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Dialogues of Plato

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PLATO, AND HIS MEANING FOR EUROPEAN THOUGHT

SOCRATES was born in 469 B.C. Aristotle died in the year 322. Within the period of nearly one hundred and fifty years defined by these two dates, falls the most remarkable movement in the history of European philosophy, and one of the most remarkable in all the annals of the human spirit. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are the heroes of this movement; and it is difficult to name three individual minds to whom the intellectual progress of mankind owes a larger debt than to these thinkers. In the case of all three men this debt is even more decidedly an indirect obligation than it is a direct one, since they influenced, and still influence, the lives and thoughts of countless persons who hardly know about them more than their names. Yet their direct influence, also, upon later thought, extends far beyond the limits of pure philosophy, and can be traced in the history of religion, of politics, and of general science. A word must here suffice to indicate the nature and extent of the obligations in question.

Viewed as to their indirect influence, our three philosophers have profoundly affected a considerable portion of our more thoughtful speech, so that their terms often appear in our daily vocabulary. Moreover, their general views of life are felt as a part of the common spirit of civilization. Their methods of inquiry have moulded, in a measure, the ordinary processes of discussion, of argument, and of exposition. Our popular conceptions of God, of the natural world, of immortality, of virtue, and of wisdom, show, in manifold fashions, traces of their teachings and of their spirit. As to their more direct influence, which has come to us through those who have actually studied the literature of antiquity, we may see their

...in certain of the most fruitful causes of scientific investigation, their ideas inspiring some even of the freest and least traditional of modern critical intellects, their ideals effective, in a measure, in not a few political and social undertakings of comparatively recent times, and their inspiration a prominent factor in many significant literary movements. And thus, despite the very genuine originality and significance of the best of our purely modern ideas, and ideals, despite that vast transformation of our conception of scientific method and of the natural universe which the past few centuries have brought to pass, we have not yet reached a point in human progress where it is hard to trace, even amidst all our wealth of spiritual possessions, the influence of our heritage from these three minds. The Socratic method in thinking, the Platonic conception of the world of ideal truth, the Aristotelian creation of a scientific vocabulary, and of an organized, if provisional, scheme of the visible cosmos,—these remain, amidst all changes, real and obvious influences in our modern world, despite the inadequacies and errors by which these gifts, in their original form, were marred.

A reader who makes his first acquaintance with Plato through translations, and through selections, must approach this author with some such sense of our common debt to him, and to his age, as the foregoing words are meant to arouse. For otherwise one fails to take the right attitude toward the author. When you read a modern writer, on topics of theory or of opinion, you read to learn from him, in some direct way, how to deal with the problems of your own day. But when you begin to read Plato, you may fail to observe your true relation to his interests. You will indeed soon feel, if you read rightly, that many of his problems are yours, and that some of his inquiries may directly help you. But you will also find that much of his thought has a remote and archaic seeming, and that you can neither agree nor disagree with him as you might with a man of to-day. Your agreement must always be accompanied by qualifications and provisos; your disagreement must be joined with an admission that perhaps, after all, you fail to comprehend what he wishes to say;

and often you will be disposed neither to agree nor to disagree, but merely to wonder at his skill—and at his seemingly far-off world. In view of these difficulties, your best way is, of course, to come to him not in the controversial, but in the historical, spirit; and your best means of here attaining the true historical spirit is to try to find out what elements of your own thinking, as it goes on to-day, you owe to Plato,—upon what ideas that you learned in childhood, or that have inspired you in youth, his spirit has been breathed,—in brief, in what sense you are, and always have been, since you began to think, an intellectual or a moral child of Plato. Difficult as is the scholarly work of expounding the Platonic writings in their evolution, their meanings, and their relations, the task of thus pointing out to the modern reader what, in general terms, he, as child of the past, owes to Plato, is not hopelessly hard. To this end, and to this almost wholly, the few following words are devoted.

Of Plato as a man, but the most necessary facts can here be premised. The philosopher was born in 427 B.C., being thus not far from forty years the junior of Socrates, and about the same number of years the senior of Aristotle (who was born in 384). Plato was of an aristocratic Athenian family, and, despite the misfortunes brought upon Athens by the Peloponnesian war, his private fortune seems not to have been at any time very narrow. In the midst of this war, which ended in 404, Plato's early years were passed. In the time immediately after that war, when the Athenian power had fallen, and when the best material prosperity of Greece had passed away, Plato's study of philosophy, and his main doctrines, came to maturity. Under the personal influence of Socrates, his early thought was moulded. The master's death by the hemlock, in 399, deeply shocked the now ardent disciple, who thenceforth devoted his life to interpreting the lesson and the spirit of Socrates, to developing the philosophical germs that were latent in the Socratic method, and, in the end, to founding a school for philosophical instruction and inquiry. The vast undertakings involved in these ideals developed slowly. Immediately after the death of Socrates, Plato spent some time in the circle of Socratic philosophical students at Megara, and then went upon extended travels. In the course of these

