's true.

Then it seems that Simonides must have meant something different when he says that to return what is owed is just.

Something different indeed, by god. He means that friends owe it to their friends to do good for them, never harm.

I follow you. Someone doesn't give a lender back what he's owed by giving him gold, if doing so would be harmful, and both he and the lender are friends. Isn't that what you think Simonides meant?

It is.

But what about this? Should one also give one's enemies whatever is owed to them?

By all means, one should give them what is owed to them. And in my view what enemies owe to each other is appropriately and precisely—something bad.

It seems then that Simonides was speaking in riddles—just like a poet!—when he said what justice is, for he thought it just to give to each what is appropriate to him, and this is what he called giving him what is owed to him. . . .

. . . But surely people often make mistakes about this, believing many people to be good and useful when they aren't, and making the opposite mistake about enemies?

They do indeed.

And then good people are their enemies and bad ones their friends?

That's right.

And so it's just to benefit bad people and harm good ones?

Apparently.

But good people are just and able to do no wrong?

True.

Then, according to your account, it's just to do bad things to those who do no injustice.

No, that's not just at all, Socrates; my account must be a bad one.

It's just, then, is it, to harm unjust people and benefit just ones?

That's obviously a more attractive view than the other one, anyway.

Then, it follows, Polemarchus, that it is just for the many, who are mistaken in their judgment, to harm their friends, who are bad, and benefit their enemies, who are good. And so we arrive at a conclusion opposite to what we said Simonides meant.

That certainly follows. But let's change our definition, for it seems that we didn't define friends and enemies correctly.

How did we define them, Polemarchus?

We said that a friend is someone who is believed to be useful.

And how are we to change that now?

Someone who is both believed to be useful and is useful is a friend; someone who is believed to be useful but isn't, is believed to be a friend but isn't. And the same for the enemy.

According to this account, then, a good person will be a friend and a bad one an enemy.

Yes.

So you want us to add something to what we said before about justice, when we said that it is just to treat friends well and enemies badly. You want us to add to this that it is just to treat well a friend who is good and to harm an enemy who is bad?

Right. That seems fine to me.

Is it, then, the role of a just man to harm anyone?

Certainly, he must harm those who are both bad and enemies.

Do horses become better or worse when they are harmed?

Worse.

With respect to the virtue that makes dogs good or the one that makes horses good?

The one that makes horses good.

And when dogs are harmed, they become worse in the virtue that makes dogs good, not horses?

Necessarily.

Then won't we say the same about human beings, too, that when they are harmed they become worse in human virtue?

Indeed.

But isn't justice human virtue?

Yes, certainly.

Then people who are harmed must become more unjust?

So it seems.

Can musicians make people unmusical through music?

They cannot.

Or horsemen make people unhorsemanlike through horsemanship?

No.

Well, then, can those who are just make people unjust through justice? In a word, can those who are good make people bad through virtue?

They cannot.

It isn't the function of heat to cool things but of its opposite?

Yes.

Nor the function of dryness to make things wet but of its opposite?

Indeed.

Nor the function of goodness to harm but of its opposite?

Apparently.

And a just person is good?

Indeed.

Then, Polemarchus, it isn't the function of a just person to harm a friend or anyone else, rather it is the function of his opposite, an unjust person?

In my view that's completely true, Socrates.

If anyone tells us, then, that it is just to give to each what he's owed and understands by this that a just man should harm his enemies and benefit his friends, he isn't wise to say it, since what he says isn't true, for it has become clear to us that it is never just to harm anyone?

I agree.

You and I shall fight as partners, then, against anyone who tells us that Simonides, Bias, Pittacus, or any of our other wise and blessedly happy men said this.

I, at any rate, am willing to be your partner in the battle.

Do you know to whom I think the saying belongs that it is just to benefit friends and harm enemies?

Who?

I think it belongs to Periander, or Perdiccas, or Xerxes, or Ismenias of Corinth, or some other wealthy man who believed himself to have great power.

That's absolutely true.

All right, since it has become apparent that justice and the just aren't what such people say they are, what else could they be?

While we were speaking, Thrasymachus had tried many times to take over the discussion but was restrained by those sitting near him, who wanted to hear our argument to the end. When we paused after what I'd just said, however, he couldn't keep quiet any longer. He coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring, and he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces.

Polemarchus and I were frightened and flustered as he roared into our midst: What nonsense have you two been talking, Socrates? Why do you act like idiots by giving way to one another? If you truly want to know what justice is, don't just ask questions and then refute the answers simply to satisfy your competitiveness or love of honor. You know very well that it is easier to ask questions than answer them. Give an answer yourself, and tell us what you say the just is. And don't tell me that it's the right, the beneficial, the profitable, the gainful, or the advantageous, but tell me clearly and exactly what you mean; for I won't accept such nonsense from you.

