

Homage to Political Philosophy

Also by James R. Flynn

Philosophy

Humanism and Ideology: An Aristotelian View (1973)

How to Defend Humane Ideals: Substitutes for Objectivity
(2000)

*Fate and Philosophy: A Journey through Life's Great
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Homage to Political Philosophy:

*The Good Society
from Plato to the Present*

By

James R. Flynn

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By James R. Flynn

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To
Gilberto Corbellini

and

My students from 1957 to the present
Most recently classes in POLS 101 and above
or PSYC 204

I refer to someone who studies the temper and desires of a great beast . . . and calls things honorable or dishonorable, good or evil, just or unjust in accord with its wants.

(Plato, *The Republic*)

Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle of ethical philosophy . . . be simply to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can?*

(William James, 1891)

Noncontroversial proposition 1: More is better than less. People [want] what the economy produces . . . unloved items would find no market.

(Alan Blinder, 1987)

What a pity that most of those with admirable principles rave like loons whenever they talk about economics.

(Milton Friedman, 1996)

Socrates on old age: I feel constrained to give an account of my life.

(Plato, *The Republic*)

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Finally, a book that makes political philosophy come alive. It mixes passages from classical texts with problems posed by today’s headlines. It describes complex positions more accessibly than the original thinkers did. Opinionated and unabashedly personal, it also betrays an astonishing erudition that underwrites the breezy prose. I wish that my children—and I as well—had been able to take a college course with this as the text.”

—**Charles Murray**, fellow of the American Enterprise Institute and recipient of their highest honor (The Irving Kristol Award), co-author of *The Bell Curve*.

“Often the best way to learn about a difficult subject is to see it through the eyes of an expert who is both opinionated and respectful of the ideas he opposes. James Flynn does not hide his commitment to a scientific humanism, but he does not caricature or belittle the alternatives. Whether they agree or disagree, students and intellectually curious readers will learn much from his clear and tough-minded examination of the great ideas on how we should run our societies and give meaning to our lives.”

—**Steven Pinker**, Harvard, winner of many awards including Humanist of the Year, author of many influential books including *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.

“I’ve noticed both that my best students have studied philosophy and that philosophy, increasingly, is considered a waste of time. Professor Flynn provides a delightful, personal, and valuable demonstration that the great philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, illuminate truth, justice, meaning, and the good life. Flynn is a rare treasure in academia, the professor whose courses you took no matter what the topic. He has written a book I want college students to read whatever their major.”

—**Joshua Aronson**, New York University, recipient (with Claude Steele) of the Scientific Impact Award, known for his pioneering work on the “stereotype threat” (a factor that penalizes minority performance on standardized tests).

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- Beyond Patriotism: From Truman to Obama.* Exeter UK, Imprint Academic (2012).
- Fate and Philosophy: A Journey through Life's Great Questions.* Wellington, New Zealand, AWA Press (2012).
- How to Improve Your Mind: Twenty Keys to Unlock the Modern World.* London, Wiley-Blackwell (2012).
- Are we getting smarter? Rising IQ in the twenty-first century.* Cambridge University Press (2012).
- Intelligence and Human Progress: The Story of What Was Hidden in Our Genes.* London: Elsevier (2013).
- Senza Alibi: Il Cambiamento Climatico – Impedire la Catastrofe.* Turin, Italy: Bollati Boringhieri (2015). English: *No Place to Hide: Climate change—A Short Introduction for New Zealanders.* Wellington, New Zealand: Potton & Burton (2016).
- Does Your Family Make You Smarter? Nature, nurture, and Human Autonomy.* Cambridge University Press (2016).

PRELIMINARIES

CHAPTER ONE

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY DEAD OR ALIVE

I was present at an interesting conversation. A skeptic asked a believer what relevance God has in today's world. He answered: "He manifests himself by his absence – look around you." This book will argue that we suffer from the absence of political philosophy, not that it is entirely absent but that it survives as a pale shadow of itself. If this is so, I must illustrate what the role of political philosophy ought to be.

