

A GUIDE TO THE POLITICAL CLASSICS

Plato to Rousseau



edited by

MURRAY FORSYTH

and

MAURICE KEENS-SOPER

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Introduction

The Significance of the Classic Texts

THE EDITORS

THIS volume of essays is directed towards students of political philosophy who are approaching the great texts of the past for the first time. The intention is to help students to find their way into the texts and to get the most from them, and at the same time to encourage them to explore the texts further themselves. The essays are not summaries or substitutes but emphatically guides. Seven texts have been selected for examination, ranging in chronological order from Plato's *Republic* to Rousseau's *Social Contract*.

The essay form has been chosen primarily for practical reasons. In so many of the studies of the great political theorists of the past and their ideas, the chief texts, on which students ought to focus their attention, are absorbed into a general discussion encompassing the entire work of the thinker. The shape and unity of the text itself tends to become blurred. A difficulty of a different kind occurs when a particular text is subjected to so detailed an exegesis that the map becomes bigger—and sometimes more complicated and difficult to comprehend—than the original work.

In this volume we have tried to avoid both these extremes. The emphasis of the seven essays is firmly on the texts themselves: their setting, form, and content. At the same time, none of the authors has tried to say everything about the text, to push into every nook and cranny, to discuss every chapter, or to pretend that theirs is the ultimate word. Each essay is a selection and an interpretation geared to awaken the interest of the student to the potentialities of the work concerned and to helping him or her over what seem to be the biggest initial hurdles. We believe that in the end each student has to arrive at his own interpretation. There can be no escape from judgement.

Although the contributors have all sought to pitch their essays at roughly the same level, each has had to decide how best this was to be achieved bearing in mind the differences between the subjects they were considering. In respect of texts that range from

what appear to be lecture notes (Aristotle's *Politics*), to a work of truly cosmic discursiveness (St Augustine's *City of God*), and from there to the systematic exposition of a new science (Hobbes's *Leviathan*), the common wish to render them more accessible can imply no uniform method of treatment.

This leads on to questions of deeper significance. Given the very different make-up of the works under discussion, and the very different circumstances in which they were written, what is it that links them together? Why are they called 'classics'? Why should present-day students, who in little more than a decade will be citizens in a new century, read these old books?

Clearly the answer to these questions can in the last resort only be given by the texts themselves. Books do not become 'classics' because some remote academic jury decides they have passed certain tests, but because they succeed—as other books do not—in reaching out beyond their age and stimulating the minds of later generations. If they continue to do this, they continue to be 'classics', and if they become incomprehensible or merely of antiquarian interest, they lose this status. The texts included in this volume have manifestly succeeded in provoking later thinkers over a very long period of time, and are called 'classics' for this reason. But it is always possible that they might fade into obscurity, and it is indeed the first assumption of this book that they should not be allowed to do so, that they continue to be worth the closest attention, and that even in our own hectically evolving era their ideas and arguments remain important.

Is it possible then to be more precise about the qualities that have enabled them to stand out and endure? The starting-point of any considered response must be that, despite the vast differences between them, these books are addressing a fact that is conterminous with human existence, the fact of rule or government. It is a commonplace that forms of rule or government have varied vastly in time and space: tribal units, Asiatic despotism, the *polis*, the 'estates-state', the 'modern state', and so on. That these are all developments of rule or government, or different expressions of a certain kind of human activity, few would deny. Man in this sense is a political animal, and with the exception of anarchists and those who have disowned the world, it is not rule or government that strikes terror or anger in the hearts of men, but its absence, abuse, or faulty construction.

What one is to make of this fact—what it reveals about our natures as moral beings—is the first impulse of political philosophy. For the self-evident fact of rule or government is not self-explanatory. It is interpretation that gives meaning to even the most rudimentary facts of life. Without interpretation there is no significance. And being men, the demand for explanation and understanding is inseparable from the impulse to transform ourselves and our world. The demand for explanation is thus no isolated or self-contained insistence. It is wedded to the fact that we are not passive subjects destined to accept impersonal fate but authors as well as actors, beings who create as well as submit to the necessities of life. The human significance of rule and government includes the world as we find it and the world as we would shape it.