he visited Egypt, Cyrene, and Sicily, studied mathematics and Pythagorean philosophy, and met with dangerous adventures. In the Sicilian visit, at the court of the tyrant Dionysius the Elder, he was sold as a slave, but was ransomed, and was finally enabled to return to his native city. Here, shortly after 387, he began, in the gymnasium called the Academy, his instruction of members of a voluntary philosophical association, which later was more and more organized into a school of philosophy. This institution, named after its meeting-place, was destined to be associated for generations with the tradition of the Platonic doctrine. Beginning thus his work as public teacher at about forty years of age, Plato continued his voluntary calling until his death in 347. His career was interrupted only by two further visits to Sicily, brought about by his efforts, after the death of Dionysius the Elder, to influence Dionysius the Younger to govern in the spirit of Plato's philosophy. Both visits proved fruitless, and Plato's long-cherished hopes of practical efficacy as a social reformer were never fulfilled in his lifetime. For he could not even dream that his ideas were in a measure to inspire in a far-off age the moral and social enterprises of Christianity.

The writings of Plato are in the form of dialogues. Certainly genuine among the thirty-five dialogues which tradition attributes to the philosopher are, above all, the works entitled, "Protagoras," "Phædrus," "Gorgias," "Theætetus," "Phædo," "The Republic," "The Symposium," and "Timæus." These are the ones that Zeller, the noted historian of Greek philosophy, arranges first in certainty in his list of the genuine dialogues. Several others, as "The Apology of Socrates," "Crito," "Lysis," "Charmides," "The Sophist," "Philebus," "The Politicus," "Parmenides," "Cratylus," "Critias," "Meno," "Euthydemus," and "The Laws," despite doubts which, for very various reasons, have occasionally been urged against one or another of them, are also to be regarded as genuine. Of the remainder, some are doubtful, and a few are almost certainly not genuine works of Plato at all. Of great importance for the understanding of our author's development, and of his whole doctrine, would be a positive assurance as to the order in which the various dialogues were produced, and as to the date of each. But here very great

uncertainty exists. The "Apology," "Crito," and "Charmides" belong to the early Socratic period in our thinker's development; the two well-known dialogues, "Protagoras" and "Gorgias," are also comparatively early works; the dialogue entitled "Phædrus" is often regarded as belonging to the date when Plato began his instruction at the academy; the "Republic" is now very frequently viewed as composed of two or three different parts, written at different periods of the philosopher's maturer life; the "Phædo" is also one of the author's maturer works; "The Laws" must be regarded as the product of his old age. Beyond these general assertions, a very great variety of opinion exists amongst scholars; and even these matters themselves are of unequal certainty.

Turning from these more external considerations to Plato's philosophy itself, every one knows that Plato's central doctrine was the famous theory of "Ideas." In speaking of this theory, we must be content with a mere indication of its spirit. Yet even this spirit can be understood only by means of some notion of the nature and result of the previous philosophy of Greece.

The early Greek philosophers, before Socrates, had begun by an effort to understand outer nature. The substance of which the world was made, the process whereby heaven and earth, the heavenly bodies, land and water and living beings, had come into existence, — these formed the topics of a type of speculation that began among the Ionian Greeks not far from 600 B.C., and that continued throughout the whole period before Socrates. These early thinkers were bold and ingenious; they wove together their fragments of knowledge with marvellous skill; they began, however rudely, the labors that have at last culminated in modern science. Their crudity is obvious to us now; but none the less we wonder at their often prophetic depth of insight. One thing they did indeed ere long certainly discover, namely, that the right way of comprehending nature could only be won, if at all, through a very careful study of the methods of sound thinking. They became, as they disputed, constantly keener critics of one another, of the popular mind, and of the nature of the human reason. For reason was their instrument, which they used at first with childish and unconscious naïveté, but which

they came to know as their instrument in the very process of employing it. They went forth to conquer outer nature; but what, for the time, they most fully won, was a certain skill in logic. They sought to comprehend the outer universe. What they really discovered was the inner world, — the world of the rational conduct of inquiries, the realm of clear thinking.