His words startled me, and, looking at him, I was afraid. And I think that if I hadn't seen him before he stared at me, I'd have been dumbstruck. But as it was, I happened to look at him just as our discussion began to exasperate him, so I was able to answer, and, trembling a little, I said: Don't be too hard on us, Thrasymachus, for if Polemarchus and I made an error in our investigation, you should know that we did so unwillingly. If we were searching for gold, we'd never willingly give way to each other, if by doing so we'd destroy our chance of finding it. So don't think that in searching for justice, a thing more valuable than even a large quantity of gold, we'd mindlessly give way to one another or be less than completely serious about finding it. You surely mustn't think that, but rather—as I do—that

we're incapable of finding it. Hence it's surely far more appropriate for us to be pitied by you clever people than to be given rough treatment.

When he heard that, he gave a loud, sarcastic laugh. By Heracles, he said, that's just Socrates' usual irony. I knew, and I said so to these people earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned *you*, you'd be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer.

That's because you're a clever fellow, Thrasymachus. You knew very well that if you ask someone how much twelve is, and, as you ask, you warn him by saying "Don't tell me, man, that twelve is twice six, or three times four, or six times two, or four times three, for I won't accept such nonsense," then you'll see clearly, I think, that no one could answer a question framed like that. And if he said to you: "What are you saying, Thrasymachus, am I not to give any of the answers you mention, not even if twelve happens to be one of those things? I'm amazed. Do you want me to say something other than the truth? Or do you mean something else?" What answer would you give him?

Well, so you think the two cases are alike?

Why shouldn't they be alike? But even if they aren't alike, yet seem so to the person you asked, do you think him any less likely to give the answer that seems right to him, whether we forbid him to or not?

Is that what you're going to do, give one of the forbidden answers?

I wouldn't be surprised—provided that it's the one that seems right to me after I've investigated the matter.

What if I show you a different answer about justice than all these—and a better one? What would you deserve then?

What else than the appropriate penalty for one who doesn't know, namely, to learn from the one who does know? Therefore, that's what I deserve.

You amuse me, but in addition to learning, you must pay a fine.

I will as soon as I have some money.

He has some already, said Glaucon. If it's a matter of money, speak, Thrasymachus, for we'll all contribute for Socrates.

I know, he said, so that Socrates can carry on as usual. He gives no answer himself, and then, when someone else does give one, he takes up the argument and refutes it.

How can someone give an answer, I said, when he doesn't know it and doesn't claim to know it, and when an eminent man forbids him to express the opinion he has? It's much more appropriate for you to

answer, since you say you know and can tell us. So do it as a favor to me, and don't begrudge your teaching to Glaucon and the others.

While I was saying this, Glaucon and the others begged him to speak. It was obvious that Thrasymachus thought he had a fine answer and that he wanted to earn their admiration by giving it, but he pretended that he wanted to indulge his love of victory by forcing me to answer. However, he agreed in the end, and then said: There you have Socrates' wisdom; he himself isn't willing to teach, but he goes around learning from others and isn't even grateful to them.

When you say that I learn from others you are right, Thrasymachus, but when you say that I'm not grateful, that isn't true. I show what gratitude I can, but since I have no money, I can give only praise. But just how enthusiastically I give it when someone seems to me to speak well, you'll know as soon as you've answered, for I think that you will speak well.

Listen, then. I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. Well, why don't you praise me? But then you'd do anything to avoid having to do that.

I must first understand you, for I don't yet know what you mean. The advantage of the stronger, you say, is just. What do you mean, Thrasymachus? Surely you don't mean something like this: Polydamus, the athlete, is stronger than we are; it is to his advantage to eat beef to build up his physical strength; therefore, this food is also advantageous and just for us who are weaker than he is?

You disgust me, Socrates. Your trick is to take hold of the argument at the point where you can do it the most harm.

Not at all, but tell us more clearly what you mean.

Don't you know that some cities are ruled by a tyranny, some by a democracy, and some by an aristocracy?

Of course.

And in each city this element is stronger, namely, the ruler?

Certainly.

And each makes laws to its own advantage. Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others. And they declare what they have made—what is to their own advantage—to be just for their subjects, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say justice is, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established rule. Since the established rule is surely stronger, anyone who reasons correctly will conclude that the just is the same everywhere, namely, the advantage of the stronger.