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PLATO GORGIAS





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WORKS BY ARISTOTLE PUBLISHED IN PENGUINS

ETHICS

Translated by J. A. K. Thomson

Revised with Notes and Appendices by Hugh Tredennick

Introduction and Bibliography by Jonathan Barnes

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) surveyed in his *Ethics* the ends to which conduct should be directed. The importance of this work to a modern reader lies in Aristotle's boldness in introducing psychology into his study of human behaviour. He extended the frontiers of philosophy to include universal science, by converting ethics from a theoretical to a practical science, based on a careful observation of life and a genuine understanding of human nature.

THE POLITICS

Translated by T. A. Sinclair

In the *Politics* Aristotle, one of the most influential philosophers of classical times, discusses which types of constitution are best and how they may be maintained. Like Plato, under whom he studied for twenty years, he considered that political philosophy should embrace the whole of human behaviour as well as the relationship of the individual to the state. Thus the problems he tackles are as relevant now as they were to the Greek city-states of his own day.

PROTAGORAS AND MENO

Translated by W. K. C. Guthrie

Plato held that philosophy must be a product of living contact between mind and mind, and his dialogues afforded him the means of reaching a wide audience. *Protagoras*, possibly his dramatic masterpiece, deals, like *Meno*, with the problem of teaching the art of successful living and good citizenship. While *Protagoras* keeps to the level of practical commonsense, *Meno* leads on into the heart of Plato's philosophy, the immortality of the soul and the doctrine that learning is knowledge acquired before birth.

THE LAST DAYS OF SOCRATES

Translated by Hugh Tredennick

In the four works which compose this volume – *Euthyphro*, *The Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* – Plato, his most devoted disciple, has preserved for us the essence of Socrates' teaching and the logical system of question and answer he perfected in order to define the nature of virtue and knowledge. The vindication of Socrates and the pathos of his death are admirably conveyed in Hugh Tredennick's modern translation.

THE LAWS

Translated by T. J. Saunders

The reader of *The Republic* may well be astonished by *The Laws*. Instead of an ideal state ruled directly by moral philosophers, this later work depicts a society permeated by the rule of law. Immutable laws control most aspects of public and private life, from civil and legal administration to marriage, religion and sport. The rigours of life in Plato's utopian Republic are not much tempered here, but *The Laws* is a much more practical approach to Plato's ideal.

THE REPUBLIC

Translated by Desmond Lee

The Republic, perhaps the best known of Plato's dialogues, is an attempt to apply the principles of his philosophy to political affairs. Ostensibly a discussion of the nature of Justice, it lays before us Plato's vision of the ideal state, covering a wide range of topics, social, educational, psychological, moral and philosophical. It also includes, in the process, some of Plato's most important writing on the nature of reality and the theory of 'forms'. Plato is critical of Athenian Democracy, which had been responsible for the execution of his friend and teacher, Socrates, and his political ideas, as expressed in *The Republic*, started lines of thought which are still relevant today.

TIMAEUS AND CRITIAS

Translated by Desmond Lee

The *Timaus*, in which Plato attempted a scientific explanation of the universe's origin, is the earliest Greek account of a divine creation: as such it has significantly influenced European thought, even down to the present day. Yet this dialogue and, even more, its unfinished sequel, the *Critias*, have latterly attracted equal attention as the sources of the Atlantis legend.

THE SYMPOSIUM

Translated by Walter Hamilton

The Symposium – a masterpiece of dramatic dialogue – is set at a dinner party to which are invited several of the literary celebrities of Athenian society. After dinner it is proposed that each member of the company should make a speech in praise of love. A full discussion follows and the dialogue ends with a brilliant character sketch of Socrates by Alcibiades.

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PLATO (c. 427-347 B.C.) stands with Socrates and Aristotle as one of the shapers of the whole intellectual tradition of the West. He came from a family that had long played a prominent part in Athenian politics, and it would have been natural for him to follow the same course. He declined to do so however, disgusted by the violence and corruption of Athenian political life, and sickened especially by the execution in 399 of his friend and teacher, Socrates. Inspired by Socrates' inquiries into the nature of ethical standards, Plato sought a cure for the ills of society not in politics but in philosophy, and arrived at his fundamental and lasting conviction that those ills would never cease until philosophers became rulers or rulers philosophers. At an uncertain date in the early fourth century B.C. he founded in Athens the Academy, the first permanent institution devoted to philosophical research and teaching, and the prototype of all western universities. He travelled extensively, notably in Sicily as political adviser to Dionysius II, ruler of Syracuse.