The peculiarity of political philosophy is the assumption that it is possible, and indeed in some sense necessary, to respond to the fact of rule or government by exercising our reason. Reason is more than curiosity, and once engaged it is as relentless in its search for 'right rule' and 'right order' as is our need for rule upon which it dwells. Yet if political philosophy is human self-interrogation through reason, prompted by the demand to establish the significance of rule or government in its widest setting and most thorough implications, this sounds like a very tall order. It is. And it is precisely at this juncture that we glimpse what is meant by 'classics' of political philosophy, and why they are an education. What distinguishes the finest, the enduring works is precisely that they succeed in bringing the fact of rule or government into reasoned connection with the nature and ends of men. They unify our experience. Far from obscuring the practicalities of rule by placing them in their widest context, the greatest works persuade us that it is only in the answers we give to questions as to the nature of man, his faculties, and his ends that these peculiar features of our existence cease to be alien.

This conception of political philosophy has been challenged on occasion by the claim that the great texts are intelligible only when interpreted by reference to their own times. They are said to be significant as historical rather than as philosophical works. What they illuminate is said to be not a universal predicament but a particular set of circumstances.

In so far as this argument reminds us that authors such as those treated in this volume inhabited worlds notably different from

our own, that they were often stirred to write by serious contemporary issues, and that they used terminology which may well have changed its meaning since their time, then there can be no quibble with it. It is one of the tasks of a guide like this, which is concerned with facilitating access to the thoughts of the classic writers, to try to indicate such contextual factors, and none of the contributors to it believes that the authors of the classic texts were disembodied minds using some immutable language of pure speculation.

If, however, it is argued that the purpose of studying the great texts of political philosophy is exclusively to show how they were influenced and moulded by the historical context in which they were written, and conversely to understand how they influenced the events of their own time, the error is profound. For in what does 'greatness' exist according to this perspective? If it is taken to mean 'the exercise of a great influence on contemporary events', then arguably we should be studying transient works that inflamed the multitude of the day rather than scholarly volumes like *Leviathan*. It is not the power to exercise an immediate impact on events that is remarkable about the works discussed in this volume but—to repeat it once more—the capacity to make us think long after historical circumstances have altogether changed. *Le divin Platon* inspired the young Rousseau two thousand years after the *Republic* was written. Why? Surely it was because from Plato's attempt to relate the perennial fact of rule to man's nature and end, Rousseau derived insights that aided his own efforts to bring them into accord.

The classics of political philosophy have thus achieved their status because they plumb most deeply the predicament of man's political existence, and it is because of this that they provide the best starting-point from which we, today, can derive our own answers to that unyielding predicament. They are not to be viewed as idols or icons, but rather as formidable whetstones for our powers of reasoning. Nor should the nature of the situation to which they are addressed be misjudged. To imagine that they contain prescriptions for current policy issues would be purest folly. It is with the larger issues of the nature and right ordering of the body politic that they are concerned.

It is not only the arguments of a particular text that can stir the minds of later generations. The dialogue between the authors of

the great texts themselves, the ideas that they received from one another, and the convergence and divergence of their arguments over central issues provide an added source of stimulus to those who come later—an added inheritance. In other words, while the reduction of the great texts to the status of historical events enmeshed in their own times must be eschewed, the development of political philosophy over time, or the history of political thought, is an immensely valuable field of study. This kind of history is, at its best, philosophical reasoning exercised in and through the words and thoughts of a succession of earlier thinkers.

Does the span of philosophical argument that is covered in this volume reveal any persistent themes? Needless to say, there are many. Consider, for example, Plato's basic assumption that the political order throws into high relief the various components of the human soul, or that men can see in the wider political order the reproduction of their own individual desires, and spirit, and reason. This vision of the state as a 'great person' recurs again and again in political philosophy—amongst the writers discussed in this volume, it can be seen in the theories of both Hobbes and Rousseau. Yet the differences that are expressed within this analogy or metaphor are as interesting as its continuity.

Another theme is that of the vicissitudes of what may be called the *polis*-idea, the idea of 'civil society' that was manifested in the ancient classical republics, and which was presented and examined with such thoroughness by Aristotle. Plato is already the critic of this idea; St Augustine downgrades or deprecates it; Machiavelli expresses much admiration for it, but Hobbes seems to have none at all; Locke points the way to a new kind of 'civil society', very different from the ancient classic conception, while Rousseau finally seeks in his own particular way to revive the spirit of the ancient *polis*, turning his back on the new order of things implicit in Hobbes and Locke.