Analyzing great thinkers from Plato to the present is the best vehicle for formulating one's own position on the fundamental problems of philosophy. Although I call these thinkers political philosophers, none of them thought you could isolate political from moral philosophy, or moral philosophy from whether we can know the good, or ethical knowledge from knowledge itself, or knowledge from what is real. Plato is our exemplar here. In *The Republic*, he begins by attempting to clarify the nature of justice; which leads him to the good society; which leads him to make a case that it can be known; which leads him to the divided line (his epistemology or theory of knowledge); which he grounds in the nature of reality (his metaphysics). Aquinas could not conceive of discussing the just society without clarifying the end of man (the salvation of souls) and showing that the existence of God and the afterlife could be known.

Reflections on the current state of political philosophy

The great thinkers do more than emphasize that political philosophy withers if detached from philosophy proper. They set up a dialogue between past and present that improves both. Let me exemplify this.

Plato and Aristotle painted a picture of the good or just society with broad brushstrokes. They discussed all its attributes, its mores, myths, institutions, and way of life. They believed they could justify the good society in the light of reason, which is to say they could show that an ideally enlightened person had to endorse it no matter what his or her proclivities, which is to say it had objective status. It was valid for all humankind in this sense: that the price of not accepting it was to grant that

you were non-rational. This put it on the firmest possible foundation. After all, you can reject even geometry or science, if you are determined to ignore logic or evidence. The good society might have to be adapted to peculiar social circumstances or might be irrelevant to the lot of savages who follow tradition rather than reason. Nonetheless, like geometry, it was a “pattern laid up in heaven” there for all to perceive.

But from a modern perspective, they neglected something of key importance: they said little about economics aside from the evil of too great a gap between rich and poor. The major economic problem was overpopulation. It could lead to an impoverished landless class, but this could be solved by sending surplus people overseas to found colonies. Moreover, their city-states were not multi-racial or multi-ethnic, and they tended to neglect mutual regard between groups (or tolerance) in favor of distinctions we would today see as arbitrary (Greek versus barbarian).

Subsequent thinkers rejected the cases the ancients offered for the objective status of their ideals. But they could not give up the lust for objectivity. They invented new arguments, which in turn were rejected in favor of those newer still. I believe that each argument sacrificed something of the full-blooded humanism of the good society. By Locke, we are defending the objective status of little more than the Ten Commandments, property rights, and republican government. Gone is the social criticism of Carthage’s materialism and Sparta’s militarism. By Mill, we are defending an overall maxim: the greatest happiness of the greatest number possible. By William James, we are defending the maxim of satisfying as many human demands as possible. What a small residue of the social vision of the ancients! The quest for objectivity has drained the good society of its rich content.

After the industrial revolution, market capitalism with all its complexity and potency became the organizing principle of human society. No one can any longer say how a just society should be organized without knowing economics. Capitalism draws immigrants from abroad that are, at least legally, full citizens. It creates highly integrated multiracial and multi-ethnic societies quite different from the empires of the pre-modern era, which featured a dominant group ruling its subject peoples. No one can say what justice in America means without engaging in the “race and IQ” debate and issues like affirmative action versus economic efficiency.

Both the history of political ethics and capitalism gave the economist priority over the philosopher. If the common good is no more than satisfying as many human demands as possible, who knows how to do that? Whether or not they compromise economic efficiency becomes the criterion for assessing all things, whether racial parity or class equality.

Who but the economist can estimate the cost? Because of their ignorance of sociology and economics, modern political philosophers have handed the organization of the good society over to the economists and crowned them philosopher kings. Few economists can resist a temptation like that.

