

## CHAPTER III

### PLATO: THE *REPUBLIC*

The imperial ambitions of Athens perished with her defeat in the Peloponnesian War, but though her rôle was changed, her influence upon Greece, and ultimately upon the whole of the ancient world, was by no means diminished. (After the loss of her empire she became more and more the educational center of the Mediterranean world, a position which she retained even after her political independence had vanished and indeed far down into the Christian Era. Her schools of philosophy and science and rhetoric were the first great institutions in Europe devoted to higher education and to the research which necessarily accompanies advanced instruction, and to them came students from Rome and all parts of the ancient world. (Plato's Academy was the first of the philosophical schools, though Isocrates, who taught especially rhetoric and oratory, probably opened his school a few years earlier. Aristotle's school at the Lyceum was opened some fifty years later, and the two other great schools, the Epicurean and the Stoic, began some thirty years after Aristotle.

Those who have mastered the fine spontaneity, both of life and of art, in the Periclean Age can hardly avoid looking upon this academic specialization of Athenian genius as a decline. Probably it is true that the Greeks would not have turned to philosophy, at least in the manner they did, had the life of Athens remained as happy and as prosperous as it seemed to be when Pericles's Funeral Oration struck its dominant note. And yet no one can doubt that the teaching of the Athenian Schools played as large a part in European civilization as the art of the fifth century. For (these Schools mark the beginning of European philosophy, especially in its relations with politics and the other social studies.) In this field the writings of Plato and Aristotle were the first great pioneering operations of the European intellect. At the start they have only rudimentary beginnings and nothing that can properly be called a body of sciences, distinguished and classi-

fied in the way that now seems obvious. The subjects and their interrelations were in process of creation. But by the time the *corpus* of Aristotelian writings was completed in 323, the general outline of knowledge — into philosophy, natural science, the sciences of human conduct, and the criticism of art — was fixed in a form that is recognizable for any later age of European thought. Certainly no scholar can afford to belittle the advancing specialization and the higher standard of professional accuracy which came with the Schools, even though it brought something academic and remote from civic activity.

#### THE NEED FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE

Plato was born about 427 B. C. of an eminent Athenian family. Many commentators have attributed his critical attitude toward democracy to his aristocratic birth, and it is a fact that one of his relatives was prominently connected with the oligarchic revolt of 404. But the fact can be perfectly well explained otherwise, his distrust of democracy was no greater than Aristotle's, who was not noble by birth nor even Athenian. The outstanding fact of Plato's intellectual development was his association as a young man with Socrates, and from Socrates he derived what was always the controlling thought of his political philosophy — the idea that virtue is knowledge. Otherwise stated, this meant the belief that there is objectively a good life, both for individuals and for states, which may be made the object of study, which may be defined by methodical intellectual processes, and which may therefore be intelligently pursued. This in itself explains why Plato must in some sense be an aristocrat, since the standard of scholarly attainment can never be left to numbers or popular opinion. Coming to manhood at the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, he could hardly be expected to share Pericles's enthusiasm for the "happy versatility" of democratic life. His earliest thought on politics, that recorded in the *Republic*, fell just at the time when an Athenian was most likely to be impressed by the discipline of Sparta and before the hollowness of that discipline was made evident by the disastrous history of the Spartan Empire.

In the autobiography attached to the Seventh Letter<sup>1</sup> Plato

<sup>1</sup> The account of Plato's adventure in Sicily presumes the historical reliability, if not the actual authenticity, of Letters III, VII, and VIII. For this there is now ample authority.

tells how, as a young man, he had hoped for a political career and had even expected that the aristocratic revolt of the Thirty (404 B.C.) would bring substantial reforms in which he might bear a part. But experience with oligarchy soon made the democracy seem like a golden age, though forthwith the restored democracy proved its unfitness by the execution of Socrates.

The result was that I, who had at first been full of eagerness for a public career, as I gazed upon the whirlpool of public life and saw the incessant movement of shifting currents, at last felt dizzy . . . and finally saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad. Their constitutions are almost beyond redemption except through some miraculous plan accompanied by good luck. Hence I was forced to say in praise of the correct philosophy that it affords a vantage-point from which we can discern in all cases what is just for communities and for individuals; and that accordingly the human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control be led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers.<sup>2</sup> )

It is exceedingly tempting to see in this passage an important reason for the founding of Plato's School, though rather curiously the School is not mentioned in the Letter. The date must have been within a few years after the conclusion of his rather extensive travels and his return to Athens in 388. Doubtless the Academy was not founded exclusively for any single purpose and therefore it would be an exaggeration to say that Plato intended to build an institution for the scientific study of politics and the training of statesmen. Specialization had not yet reached this point, and Plato hardly thought of the need for the philosopher in politics as a need for men trained *ad hoc* in the professions of administration and legislation. He thought of it rather as a need for men in whom an adequate intellectual training had sharpened the perception of the good life and who were therefore prepared to discriminate between true and false goods and between adequate and inadequate means of attaining the true good.<sup>7</sup> The problem was an outgrowth of the distinction between nature and convention which had been before the minds of reflective Greeks during the second half of the fifth century. It was, therefore, in

<sup>2</sup> Letter VII, 325 d-326 b; L. A. Post's trans. Plato was writing in 353 B.C. The last sentence echoes the famous passage in the *Republic* (473 d) about philosophers becoming kings.