

PLATO AND THE INDIVIDUAL

H. D. Rankin

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Plato and the Individual

H. D. RANKIN

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TO MY WIFE

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Foreword

This contribution to the debate about Plato's social and political views arises from a conviction that the human individual and his condition are worthy of separate study within the context of these views. Consequently I have discussed what seemed to me to be the most important environmental and social pressures upon the individual at critical stages of his life-span. I hope that the discussion will be of interest not merely to classical specialists, but to all who are interested in the problems that it treats.

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Sheffield

March 1964

The Theme of the Individual

The individual and his life-history in Plato's works will be the subject of this and the following chapters. It is not necessary to ask who the individual is in person. He is at the same time, a sociological relation (a mere part of something greater than himself), and also a strongly instinctual, sometimes rational, *zōon*, a living thing that shelters under a continuous outline.¹ He is a body and a soul which are not inseparably joined.² He is a wingless biped without horns, that lives in herds.³ For the Greeks, the individual is also *tis*,⁴ somebody or other, a person who might be referred to as a standard of average agreement or dissent about any subject: 'What would one (*tis*) say to that?' 'What would the "man in the street" say?' Unidentified though he is, *tis* is a member of society. This crepuscular *tis* has first to be an embryo, then to be born, and then to be reared. People may be society, and society may be people,⁵ but when individuals are young, and even when they mature, they are still strongly held in the grip of a collective more powerful than their oneness.

I maintain it is impossible for more than a few human beings to achieve a condition of happiness and bliss. I restrict this statement, however, to the time when we are alive. After death, there is a reasonable expectation that we shall obtain such rewards as would encourage

¹ *Epinomis* 981 e.

² *Phaedrus* 246 c.

³ Plato arrives at this (perhaps not wholly serious) definition by means of a process of *diaeresis* to taxonomic division (*Politicus* 266 e-267 c).

⁴ Possibly this indefinite pronoun *tis* (anybody, etc.) evolved from the interrogative *tis*, *ti* (who? what?, etc.). See E. Schwyzler's cautious remarks on this point (*Griechische Grammatik*, Munich 1950, Vol. II. pp. 212-13). S. mentions the Latin cognates of *tis* *tis*, *quis*? *quis*? *quis*? and refers to H. Freis' view that the same process is to be observed in Chinese (*Interrogatif et Indefini*, Paris 1940).

⁵ An Athenian army in the field is a species of *polis*, *Thucydides* VII, 77. In referring to *Athens* and other cities, there is a tendency for Greek authors not to say *Athens* or *Corinth*, etc., but *the Athenians*, *the Corinthians*, etc., that is the citizens were not subsumed under the city's name; their name was the name of the city.

us to live as virtuously as possible now and die in the same condition. In saying this, I'm not putting forward any esoteric philosophical position, but merely expressing what all of us, Greeks and non-Greeks alike, believe in one way or another. For a living creature (*zōon*), birth and first beginnings are very difficult; it must first of all endure the state of being an embryo; then it must be born; after this it must be reared and educated. It is generally acknowledged that all of these processes are attended by innumerable difficulties and hardships (*Epinomis* 973 a-974 a).

These are the words of the Athenian Stranger, the principal speaker of the *Epinomis*, and of the *Laws*. The *Epinomis* is of doubtful authenticity, but it represents very much the same spirit as that of the *Laws*, whose thirteenth book it has been thought to be.¹ If the Athenian Stranger is not actually Plato's spokesman, he is undoubtedly an acceptable enough representative of a 'Platonic' position. His mild pessimism about human life reflects the fourth century B.C. and the *Laws*, but the good hopes he extends recall three important facets of Socrates' position in the *Phaedo*: virtuous living, a contented death, and a better, more justly disposed after-world. Here in the *Epinomis* we are reminded, with a somewhat different emphasis, of the earlier 'Socratic' teaching in the *Phaedo* that virtuous living is an essential part of 'practising for death'.² Here the individual living creature, the *zōon*, is not principally a 'Socratic' soul with its gaze fixed upon the world to come, and insulated from the sufferings of this one by the transcendent power of its individual self. Here we have a creature that is subject to the biological wretchedness of man's beginnings and the painful procedures of being reared in a complicated human group. This creature, in short, is a member of society.