This was the most important result of that early and hasty attempt to take nature by storm. The actual and serious failure of the early physical speculations to reach a satisfactory agreement with one another, and with the nature of things, was, so to speak, the Bull Run of the warfare of European science. Thenceforth men came nearer to knowing that thinking was a serious and problematic business, and that the philosophical kingdom of heaven, if in one sense open even to the little children, is still, in the end, to be taken only by a patient sort of long-continued violence. Thus opened the era of a thought that was no longer naive, but that was, literally speaking, sophisticated. For the Sophists, the popular teachers of wisdom, whose age follows that of the earlier physicists, were the conscious representatives of a universal and skeptical criticism of all tradition, of all current science, and especially of all the known methods of human thinking. In the disorganization that temporarily followed thought's first great defeat, the Sophists thus appear as the assailants of every more profound assurance. In their eyes, all is mere opinion. They represent the intellectual skill, the conscious cultivation, and the destructive tendencies, of an age of doubt. But thereby they only made surer the approach of an age of the profoundest speculative thinking, which was to profit by the early failures of thought, and by the reflective skill now won.

The negative tendencies of the Sophists awakened the earnest mind of Socrates to a close and careful consideration of the right way of investigation. Socrates was a representative of a very important intellectual type, the type of the essentially reverent, the sincerely pious rationalist. Rationalist he was, because he would never say that he knew unless he saw clearly and had acutely observed every step of the way to conviction. Rationalist he was, moreover, because, like the Sophists, and even more than they, he had become

conscious of the existence, of the nature, and of the paradoxes, of the reasoning process. His favorite questions were those of morals, and not of physics; of man, and not of the outer world. But the central problem of philosophy was for him, whatever special questions he studied, a problem of method. In constant intercourse with his fellow men, he labored to bring to light thought itself, and all its most secret doings. He carried on these tasks by constant dialogues, that is, by the aid of an endless contrasting of ideas with ideas, of one mind with another, of opinion with opinion. His work as a public teacher was altogether confined to such actual conversations with his fellows. He wrote nothing, and had no system to teach. He lived in his art, and his art was to become conscious of what he meant, and of why he meant it, and to help others, especially plastic youth, to become conscious of what was in their own meanings also. In all these ways Socrates showed himself the ideal rationalist, was feared by the conservative minds of his day as such, and died a martyr to the cause of clear thinking and of enlightened humanity. But Socrates was also more than a rationalist. He was a lover not merely of the process of reasoning, but of that whole human nature which reasoning was to ennoble. Hence his aim was never destruction, but what he called the midwifery of souls, — of souls that were, by the reasoner's art, to be delivered of the truth that was in them, to be brought to delight in their own thought's offspring, to be lifted to a higher organization and self-control by means of the moral insight into life which right method might give them. Hence Socrates conceived the thinker's mission as the service of a divine order. He had faith that Wisdom would be justified of her children. His spirit was one of the sincerest piety. His love of clearness was essentially reverent. His service of keenly critical method was based upon a wholesome and vital confidence in life and in the reasonableness of things. Hence his vast influence upon his countrymen and upon posterity.

Plato followed Socrates. No less humane in his purpose than was his master, he was essentially the more constructive spirit of the two. His was a nobly aristocratic nature, with a large sense for the architectural unity of thought and of

things, with a passionate love of ideals, with a profound contempt for vulgarity, with the sensitiveness of an artist, with the eloquence of a poet, with an originality of intellect such as with difficulty can find its equal. Plato, thus endowed, learned the lesson of Socrates, applied it to nearly the whole range of known philosophical problems, reviewed, in a measure, the most characteristic issues of the earlier philosophers, and thereupon undertook afresh the whole task of philosophy. But the world upon which Plato now looked was remote enough from the world of the earlier physical philosophers.

The former thinkers had been, until the very age of the doubting Sophists, one and all materialists. Whatever else they had discovered or doubted, they had all proceeded upon the assumption that the world to be investigated is the well-known world yonder in space, the corporeal world. To this corporeal world, soul as well as body, meanings as well as facts, the divine as well as the natural order, alike belonged. If an earlier philosopher tells you that soul pervades all things, you must not suppose him on that account to be an idealist. What he means is simply that the same fine warm stuff of which the vital principle of your body seems to him to be made, is, in his opinion, to be found anywhere and everywhere in nature. If, again, he tells you that Intelligence orders all things, you find, if you look closer, that he means by Intelligence merely that peculiarly ethereal and orderly matter of which the regularly moving and permanent heavens above you appear to be constituted. This stuff, he declares, is the principal and ruling type of matter in the natural world. Thus, in the earlier philosophers, all is corporeal. When they talk of Being, or of some such seemingly pure abstraction, they really mean simply body, and such body as you daily see or touch.