Perhaps the most interesting and deepest theme, however, is the contrast that can be seen reproducing itself in different forms over the centuries between those who seek to harness or subordinate the political order to a higher world of absolute and eternal moral rectitude, and those who insist that the political order is concerned with the mundane and practical world of human co-existence, and hence consider that the wish to implement absolute

moral values may destroy such coexistence. This theme also helps to make plain the importance of the epistemological problem for political philosophy which will be evident in some of the chapters that follow. Is it possible for man to *know* absolute and transcendental moral truth, or is his knowledge necessarily limited and relative? The answer has profound political implications.

These are but some of the themes that are explored by the texts discussed in this volume. There has inevitably been a certain degree of arbitrariness in the selection of the texts for inclusion. It must not be concluded that the seven chosen represent a closed list of classic works for the period they cover, nor that we believe that the production of such classic works terminated abruptly on the eve of the French Revolution. The main aim has been to provide reasonably extensive treatment of certain works that students will be likely to encounter.

All the contributors to this volume have experience of teaching political philosophy, and all have connections with the Department of Politics at Leicester University. Christopher Hughes was formerly Professor in the Department, and has now retired. Bruce Haddock studied at Leicester and now teaches politics at the University College of Swansea. Andrew Lockyer also studied at Leicester and now teaches at the University of Glasgow. The remaining four contributors are currently members of the Department at Leicester.

I

Plato: *The Republic*

JOHN DAY

PHILOSOPHY began in classical Greece and reached its first splendid climax in the Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Plato made immense contributions to many branches of philosophy. His is one of the outstanding minds of Western civilization and he was probably the most influential philosopher of all times. His *Republic* (in Greek, *Politeia*—a less misleading translation would be 'regime') was the first great work of political philosophy. In it Plato elaborated arguments that were to affect profoundly subsequent discussions in Greece, Rome, medieval Christendom, and the modern world about man, society, government, and morality.

The Context of the *Republic*

Political philosophy for the Greeks meant understanding the *polis*, the unique type of community produced by classical Greece. In its most fully developed form the *polis* prevailed in the Greek world from around 550 BC until Philip of Macedon absorbed the *poleis* into his empire in 338. The *poleis* were significantly different from the monarchies and aristocracies from which they had evolved: rulers no longer treated subjects almost as property and people felt loyalty to the whole *polis* rather than merely to a clan or tribe. The *poleis* varied in size and practice, but in essence they were small, independent, and largely self-sufficient communities in which the citizens ruled themselves. The number of people who qualified as citizens varied considerably between different *poleis*, so that in some the poor participated in government, whereas in others they did not. The ideal of the *polis* was that all the citizens fulfilled themselves as individuals by carrying out their duty to the community.

Many people (of whom Plato was emphatically not one) have regarded the democracy of Athens, in which many people were citizens, as the highest point that the *polis* reached as a self-

determining community. Although the majority of those who lived in Athens, including women, slaves, and non-Athenian residents, were not eligible to be citizens and therefore took no part in governing the *polis*, the achievement of Athenian democracy (the rule of the people (*demos*)) remains impressive. Those citizens who chose to attend the Assembly helped to make decisions for the *polis*, so that the citizens as a body governed themselves as individuals.¹

The eligibility of all citizens to participate in the affairs of the *polis* meant that government was in the hands of people who did many different jobs. The Athenians regarded this as a positive advantage, because the citizens as a whole brought to the task of ruling vast experience of other activities in the *polis*. In the *Republic* Plato, who believed that governing required special knowledge, blamed the amateur principle of democratic government for what he regarded as its serious deficiencies.

Plato was both a product and a theorist of the *polis*. Critical of the imperfections of the Athenian *polis* in practice, he sought in the *Republic* to create a perfect *polis* in theory. His principal purpose was to explain what justice is by discussing how just men would behave in a just *polis*. At the same time he was proposing remedies for the moral, social, and political ills of contemporary Athens. Paradoxically, Plato's ideal *polis* diverged fundamentally from the idea that the citizens should rule themselves, which lay behind the historical practice of the *poleis*. Aristotle later reacted against Plato's vision of a perfect *polis* remote from empirical reality and insisted that understanding the *polis* must be rooted in detailed examination of the actual workings of different *poleis*.

