

LECTURES

ON THE

REPUBLIC OF PLATO

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NOTE

A LARGE part of the subject-matter of the lectures which form the contents of the present volume was also treated by Nettleship in his essay in *Hellenica*, entitled 'The Theory of Education in the *Republic* of Plato,' and again in an essay on 'Plato's Conception of Goodness and the Good,' which will be found in vol. i. of these *Lectures and Remains*. Students of the *Republic* who make use of this volume may be recommended also to read the two essays above mentioned.

In reproducing Nettleship's lectures on the *Republic*, I have followed in the main the very full notes taken by several pupils in the year 1887 and the beginning of 1888. I have, however, made much use of my own and other notes of the lectures as given in 1885, adopting from them, besides single sentences and phrases, many

whole passages in which some subject happened to have been more fully treated than in the later year. In every case where there was a substantial discrepancy between the lectures given in the two years I have followed the later version.

In the actual lectures Nettleship used Greek terms and English equivalents for them almost indifferently. As the lectures may be read by some who do not read the original Greek, I have throughout adopted English words, except where no English equivalent for the Greek seems possible, or where the meaning of the Greek word is itself the subject referred to.

While remaining solely responsible in every point for the form in which these lectures finally appear, I have to thank Mr. Bradley, the editor of the preceding volume, for most valuable advice and assistance which I have received from him at several stages in my task.

GODFREY R. BENSON.

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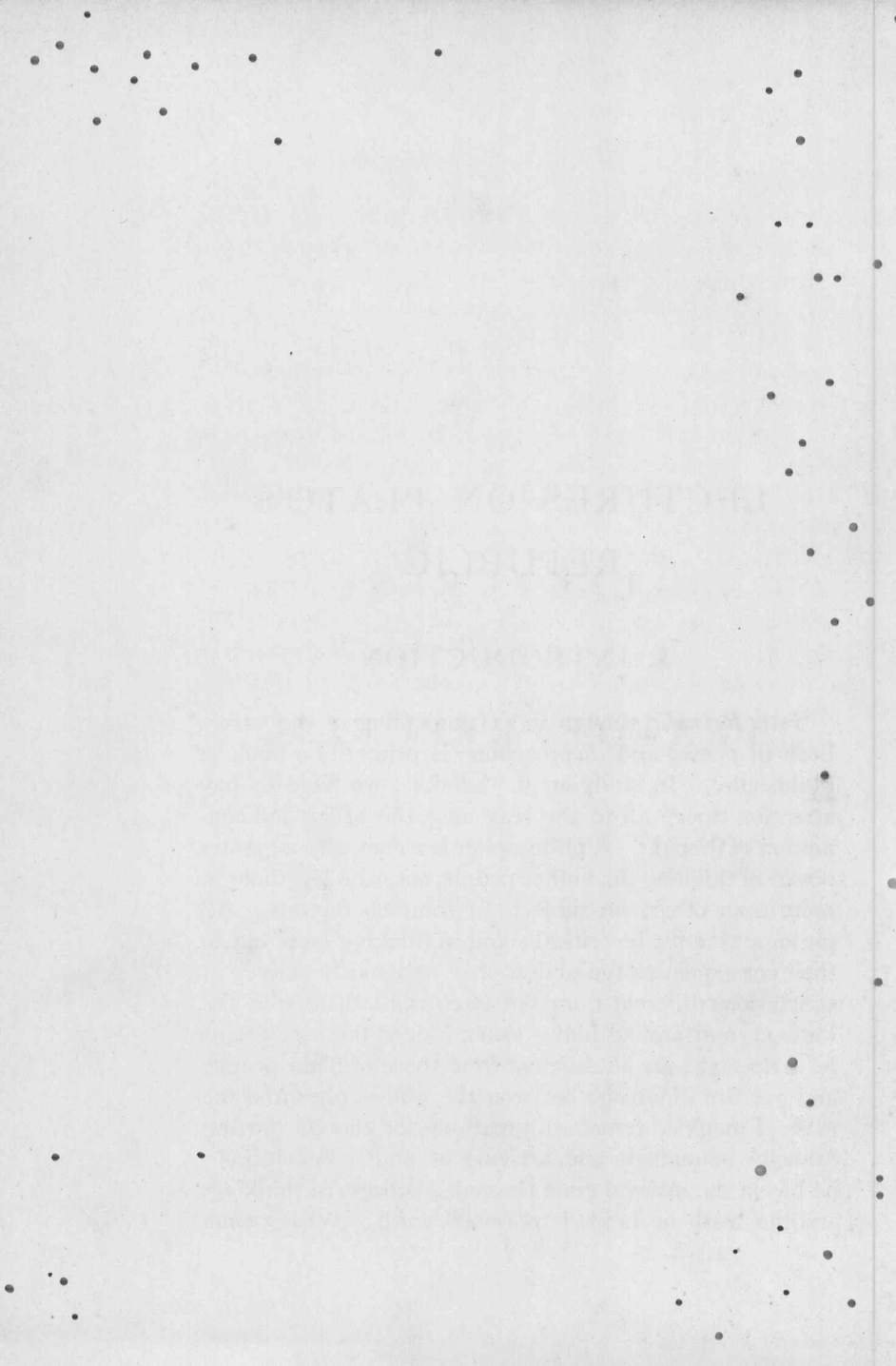
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LECTURES
ON
PLATO'S 'REPUBLIC'