But in Plato's time the Sophists had already come to doubt the power of the human mind to know justly any corporeal world at all; and Socrates, "calling philosophy down from heaven to earth," had devoted himself to a study of certain invisible and incorporeal facts called "Virtue," "the Good," "Wisdom," and the other ideal objects to which he directed the eager discussions of his disciples. Moreover, in considering the right methods of thinking, Socrates had attracted

renewed attention to the human reason itself, which, when studied in the light of his spirit, came to appear as something very real but by no means corporeal. The center of gravity of the world, for the philosopher, was thus shifted. Plato has the honor of first fully realizing the change. To his mind, philosophy is the art of discovering, and of conquering, an essentially incorporeal world. This is the realm of the Platonic Ideas. This, to our philosopher's mind, is the world of Truth. The physical world is the world of seeming, whose only reality comes from the hints that it gives of the realm of pure truth beyond it.

It is easy to misunderstand the meaning of Plato's Ideas, because his language in speaking of them is often open to extremely obvious and sometimes trivial objections. But, passing for the moment such objections, one comes nearest to a preliminary sense of Plato's thought if one views his world of Ideas in three senses: (1) as a world of Values, or of Meanings; (2) as a world of Truths; (3) as a world of Ideals, or of Models, after which lesser grades of being are fashioned. In all three senses the Platonic Ideas are, on occasion, expounded by their author. In all three senses they are represented in later doctrines, and in all three capacities they determine what may be called the Platonic tradition in the history of thought. A word as to each sense will help to make it familiar.

We all speak of facts, and we also speak of the value of facts. The artist's paint is a fact. The pictures that he makes when he spreads the paint upon canvas embody artistic values. The paint you can touch. It is corporeal. The artistic value of the picture is incorporeal. You may indeed object that this value of the picture seems to exist only in the mind of any appreciative observer. But no — Plato would point out in reply — the value is viewed by the appreciative observer himself as something independent of himself, as something that he *ought* to recognize, whether he chances to feel it at any one moment or not, as a value existent for anybody, — in brief, as a sort of independent reality. The value of the artist's work, if viewed as an independent reality, which any observer ought to recognize, and which is independent of anybody's whim or present feeling, is an incorporeal reality

of the type which Plato ascribed to his Ideas. As a fact, in this special case, Plato would say that the picture, as an object of sense, is beautiful only because it "reminds" the soul of "Beauty in itself," or of the "Idea of the Beautiful," — a fact not to be found in the physical picture alone, nor in the observer alone, and so a fact to be referred to an incorporeal world of ideals.

"Values" and "meanings" are words whereby we often name characters that seem to us to belong to facts, but that cannot easily be identified with the mere facts themselves. In moral and æsthetic doctrines we have names for such values and meanings. The just, the worthy, the good, the fair, the genuine, are examples of such names. Many later psychological theories have tried to show why we come to view these names as standing for realities external to the individual observer, and at the same time as different from the physical facts to which the values seem to belong. This is not the place to study such psychological theories, or to defend Plato against them, or to surrender Plato's conception to theirs. It is enough to say, by way of mere exposition, that Plato found in the world of reality values which seemed to him real, and in fact more real than those literal or visible facts to which value is usually attributed. In consequence, he refused, on the other hand, to regard these values as mere states of feeling or of estimate in this or in that man's mind. And therefore, in the ethical spirit that determines all his philosophy, he declared the values to be permanent and incorporeal verities, known to us as something that we ought to recognize, and that we must regard as objectively real. The world of values is thus, already, for the philosopher a world of ideas, in his sense of that term.

It is already plain to any reader of ethical, of poetical, or of religious literature, that this disposition to recognize values as having a being outside of your private mind or of mine, and equally independent of this or of that physical fact, is very widespread and influential. Orators and poets presuppose this disposition whenever they talk of authoritative laws, of inspiring moral ideals, of the realm of the beautiful, and of the higher unseen world in general. What interests us here is, that all more recent doctrines of this type

are directly or indirectly the outcome of the influence of Plato; and that whenever the reader speaks, as he will often speak, in terms of notions of this kind, he is voicing afresh the spirit of the Platonic philosophy.

