

# Philosophy and Politics

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Bertrand Russell

# PHILOSOPHY AND



BERTRAND RUSSELL F.R.S.

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## Paperback Reissue

Originally published in 1947, this book presents the content of the fourth annual lecture of the National Book League, which was delivered by Bertrand Russell in October 1946. In his lecture Russell provides a discussion of the relationship between philosophies and the development of political systems, in addition to the political qualities of philosophical thinking. This book will be of value to anyone with an interest in political philosophy and the works of Russell.

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PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS

NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE FOURTH ANNUAL LECTURE



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# PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS



THE British are distinguished among the nations of modern Europe, on the one hand by the excellence of their philosophers, and on the other hand by their contempt for philosophy. In both respects they show their wisdom. But contempt for philosophy, if developed to the point at which it becomes systematic, is itself a philosophy; it is the philosophy which, in America, is called "instrumentalism". I suggest that philosophy, if it is bad philosophy, may be dangerous, and therefore deserves that degree of negative respect which we accord to lightning and tigers. What positive respect may be due to "good" philosophy I will leave for the moment an open question.

The connection of philosophy with politics, which is the subject of my lecture, has been less evident in Britain than in Continental countries. Empiricism, broadly speaking, is connected with liberalism, but Hume was a Tory; what philosophers call "idealism" has, in general, a similar connection with conservatism, but T. H. Green was a Liberal. On the Continent distinctions have been more clear cut, and there has been a greater readiness to accept or reject a block of doctrines as a whole, without critical scrutiny of each separate part.

In most civilised countries at most times, philosophy has been a matter in which the authorities had an official opinion, and except where liberal democracy prevails this is still the case. The Catholic Church is committed to the philosophy of Aquinas, the Soviet Government to that of Marx. The Nazis upheld German idealism, though the degree of allegiance to be given to Kant, Fichte or Hegel

respectively was not clearly laid down. Catholics, Communists, and Nazis all consider that their views on practical politics are bound up with their views on theoretical philosophy. Democratic liberalism, in its early successes, was connected with the empirical philosophy developed by Locke. I want to consider this relation of philosophies to political systems as it has in fact existed, and to inquire how far it is a valid logical relation, and how far, even if not logical, it has a kind of psychological inevitability. In so far as either kind of relation exists, a man's philosophy may have an intimate connection with the happiness or misery of large sections of mankind.

The word "philosophy" is one of which the meaning is by no means fixed. Like the word "religion", it has one sense when used to describe certain features of historical cultures, and another when used to denote a study or an attitude of mind which is considered desirable in the present day. Philosophy, as pursued in the universities of the Western democratic world, is, at least in intention, part of the pursuit of knowledge, aiming at the same kind of detachment as is sought in science, and not required, by the authorities, to arrive at conclusions convenient to the government. Many teachers of philosophy would repudiate, not only the intention to influence their pupils' politics, but also the view that philosophy should inculcate virtue. This, they would say, has as little to do with the philosopher as with the physicist or the chemist. Knowledge, they would say, should be the sole purpose of university teaching; virtue should be left to parents, schoolmasters, and churches.

But this view of philosophy, with which I have much sympathy, is very modern, and even in the modern world exceptional. There is a quite different view, which has prevailed since antiquity, and to which philosophy has owed its social and political importance.

Philosophy, in this historically usual sense, has resulted from the attempt to produce a synthesis of science and religion, or, perhaps more exactly, to combine a doctrine as to the nature of the universe and man's place in it with a practical ethic inculcating what was considered the best way of life. Philosophy was distinguished from religion by the fact that, nominally at least, it did not appeal to authority or tradition; it was distinguished from science by the fact that an essential part of its purpose was to tell men how to live. Its cosmological and ethical theories were closely interconnected: sometimes ethical motives influenced the philosopher's views as to the nature of the universe, sometimes his views as to the universe led him to ethical conclusions. And with most philosophers ethical opinions involved political consequences: some valued democracy, others oligarchy; some praised liberty, others discipline. Almost all types of philosophy were invented by the Greeks, and the controversies of our own day were already vigorous among the pre-Socratics.

