

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE REPUBLIC OF PLATO

William Boyd

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BY

WILLIAM BOYD

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New Edition

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FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

IN the years which have elapsed since this book made its first appearance there has been a very considerable change in the philosophical atmosphere. The idealistic philosophy which drew its inspiration from Plato in the ancient world and from Hegel in the modern has lost much of its influence on religious and political thinking. The emphasis in our times is on analysis rather than constructive thinking, and there is a distrust of metaphysical attempts to reach beyond the realm of verifiable experience. It is little wonder that under these conditions Plato, the first great metaphysician and one of the pillar apostles of Idealism, should have come under increasing criticism. The *Republic*, once regarded with a reverence usually reserved for the Scriptures, has been shaken on its pedestal.

The objections commonly taken to the *Republic* have been on ethical and political grounds, and it must be admitted that if Plato's ideal state is regarded as a model for imitation there are some grounds for them. In the scheme for his city, social classes are sharply demarcated; government is in the hands of an elect group who have come to see life whole and have been specially trained for their task; the life of both rulers and subjects (and rulers even more than subjects) is absorbed by the state, and individual interests are quite secondary; literature and the arts are politically controlled and changes in them are absolutely prohibited. And behind all this is a philosophy of fixed ideals. Here is the totalitarian state!

The indictment is quite formidable, but there is surely no need to take it too seriously. Plato himself did not. He was not only a great philosopher but a man of outstanding statesmanship with a strong practical sense; and the *Republic* with its philosophical rulers had its complement in the more ordinary state of the *Laws* managed by a civil service which he designed in his later years. He was ready to compromise.

The problems of life and government which are the central

theme of the Republic are still with us but there is no question of taking over his ideals, still less of adopting his practical suggestions. For us the *Republic* is inspirational, not didactic. Its great virtue is in its power to stimulate thought, and from that point of view what the critics regard as defects are really an advantage. The views presented in it were the outcome of strenuous discussion and they come to the modern reader as a challenge. To get to the heart of them he must continue the discussion for himself and make his own applications. This Introduction is meant to help him on his way.

May, 1962

PREFACE

A CONSIDERABLE part of this book made its first appearance as a course of lectures in connection with the Class of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow University during my tenure of the Euing Fellowship in Mental Philosophy.

The origin of the book defines its purpose. It is intended in the first instance for the beginner in philosophy who finds Plato difficult, even when read with the help of the excellent expositions of his English commentators. Perhaps it may also appeal to readers who, though not specially interested in philosophy, wish to know something of one of the great classics of thought. Hence the book makes no pretension to completeness. Questions of interpretation, upon which the advanced student must enter, have for the most part been treated briefly if at all, and attention has been concentrated on the broad outlines of Platonic doctrine.

In writing a book such as this, one comes under obligations to many authors. I have to express indebtedness to the works of Mr Nettleship and Professor Bosanquet, and especially to the lectures of Edward Caird, Master of Balliol, by whom I was introduced to the study of Plato in the Class of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow. In making quotations from the *Republic* I have generally followed the translation of Davies and Vaughan. When it has been necessary to amend their translation I have usually guided myself by the translations of Jowett and Bosanquet.

May, 1904

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I PLANNED at one time to revise this little book of introduction to Plato's *Republic* in the light of the special knowledge and experience acquired since I wrote it, and particularly to attempt a more adequate treatment of those discussions of educational ideals and practice which make the *Republic*, as Rousseau said, 'the finest book ever written on education'. But now that the opportunity for the issue of a new edition has come, second thoughts, strengthened perhaps by the call of other tasks, have led me to set aside this plan. Revision with an educational bias would have meant the rewriting of considerable sections, and have altered the character of the book as a whole. It is because I believe that with all its limitations the simple sketch of the leading ideas of the *Republic* is still likely to be found helpful by a large number of readers, and not because I would not treat the subject differently if I were to revise, that I prefer to let it stand in its original form.

I am the more inclined to this because I have the satisfaction of knowing that the book has been appreciated by the class of students for whom it was written. It found its main constituency among university students making a beginning with the study of philosophy, and then to my great happiness it proved capable of interesting and instructing studious working men in the problems of ethics and politics. I hope that on its reappearance it will continue to have this double virtue.

Especially am I anxious that it should reach the hands of the workmen students. I have had the privilege of lecturing to a great many of these over a period of years in my own city of Glasgow, and I know that when they get the chance they enter into philosophical inquiries as keenly as into the economic subjects which are the staple themes of adult class study. I know too, from the pleasantest of experiences, that there is no better starting-point for the popular study of philosophy as it bears on the questions of modern social life than Plato's *Republic*. On three occasions I have given courses of lectures on the *Republic*, twice to a Citizen-

ship class under Continuation School auspices, and once to a W.E.A. class, and in each case the interest excited was great beyond all expectations. Something of this may have been due to the romantic appeal made by the little states of ancient Greece, and to the discovery that in spite of all the differences of time and condition the problems of these states which form the background for the argument of the *Republic* had a good deal in common with the problems of the modern world. But most of all, it was Plato, the poet turned philosopher, dealing with the fundamentals of human behaviour greatly and simply, who put a spell on us all and set us on the way to a clearer view of ourselves and our own times.

September, 1922.

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INTRODUCTION

SECTION 1. PLATO, THE FIRST GREAT POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER

PLATO brought to the study of political philosophy an experience such as falls to the lot of few men. Born in a noble Athenian family about 429 B.C., the year in which the great statesman Pericles died, he grew to manhood in the exciting times of the Peloponnesian war. Thus, in the formative years of his life, he was compelled to take part in the great struggle with Sparta which brought Athens, but shortly before at the height of its glory, to the verge of ruin. A catastrophe so overwhelming could not but have a great influence on the youthful Plato. Perhaps we may find in it one of the reasons for the distrust of democracy which marks all his political thinking. During the war the democracy which Pericles had created had been on its trial, and though the Athenian democracy was good, as Greek democracies went, it had come out of the ordeal rather badly. At any rate, if tradition is to be trusted, his sympathies were with the aristocratic families who took the government of the city in hand after its fall in 405 B.C. But the excesses of the Thirty Tyrants soon showed him that an oligarchy could no more be trusted to govern well than the democracy, and he is said to have welcomed their overthrow. He tried to take a part in the government of the city under the restored democracy; but his success as a politician was not great, probably because his aristocratic birth made the people suspect him, and he retired from Athens and from politics when the people put his master, Socrates, to death in 399 B.C.

The result of Plato's brief experience of practical politics was an alienation from all existing parties and governments. But he never ceased to be interested in political affairs, or to be a loyal citizen of Athens. It is reported that on his death-bed he thanked the gods that he had been born an Athenian: and his dying utterance shows the spirit of his life. If he took no part in