Plato wrote over twenty philosophical dialogues, and there are also extant under his name thirteen letters, whose genuineness is keenly disputed. His literary activity extended over perhaps half a century: few other writers have exploited so effectively the grace and precision, the flexibility and power, of Greek prose.

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GORGIAS

TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WALTER HAMILTON



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INTRODUCTION

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THE GORGIAS has as a sub-title in some manuscripts the words 'Concerning oratory'. Gorgias himself is a professor of oratory, and the dialogue opens with a discussion between him and Socrates on the nature of his art. It soon becomes clear, however, that the true concern of the *Gorgias* is with ethics, and its scope cannot be better indicated than by a quotation from Socrates' concluding words: 'All the other theories put forward in our long conversation have been refuted, and this conclusion alone stands firm, that one should avoid wrong-doing with more care than being wronged, and that the supreme object of a man's efforts, in public and private life, must be the reality rather than the appearance of goodness.' The dialogue is in fact a passionate defence by Socrates of the ideal for which he gave his life, that man's business on earth is to discover and do what is right, and if we ask what this ideal has to do with oratory the answer is that in Plato's view it stands in direct opposition to the ends which the oratorical training of his day was adapted to serve.

To us the ability to speak acceptably and convincingly in public is a relatively trivial factor in the ordinary citizen's equipment for a successful life; to the ambitious Athenian of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. it was essential. In the small but highly-developed democracy of which he was a member, participation by all the citizens in politics was taken for granted; the most important issues were settled by a debate of the whole citizen body; and the method of lot which governed the appointment of many officials might at any time place an individual in a position of great, if temporary, prominence. Moreover, in a community which was intensely litigious and in which representation by professional advocates was unknown, a man's property or even his life might depend on his power to sway a large court of his fellow-citizens, always more open to emotion

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than to logic. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the itinerant popular educators known as Sophists should have found among the young men of the Athenian upper classes an audience eager to pay high fees for lessons in oratory, and that those who professed to be able to impart its secrets claimed, like Gorgias, that the subject of their art was 'the greatest and best of human concerns'. On the other hand, the dangers of such an accomplishment in the hands of the ignorant or unscrupulous were sufficiently obvious then as now – the new-fangled art which can make the worse cause appear the better was scathingly satirized in 423 B.C. by Aristophanes in the *Clouds* – and Plato saw in it the breeding-ground of all that was false and corrupt in the life of his time. So it is that the discussion of the nature of rhetoric or oratory at the beginning of the *Gorgias* leads by a natural transition to a discussion of its immoral implications, and it is against the background sketched in this paragraph that the contrast between the true philosopher and the product of rhetorical training is to be studied, a contrast embodied in the persons of Socrates and Callicles.

II

The setting of the dialogue is of the simplest kind, and, if we except Chaerophon, whose part is negligible, the persons engaged in it number only four, Socrates himself, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. The scene is vague; Socrates encounters the others apparently in the open air at a moment when Gorgias, a distinguished visitor in Athens, has just given a public exhibition of his oratorical skill. Socrates expresses a wish to discuss with Gorgias the nature of his art, and is invited by Callicles, Gorgias' host, to come to his house for the purpose. Whether a change of scene is to be assumed at this point we are not told; without further preliminaries we are launched on the main business of the dialogue, the structure of which is as simple as its setting. There is little or no general conversation; Socrates converses with each of the other participants in turn, and the argument falls into three corresponding phases, marked by an increasingly earnest and vehement

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tone as the issues at stake become clearer and more fundamental. Gorgias, a native of Leontini in Sicily, who came to Athens in 427 B.C. with other delegates to ask for aid for his city against Syracuse, is a man of considerable age and international reputation as an orator and teacher of oratory, and, though there is something faintly absurd in the complacency of his earlier answers, he is treated by Socrates with genuine respect. He is indeed a thoroughly respectable man. Though he is known from other sources to have been completely sceptical in metaphysics, he does not carry this scepticism into the sphere of ethics. He claims that the accomplished orator will need no other specialized knowledge of any kind to get the better of expert opposition on any subject, but he shrinks from extending this claim to moral questions, and, though he has earlier asserted that a teacher of oratory has no responsibility for the use to which a pupil puts his teaching, he admits in the end that he would feel bound to give instruction in morals to a pupil who needed it, before putting into his hands the weapon of oratory. For all his reputation as an intellectual giant of the new age, Gorgias turns out to be a conventional person, and at this stage he is replaced in the conversation by his younger colleague and admirer, Polus, who proclaims his readiness to break with the orthodox morality to which his master still pays allegiance.

