

January 1930

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Recommended Citation

F. L. Grant, Rambling Comments on Plato's Republic, 7 Dicta 15 (1930).

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RAMBLING COMMENTS ON PLATO'S REPUBLIC

(PLATO 428-347 B. C.)

By F. L. Grant of the Denver Bar

LAWYERS have always been interested in Plato's Republic because it was an attempt by one of the most famous philosophers of all times to set forth his views of an ideal state of society, its organization and method of government.

In order to understand Plato's Republic it is necessary to go back to Socrates because Plato's philosophy was based largely upon the philosophy of his teacher, Socrates. Socrates is described as having been very homely, with large head, flat nose, squatty body, but because of his unassuming simplicity he was beloved by his pupils and those with whom he came in contact. He wore uncouth garments, and so far as history records never seemed to have had any occupation or business, and yet he never seemed to worry. How he lived nobody seemed to know; he never worked and took no thought of the morrow. He was always a welcome guest away from home, but not so welcome in his own home, because it was said he neglected his wife and children, and from his wife's point of view he was a "good for nothing". Nevertheless she remained loyal to him throughout his life.

Socrates was very modest and unassuming in his knowledge. He frequently said, "One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing;" also, "That philosophy begins when one begins to doubt those beliefs which one had never before doubted."

For eight years Plato had lived in the greatest intimacy with Socrates as his teacher and Plato's works show that his whole subsequent life was influenced by it. Following the death of Socrates in 399 B. C. Plato devoted himself to philosophy, and largely along the paths of inquiry which Socrates had opened to him.,

The Republic is written in a conversational style covering ten chapters, with Socrates as the principal interlocutor, generally expounding Plato's own views, in conversations held

with different individuals, principally Glaucon and Adeimantus, brothers of Plato, with an old man named Cephalus and his son Polemarchus, and with a sophist named Thrasymarchus.

According to the Republic Socrates went about presenting unto the human mind and discussing all kinds of abstract questions such as "What is justice?" "What is truth?" "What is religion?" "What are Morals?"

To show that human nature has not changed greatly in the last 2500 years let me quote the following conversation which Socrates (according to Plato) addressed to his pupil Glaucon:

"Do you think it at all less scandalous, when a man not only consumes the greater part of his life in courts of law as plaintiff or defendant, but actually has the vulgarity to plume himself upon this very fact, boasting of being an adept in crime, and such a master of tricks and turns, of manoeuvre and evasion, as always to be able to wriggle out of the grasp of justice, and escape from punishment, and that for the sake of worthless trifles, not knowing how much nobler and better it were to order his life as never to stand in need of a sleepy judge." (Davies & Vaughan's Translation, page 101).

Philosophy in those days was taught not from books but while walking about and in conversation. Socrates would have his pupils with him and while walking about through the groves and parks of Athens would discuss with them the philosophy of life. Socrates died because he taught a philosophy that was contrary to the accepted views of his time. Jesus died because he taught a doctrine contrary to the accepted views of his time. It has always seemed strange that Jesus received so severe a punishment for such a seemingly slight offense, and yet 400 years before Socrates had met his death for the same reason. Plato likewise would have met a similar fate had he not concluded about then on the suggestion of friends, that it was a good time to leave Athens and visit other places. So he withdrew to Megara and then started on his travels through Egypt and Asia, from which places he did not return for twelve years. When he returned to Athens about 388 B. C. he taught philosophy for about forty years, and like Socrates received no fees for his teachings, and taught, it is supposed, chiefly through conversation.

He established a kind of open air school in a grove which had belonged to a man named Academos, and which was therefore called the Acadameia or Academy.

Durant says: "Woe to him who teaches men faster than they can learn. Socrates taught that the state should be governed by its wisest men; that the mob, the great mass, are hopelessly incapable of governing. He proclaimed the right of free thought and the right to differ from the accepted thought of his day, and his life was the penalty, and Athens humiliated and disgraced herself by his trial and death."

