

CHAPTER II

POLITICAL THOUGHT BEFORE PLATO

The great age of Athenian public life fell in the third quarter of the fifth century B C , while the great age of political philosophy came only after the downfall of Athens in her struggle with Sparta. Here, as in so many cases in history, reflection followed achievement, and principles were abstractly stated only after they had long been acted upon. The Athenian of the fifth century was not much given either to the reading or the writing of books and, moreover, even if political treatises were written before the time of Plato, not much has been preserved. Nevertheless there are clear indications that much active thought and discussion were expended upon political problems during the fifth century and also that many of the conceptions found later in Plato and Aristotle had already crystallized. The origin and development of these ideas cannot be properly traced, but the atmosphere of opinion must be suggested in which the more explicit political philosophy of the next century could evolve.

POPULAR POLITICAL DISCUSSION

That the Athenians of the fifth century were immersed in the discussion of politics need scarcely be said. Public concerns and the conduct of public affairs were their great topics of interest. The Athenian lived in an atmosphere of oral discussion and conversation which it is difficult for the modern man to imagine. It is certain that every sort of interesting political question was actively canvassed by the curious and inquiring minds of Athenian citizens. Indeed, the circumstances could hardly have been more favorable to certain sorts of political inquiry. The Greek was almost forced to think of what would now be called comparative government. Throughout the length and breadth of the Greek world he found a great variety of political institutions, all indeed of the city-state type, but still capable of very great differences. At the very least there was one contrast which every Athenian

must have heard discussed from the time he was old enough to follow conversation at all, that between Athens and Sparta, the types of the progressive and the conservative state, or of the democratic and the aristocratic state. Then in the east there was always the terrible shadow of Persia which could never be long out of any Greek's consciousness. He hardly counted it, indeed, as a genuine government, or at all events he counted it such a government as only the barbarian merited, but it formed the dark background upon which he projected his own better institutions. As his travels took him still farther afield — to Egypt, to the western part of the Mediterranean, to Carthage, to the tribes of the Asiatic hinterland — he found continually new material for comparison.

That the Greek of the fifth century had formed already a lively curiosity about the queer laws and institutions which filled his world is amply proved by the fund of anthropological lore embodied by Herodotus in his *History*. The strange customs and manners of foreign peoples form a regular part of his stock in trade. Behavior which in one country is looked upon as expressing the greatest piety and goodness is regarded in another with indifference or perhaps even with loathing. Each man naturally prefers the customs of his own country, and though there may be little in these customs which is intrinsically superior to those of another country, the life of every man must be lived in accord with some standards. Human nature needs the piety that belongs to some sort of observance. Herodotus looked with a curious and a tolerant eye, but withal respectfully, upon the strange medley that he revealed. He considers it the most certain evidence of Cambyses's madness that he despised and insulted the religious rites of other nations besides the Persians. "It is, I think, rightly said in Pindar's poem that 'use and wont is lord of all.'"¹

Even in this very unphilosophical book there is one rather startling bit of evidence of the lengths to which popular thought in Greece had gone in theorizing about government. This is the passage² in which seven Persians are represented as discussing the relative merits of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Most of the stock arguments appear: The monarch tends to degenerate into a tyrant, while democracy makes all men equal

¹ Herodotus, Bk. III, 38.

² Bk. III, 80-82.

before the law. But democracy readily becomes mob-rule and a government by the best men is certainly preferable. And nothing can be better than the rule of the one best man. This is a genuine Greek touch which Herodotus certainly did not learn in Persia. This standard classification of the forms of governments, then, was a bit of popular theorizing long antedating anything known as political philosophy. When it occurs in Plato and Aristotle it is already a commonplace which need not be taken too seriously.