How to resurrect political philosophy

Most secular thinkers today no longer worry about objective status. As Kymlicka (2002) says, they just assert that they are humane egalitarians and debate political issues within that moral perspective. But we should all be aware of our inheritance from the debate about objective status, namely, our diminished vision of the ideal society. To reclaim their proper role, political philosophers must do two things. First, reassess the ancients to see what we have lost. Second, learn far more economics and social science than political thinkers tend to do, so we can portray an ideal society. To tame capitalism, we must go beyond theory to practice. It is not enough to debate what rules would distribute good things more fairly. It is necessary to refute in detail those who think that society is about satisfying as many human demands as possible; and suggest concrete reforms needed to humanize the market. It is also necessary to discuss the materialistic mores that underlie the market. If this seems beyond the scope of political philosophy, wait until you read Plato on the myth of the metals.

I will try to present political thinkers from Plato to the present in a way that makes their thoughts come alive. I will also append to each great thinker an account of what the social science of our day can do to resolve some of the problems they pose. Treating the great thinkers as if they were alive dictates trying to test the truth of what they say or assume. For example, when the existence of slavery is endorsed, this is an invitation to discuss whether it makes sense to rank human races in a hierarchy of merit. When Hobbes suggests that he knows how to turn anarchy into order, it is worth trying out his solution on the anarchy of the nuclear age, even if some supplementation is needed to formulate a Hobbes-type solution. Whether it is what Hobbes would have said is unknowable but still, we may have learned something illuminating from Hobbes. If at a certain point the ideas become more ours than his, so be it.

Historians of political thought hate this kind of thing. They make a meticulous effort to diagnose exactly what a great mind intended using the context of his or her time. What they do is good history. What I present would be bad history, but it is not intended as history at all. It is a contemporary mind trying to learn from great thinkers both past and

present, learn whatever would enhance the ability of a moral and political philosopher living today. This assumes of course that the greats discussed issues that are perennial. Naturally, Plato wanted to refute the arguments of the sophists of his time. However, he thought that his central problem, namely, what would make society more just and whether or not that task would compromise other great goods (such as art) would instruct all ages – and he was correct. He did not attempt to write a history of his predecessors; he did political philosophy. He attempted to show that what they said was to some degree false, and what he was saying was true.

Everyone from Plato to Nietzsche to Rawls believed this, even when their message was that certain kinds of truth were impossible. So let us have good courses on the history of political ideas but not eschew doing something more. You can teach the history of alchemy and the history of chemistry with the same rigor, but chemistry has a job that alchemy does not: it discovers truths and applies them to the contemporary world. To teach only the history of political ideas gives students the impression that the ancients are of only historical interest, a museum piece that influenced the past but has little relevance to the present.

An invitation

This book invites teachers to ask: do I wish I had taken a course of this kind as an introduction to political philosophy? Even if a lecturer answers in the affirmative, she will create her own version centered on what great thinkers she loves most and what current problems she feels those thinkers pose. The best courses are never taught out of a text but are the unique creations of a lecturer seeking the truth.

As presented, this course has won the hearts and minds of thousands of students. It represents what I have taught during a career of 60 years beginning at Eastern Kentucky State University (then a college) and continuing at the University of Otago (New Zealand) today. My courses have evolved over that time, but really they constituted one grand design. If any from the class of 1957 read this, they will recognize a core that has never altered and Otago students who have taken POLS 101 or POLS 205 or PSYC 204 will feel at home. About 5,000 students have heard these lectures over the years and I remember more of you, with affection, than you can possibly imagine.

I did not treat the classics as sacred texts frozen into immobility by the mind that wrote them or the time that gestated them; and I did not empty my mind of current knowledge that could resolve issues they left unresolved. Some of the chapters that use current studies (say Chapters 4

and 6) may try the patience of philosophers. But I want philosophy students to get used to what social science looks like.

PART I:
TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF ESSENCES

CHAPTER TWO

PREFACE TO PLATO

Plato attempted to solve the problem of ethical skepticism and therefore, I wish to clarify that problem before we address him. The skeptic claims that no one has ever shown that one must either hold a particular set of ideals (perhaps humane ideals) or be labeled non-rational, that is, remiss in the sense of being guilty of a logical contradiction or ignoring relevant evidence.