Plato whose original name was Aristocles, but changed to Platon or Plato, presumably because of the unusual breadth of his shoulders, had been brought up in comfort. He was the son of parents of considerable means. He was handsome, vigorous, and a great athlete. He was probably twenty or twenty-two, when he first met Socrates. He was twenty-eight when Socrates died. He loved Socrates dearly and once afterwards said: "I thank God that I was born Greek and not barbarian, freeman and not slave, man and not woman, but above all that I was born in the age of Socrates."

Plato was deeply affected by those social and political conditions which brought about the death of Socrates. It filled him with a hatred of democracy more intense than was bred into him by his aristocratic boyhood. The absorbing topic of his life was to find a method whereby the wisest might be discovered and then induced to rule. That was the primary reason for the writing of his Republic. His dialogues remain one of the great literary treasures of the world, and again drawing on Durant, the best of them "The Republic" is a complete treatise in itself covering a great range of philosophic thought, metaphysics, theology, ethics, psychology, pedagogy, politics, the theory of art, and such modern subjects as eugenics, birth control, feminism, socialism, and communism.

Socrates, according to Plato, did not believe in democracies because although beautiful in theory, they did not work out in practice; he believed that the great bulk of the people of any country were hopelessly inadequate to rule, and that in the last analysis only those properly qualified to hold office should be elected to office; that public office requires specially trained men;—just as a physician must be trained to care for

people who are sick, or shoemakers to make shoes, so must men be trained for public office. He believed that the first ten years of life should be devoted exclusively to physical training, and play and sport should cover the entire curriculum. From ten years on general education should commence, with particular stress on music and gymnastics. That as men and women advanced in years they should undergo tests or examinations, the unsuccessful ones dropping out and performing the manual labor while the successful ones, becoming fewer and fewer, should go on, studying particularly the problems of state, competing in business and learning the cold-blooded problems of business by actual contact, so that by the time they arrived at the prime of life those only who survived this process of examination and elimination would be qualified for selection as rulers of the state, they becoming the rulers automatically. Even then, however, the weeding-out process would not be complete because one would have to first fill a minor office, and enter a process of promotion before serving in the highest offices of the state and nation. These rulers were to be called guardians and one of the qualifications was that they should not own property; that what property they used should be owned in common, nor were they to receive salaries, but were to be provided with only the necessities of life; that the remuneration which would be theirs for the performance of their duties would be the honor of holding such positions. This he thinks would take away the greed for money which has always a warping and detrimental effect on the individual. Another provision was that the guardians should have no wives, but might associate promiscuously with the female guardians. Women were to be selected as guardians because of their perfection, mentally and physically, and the law of eugenics would be invoked in the procreation of posterity.

There would be no sex barrier of any kind, and if a woman showed herself more capable of administering the affairs of an office she was to receive it. When one of the pupils objected to women being given equal rights with men, Socrates replied that division of labor should be based upon ability and not sex. Children brought into the world through the union of these selected guardians would not know their

parents, but would be reared under special nurses in state nurseries. This theory by the way may seem utterly chimerical, and yet it is in force in Russia today under the Soviet Government; and while not made compulsory it is becoming a common practice in Russia for parents to have their children educated in these general nurseries, under state supervision, on the theory that these nurses are especially trained for the rearing of children and that the children get far better care and attention in this manner than they would get from ordinary parents, ignorant of how to properly train children, except possibly in the homes of the wealthy where specially trained nurses can be employed. There may be more in this theory than might appear at first blush.

Socrates, according to Plato, even provided against the accumulation of wealth in the individual, so that anyone acquiring more than four times the average possessions of the citizens would be required to relinquish the excess to the state.

Whether Plato's ideal state can ever be even approximately realized is of course open to violent discussion, and would undoubtedly require the remoulding of human nature, or at least its progressive evolution. Plato himself admits the plan would be an ideal rather than a practical working model.

The story of the Republic ends with the tale of Er, a soldier who was thought to have been killed in battle, but on the twelfth day after his supposed death, he was revived or came to life again and he then told what he had experienced during the twelve days interim and how the just were rewarded and the unjust punished, possibly as a sort of reminder to those who were just or unjust while living on this earth, of what might be expected in the hereafter.

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