The fundamental problem of ethics and politics is that of finding some way of reconciling the needs of social life with the urgency of individual desires. This has been achieved, in so far as it has been achieved, by means of various devices. Where a government exists, the criminal law can be used to prevent anti-social action on the part of those who do not belong to the government, and law can be reinforced by religion wherever religion teaches that disobedience is impiety. Where there is a priesthood sufficiently influential to enforce its moral code on lay rulers, even the rulers become to some extent subject to law; of this there are abundant instances in the Old Testament and in medieval history. Kings who genuinely believe in the Divine government of the world, and in a system of rewards and punishments in the next life, feel themselves not omnipotent, and not able to sin with

impunity. This feeling is expressed by the King in *Hamlet*, when he contrasts the inflexibility of Divine justice with the subservience of earthly judges to the royal power.

Philosophers, when they have tackled the problem of preserving social coherence, have sought solutions less obviously dependent upon dogma than those offered by official religions. Most philosophy has been a reaction against scepticism; it has arisen in ages when authority no longer sufficed to produce the socially necessary minimum of belief, so that nominally rational arguments had to be invented to secure the same result. This motive has led to a deep insincerity infecting most philosophy, both ancient and modern. There has been a fear, often unconscious, that clear thinking would lead to anarchy, and this fear has led philosophers to hide in mists of fallacy and obscurity.

There have, of course, been exceptions; the most notable are Protagoras in antiquity, and Hume in modern times. Both, as a result of scepticism, were politically conservative. Protagoras did not know whether the gods exist, but he held that in any case they ought to be worshipped. Philosophy, according to him, had nothing edifying to teach, and for the survival of morals we must rely upon the thoughtlessness of the majority and their willingness to believe what they had been taught. Nothing, therefore, must be done to weaken the popular force of tradition.

The same sort of thing, up to a point, may be said about Hume. After setting forth his sceptical conclusions, which, he admits, are not such as men can live by, he passed on to a piece of practical advice which, if followed, would prevent anybody from reading him. "Carelessness and inattention", he says, "alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them". He does not, in this connection, set forth his reasons for being a Tory, but it is obvious that "carelessness and inattention", while they may lead to acquiescence in the *status quo*, can-

not, unaided, lead a man to advocate this or that scheme of reform.

Hobbes, though less sceptical than Hume, was equally persuaded that government is not of divine origin, and was equally led, by the road of disbelief, to advocacy of extreme conservatism.

Protagoras was "answered" by Plato, and Hume by Kant and Hegel. In each case the philosophical world heaved a sigh of relief, and refrained from examining too nicely the intellectual validity of the "answer", which in each case had political as well as theoretical consequences—though in the case of the "answer" to Hume, it was not the Liberal Kant but the reactionary Hegel who developed the *political* consequences.

But thorough-going sceptics, such as Protagoras and Hume, have never been influential, and have served chiefly as bugbears to be used by reactionaries in frightening people into irrational dogmatism. The really powerful adversaries against whom Plato and Hegel had to contend were not sceptics, but empiricists, Democritus in the one case and Locke in the other. In each, empiricism was associated with democracy and with a more or less utilitarian ethic. In each case, the new philosophy succeeded in presenting itself as nobler and more profound than the philosophy of pedestrian common sense which it superseded. In each case, in the name of all that was most sublime, the new philosophy made itself the champion of injustice, cruelty, and opposition to progress. In the case of Hegel this has come to be more or less recognised; in the case of Plato it is still something of a paradox, though it has been brilliantly advocated in a recent book by Dr. K. R. Popper.\*

Plato, according to Diogenes Laertius, expressed the

\* *The Open Society and its Enemies*. The same thesis is maintained in my *History of Western Philosophy*.

view that all the books of Democritus ought to be burnt. His wish was so far fulfilled that none of the writings of Democritus survive. Plato, in his *Dialogues*, never mentioned him. Aristotle gave some account of his doctrines; Epicurus vulgarised him; and finally Lucretius put the doctrine of Epicurus into verse. Lucretius just survived, by a happy accident. To reconstruct Democritus from the controversy of Aristotle and the poetry of Lucretius is not easy; it is almost as if we had to reconstruct Plato from Locke's refutation of innate ideas and Vaughan's "I saw eternity the other night". Nevertheless enough can be done to explain and condemn Plato's hatred.