Facts and values

We can settle disputes about factual propositions, at least in theory, because we live in a shared physical universe and have discovered a method that explores it accurately. For example, assume I have 20/20 vision and a student in the back of the lecture room suffers from uncorrected astigmatism. I draw a triangle on the whiteboard and assert, "There is a triangle on the whiteboard." The student protests that he only sees a blur, and sees no reason why my visual experiences should be privileged over his. I offer a prediction: "if you come 100 paces forward, you will see a triangle." When he does, he sees that the proposition is true. My visual experiences are better predictors *for him* than his own experiences are. This is true only because we live in a shared physical universe. If we each lived in a private physical universe, where the objects of perception differed, and we could still communicate (say by mental telepathy), my whiteboard might not exist for him and I would be at a loss.

Another example highlights the importance of the fact that we know a method of exploring our common universe accurately. Take a more complicated proposition: "The world is round." For centuries, people would counter that anyone could see that it is flat. To refute them, we would have to have grasped the essentials of the scientific method: propose a theory, use logic to deduce an observation from that theory, and test it against experience.

When we look into the heavens, both the sun and moon look round, which engenders a theory: perhaps all celestial objects are round including the earth. We deduce a consequence: if the earth is round, a ship

approaching us from far out at sea will look like it is climbing a hill, which means that we will see the top of its mast first rather than seeing the whole of a tiny ship. All observations confirm this prediction. If we did see tiny ships, that evidence would falsify the theory. Note that this implies that any plausible theory about the physical world must be subject to falsification, even though falsifying experiences may never in fact occur. It also exemplifies why I say that believing that the triumph of truth over skepticism in an area means that disputes about propositions may be resolvable only in theory: both sides must be rational enough to grasp the proper method and apply it. In fact, like the inhabitants of Zion, Illinois, some people may hold that the Bible tells them that the earth is flat, and that observations to the contrary are works of the devil. Numberless disputes about facts that are resolvable in theory cannot be resolved in fact because at least one party refuses to even look at the evidence (say at environmental differences between the races).

Now what about the world of moral values? Do we all live in private moral universes, some deeply committed to humane ideals according to which all human beings are worthy of moral concern, some who feel that only whites are fully human and blacks have the status of animals more intelligent than average, some who believe that only “supermen” (say great artists) are worthy of moral concern and the rest of us can be treated like a separate species (experimented upon: I refer to Nietzsche)? Or is it a case that that these conflicting ideals exist only because some people are oblivious to a universe of moral values that exists for all of us.

As we shall see, Plato believed he had a case for ethical truth (a refutation of ethical skepticism) because he could demonstrate the existence of a realm in which there existed the perfect state of things (the just society). He also offered a method of exploring it properly (dialectic), something resembling the scientific method, which could test conflicting moral principles and tell us which of them are objectively valid. Thus all human beings either had to espouse roughly humane ideals (those we find hidden in the moral realm) or be indicted as non-rational. When I say indicted that is too strong: most of us are not intelligent enough to learn the proper method of exploring the moral realm, and should be guided by philosopher kings who can grasp dialectic. If we are not so guided, we are sunk in illusion, simply take the moral conventions of our time and place as our guides, which means we may believe in revenge, dueling, head-hunting, or worship the ideal soldier or capitalist entrepreneur.

Other thinkers have also posited a moral reality (they are called moral realists) but they are not as sophisticated as Plato. They tend to just

assume that there is a moral reality; and assert that those who do not access it properly are morally insensitive. They are called “intuitionists” and the best of them was G. E. Moore, who thought certain human acts simply possessed moral goodness and we had only to “cognize” them properly to see which ones. Intuitionists tend to say that morally insensitive people are like the student suffering from astigmatism and need better spectacles.

Needless to say, there are a lot of other people who believe they have ethical truth-tests, which are even less philosophically respectable. They may believe that they can demonstrate the existence of a God (or establish His existence by authenticated faith) who has knowledge of what principles his creatures should obey, and that there is an infallible scripture that communicates God’s will (the ten commandments). They too reject ethical skepticism in the sense that they have a truth-test that dictates a certain set of moral ideals as having objective status: ones that are valid for all humanity unless one wishes to eschew what “reason” dictates. Recall the core of belief in ethical truth: whether or not you share them, *my* principles are valid *for you* rather than *your own*.