In the beginnings of political thought no doubt disinterested curiosity about foreign countries counted for something, but this was certainly not the main motive. The essential condition was the rapidity with which Athenian government itself had changed and the tenseness of the struggles by which the changes had come about. At no date within the historical era had there been a time when Athenian life — or indeed Greek life — had been mainly regulated by unquestioned custom. Sparta indeed could pose as a marvel of political stability but the Athenian had perforce to take pride in progress, since not much could be said for the antiquity of his institutions. The final triumph of democracy was not much older than the political career of Pericles (the constitution itself went back only to the last years of the sixth century; and the beginning of the democracy, counting from the establishment of popular control over the courts by Solon, was less than a century older. Moreover, from Solon on the general issues of Athenian domestic politics had been the same. The underlying causes were economic and the issue was between aristocracy, dominated by the old and well-born families whose property was in land, and democracy, dominated by the interests of foreign trade and aiming to develop Athenian power upon the sea. Already Solon could boast that the purpose of his legislation was to see fair play between the rich and the poor, and this difference of interest was still for Plato the fundamental cause of disharmony in Greek government. Athenian history, and indeed the history of the Greek cities generally, had been for at least two centuries the arena of active party-struggle and the scene of rapid constitutional change.

Only occasionally is it possible to catch a glimpse that enables one to guess how intense the discussion of political questions must have been that accompanied these struggles. (In particular, the triumph of the democracy at Athens was the occasion of at least

one astonishing bit of political description which probably did not stand alone and which serves to show how well the underlying economic causes of the political changes were understood. This is the little essay on the *Constitution of Athens*, written by some disgruntled aristocrat and formerly attributed (falsely) to Xenophon.³ The author sees in the Athenian constitution at once a perfect instrument of democracy and a thoroughly perverted form of government. He sees also that the roots of democratic power are in overseas commerce and in the consequent importance of the navy which, under ancient conditions, was the typically democratic branch of the military system, just as the heavy-armed infantry was the typically aristocratic branch. Democracy is a device for exploiting the rich and putting money into the pockets of the poor. The popular courts he regards as merely a clever way of distributing pay to the six thousand jurymen and of compelling Athens's allies to spend their money in Athens while they wait to get their judicial business transacted. (Like Plato later he complains that in a democracy one cannot even tell a slave when he jostles one in the street.) It is obvious that Plato's satirical picture of the democratic state in Book VIII of the *Republic* was no new theme.

There is other evidence also that the Athenian public was no stranger to the discussion of the most radical programs of social change. (Thus Aristophanes in his *Ecclesiazusae*, which was performed about 390, was able to make a comedy out of the idea of women's rights and the abolition of marriage, which has strongly suggested a relation to the communism put forward seriously by Plato at about the same time.) Women are to oust men from politics; marriage is to be discarded, children are to be kept in ignorance of their true parents and are to be all equally the sons of their elders; labor is to be performed only by slaves; and gambling, theft, and lawsuits are to be abolished. The relation of all this to the *Republic* is obscure, since it is not known whether Aristophanes or Plato published first.⁴ But this is not the really interesting

³ Translated by H. G. Dakyns in *Xenophon's Works*, Vol. II; also by F. Brooks in *An Athenian Critic of Athenian Democracy*, London, 1912. The probable date is about 425 B.C.

⁴ Various hypotheses are discussed by James Adam in his edition of the *Republic*, Vol. I, pp. 345 ff. Communism of women might be sufficiently familiar to readers of Herodotus. See Bk. IV, 104, 180. See also Euripides, Fr. 655 (Dindorf).

point. Aristophanes seems to be lampooning not a speculative philosophy but the utopian ideas of a radical democracy. And since the primary requirement of comedy is that it should go over the footlights, his audience must have known what he was talking about. It is an obvious inference that, early in the fourth century at least, an Athenian audience found nothing incomprehensible in a thoroughly subversive criticism of their political and social system. Again Plato was not an innovator; he was merely trying to take the social position of women seriously, a serious question then as now in spite of the hare-brained treatment it may receive.