To turn to the second sense of the Platonic Ideas. Physical facts are said to *exist*, but truths are said to be *valid*. What is valid is, as truth, independent of you or of me. It is, just like a value, something that you and I ought to recognize. It is there, in reality, whether we admit it or not. But validity is no corporeal fact. What makes a true proposition valid is not identical with any fact that we see or touch. Plato's theory explains validity by regarding the world of ideas as the source, the cause, the dwelling-place, of eternal truth, or of what makes true assertions valid. Here, again, many later theories have been put forth to explain otherwise the facts about validity. But such explanations concern us not now. And to any reader of discourses and questions concerning truth as truth, it is plain that there exists, and has long existed, a strong tendency to speak of truth as something distinct from physical fact, as independent of such fact, as incorporeal, as independent also of you or of me, and so as real in a sense in which nothing transient is real. The reader himself often speaks thus, and views truth thus, — whether justly or unjustly concerns us not now. Enough, the tradition that thus speaks of the realm of truth as an incorporeal and eternal reality, outside of your mind and of mine, is the tradition of the Platonic philosophy. And wherever, in literature or in the creeds, in faith or in teaching, men speak thus of truth, they are speaking of it as Plato spoke of the world of ideas.

But, finally, the realm of values and the realm of truth are often viewed as realms of ideal Models, according to which our lives and thoughts ought to be moulded. So to speak of values and of truth is to speak of them as objects whose very interest lies in the consideration that, while our present life, as it is in mere fact, does not fully realize them, they are the goal of our more ideal activities, the aim of existence. Our ideal or goal is not any corporeal fact, or any one state of feeling as such. If, however, one regards an aim, a goal, a model, a guiding ideal, as a reality, independent of you or

of me, but incorporeal, higher than merely existing present fact, but not on that account lacking in genuineness, he views this reality in a fashion to which Plato's doctrine of ideas gave an early expression. Whenever the reader thus speaks of ideals, he makes use of the Platonic tradition in philosophy. Moreover, the reader will remember how similar conceptions have been popularly, and, at times, technically, used as means of explaining natural, especially biological, processes; namely, whenever these processes have been conceived as nature's efforts to "realize" her "types." A "type," viewed as something that never is quite realized, but that nature tries to realize, that is not a corporeal fact, but that is equally not in your mind nor in mine, nor in any observer's mind, — such a type, as nature's ideal model, is conceived in the way in which Plato conceived his ideas.

In these three ways, the characters of the ideas of Plato, and senses in which they still influence men's thoughts and expressions, have now been brought out. To sum up and to develop a little the whole theory: Plato held that the world we see and touch is not the genuinely real world, but is the hint, or imitation, or shadow, of a world of ideas. These ideas are to be discovered by reason, not seen with our bodily eyes. Yet, on the other hand, they are not merely our inner or private ideas, but external and objective truths, — eternal, independent of sense, of anybody's mind, and of time. They form an incorporeal world, eternal, separate from the physical world, and complete in itself. If you ask what in particular the ideas are, Plato replies that they correspond to your own universal conceptions, to what you define when you think the meaning of a term, to what you grasp intellectually when you inwardly observe the true nature of any general object of your thought. Whenever you form any general concept, your thought corresponds to a Platonic idea. So viewed, the ideas appear as numerous, in fact as correspondent in multitude to your actual and possible universal conceptions. Yet the ideas are not a mere multitude. They form an organized realm of truth, whose laws and inter-relationships Plato made various profound and critical efforts to study and to exhibit, not wholly consistent, and never finished. But his theory of this hierarchy of the ideas seems never to have

assumed a final shape in his own mind. Yet the ideas are to form such a hierarchy. The "Idea of the Good," the highest of the ideas, "the sun in the realm of truth," is to be conceived as the source of the others, and as the principle of the whole unity of this realm. And the realm of ideas itself is at once the world of values (for value is in things only in so far as things embody or imitate ideas); the realm of truth (for no mere fact has truth except in so far as it participates in eternal being); and the model, or ideal, or type, which temporal facts seek to imitate in their transiency, and which explains the order and significance of natural objects wherever these objects have any significance whatever. In man, the soul, especially by virtue of its rational part, is allied in nature to the ideas, and so, partaking of their eternity, is immortal. Ethical doctrine, wherein lies, after all, Plato's principal philosophical interest, depends upon the true apprehension of the nature of the ideas. To turn from the world of sense, to dwell in the unseen and the eternal, is man's highest good.

In speaking of these last considerations, mention has been made of two of the most important of Plato's contributions to the later history of opinion. The conception of individual immortality, in the form in which Christianity later adopted it, is very largely due to Plato, and, in fact, could hardly be recognized if its Platonic elements were taken away. The conception of virtue and of the good that Plato developed, upon the basis of the theory of ideas, forms a very important element of Christian ethics, and of every more ideal view of the practical problems of life. In brief, whoever conceives or loves an unseen world of truth, of beauty, and of goodness, and who longs to participate therein, is, amongst us of European origin, a more or less conscious disciple of Plato.

With these considerations once clearly in mind, the reader may well turn to Plato himself for further guidance as to his thought.

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