There is another road to ethical truth we will encounter when we get to John Stuart Mill, one akin to logical demonstration of geometrical propositions. If you deny a truth of geometry, you are guilty of a logical contradiction. Perhaps we can show that failure to espouse humane ideals also implies a contradiction of some sort.

The logical consequences of ethical skepticism

Editorial writers often condemn what they call “ethical relativism,” words I have not used because so much confusion surrounds them. The substance of their message is that they are opposed to people who fail to condemn the ideals of others, ideals they consider vicious, let us say the practice of female circumcision in certain societies. If we distinguish the logical consequences of ethical skepticism from its psychological consequences, we can see that they make the mistake of identifying ethical skepticism with ethical nihilism. Here we must discuss the nihilist fallacy.

I believe that no one has ever provided a sound case for a truth-test in ethics, or a plausible demonstration that only certain ideals are logically coherent. That does not forbid the possibility that someone will. But after 2500 years of trying and failing, I believe that there are grounds for pessimism and therefore call myself an ethical skeptic. What does that commit me to, that is, what are the logical consequences of the absence of a truth-test? Three schools of thought have provided an answer.

First, my old professor, Leo Strauss, thought that the consequence was nihilism: no matter how strongly committed I am to humane ideals they are no more than whims, like a preference between soft drinks. There is no more moral value in risking your life to save a child in traffic than in pushing a child into traffic. In other words, my moral ideals are devalued *even for myself*. Dostoevsky seems to agree. He believed that only God could provide a truth-test and that when faith was gone, anything was allowable, such as Smerdyakov killing his own father. Second, there are those who contend that the only consequence is a political one: I cannot hope that reason will resolve every moral dispute and therefore politics may be necessary to resolve it. But if I am committed to my ideals that in itself logically entails that *all mankind should adopt them* (even Nietzsche). In other words, simply expressing a moral judgment uses categorical language. We do not say “you ought not to kill if you happen to think killing wrong,” we say flatly “you ought not to kill” without qualification. Wittgenstein endorsed this (if someone believes stealing is right, well they ought to believe that it is wrong). Finally, there are those like myself who say: in the absence of a truth-test, my ideals can neither pass a non-existent truth-test (and be objective or rationally binding on all), nor can they fail a non-existent truth-test (and be subjective rather like a hallucination that is bankrupt even for me).

In sum, in the absence of a truth-test, each person’s ideals are as important to himself as the depth of his commitment to them entails; but they are *neither like failed principles with truth against them, nor passed principles with truth on their side*. The novels of John Barth seem to agree (merely because something is not objective does not mean it is not important). Deeply committed to humane ideals, I have every right to judge others in accord with them. I will try to get everyone to share them because I think that would make a better world. If I hold humane ideals deeply enough, I may lay down my life on their altar.

But I cannot tell the anti-humane that they ought to exchange their ideals for mine in the rational sense of ought. Ethical skepticism forbids that. I can try to change them, however, by altering their life experiences and hope that this will alter their character, what Marx called praxis. Martin Luther King did this in the American south. In fact, there was a rational case against those who held racist ideals, but reason was not their strong suit. Therefore, he exhibited blacks behaving in a way that biased whites did not think blacks could behave. Blacks showed that they could organize a complex car pool to get to work, that they had the self-discipline to boycott the busses that humiliated them, that they could suffer violence without retaliation. In other words, they showed maturity of mind

and character. When active in the South about 1960, I heard whites say, “I don’t know that I could behave as they are doing.” And it never occurred to me to sacrifice my ideals simply because they had not passed a truth-test.

Most would concede as self-evident that ethical skepticism forbids saying to Nietzsche that he ought to adopt humane ideals in the *rational* sense of ought. We cannot say something like “You ought to accept that the world is round, or admit that you are blind to reason.” But can we not use a *moral* ought to condemn Nietzsche as a person? Can we not say, following Wittgenstein (1965), that you ought to accept humane ideals or you are morally remiss?

