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John Gould

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THE
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PLATO'S ETHICS

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BY

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PREFACE

THE book that follows contains no systematic account of Plato's ethics in all its aspects; it is a piece of research, not a text-book. It is also a first piece of research. It was begun in 1950 and submitted in 1952 as a Fellowship dissertation to my Cambridge college: since then, I have rewritten the first two chapters and made a number of alterations and additions to the remainder of the book.

In writing this essay, I have incurred numerous obligations of gratitude: to the University of Cambridge, the Electors to the Charles Oldham Classical Scholarship, and to the Master and Fellows of Jesus College, Cambridge, for making it possible; to Professor W. K. C. Guthrie, for allowing me to use some unpublished work of Professor Cornford; and to Mr D. J. Allan, for reading my manuscript and making several valuable suggestions, and, indeed, for prompting me to seek publication. My debt to Mr J. E. Raven, my research supervisor at Cambridge, is very great: his kindness and encouragement gave me the determination to finish what I had rather doubtfully begun, and his restraining hand kept me from many errors more serious than those that now remain. Lastly, I should like to thank Mr G. E. L. Owen and Mr G. S. Kirk who have helped me in correcting the proofs; the staff of the University Press for coping skilfully with a somewhat untidy manuscript; and the many friends, professional scholars and otherwise, who have so often helped me and listened with patience to my recitals.

That the finished work might profit from complete revision and greater coherence I am only too well aware, but even now I cannot claim that if I were the reviser, it would be much different from what it is. For its faults are mine.

J. G.

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INTRODUCTION

IN reading the dialogues of Plato, we look back on a world whose differences from our own we may find it difficult to realize. It seems worth while pointing out that a contemporary reader who turns to this book after reading (say) Professor Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* is likely to find himself in a very different atmosphere, strange but not, I think, irrelevant to him. Even within the works of one age, we are accustomed to finding different answers suggested to the peculiar problems of ethics. But what we must here remember above all, is that even the identity of the questions which have seemed important at different times, itself undergoes changes. This difference of approach to moral philosophy has been well set out by Mr Stuart Hampshire in a recent article;¹ he rightly suggests that the typical question of recent moral philosophy is: 'What do we mean by, and how (if at all) do we establish the truth of, sentences used to express moral judgments about our own or other people's actions?' Now this is not at all the sort of question which we find Plato asking in the dialogues: Plato, like Aristotle, is concerned with the problems of the moral 'agent', not the moral 'judge or critic', to quote Mr Hampshire again. The roots of this difference of outlook on what we loosely call 'ethics' may perhaps be put psychologically: Plato, it will appear, is not subject to any basic doubt about the reliability of moral decisions, nor even, to put the matter more largely, about the existence of any valid and arguable 'aim' in human life. His own most urgent efforts were directed towards the discovery of a viable method of *attaining* (in practice) an aim which, for him, is in some sense 'given'. Thus the question, if I may formulate it in general terms, which I have chosen as the guiding issue in this essay is: 'How is a man to achieve his true (moral) stature?' I cannot and do not claim that all that Plato has to say of ethical problems can be adequately considered under this head, but I am convinced that it remains his central concern, and

¹ 'Fallacies in Moral Philosophy', in *Mind*, n.s. LVIII (1949), pp. 466ff.

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other matters must make their appearance only on the side-lines of the present inquiry. The chapters that follow turn on Plato's various and differing answers to the question I have just set out.

It is curious, but true, that Plato has been little studied for what he has to say about the problems of action. In our total picture of Plato, which in some areas is minutely detailed, comparatively little light is thrown on the ethical preoccupations which he inherited from Socrates. A dialogue such as the *Republic* has for years been the happy hunting-ground of historians of metaphysics, epistemology and political theory. But it must be obvious that it offers just as much illumination to the man who seeks to discover what happened, in Plato's middle and last years, to the ethical ideas and ideals which occupied Socrates' mind so much. In this book, it is just such a focal-point that I have tried to give to our interest in Plato. To take another concrete example, critical attention among Platonists has recently been absorbed with the dialectical method of the 'late period' dialogues, to such an extent that the *Laws*, which has nothing to say of this matter, might, for all the attention it has received, almost have disappeared from the Platonic corpus. This is a good example of the way in which the general acceptance of some theory, say of Plato's development, can affect the degree to which different parts of his writings seem to his readers significant, and viewed from this angle, the present attempt to put forward an account of Plato's ethical development implies a different canon of significance.

In the first section of this book, I have tried to reconstruct the answer which Socrates gave to the question I have described as central to the inquiry. Much of the first chapter turns of necessity on the meaning of certain Greek words, and here I have been unable to translate many of the quotations which I use as evidence. But the main trend of the argument will, I hope, be clear: Socrates, starting from a parallel that has often been drawn in the history of ethics, between the moral agent and the artist or craftsman, arrived, I believe, at the hope that the moral agent might learn to direct his actions in accordance with the same assured and acceptable procedures which the artist adopts to produce his concrete works; that is, in general terms, that he might achieve some 'technique'