¹ Diogenes Laertius, III, 1, 37, seems to imply that the *Epinomis* like the *Laws* was transcribed 'from the wax', by Philippus of Opus. Proclus wished to reject the *Epinomis* but produced no evidence of its spuriousness (A. E. Taylor, *Plato, The Man and his Work*, London 1926, p. 497 f.). For a modern assessment of the evidence for and against the *Epinomis*, see A. C. Lloyd's introduction to Taylor's translation (*Philebus and Epinomis*, edit. R. Klibansky and A. C. Lloyd, Edinburgh, 1956).

² *Phaedo* 81 a.

Society, for our purposes, is the Greek *polis*.¹ How, according to Plato, did society happen? Socrates says early in the *Republic* (369 b-c), that society comes into being because mankind is not individually self-sufficient. A human individual has many different needs, and this is a sufficient motive for the association of individuals into a *polis*. The *polis* contains people who can render specialized services to the other inhabitants which the others could not so effectively execute for themselves. The minimal *polis* needs at least one each of specialists in carpentry, farming, weaving, cobbling, etc., if it is to be viable. The minimum population will be about half a dozen people. *Polis* is the name that is given to the small group of specialist workers benefiting from each other's skill. The capacity to live in such a group is characteristically human. In the dialogue which bears his name, Protagoras is represented as saying that primeval man was naked and unarmed, whereas other animals each had their respective weapons (pp. 321-2). Therefore, Zeus endowed this defenceless species with the capacity to live in groups, to be in fact what Aristotle called a 'social animal' (*zōon politikon anthrōpos*, *Politics* 1253 a). Plato was very far from accepting the Protagorean view that all men had political potentialities distinct from their ability to live in the group. As a democratizing aspect of the famous principle of Protagoras that 'man is the measure of all things',² it had little appeal for him. However, this myth of mankind's early feebleness which Plato puts in the mouth of Protagoras suggests that Plato

¹ In this and the following chapters 'society' and 'polis' will be deemed to be equivalent, and no consistent distinction between 'state' and 'society' will be observed. 'State' however may occur from time to time for the more emphatically executive and normative aspects of the *polis*. Cf. Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory*, London 1960, pp. 12-13.

² 'Measure—of the things that are, that they are, of things that are not, that they are not.' See Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin 1952, B 1, II, p. 263 6 ff. (Plato, *Theaet.* 151 e). D. Loenen contends (*Protagoras and the Greek Community*, Amsterdam 1940) that Protagoras though favourable to democracy was no 'superficial leveller', (pp. 36-37), but believed that innate characteristics could be developed towards *aretai* by the environmental influence of *paideia* (p. 30). Protagoras held also that differences in natural talent were strongly marked, and that society should recognize this by accepting the guidance and leadership of the wise man, the *sophos*. This is one of many points of correspondence between the political philosophies of Protagoras and Plato (pp. 102-3).

thought that individual man was in some sense 'prior' to society. The account of the origin of the *polis* in the *Republic* (369 b-c) suggests the same, though it is concentrated upon the individual's downright need of the physical resources of society. Later on in the *Republic* (435 e), we have a more explicit indication that this was Plato's view. 'Where else', the question is asked, 'did society get its characteristics if not from the human beings?' And we have, further, the notable analogy between the constitutional structures of cities and the dispositions of their inhabitants' souls. Plato was interested in the question: 'What kind of society?' and he was also interested in the question: 'What kind of individual?' But he did not systematically maintain a parallelism in his treatment of these questions, for his writings are not a system.

An influential spectrum of opinion has held that Plato was genuinely interested in the individual as such, while admitting that he was hostile to the raw individualist 'might-is-right' school represented by Callicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*.¹ On the other hand, it has been said that Plato was not very heartily concerned with the individual and indeed was cold or even hostile towards him. It has been suggested that Plato was not sufficiently interested in the individual to provide effective illustration of the conflict between individual and society and that consequently he glossed over and deceptively smoothed away problems of considerable urgency.² Plato's interest, it has been said, was directed towards types, and representatives of classes,

¹ E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, Bd. V, 191, pp. 364-5 (1902); Barker, op. cit., pp. 26-27; Georg E. Burckhardt, *Individuum und Allgemeinheit in Platons Politeia*, Halle 1913, p. 15, points out how particularly sharp the problem of the individual in relation to society was for an aristocrat like Plato, living in democratic Athens. John Wild, *Plato's Theory of Man*, Harvard 1946, p. 132, says: 'neither community nor individual could exist actually without the other'. Also R. B. Levinson, *In Defense of Plato*, Harvard 1953, p. 524. On page 530 he maintains that while Plato was no individualist he regarded the individual with some sympathy as: 'the ultimate reality here below'.