Well, we can but the words have been robbed of all their normal meaning. Words are meant to communicate a message and the message we are sending Nietzsche is an invitation to go crazy. Imagine he did respond by saying, “well, all right, I accept humane ideals.” He does this despite his deep commitment to elitist ideals, the prerogatives of supermen to use herd men to achieve great things. In tamely jettisoning his ideals, we would think that he had literally lost his mind. It would be like agreeing that we would abandon deep commitments at the toss of a coin: heads we will both accept humane ideals, tails we will both accept elitist ideals. “Ought” implies “can.” You do not tell an injured sprinter that he ought to run 100 meters in 10 seconds unless you have already cured him. You cannot tell Nietzsche he ought to accept humane ideals unless you have already altered him, used praxis to expose him to behavior in ordinary people he would admire (lots of luck).

We can keep saying, “Everyone ought to adopt humane ideals” as a message addressed to fellow humanists of course, perhaps to boost our morale. Just as Nietzsche can say to his devotees, “You ought to adopt elitist ideals.” But addressing these messages to the opposite camp would be silly and irritating. Nietzsche and I would do better to each get into his own phone booth, phone himself, and shout into his own ear; “All humankind should adopt humane ideals/elitist ideals” as the case may be.

The psychological consequences of ethical skepticism are a different matter. Every individual has their own peculiar psychology and it is a purely empirical question as to how they react to certain events. When people lose their faith in God, some feel that life has no more meaning, and others reconcile themselves to the notion that humankind must endow their existence with whatever meaning it has. When people become ethical skeptics and face the fact that humane ideals have no objective status, some may be utterly demoralized, and others content that their ideals express their deepest selves even though those ideals are not something

that have passed an impersonal truth-test. I will say more about this later by disclosing a darker side to ethical truth-tests. But for now, the point is that the psychological consequences of giving up beliefs in objectivity vary from person to person.

There is a supplementary point: one's psychological reaction to the loss of objectivity should not be occasioned by bad thinking about its logical consequences. If you thought that God becoming non-objective logically coerced you into believing in an omnipotent devil, anyone would be daunted. If you thought that humane ideals losing objective status logically coerced you into nihilism, you would be as horrified as Leo Strauss. But when you see that they become neither objective nor subjective, but merely non-objective, you may feel better. You still have every right to live according to your humane ideals as an affirmation of who you really are and try to convert others. You simply cannot tell those with conflicting ideals that they "ought" to adopt your ideals in the normal sense of the word--unless you have already found a way to re-make them in your image.

Confusion about ethical skepticism

Using the term "moral relativism" causes confusion about what ethical skepticism entails. The latter has to do with epistemological status, whether either humane ideals or certain anti-humane ideals can claim an advantage in terms of rationality. It does not imply anything about the content of our ideals, or their flexibility, or their mutability, or their certainty. The best way to dismiss confusion is to pose a series of questions.

Must an ethical skeptic tolerate all of the conflicting ideals, ranging from the benevolent to the cruel, that we find in various societies? Must we treat good and evil as "culturally relative" in the sense of being non-judgmental about the mores of different peoples? The answer is no. An ethical skeptic with humane ideals can condemn female circumcision either in Belgium or Eritrea. There is nothing about ethical skepticism that automatically drains the content of humane ideals of their goal of alleviating unnecessary suffering. You are free to determine whether eliminating female circumcision in a pre-industrial society would cause other consequences that would be counterproductive (shatter the whole fabric of society) or could be done without cultural disaster. You are not frozen into cross-cultural neutrality.

Can someone without anti-humane ideals be a believer in ethical truth? Of course: they may believe that they have a case for a truth-test

that vindicates elitist ideals. Ethical skepticism has to do with the status of ideals in the light of rationality; it does not discriminate between ideals in terms of their content.