ORDER IN NATURE AND SOCIETY

It is clear, then, that active thought and discussion of political and social questions preceded explicit political theory and that isolated political ideas, of more or less importance in themselves, were matters of common knowledge before Plato tried to incorporate them in a well-rounded philosophy. But there were current also certain general conceptions, not exclusively political in their nature, but forming a kind of intellectual point of view, within which political thought developed and which for the first time it made explicit. Here too the conceptions were present and had been expressed before they were abstractly stated as philosophical principles. Such assumptions are elusive but important, for they largely determine what sort of explanations are felt to be intellectually satisfying and therefore the direction that later theories will try to take.

As was said in the preceding chapter, the fundamental thought in the Greek idea of the state was the harmony of a life shared in common by all its members. Solon commended his legislation as producing a harmony or a balance between the rich and the poor in which each party received its just due.⁵ The part which ideas of harmony and proportion played in Greek conceptions both of beauty and of morals has been too often emphasized to need repeating. These ideas appeared at the very beginning of Greek philosophy, when Anaximander tried to picture nature as a system of opposite properties (like heat and cold, for instance) which are "divided off" from an underlying neutral substance. Harmony

⁵ The poem is quoted by Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory* (1925), pp. 43 f.

or proportion or, if one prefers, "justice" is an ultimate principle in all the earliest attempts at a theory of the physical world. "The sun will not overstep his measures," said Heraclitus; "if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of Justice, will find him out." The Pythagorean philosophy in particular regarded harmony or proportion as a basic principle in music, in medicine, in physics, and in politics. In a figure of speech that still persists in English, justice is described as a "square" number. This regard for measure or proportion as an ethical quality is registered in the famous proverb, "Nothing too much." The same ethical idea in a literary form appears in Euripides's *Phoenician Maidens* when Jocasta urges her son to moderation, begging him to honor

Equality, which knitteth friends to friends,
Cities to cities, allies unto allies.
Man's law of nature is equality.

Measures for men equality ordained
Meting of weights and number she assigned.⁶

At the start, then, the fundamental idea of harmony or proportionality was applied indifferently as a physical and as an ethical principle and was conceived indifferently as a property of nature or as a reasonable property of human nature. The first development of the principle, however, took place in natural philosophy and this development reacted in turn upon its later use in ethical and political thought. In physics measure or proportion came to have a definite and somewhat technical significance. It meant that the details or the particular events and objects that made up the physical world were to be explained on the hypothesis that they were variations or modifications of an underlying substance which in essence remained the same. The contrast here is between fleeting and ever-changing particulars and an unchangeable "nature" whose properties and laws are eternal. This conception as a physical principle culminated in the formulation (late in the fifth century) of the atomic theory, according to which the unchanging atoms, by various combinations, produce all the variety of objects that the world holds.

The interest in physical nature which produced this brilliant first approximation to a scientific point of view lasted right through

⁶ Ll. 536-542 (Way's trans.).

the fifth century, but at about the middle of that century a change of interest began to make its appearance. This was a swing in the direction of humanistic studies, such as grammar, music, the arts of speech and writing, and ultimately psychology, ethics, and politics. The reasons for this change, which came to have its chief center at Athens, were in the first place a growth of wealth, an increasing urbanity of life, and the feeling that a higher level of education was needed, especially in those arts, like public speaking, which had a direct relation to a successful career in a democratic government. The instruments by which the change was initiated were those itinerant teachers known as Sophists, who made their living — sometimes a very opulent living — by offering instruction to such as were able to pay for it. But the force by which the change of interest was consummated was the tremendous personality of Socrates, supplemented by the incomparable representation of that personality in the Dialogues of Plato. This change amounted in its results to an intellectual revolution, for it turned philosophy definitely away from physical nature and toward humanistic studies — psychology, logic, ethics, politics, and religion. Even where the study of the physical world persisted, as with Aristotle, the explanatory principles were drawn largely from the observation of human relationships. Never again, from the death of Socrates down to the seventeenth century, was the study of external nature for its own sake, irrespective of its relation to human affairs and interests, a matter of primary concern to the great mass of thinkers.