N. P.

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LECTURES ON PLATO'S 'REPUBLIC'

I. INTRODUCTION

THE *Republic*, though it has something of the nature both of poetry and of preaching, is primarily a book of philosophy. In studying it, therefore, we have to pay attention above all to the reasoning, the order and connexion of thought. A philosopher is a man with a greater power of thinking than other people, one who has thought more than others on subjects of common interest. All philosophy must be critical; and in thinking facts out to their consequences the philosopher necessarily arrives at conclusions different from and often contradictory to the ideas current around him. Often indeed the conclusions he arrives at *seem* no different from those of plain people, and yet the difference between the philosopher and the mass of mankind remains a great one, for, though starting from the same facts and arriving at similar conclusions, he has in the interval gone through a process of thinking, and the truth he holds is reasoned truth. What seems

at first sight the same truth, and may be put in the same words that anybody else would use, is yet a very different truth to the philosopher, containing a great deal that is not present to the minds of most men. In either case, whether the results, at which the philosopher arrives, are what we believe or what we do not believe, the first thing we have to do is to follow his *enquiries*. We should see how he arrives at his conclusions before we begin to criticize them.

To study the *Republic* in this way is difficult. Plato's ideas are often expressed in a manner very different from any that we are accustomed to. This is, in part, a difficulty common to all reading in philosophy. In arriving at ideas unlike those of most people philosophy does not differ at all from the special sciences; but while the elementary conceptions of the sciences are approximately fixed, and the meaning of the terms used can be seen at once or quickly learnt, it is otherwise with philosophy; for the subject-matter of philosophy is of a comparatively general character, being chiefly the main facts about human knowledge and human morality, and in such subjects there can be no absolutely fixed terminology. Sometimes also, in Plato and other Greek philosophers, the significance of what is said escapes us just because it is expressed in a very simple way. The *Republic*, moreover, has special difficulties arising from the peculiarities of its form and method;—every great book has characteristics of its own, which have to be studied like the characteristics of a person.

What, in the first place, is the subject of the book? Its name might suggest that it was a book of political philosophy, but we very soon find that it is rather a book of moral philosophy. (It starts from the question, 'What is justice (*δικαιοσύνη*)?' that being the most comprehensive

of the Greek names for virtues, and in its widest sense, as Aristotle tells us, equivalent to 'the whole of virtue as shown in our dealings with others¹.) It is a book about human life and the human soul or human nature, and the real question in it is, as Plato says, how to live best². What then is implied in calling it the *Republic* (πολιτεία)? To Plato one of the leading facts about human life is that it can only be lived well in some form of organized community, of which the Greeks considered the civic community to be the best form. Therefore the question, What is the best life? is to him inseparable from the question, What is the best order or organization of human society? The subject of the *Republic* is thus a very wide one; and a modern critic, finding such a variety of matter in it, is inclined to think that Plato has confused quite distinct questions. This is not so; he gives us in the *Republic* an ideal picture of the rise and fall of the human soul, its rise to its highest stage of development and its fall to its lowest depth; and in doing so he has tried to take account of everything in the human soul, of its whole nature. Modern associations lead us to expect that the book should be either distinctly ethical or distinctly political, that it should either consider man in his relations as a citizen or consider him simply as a moral agent. Because the Greek philosophers did not separate these two questions it is frequently said that they confused them; whereas it would be truer to say that they looked at human life more simply and more completely than we are apt to do. But of course there are questions which we have to differentiate as ethical or political, and which the Greeks did not thus differentiate. The reason is that their actual life was

¹ *Eth. Nic.* V. i. 15 and 20.

² 344 E.

less differentiated than ours; that law, custom, and religion were not in practice the distinct things that they are now.

Along with the main subject there are many incidental and subordinate subjects in the *Republic*; there is a great deal of criticism of existing institutions, practices, and opinions. The book may be regarded not only as a philosophical work, but as a treatise on social and political reform. It is written in the spirit of a man not merely reflecting on human life, but intensely anxious to reform and revolutionize it. This fact, while giving a peculiar interest to Plato's writing, prejudices the calmness and impartiality of his philosophy. He is always writing with crying evils in his eye—a characteristic in which he differs widely from Aristotle.