Can someone say “at times it is right to tell the truth, at other times it is right to lie” and be a believer in ethical truth? Yes, virtually all ethical systems accept that consequences count and therefore, incorporate flexibility. They make exceptions to broad ethical principles according to the circumstances. This is true no matter whether you think your ethics is vindicated by a truth-test or not. It is rarely right to lie to a friend or loved one. When a President wants to get members of Congress to vote for a higher minimum wage, some flattery is legitimate. In a crisis that might lead to a nuclear war, he would be obliged to lie if that could defuse the situation. In the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy wanted to give Khrushchev a face-saving expedient for backing down. He made a promise he was not sure he could keep: to remove US missiles from Turkey (on Russia’s border). Fortunately, he was subsequently able to secure Congressional approval, but that was by no means certain at the time. There are ethical systems that allow no flexibility of course: rigid adherence to the Ten Commandments; and Kant thought it was never right to lie, although even he allowed some equivocation when courtesy demanded it.

Must someone assert that they have a final and certain set of moral principles in order to believe in ethical truth? No, it is only necessary to believe that a truth-test gives you sufficient knowledge to label some ethical positions as failed and commend others as being on the right track. In *The Republic*, Plato believed he had sufficient knowledge of the perfect state of human society to condemn Thrasymachus’s concept of justice, and to paint a tentative picture of what a good society would look like. But he allowed for the fact that he might learn more (about The Chief Good) and that this would allow him to do a better job. Aristotle believed that human history thus far indicated that a certain kind of society maximized human potential; but since history is open-ended, we may never have final and certain ethical knowledge. Even scientific theories are only tentative and probable. The scientific method provides a truth-test that falsifies certain theories and approves others as being on the road to knowing the real world. But the latter may have to give way to better theories, and it may be that scientific knowledge will never become final and certain.

The quest for ethical objectivity

The possibility of using reason to settle disputes rather than having to resort to politics, and the possible psychological consequences of skepticism, may seem to dignify the determination of Western philosophers over the last 2,500 years to find a truth-test or demonstration that vindicates humane ideals. However, we will have to wait for the end to make a final assessment. Let us begin by seeing what the greatest philosopher of our civilization can teach us. As Alfred North Whitehead said, all of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes on Plato.

CHAPTER THREE

PLATO AND THRASYMACHUS

To begin with Plato (425-347 BC) is sad because the best comes at the very beginning. Thanks to the passage of time, later thinkers may have come closer to the truth than Plato, but none have created anything so beautiful. Once every part of *The Republic* is understood in the context of the whole, it has an austere beauty akin to the highest kind of sculpture. It seems incredible in this day of mass education that some people go to their graves without ever having learned to love Plato.

We cannot be certain that Plato was blessed with the premier intellect of our civilization. Pythagoras may have matched him: he reduced the pitch of a note to the length of the plucked string. This was the first time anyone showed that the qualitative distinctions we make in everyday life could be reduced to quantity: two notes have a very different sound; we can measure the length of a plucked string. You all know that today we can reduce the differences between the colors we see to the wavelength of light. In other words, Pythagoras began what was to become science. He was so admired that his followers formed a brotherhood that became a political force and ruled Greek colonies in Italy. Unfortunately, they banned the eating of beans. As Bertrand Russell says, the populace maddened by their hankering after beans rose up and overthrew them.

Plato also tried to influence politicians for the better but was even less successful. He tried to turn Dionysius the tyrant of Syracuse into a philosopher, but Dionysius got tired of him and sold him into slavery (he was rescued). There is a legend that he was a champion wrestler and that the name Plato is a nickname, the Greek equivalent of “flat” or broad, referring to his broad shoulders. I join many classical scholars in doubting this. There is nothing about his athletic achievements in Plato’s dialogues.

The preliminary definitions of justice

Plato summarizes his case for ethical truth in *The Republic*. He speaks through the mouth of Socrates, his teacher. He and three others are at the home of Cephalus, an elderly, retired businessman. Socrates asks him

whether old age has certain consolations. Cephalus replies that wealth can offer old age the solace of having lived a just life. But this implies that he knows what justice really is. Thus, Cephalus offers the first definition of justice: he says that his money made it easier for him to tell the truth, pay his debts, and do his civic duty by sacrificing to the gods.