So far as the Sophists were concerned, they had no philosophy; they taught what well-to-do students were willing to pay for. But none the less some of them at least stood for a new point of view as compared with the hitherto prevailing interest of philosophy in the discovery of a permanent substratum for physical change. On its positive side (this new point of view was simply humanism — the twisting of knowledge toward man as its center. On the negative side it implied a kind of skepticism toward the older ideal of a detached knowledge of the physical world.) This is the most plausible understanding of Protagoras's famous saying that, "Man is the measure of all things, of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not." In other words, (knowledge is the creation of the senses and other human faculties and so is a

strictly human enterprise. Nothing that Plato says about Protagoras justifies the notion that he meant really to teach that anything is true which anyone chooses to believe, though Plato himself thought that this was what he ought to mean. This would be, indeed, a suicidal doctrine for a professional teacher. What Protagoras presumably meant is that "the proper study of mankind is man."

If, however, it was really the object of the new humanism to set entirely aside the ways of thinking followed by the older physical philosophy, it failed utterly. What it succeeded in doing was to give a new interest and a new direction. The earlier philosophers had gradually come to conceive of physical explanation as the discovery of simple and unchanging realities to the modification of which they might attribute the changes that everywhere appear upon the face of concrete things. But the Greeks of the fifth century had become familiar — through their contacts with foreign peoples and through rapid changes of legislation in their own states — with the variety and the flux of human custom. What more natural, then, than that they should find in custom and convention the analogue of fleeting appearances and should seek again for a "nature" or a permanent principle by which the appearances could be reduced to regularity? The substance of the physical philosophers consequently reappeared as a "law of nature," eternal amid the endless qualifications and modifications of human circumstance. If only such a permanent law could be found, human life might be brought to a degree of reasonableness. Thus it happened that Greek political and ethical philosophy continued along the ancient line already struck out by the philosophy of nature — the search for permanence amid change and for unity amid the manifold.

The question remained, however, as to what form this permanent element in human life should take. What really is the unchanging core of human nature which all men have in common, whatever may be the veneer of "second nature" which habit and custom have laid over the surface? What are the permanent principles of human relationship which remain after due allowance has been made for all the curious forms in which conventionality has clothed it? Obviously, the mere presumption that man has a nature and that some forms of relationship are right and proper in no way

settles what the principle shall be. Moreover, what will be the consequence of finding it? How will the customs and the laws of one's own nation look when compared with the standard? Will it enforce the substantial wisdom and reasonableness of the traditional pieties or will it be subversive and destructive? If men discover how to be "natural," will they still be faithful to their families and loyal to their states? Thus was thrown into the caldron of political philosophy that most difficult and ambiguous of all conceptions, the natural, as the solvent for the complications, psychological and ethical, which actual human behavior presents. Many solutions were offered, depending on what was conceived to be natural. Except for the skeptics, who finally declared in utter weariness that one thing is as natural as another and that use and wont are literally "lord of all," everyone agreed that something is natural. That is to say, some law does exist which, if understood, would tell why men behave as they do and why they think some ways of doing are honorable and good, others base and evil.

NATURE AND CONVENTION

There is ample evidence that this great discussion about nature *versus* convention was spread wide among the Athenians of the fifth century. It might, of course, as frequently it has done since, form the defense of the rebel, in the name of a higher law, against the standing conventions and the existing laws of society. The classic instance of this theme in Greek literature is the *Antigone* of Sophocles, perhaps the first time that an artist exploited the conflict between a duty to human law and a duty to the law of God. Thus when Antigone is taxed with having broken the law by performing the funeral rites of her brother, she replies to Creon:

Yea, for these laws were not ordained of Zeus,
 And she who sits enthroned with gods below,
 Justice, enacted not these human laws.
 Nor did I deem that thou, a mortal man,
 Could'st by a breath annul and override
 The immutable unwritten laws of Heaven.
 They were not born to-day nor yesterday;
 They die not; and none knoweth whence they sprang.⁷

⁷ Ll. 450-457 (F. Storr's trans.). A passage in Lysias (*Against Andocides*, 10) suggests that the idea came from a speech by Pericles.