² Cf. Wilamowitz, *Platon, I, Sein Leben und seine Werke*, Berlin 1919, pp. 394-395; Julius Stenzel, *Platon der Erzieher*, Lips. 1928, p. 138, points out that Plato is concerned with the *trophē* of the whole organism. He is not interested in the fate of the individual as a suffering, experiencing entity. According to Warner Fite (quoted by Levinson, op. cit., p. 10), Plato cares nothing for the individual in the Christian, Kantian sense.

professions and the like, rather than towards the individual as a human being.¹ Severest of all is the view that Plato hated the human individual just as he hated the particular and the variant in the world of non-human phenomena.²

Certainly Plato believed that the philosopher's eye should be panoramic and that he should take the widest possible view of the world which it was his business to try to understand. The philosopher should study all of wisdom and not confine his attention merely to a small and restricted section of it.³ But this does not mean that he must or should feel hatred for the particular and unstable phenomena of this world. In order to find out what lies behind these variables, the philosopher must study the variables themselves. The Form-of-table may cause and permeate every transient and phenomenal table in the world, but the mere phenomenon has its part to play. At the very least, it is a pawn that has some usefulness for the philosopher in the complicated game of transcending mere phenomena and appreciating the realities that lie behind phenomena. It helps him to 'remember' the realities which he apprehended before his birth. The phenomenon is not merely a formal symbol of the 'true' and the reality which is the *eidos*, but an imitation of it, assimilated to its transcendent heavenly counterpart as far as is possible.⁴ There is a certain particularity about the 'Theory of Forms' in its earlier stages, in that each material object is taken to represent the embodiment of its particular *eidos* or Form.

There is also an emphasis upon human individuality in the literary genre that Plato uses to communicate his philosophical

¹ Paul Friedländer, *Platon*, Vol. II, ed. 2, Berlin 1954, p. 118: 'Platon sieht bei einzelne Person, selbst den Gorgias, den Alcibiades immer als Repräsentanten eines Standes, eines Alter, einer Lebensform.' This does not diminish the individuality of Plato's literary characterizations of these individuals.

² Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. I, *The Spell of Plato*, ed. 3, London 1957, pp. 103-4: 'Never was a man more in earnest in his hostility towards the individual. And this hatred is deeply rooted in the fundamental dualism of Plato's philosophy; he hated the individual and his freedom just as he hated the varying particular experiences, the variety of the changing world of sensible things.'

³ *Republic* 475 b.

⁴ *Phaedo*, pp. 100-5; Parmenides 132 a.

theories. The most colourful and dominant individual in the dialogues is Socrates. But apart from Socrates, whose eminence is so clear and whose influence (however difficult it may be to define narrowly) is so important in Plato's philosophy, there are also highly coloured characters such as Alcibiades, Callicles, Gorgias, Protagoras, Aristophanes. There are also the interesting buffoons, Dionysodorus and Euthydemus. There is the shy youth, Charmides, and the old man, Cephalus. There are many others. Plato clearly was in disagreement with the doctrines of the great sophists Protagoras and Gorgias, but he gives them a hearing which, though biased against his views, is not hostile. Thrasy-machus and Callicles he clearly regards as being politically and ethically dangerous, but their characters are delicately drawn and we obtain some notion of what kind of men they were. Their views may be dark and sinister in content and in their implications, but they themselves are human. In the presentation of their characters in the dialogue, there is something of the novelist's or dramatist's appreciation of individual human differences.

These characterizations cannot be allowed to blind us to the fact of Plato's opposition to the individualism that in his time permeated society and its constitutional engines and endeavoured to make them serve personal and narrow ends. The 'literary' individual who is given a hearing in the dialogues and who is eventually given the lie by Socrates, casts a benign but secondary light upon our main problem.¹ Plato regarded the self-seeking individual as hostile to society and characteristic of a diseased state of affairs within society. Like the glory-seekers of Renaissance Italy,² the fourth-century individualist was in part the product of a new philosophy, a broad relativism that changed the inner structure of the personality, a relativism based on the

¹ Popper's view that there was a group of great individuals, a 'Great generation' of broad-minded seekers after truth, is criticized by Levinson, pp. 17, 139, 142, 285. His main criticism is that it is a 'stage army', though (142) he is not prepared to deny its significance altogether.

² Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, English translation by S. G. C. Middlemore, London 1937, p. 75: 'to [the] inward development of the individual corresponds a new sort of outward distinction, the modern form of glory'.