It is immediately shown that he cannot universalize this criterion of justice, that is, he is unwilling to apply it to hypothetical situations drawn from real life. For example, he agrees that one should not return a borrowed weapon to a friend who has gone mad and also that there are exceptions to truth telling. The subtlety of Plato's sense of humor is exhibited when Cephalus, undeterred by the fact that his criterion of justice lies in ruins, goes off to act on it by sacrificing to the gods (*Republic*, i, 331). Cephalus represents a pre-philosophical member of the older generation of Plato's day. He is a typical decent person who unthinkingly answers the question "What is justice?" by giving examples from the code of an Athenian gentleman. Setting aside its other defects, his method, citing examples from the conventions of one's time and place, could provide a criterion in accord with true justice only by an astonishing piece of luck. It is as if we asked a medieval knight what justice was, and he said, "Taking only one-tenth of my serf's crops, fighting duels whenever challenged, and defending the honor of my lady."

Polemarchus, who is Cephalus's son and heir, becomes heir to the argument. He says that justice is giving each person his or her due. To avoid the implication that one should return a weapon to a friend gone mad, he adds that what is due to one's friends is the beneficial and what is due to one's enemies is the harmful. This is translated into benefiting the good and harming the wicked (because a wicked friend would be no friend at all). But this criterion is nonoperational until we know who is really good and who is really evil. It also raises the question of whether it is ever right to harm anyone, even the wicked, particularly if that will worsen their character (*Republic*, i, 331-335). Polemarchus did not intend his criterion of justice to degenerate into the punitive Old Testament concept of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but he was betrayed by its empty generality.

His method, the opposite of that of Cephalus, is equally defective. The assumption is that an ideal of justice is defective unless it can be used to order a human society because that is the job of justice. Just as you cannot do that by listing examples of supposed just acts, because this will always omit areas of human behavior we wish to regulate, you cannot do it by leaping prematurely to a concept so broad that it is non-operational. Polemarchus's definition leaves open the question: what is due to whom?

That question can be answered only by a psychology that classifies people and a sociology that classifies social roles, so that the proper person can be matched with the proper role; plus a criterion of goodness that ensures you are contemplating a good rather than a debased human society.

Thrasymachus offers the first definition of justice with a serious claim to be operational, one so powerful that it threatens to marginalize Plato's own. He anticipates the methodology of modern social science, that is, the methodologies of cross-cultural anthropology and comparative politics. He has surveyed a variety of human societies, including democracies and tyrannies, and found they have no ethical principles in common. However, he can offer an empirical generalization: they were all ordered by the struggle for power. This struggle divides society into winners and losers. The winners write the legal code, which defines as "right" what is in their own interest and the losers are told to honor it. There is no true right or wrong operating at all, of course. It is just that the rulers have the power to label the weak "wrongdoers" if they break the law (*Republic*, i, 338-339).

The two challenges

Thrasymachus presents Plato with a dual challenge. First, if reason defined as the scientific method is the only road to knowledge, it discloses no ethical truth. Second, even if there were such a thing as true justice, it would be purely academic. In the real world, politics is the ordering principle of human society, and ethics plays no role. So-called justice is rule in the interest of the stronger. It is no more or less than the principle of might makes right. However, before Plato defends himself, he subjects Thrasymachus's own position to critique.

Preliminary arguments

Initially, Plato uses ordinary non-truth-test arguments against Thrasymachus. The latter is unwilling to face up to some of the consequences of his principles in practice. Many political actors, Hitler for example, were skilled at winning power but ruled in a way destructive of their own interests. Is anyone really bound to help them destroy themselves and often the rest of society with them? Thrasymachus responds that his ideal ruler would know not only how to achieve power but also how to use it in his or her own interest. So power is not enough. It must be accompanied by knowledge or wisdom, if only the amoral wisdom of enlightened self-interest. And if the ruler must be knowledgeable, that suggests analogies