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## On Dubious Conceptions of Transcendence

### *The Politics of Transcendence: The Pretentious Passivity of Platonic Idealism*

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Plato and Aristotle are still approached with deference by many political thinkers who have not abandoned the notion of moral universality. Some of them treat Plato as the ultimate philosophical authority and even regard substantial criticisms of him as a sign of not really having understood him. Yet Plato and Aristotle are philosophers with human flaws, and their weaknesses, too, have influenced Western political philosophy and practice. It is possible to argue, specifically, that certain dubious tendencies in Greek philosophy, especially in Plato, have deeply affected the Western way of thinking about political morality, even among philosophers who disagree with them. Those same tendencies may help explain the strong prejudice against the notion of moral universality in modern political thought. One reason for revisiting Plato and Aristotle is to separate persuasive from questionable elements in their legacy and to remove obstacles to a reconsideration of the issue of moral universality.

This article and the one that follows challenge widely held assumptions. It may be appropriate to remind readers that HUMANITAS is always open to publishing scholarly responses to articles in its pages.

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Present-day admirers of the Greeks typically assume that criticisms of Plato and Aristotle must stem from nihilism or relativism. Most of their critics, as well as academia in general, do indeed reject the idea of a universal good for politics. According to long-dominant liberal theory, routinely violated in practice, the state should not exhibit any moral preferences but should be a neutral umpire among contending interests, a view that flatly contradicts the Greek ethos. Most academic liberals today recognize no moral standard beyond subjective desires and claim to want virtually endless tolerance of differences (though this tolerance turns out to be highly selective). Liberals of this type and the Greeks seem to hold philosophically incompatible views, the one camp accepting and the other rejecting a universal moral good.

But questioning the Greeks need not imply a refusal to accept the idea of moral universality. One can criticize Plato in particular because his political idealism has fostered a fundamental misunderstanding of moral good in politics. In the Western world, reflecting on this flaw may be one of the preconditions for gaining a wider hearing for the notion of moral universality and for elaborating a morally sensitive, yet non-ethereal, non-sentimental and realistic political ethics. So profound has been the influence of Plato's political idealism that it continues to affect even thinkers who reject the notion of a higher good for politics.

### ***Tensions within the Republic***

For many admirers of the Greeks, the greatest single work of political ethics is Plato's *Republic*. Over the centuries, its way of connecting politics with the transcendent has cast a powerful spell. The truly just society, Plato proclaims, cleanses government of unworthy ambition. It establishes rule by the wise and virtuous. One of the reasons for the appeal of the dialogue is surely that the reader who feels the lure of its vision is able to think that *he* or *she* must surely have a noble soul for identifying with such a pure and lofty aspiration.

It would be incorrect to describe Plato's great dialogue as the quintessentially Greek work of political philosophy, for not only does it express Plato's opposition to much of Greek culture, but Aristotle, the other giant of Greek thought, has weighty criticisms of it; his philosophy is in important respects quite different from

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Plato's. But the *Republic* helped shape Western thinking about political morality. The dialogue is at the bottom of much of the wisdom of the Western mind but also of some of its more unfortunate features.

*Platonic  
transcendence  
separate from  
all particular-  
ity.*

One very old tendency in Western philosophy is to approach morality, including public virtue, ahistorically. Thinking of that kind conceives of the standard of political good as existing somehow apart from all particular social circumstances, apart from everything individual and changeable: That with reference to which historical life should be morally assessed cannot itself be historical. An important aspect of that tendency of thought can be traced back to the *Republic*. In this dialogue Plato contends that politics should be tied to the transcendent Good, a reality that he understands as lying entirely beyond the world of concrete particulars, as having no essential, integral relation to man's historical existence. A similar view of moral universality has been held by many over the centuries who have *rejected* the idea of universality. The inclination to think of universality as abstract and disembodied may be one of the reasons why the notion of a higher, more than subjective and transitory norm for life and politics has often seemed hard for philosophers to accept, especially since the nineteenth century.