In the *Republic* Plato, while fiercely critical of Athenian democracy, incorporates into his model of the perfect *polis* elements that reflect the ideals of Sparta, Athens' great rival, to whom she eventually lost the Peloponnesian War in 404. The two *poleis* were opposed during the fifth century not only as military and

¹ It was similar to the ideal society of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. There the general will, which identifies the good of the community as a whole, can emerge only in an assembly of the whole community of citizens and only when they talk face to face. However, while the citizens in Rousseau's theory make the laws, they leave the routine of governing to delegated officials. In the classical age of Athenian democracy the citizens made few laws, having inherited their basic laws from past lawmakers like Solon, but they did make day-to-day decisions on policies that were to govern the *polis*.

naval powers but also ideologically. Whereas Athens stood for individualism and an open society, Sparta's aristocratic rulers favoured conformity and a closed society.

During and after the Peloponnesian War the Athenian *polis* suffered some moral decay and an increase of factionalism. Athenian democracy and civilization lost some of their vigour and self-confidence, although their decline tended to be exaggerated by contemporary critics. Athens did suffer from increasing internal discord and from a declining sense of civic responsibility, but her democracy still functioned and her cultural and intellectual life still flourished. Plato himself was a proof of that.

Plato was born in 428/7, a few years after the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, and died in 348/7, nine years before the *poleis* were absorbed into the Macedonian Empire. He had direct knowledge of Athens only during her relative decline after the period of her greatest glory. As an aristocrat yearning for order and stability, he was one of those who exaggerated the excesses of Athenian democracy. He was also profoundly affected by the death of Socrates, the great philosopher and teacher. Socrates was condemned to death in 399 for allegedly corrupting the youth of Athens, although he was in fact a strong patriot who prescribed moral discipline. For Plato the death of Socrates was unambiguous confirmation of the moral degradation of the Athenian democracy. The *Republic* was partly a reaction to what Plato regarded as the irresponsible individualism of undisciplined democracy. Living in an unstable world of war, factionalism, and political unscrupulousness, Plato sought in the *Republic* a permanent universe of moral truths.

He believed that some of the moral decadence that he perceived in Athens was encouraged by the Sophists, who taught philosophy in contemporary Athens and challenged traditional beliefs. In the *Republic* Plato tried to refute their arguments, which, he thought, undermined morality and stability. The Sophists were teachers of practical morality, but Plato condemned them for superficiality and alleged that they taught people merely to be clever talkers. Although the Sophists placed men at the centre of their enquiries and applied reason to ethics and politics, Plato thought that they argued for the sake of argument, without respect for truth and morality. Where Plato sought certainty, the Sophists encouraged doubt. By arguing that morals were the

product of convention, not nature, the Sophists presented the case for moral relativism, which Plato hated.

The Opening Arguments of the *Republic*

The best way to study the *Republic*² is first to read it straight through without delaying over difficult passages, in order to gain an impression of the general shape, style, and content of Plato's argument; and then to reread it, examining in depth the most crucial parts of the argument. This commentary suggests that certain sections of the *Republic*, detailed references to which will appear below, are particularly important in the central enquiry into the nature of justice, although each reader is entitled to make his own judgement on this, especially as he becomes more familiar with the book. Plato, of course, intended the dialogue to form a continuous whole, but the modern reader nevertheless is likely to find some parts less worthy of close study than others if his primary purpose is to follow Plato's argument about what justice is. For example, the disquisitions on censorship of the arts and on the immortality of the soul, while not irrelevant to Plato's account of justice, are not vital to its definition.

The *Republic* is written in the form of a dialogue between Socrates,³ Plato's teacher, and a group of his Athenian friends. The purpose of the dialogue is to discover the nature of justice.⁴ In the first part of the book Socrates elicits from his friends some

² The edition specially recommended, because it is intended to be as literal a translation of the Greek text as possible, is: *The Republic of Plato*, translated, with notes and an interpretative essay, by A. Bloom (Basic Books, New York, 1968). A satisfactory alternative at a lower price is: *Plato, The Republic*, translated by A. D. Lindsay (Dent, London, 1984). See the bibliographical note for a fuller explanation of these recommendations. The quotations from the *Republic* in this chapter are from the Bloom edition. References are given in the text to pages in Bloom and to the section numbers common to most editions of the *Republic*. Where the section numbers in the text do not follow quotations, the page numbers in both Bloom and Lindsay are given in the footnotes.