We must next consider the form of the book. It was not peculiar to Plato to throw his speculations into the form of dialogues. Several of the pupils of Socrates wrote dialogues, and the fashion lasted to the time of Aristotle. The fact that this form came naturally to a Greek philosopher is part of a more general literary phenomenon. Greek literature is certainly less personal than modern literature (the Greek drama, for instance, is less subjective than ours), but on the other hand Greek literature is more concrete. Thucydides' history differs from modern books of history both in the absence of personal detail and in the absence of general reflexions. The place of general reflexions is taken in Thucydides by fictitious speeches put into the mouths of actual persons; and in this we see that the distinction now observed in literature between the exposition of ideas and principles and the representation of persons and character had not then become prominent. So Plato takes a number

of actual personages, some contemporary, some belonging to the last generation, some of them public men, others friends of his own, and makes them the exponents of the philosophical opinions and ideas that he wishes to set before us. These persons are not used as mere lay figures; they are chosen because they actually had in them something of what the dialogues attribute to them, and they are often represented with dramatic propriety and vivacity. Nevertheless they are handled without the slightest scruple as to historical truth;—(the sense of historical truth is a feature of modern times, its absence a feature of ancient, and we see this in Plato, just as we see it in Aristophanes). So the personages of the dialogue are on the one hand simply ideal expressions of certain principles; on the other hand they carry with them much of their real character. The Platonic dialogue is a form of writing which would be impossible now. We require a writer to keep the exposition of principles distinct from the representation of persons, and to treat characters primarily with an historical interest if they are actual people, primarily with a dramatic interest if they are fictitious. As a rule, when the form of dialogue has been used by modern philosophers, as it was by Berkeley, the personages are not characters at all; the dialogue of Bunyan is the best analogy in English literature to that of Plato. In Plato the dramatic element is present in different degrees in different dialogues. The *Protagoras* is the most finished philosophical drama, and in the *Euthydemus* we have a philosophical burlesque. In the later dialogues the dramatic element is smaller, but all of them are real dialogues, except the *Laws*, in which the conversation is very slight, and the *Timæus*, in which even the form of conversation is dropped for that of exposition. In the

Republic itself the dramatic element diminishes as the book proceeds, but is occasionally resuscitated.

While however Plato's adoption of this form is in agreement with other tendencies in Greek literature generally, there is also a special reason to be found for it in the history of philosophy; the dialogue form has a serious import. Philosophic dialogue had its origin in Socrates himself, with whom Greek philosophy, as distinct from the investigation of nature, practically begins. He passed his life in talking. It was the impulse given by his life that produced Plato's dialogues. Socrates is unique among philosophers because he lived his philosophy; he put out what he had to put out, not in books, but in his life, and he developed his ideas by constant contact with other men. That he was able to do this was his great power; he was a man who, wherever he was and whomsoever he met, showed himself master of the situation. In his case, then, it was apparent that philosophy is a living thing developed by the contact of living minds. We are apt to think of it as something very impersonal and abstract, but, emphatically, all philosophy deals with something in human nature, and differences in philosophy are differences at the bottom of human nature. When, however, philosophy is concentrated and embodied in a book, it speaks a language not understood by most people, and the author, when once he has published his book, cannot help it if his readers misunderstand what he says, for he is not in immediate contact with them. Plato stands between Socrates and a modern writer on philosophy. He has endeavoured to preserve the living philosophy in the written words; he takes types of human nature more or less familiar to his readers, and he makes them develop his ideas by the natural process

of question and answer. The literary function of the Platonic dialogue is in modern literature distributed between different kinds of books, chiefly between books of philosophy, and novels, in which ideas grow, embodied in the lives of the characters.

Further, the form of question and answer seems to Plato the natural form for the search after truth to take. He constantly opposes this to the mode, which the sophists adopted, of haranguing or preaching—producing effect by piling up words¹. Why does he thus insist on question and answer? Because the discovery of truth must be a gradual process, and at every step we should make ourselves realize exactly at what point we have arrived. In Plato this is effected by the dialogue form, each step being made with the agreement of two or more persons. Now, though philosophy need not proceed by discussion between two people, its method must always be in principle the same; a person who really thinks elicits ideas from himself by questioning himself, and tests those ideas by questioning; he does, in fact, the same sort of thing with himself that Socrates did with other people. In dialogue two or more minds are represented as combining in the search for truth, and the truth is elicited by the contact of view with view; in this respect it is replaced in a modern philosophy book by a criticism which endeavours to elicit the truth from opposing views.