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of moral decision-making and behaviour, not so much in the sense of a set of rules, as of an intense personal conviction, evinced in his day-to-day actions. The second chapter is taken up with an attempt to delimit the area of applicability which Socrates supposed this analogy to have, and the remaining chapters of Part I with filling in as much of the general picture of Socrates' approach to moral philosophy as now seems possible. Following upon this, I have switched my attention to the other end of the Platonic time-scale, to a consideration of the *Laws*, which presents Plato's own convictions in their final form. The difference in atmosphere will readily appear: here Plato abandons the personal and particular ideal of Socrates and seems to regard the individual as merely one unit in a moral phalanx which has to be disposed as effectively as possible in the battle between good and evil. The *Laws* displays, in great detail, a joint pursuit of the good, steering the individual as near as possible towards his goal by an interlocking system of teaching, conscious, and unconscious (i.e. propaganda), and enactment. The craftsman ideal has not altogether vanished, but where Socrates envisaged the moral 'technician' operating upon unruly material in himself, Plato's expert moral agent has his own welfare only as a side issue in his life; his primary task is to direct the shaping of society *en masse* within the dimensions of the moral dilemma.

Having seen the gap wide open between Socrates and Plato, our final task is to examine the genesis of the split, and the third and longest section of the present essay contains a survey of the no-man's-land between. The trend from the *Meno*, with its first hints of a new world to come, to the *Politicus* and *Philebus*, which leave the *Laws* hardly more than round the corner, is, I suggest, a progressive coming to terms with the possible. The fifty or more years which separate the Plato of the *Laws* from Socrates condemned and dead, involved, we must remember, the collapse of that Athenian society and civilization which Plato had known in his youth; the world he was born into broke up, and the tensions of social crack-up and decay are too obviously reflected in his dialogues to need comment. Socrates could conceive of a man achieving his own moral aim unaided (if unoppressed) by society,

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but this was possible for him only because social support, to some degree at least, could be taken for granted. For Plato at the end of his life, no such assumption could stand the test of even the most cursory inspection of the world as it now was: a coherent society, capable of buoying up its members by the density of its moral tradition, was lost way back in the past, and Plato's deep realization of this led him to the belief that it was only by the remoulding of a rational and self-sufficient social frame, that any but the most morally tenacious of men could arrive at a positive moral stature. I have tried to plot the stages on this way to acceptance of reality as they appear in the dialogues of Plato's middle and last years. They can be seen in the new conception of 'true conviction' in the *Meno*, in the first (and perhaps the greatest) attempt to construct an entire new moral fabric in the *Republic*, in the *Timaeus* with its emphasis on impossibility, through the *Politicus* to the moment of acceptance, with its discordant undertone of irrational revolt, that we find in the *Philebus*. This progress is brought out by such incidental comment as seemed necessary in order to make possible an understanding, rather than a criticism, however reasonable or justified, of Plato's changing views.

Two related problems have been obvious to me all the way. Involved in any attempt at exposition is a drive towards definitive statement; but the latter is beyond our grasp. Before all other difficulties lies the fact that the language I must use to express my interpretation, inevitably embodies distinctions and gradations of sense that are foreign to the world I am trying to understand. An example is at hand in my first chapter: as I have mentioned, the purpose of this chapter is to rediscover the meaning of Socrates' dictum that 'Virtue (ἀρετή) is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη)'. Now the word 'knowledge', in current English, most commonly denotes awareness of facts; I cannot believe that this was what the Greek word ἐπιστήμη meant for Socrates. I have used here Professor Ryle's careful distinction between 'knowing *how*' and 'knowing *that*'; but this distinction or dichotomy is already at least inherent in the meaning of 'know', whereas an examination of the evidence shows us that the two, to us different, meanings were at one in the Greek word. Thus in attempting to redress the balance of inter-

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pretation, I am forced into a reconstruction of Socrates' ideas which still, I am well aware, contains an ineradicable element of distortion. Dilemmas such as this constantly recur, and I would ask the reader to bear them in mind while he reads.

But this is a general difficulty which must beset all who try to establish a picture of the past with the only tools they possess, the tools of current language. My second problem is more intimately connected with the subject of this essay. In such a work as this, some sort of apparent definitiveness was unavoidable; yet finality, definitiveness of exposition, were among the last things at which Plato himself ever aimed: indeed they were among the first which he set himself to avoid. His commentators have always baulked at this truth; they have denied it, quarrelled with it, proceeded silently as if it were untrue, but it remains a stone to trip them within sight of their goal. Even in the early period of Plato's work, where there is at least a superficial atmosphere of coherence and veiled finality from dialogue to dialogue, I have been aware all along that the seeds of different and later ideas, together with caveats and half-withdrawals, are there to be observed. In the end, I think, we must recognize that the attempts, of which this book is one, to reconstruct Plato's philosophical outlook along some roughly systematic lines run counter to the whole tendency of the writer they set out to 'reconstruct'. However much he may seek to avoid the charge, the historian of thought is bound to value the definitive, which he can clearly formulate, above the tentative indication, the no more than suggested reaction; and Plato is not there to help him, but to offer a reminder only of the way, the other way, he himself has gone. As Professor Ryle said in one of his 1953 Turner lectures:¹ 'Plato was . . . a very unreliable Platonist. He was too much of a philosopher to think that anything he had said was the last word. It was left to his disciples to identify his footmarks with his destination.' Which leaves the historian, quite as much as the true believer, looking by virtue of his office for destinations. The reader must for himself translate the concrete world of sign-posted terminal stations back into the sometimes ambiguous traces which are all that Plato has left us.

¹ Published as *Dilemmas* by the Cambridge University Press (1954), p. 14.