³ Scholars have debated how far the historical Socrates resembled the Socrates of the dialogue. However, the arguments in the dialogue are interesting in their own right, irrespective of whether Plato reproduced Socrates' opinions accurately or not. All references here to Socrates will be to the figure in the dialogue, without any implication that what he says is what Socrates would actually have said.

⁴ Justice has remained a central concern of political philosophy since Plato. See, for example, Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, and, among our contemporaries, John Rawls, whose modern classic is called *A Theory of Justice*.

ideas on justice and demonstrates their inadequacies (327a–367a),⁵ before proceeding later in the book to remedy those inadequacies by elaborating his own conception of justice. The ideas on justice that are put forward by the other figures in the dialogue are common-sense ideas that were widely held at the time and which have commanded much support since. The dialogue tries to show how to move from the imperfections of common understanding to the correctness that results from philosophical argument. Philosophy starts, therefore, as the elucidation of what the non-philosopher already knows implicitly, incompletely, imprecisely, and inchoately, although, as the argument in the *Republic* progresses, Plato envisages philosophy going beyond and above mere clarification and correction of common usage.

The first idea of justice to be considered in the dialogue emerges incidentally during an explanation of the value of wealth by Cephalus, for whom justice seems to be honesty in money matters. Socrates moves towards giving this notion more precision by asking if justice is 'the truth and giving back what a man has taken from another' (331c, p. 7). Socrates does not fully explain what this definition means before going on to criticize it, but it is implicit in his criticism that the definition under consideration is telling the truth and repaying what we have borrowed because we have promised to. Throughout history keeping promises has been regarded as a central part of justice, and for Hobbes keeping promises, or more precisely, keeping covenants, was the entirety of justice. Socrates, however, argues that it is not always just to repay debts and to tell the truth. If you borrow a knife from a man, you should not give it back to him if he has gone mad, presumably because he might attack you or other people with it. Similarly you should not tell such a madman the whole truth. If he asks you where you have hidden his knife, which you have refused to return to him, you should not tell him.

The basic argument that Socrates is advancing seems to be that there is no obligation to tell the truth and keep promises if very unpleasant consequences would follow. It is an argument that appeals to those for whom a good act is one that increases pleasure and decreases pain, but is unacceptable to those for whom the obligation not to tell lies and to keep promises is absolute. We can

⁵ Bloom, pp. 1–44; Lindsay, pp. 1–46.

adapt an illustration that Kant uses⁶ in order to demonstrate the weakness of Socrates' position. A man promises to execute the will of his friend, but nothing is written down, so that only the author and the executor of the will know its contents. When his friend dies, the executor discovers that those to whom his friend wished to leave his money are extremely rich and thoroughly evil, while he himself and his family are destitute and highly virtuous. The executor would receive more pleasure from the money than the intended heirs, who have more money than they know what to do with, and, in addition, the executor deserves some reward for his moral superiority. Yet a child of eight, according to Kant, would not think that the executor has any moral grounds for breaking his promise. Socrates by contrast seems in his first major intervention in the *Republic* to be undermining the sanctity of promises, which is ironic in view of his general stance in the dialogue (and in life) of defending pure virtue against short-term, hedonistic self-interest.

It is possible that Socrates is implying not that one should refuse to return a knife to a madman because unpleasant consequences would follow, but rather because the madman is 'out of his mind' and therefore not the same person to whom one made the promise. However, Socrates would not then be showing, as he intends, that it can be just to break a promise. For, in not returning the knife, one has not broken a promise: the promise was to return the knife to, let us say, Smith, but at present Smith does not exist and one cannot return the knife to him, since his body is now possessed by non-Smith, the madman, the non-person. The promise cannot be kept, but is not being broken.

The dialogue moves on to another formulation of justice when Polemarchus, defending the view of justice as keeping promises and telling the truth, suggests that this is part of a broader conception of justice, giving to each what is owed. This general, although imprecise, notion of justice would have commanded widespread acceptance in Plato's time and does so now. Yet Socrates is not happy with it. To show its imperfection he first persuades Polemarchus to translate the notion of what is owing or fitting into 'doing good to friends and harm to enemies' (332d, p. 8), which sounds more like partiality than justice. A further stage

⁶ In *On the Common Saying: 'This May be True in Theory, but it does not Apply in Practice'* (in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 70-1).