Polus, like Gorgias, is an historical character and a native of Sicily, of whom, however, we know little except that he was the author of a treatise on oratory, of which his sententious and mannered reply to Chaerophon on page 21 is presumably a sample, if it is not a parody. Whatever may have been his real character he is represented by Plato as living up to his name of Polus or 'Colt'; the impetuous self-confidence with which at the beginning of the dialogue he tries to take its whole burden on himself is matched only by his incompetence at the Socratic method of argument, and Socrates treats him with a humorous condescension which contrasts strongly with his attitude towards Gorgias. Polus' demand that Socrates should himself define the nature of oratory opens the way for the unsparing attack upon contemporary politicians which is one of the most noticeable features of the *Gorgias*. Oratory, we are

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told, has no more claim to be a genuine art than cookery; both aim at the immediate gratification of the consumer without any regard for his welfare or any attempt to proceed on rational principles, and there is nothing to be envied in the so-called power of the successful speaker, since its results are often as fatal to the real interests of its possessor as to those on whom it is exercised.

To this Polus' answer is simply to charge Socrates with hypocrisy. Whatever he may profess he would certainly change places with a dictator, however criminal, if he had the chance. Socrates replies that he would not, and proceeds to enunciate the ethical doctrine which is the core of the whole dialogue, that 'it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong'. Polus treats this at first as an absurd paradox, and it is unnecessary to summarize the arguments by which he is driven to admit its truth. What emerges is that in spite of his bold talk Polus is as much hampered by conventional scruples as Gorgias. He cannot bring himself to deny that doing wrong is an 'uglier' or 'baser' thing than suffering wrong, and this leads to his downfall. The second 'act' of the *Gorgias* closes with the triumphant establishment by Socrates not only of his main principle, but also of the corollary that not to be punished for his faults is the worst fate that can befall a wrong-doer.

The stage is now set for the entrance of Callicles, who has listened with growing impatience to the victory of what he regards as preposterous nonsense. His attitude is very much what we might expect in our own day from a convinced believer in power politics confronted by a proposal that the principles of the Sermon on the Mount should be universally adopted in their literal sense. For him conventional morality is simply a device invented by the weak as a defence against the strong, who are their natural superiors (the contrast of *nomos* and *physis*, law and nature, was one of the sophistic commonplaces of the age), and the only morality worthy of a man is the morality of 'might is right'.¹

1. The view that moral standards are purely conventional and that the strong man is entitled to violate them if he can do so with impunity has had a long and influential subsequent history. (It is, for example, in essence the view of Nietzsche and is used by Raskolnikov to justify his crime in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.)

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His ideal is the complete antithesis of that represented by Socrates, who recognizes at once that he has to deal with an opponent of very different calibre from Gorgias and Polus, and it is in the clash between these two ideals in their extremest form that the chief interest of the dialogue consists.

Nothing is otherwise known of Callicles, and it has generally been supposed that he is a fictitious personage, invented by Plato to embody the principles which he so strongly maintains. Against this it may be argued that the mention of his deme of Acharnae (p. 96) gives an impression of fact, and, more convincingly, that it is not Plato's habit to introduce imaginary characters as direct participants in a dialogue. The question must remain open; but, whether fictitious or not, Callicles, who is young, rich, and ambitious, represents a type of which Athenian history in the closing years of the fifth century furnished a number of instances. Several were to be found among the Thirty Tyrants, a ruthless oligarchy which seized power after Athens' final defeat in the Peloponnesian War, but the supreme example is perhaps Alcibiades. It is worth recalling that it was under his influence that Athens in 416 B.C. demanded the surrender of the small and unoffending island of Melos, and on its refusal killed its men and enslaved its other inhabitants. Thucydides has made the episode the occasion for a dialogue between Athenians and Melians, in which the former frankly assert that it is the law of nature that the stronger should rule over the weaker – 'the strong exact what they can and the weak submit' – and no better illustration could be found of the philosophy of Callicles in action, though modern history presents us with many on a larger scale.

It is important to recognize that the life for which Callicles invites Socrates to abandon philosophy is a life

I call it sophistic because the distinction between natural right and man-made law and custom is first found in several of the Sophists, who were predominantly sceptical of traditional standards. In the extreme form expounded by Callicles it occurs in a fragment of the Sophist Antiphon. For Sophists in general, cf. Plato's *Protagoras* and W. K. C. Guthrie's introduction to his Penguin translation of that dialogue.