

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.

* This identification of nature with the law of God and the contrast of convention with the truly right was destined to become almost a formula for the criticism of abuses, a rôle in which the law of nature has appeared again and again in the later history of political thought. In this rôle the contrast occurs also in Euripides, who uses it to deny the validity of social distinctions based on birth, even in that critical case for Greek society, the slave:

There is but one thing bringeth shame to slaves,
The name: in all else ne'er a slave is worse
Than free men, so he bear an upright soul.⁸

And again,

The honest man is Nature's nobleman.⁹

The critical Athenian of the fifth century was quite aware that his society had its seamy side and the critic was prepared to appeal to natural right and justice as against the adventitious distinctions of convention. -

On the other hand, it is by no means necessary that nature should be conceived as setting a rule of ideal justice and right. Justice may itself be thought of as a convention having no other basis than the law of the state itself, and nature may figure as, in any usual sense, non-moral. Such a view is associated with the later Sophists who apparently found it profitable to shock conservative sensibilities by denying that slavery and nobility of birth are "natural." Thus the orator Alcidas is credited with saying, "God made all men free; nature has made no man a slave." Most shocking of all, the sophist Antiphon denied that there was "naturally" any difference between a Greek and a barbarian. The end of the fifth century was a time when the dearest prejudices of the fathers were being dissected by and for a not-too-reverent younger generation.

Fortunately something is known of the political ideas of this sophist Antiphon since a small fragment remains of his book *On Truth*.¹⁰ He asserted flatly that all law is merely conventional

⁸ *Ion*, ll. 854-6 (Way's trans.).

⁹ Fr. 345 (Dindorf); trans. by E. Barker.

¹⁰ *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, No. 1364, Vol. XI, pp. 92 ff. Also in Ernest Barker, *Greek Political Theory, Plato and his Predecessors* (1925), pp. 83 ff. The Sophist Antiphon is not to be confused with the Antiphon who led the oligarchical revolt at Athens in 411, though he was a contemporary.

and hence contrary to nature. The most advantageous way to live is to hold the law in respect before witnesses, but when one is not observed to "follow nature," which means to consult one's own advantage. The evil of breaking the law is in being seen and rests only "on opinion," but the bad consequences of going against nature are inevitable. Most of what is just according to law is against nature, and men who are not self-assertive usually lose more than they gain. Legal justice is of no use to those who follow it, it does not prevent injury or correct the injury afterward. For Antiphon "nature" is simply egoism or self-interest. But obviously he was setting up self-interest itself as a moral principle in opposition to what is called moral. The man who followed nature would always do the best he could for himself.

These fragments show clearly that the radical speculation about justice with which Plato begins the *Republic* were not the inventions of his own imagination. The argument of Thrasymachus, that justice is only "the interest of the stronger," since in every state the ruling class makes those laws which it deems most conducive to its own advantage, is quite in the same spirit. Nature is not a rule of right but a rule of strength. A similar point more elaborated is made by Callicles in the *Gorgias*, when he argues that natural justice is the right of the strong man and that legal justice is merely the barrier which the multitude of weaklings puts up to save itself. "If there were a man who had sufficient force . . . he would trample under foot all our formulas, and spells, and charms, and all our laws which are against nature."¹¹ In the same vein was the famous speech of the Athenian ambassadors to Melos in Thucydides. "Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their own nature they rule wherever they can."¹² It seems quite clear that Thucydides meant this speech to express the spirit of Athens's policy toward her allies.

Of course, the theory which identifies nature with egoism need not carry quite such anti-social implications as it seems to have in Antiphon or as Plato gives it in speeches of Callicles. Glaucon in Book II of the *Republic* develops it more moderately as a kind of social contract, by which men agree together not to do injuries, in order that they may escape injury at the hands of their fel-

¹¹ 484a (Jowett's trans.)

¹² Bk V, 105

laws. The rule would still be egoism, but enlightened self-interest might be compatible with law and justice, as the most feasible way of living together. This view, though not an invitation to lawlessness, is still not compatible with the idea that the city is a life in common. This cool way of holding a fellow citizen at arm's length until one is sure he can get as much as he gives is not in the spirit of a "community." Accordingly, Aristotle argues against it in the *Politics*,¹³ where he attributes it to the Sophist, Lycophron. Since Lycophron was a Sophist of the second generation, a pupil of Gorgias, it is possible that a sort of contract-theory — a utilitarian development of the principle of self-interest — existed early in the fourth century. At a later date this kind of political philosophy reappeared in the Epicureans.

Before the close of the fifth century, then, the contrast of nature and convention had begun to develop in two main directions. The one conceived nature as a law of justice and right inherent in human beings and in the world. This view necessarily leaned to the assumption that the order in the world is intelligent and beneficent; it could be critical of abuses but it was essentially moralist and in the last resort religious. The other conceived nature non-morally, and as manifested in human beings it was self-assertion or egoism, the desire for pleasure or for power. This view might be developed as a kind of Nietzschean doctrine of self-expression, or in its more moderate forms it might become a kind of utilitarianism; the extreme forms could become theories of a definitely anti-social complexion. Already in the fifth century, therefore, there were ideas, not as yet systematic or abstract, which contain suggestions of most of the philosophical systems which were produced in the fourth century. Perhaps it needed only that Athens should fall upon evil days, as she did at the close of the Peloponnesian War, to make her people contemplative rather than active, and to make her a "school for Hellas" in a sense of which Thucydides never dreamed.

SOCRATES

The personal agency by which suggestive ideas were turned into explicit philosophy was Socrates, and, curiously enough, all the possibilities were equally indebted to him. The profoundly ex-