In addition to Plato's use of dialogue we have to reckon with his habit of stating ideas in a picturesque manner. Thus in Book II of the *Republic*, when he is analyzing principles which are at work in existing society,

¹ See, for example, *Rep.* I. 348 A and B, and 350 D and E, and for a favourable representation of the manner of the sophists see the *Protagoras*.

he exhibits them in what appears to be an historical sketch. He describes first a state organized solely for the production of the necessities of life, and afterwards makes it grow into a luxurious state; but he knows all the time that the features he ascribes to each are simply taken from the Athens of his own day. This is more noticeable still in Books VIII and IX, where he wishes to exhibit various developments of evil in a logical order of progress, and to do so takes five characters and five states in succession, describing them as historically growing one out of the other. The result of this tendency is to make his writing more vivid, but it is misleading and gives unnecessary occasions for retort. The order in which Plato's thoughts follow upon one another in the *Republic* is logical, but the dramatic or the picturesque medium through which he is constantly presenting his ideas disguises the logical structure of the work.

The logical method of the *Republic* is in accordance with the form of conversational discussion. Plato does not start by collecting all the facts he can, trying afterwards to infer a principle from them; the book is full of facts, but they are all arranged to illustrate principles which he has in mind from the beginning. Nor does he set out by stating a principle and then asking what consequences follow from it. Starting with a certain conception of what man is, he builds up a picture of what human life might be, and in this he is guided throughout by principles which he does not enunciate till he has gone on some way¹. He begins the con-

¹ We may say that the ultimate principle of the *Republic* is that the universe is the manifestation of a single pervading law, and that human life is good so far as it obeys that law; but of this principle Plato does not speak till the end of Book VI.

struction of his picture with admitted facts about human life, and he gradually adds further elements in human life; he at once appeals to and criticizes popular ideas, as he goes on, extracting the truth and rejecting the falsehood in them. Thus neither 'induction' nor 'deduction' is a term that applies to his method; it is a 'genetic' or 'constructive' method; the formation of his principle and the application of it are going on side by side.

Before beginning to follow the argument in detail, we must notice the main divisions into which it falls. They are the following:—

1. Books I and II, to 367 E. This forms an introduction; in it several representative views about human life are examined, and the problem to which the *Republic* offers a solution is put before us. That problem arises in the following manner: we believe that there are moral principles to be observed in life; but this belief is in apparent contradiction to the fact, which meets the eye, that what we should commonly call success in life does not depend upon morality. The sense of this contradiction leads to the demand, with which the Introduction culminates: 'Show us what morality really is, by explaining (without any regard to its external and accidental results) how it operates in the soul of him who possesses it. What does morality mean in a man's innermost life?' This question indicates the central idea of the *Republic*.

2. From Book II, 367 E, to the end of Book IV. In this section Plato describes in outline what, as he conceives, would be the best form of human society; 'justice' is to be traced first in the institutions of this society. These are based, as he considers, upon the requirements of human nature. The society is a community in the life of which every element in human

nature has its proper scope given to it ; and in this its justice consists. The external organization, of which this section treats, is only of importance because the inner life of man finds its expression in it. Beginning therefore with the organization of life in the state, and discovering in every part of it a principle upon which the welfare of the community depends, Plato endeavours to trace this principle to its roots in the constitution of human nature, showing how whatever is good or evil, in the external order of society depends upon the inner nature of the soul.

3. Books V to VII. Beginning with a further discussion of some points in the institutions of the ideal society, Plato, in the main part of this section, starts from the question by what means this ideal could be realized. The answer is that human life would be as perfect as it is capable of being, if it were governed throughout by knowledge ; while the cause of all present evils is that men are blinded, by their own passions and prejudices, to the laws of their own life. Plato expresses this by saying that, if the ideal is to be reached and if present evils are to be brought to an end, philosophy must rule the state ;—(by philosophy he means the best knowledge and the fullest understanding of the most important subjects). In these Books he is occupied on the one hand with the evils that result from the waste and perversion of what he feels to be the most precious thing in human nature, the capacity for attaining truth, and on the other hand with the means by which this capacity might be so trained and so turned to account as to bring the greatest benefit to mankind.

4. Books VIII and IX. As the earlier Books put before us a picture of what human life might be at its

best, so these put before us an ideal picture of human evil, tracing the fall of society and of human nature to the lowest depths they can reach. Plato here tests and develops further his idea of the principle upon which human good depends, by undertaking to show that all existing evil is due to the neglect of that principle.

5. Book X. This is the most detached part of the *Republic*, and consists of two disconnected sections. The first half of it treats over again the subject of art, and especially of poetry, which has already been considered in Book III. The last half continues the consideration of the main subject, the capabilities and destinies of the human soul, by following the soul into the life after death.