Democritus is chiefly famous as (along with Leucippus) the founder of atomism, which he advocated in spite of the objections of metaphysicians—objections which were repeated by their successors down to and including Descartes and Leibniz. His atomism, however, was only part of his general philosophy. He was a materialist, a determinist, a free thinker, a utilitarian who disliked all strong passions, a believer in evolution, both astronomical and biological.

Like the men of similar opinions in the eighteenth century, Democritus was an ardent democrat. "Poverty in a democracy", he says, "is as much to be preferred to what is called prosperity under despots as freedom is to slavery". He was a contemporary of Socrates and Protagoras, and a fellow townsman of the latter; he flourished during the early years of the Peloponnesian war, but may have died before it ended. That war concentrated the struggle that was taking place throughout the Hellenic world between democracy and oligarchy. Sparta stood for oligarchy; so did Plato's family and friends, who were thus led to become Quislings. Their treachery is held to have contributed to the defeat of Athens. After that defeat, Plato set to work to sing the praises of the victors by

constructing a Utopia of which the main features were suggested by the constitution of Sparta. Such, however, was his artistic skill that Liberals never noticed his reactionary tendencies until his disciples Lenin and Hitler had supplied them with a practical exegesis.\*

That Plato's *Republic* should have been admired, on its political side, by decent people, is perhaps the most astonishing example of literary snobbery in all history. Let us consider a few points in this totalitarian tract. The main purpose of education, to which everything else is subordinated, is to produce courage in battle. To this end, there is to be a rigid censorship of the stories told by mothers and nurses to young children; there is to be no reading of Homer because that degraded versifier makes heroes lament and gods laugh; the drama is to be forbidden because it contains villains and women; music is to be only of certain kinds, which, in modern terms, would be "Rule Britannia" and "The British Grenadiers". The government is to be in the hands of a small oligarchy, who are to practise trickery and lying—trickery in manipulating the drawing of lots for eugenic purposes, and elaborate lying to persuade the population that there are biological differences between the upper and lower classes. Finally, there is to be large-scale infanticide when children are born otherwise than as a result of governmental swindling.

Whether people are happy in this community does not matter, we are told, for excellence resides in the whole, not in the parts. Plato's City is a copy of the eternal City laid up in heaven; perhaps in heaven we shall enjoy the kind of existence it offers us, but if we do not enjoy it here on earth, so much the worse for us.

This system derives its persuasive force from the mar-

\* In 1920 I compared the Soviet State to Plato's *Republic*, to the equal indignation of Communists and Platonists.



riage of aristocratic prejudice and "divine philosophy"; without the latter, its repulsiveness would be obvious. The fine talk about the good and the unchanging makes it possible to lull the reader into acquiescence in the doctrine that the good shall rule, and that their purpose should be to preserve the *status quo*, as the ideal State in heaven does. To every man of strong political convictions—and the Greeks had amazingly vehement political passions—it is obvious that "the good" are those of his own party, and that, if they could establish the Constitution they desire, no further change would be necessary. So Plato taught, but by concealing his thought in metaphysical mists he gave it an impersonal and disinterested appearance which deceived the world for ages.

The ideal of static perfection, which Plato derived from Parmenides and embodied in his theory of ideas, is one which is now generally recognised as inapplicable to human affairs. Man is a restless animal, not content, like the boa constrictor, to have a good meal once a month and sleep the rest of the time. Man needs, for his happiness, not only the enjoyment of this or that, but hope and enterprise and change. As Hobbes says, "felicity consisteth in prospering, not in having prospered". Among modern philosophers, the ideal of unending and unchanging bliss has been replaced by that of evolution, in which there is supposed to be an ordered progress towards a goal which is never quite attained, or at any rate has not been attained at the time of writing. This change of outlook is part of the substitution of dynamics for statics which began with Galileo, and which has increasingly affected all modern thinking, whether scientific or political.

Change is one thing, progress is another. "Change" is scientific, "progress" is ethical; change is indubitable, whereas progress is a matter of controversy. Let us first consider change, as it appears in science.