But Plato's political idealism has many admirers even today, and indirectly it may be more influential than generally assumed. Plato's thought will be examined here to assess its general significance for understanding politics and morality. So that the analysis will not appear one-sided, it should be pointed out from the beginning that in the *Republic* as well as in the entire Platonic corpus a more historically grounded strain of thought competes with ahistoricist universalism: Reliance on immediate human experience contends with idealistic avoidance of the concrete world. The complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the dialogue prevents easy categorization and explains why over the centuries philosophers of very different types have been attracted to it. Taking note of the two mentioned orientations and examining the tension between them will help identify the dubious element in Platonic idealism and may shed light on the disagreement about political virtue in later philosophy.

Plato tries to show, on the one hand, that politics ought to conform to a transcendent standard of perfection. He expends

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great energy on the architecture of the just *polis*. On the other hand, he expresses virtual despair that what ought to be can ever be realized. Politics probably will always remain the sort of thing it has been—hence the melancholy of the dialogue. Despite the radical discrepancy between what Plato takes to be just and what has existed historically, he does not seriously consider that something might be fundamentally wrong with his conception. That the just republic is probably unattainable is of no consequence. What is ideal must be kept before the mind's eye to give proper direction to the soul and to politics.

For Plato, adjusting the understanding of political morality to politics as we know it in history would be a betrayal of everything high and admirable. Morally noble people take their stand with true justice, the discipline that orients the soul and society to the *Agathon*, the transcendent Good. Only people of inferior character would be willing to accommodate degrading reality. Innumerable readers of Plato have found his moral idealism and his refusal to compromise indicative of complete dedication to the Good. But is it? A case can be made that, by associating political morality with an unattainable, ahistorical standard and urging those who aspire to virtue to contemplate the ideal rather than the possible, Plato falls prey to a romantic abstractionism that *undermines* political morality.

*Political idealism may undermine morality.*

What might be called Plato's hypermoralism is connected to a methodological tendency to speculate in the abstract, apart from life and politics as known in actual human self-experience. Yet that tendency is far from always dominant in the *Republic*. For some purposes Plato makes repeated use of historical, experiential evidence. Most of his comments about human nature and politics are rooted in observations of concrete life—life at its best and worst as well as in its ordinariness and mediocrity. Human existence presents to the philosopher a broad range of potentialities. The contrast in the dialogue between life and politics as historically known and the alleged ideal is related to a methodological tension between relying on the facts of actual human experience and discounting or setting them aside.

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### *An Experiential Foundation for Morality*

The arguments of the *Republic* that may be considered most vivid and plausible rely heavily on historical-experiential evidence. Plato's insights regarding the moral terms of human existence are for the most part a result of careful examination of actually lived life. Opinions vary regarding Plato's purpose in designing the ideal republic, but it is generally agreed that he sees political good as having only one possible source: individual souls shaped by the moral-intellectual discipline of justice. The *polis* cannot become just without just individuals. In one of his more questionable arguments, Socrates even goes as far as to explain the structure of a just *polis* as but an enlargement of the structure of a just individual soul. To Plato as to Aristotle it would have made no sense to differentiate sharply between public and private life in the manner dear to so many liberals today. According to a familiar modern mantra, as long as a person's private life does not interfere with the person's public duties, it should be of no interest to others. Private vice may be compatible with, or, in the view of some, actually correlated with, public virtue. For the Greeks, by contrast, a person's character is all of a piece. The individual who acts in private life is morally the same as the one who acts in public life. An inability to subject appetites to moral control is a flaw of character that is bound to manifest itself also in public life, even if rhetorically disguised or moderated by external restraints like law. Rapacity may manifest itself in so-called "private" life as voraciousness about food and drink or as sexual promiscuity, but it is equally likely to appear in so-called "public" life, for example, as a ruthless or otherwise inordinate pursuit of political self-interest, wrapped of course in high-sounding rhetoric. The kind of virtue that advances the common good presupposes an ability to restrain the self-indulgence of the ego.

To see truth in this Greek view is not the same as to accept Plato's idealistic hypermoralism. One may concede that a person of defective character might rise to morally admirable political action, as any human being can display an unexpected nobility of spirit, and still recognize that either depravity or morality is not confined to a sharply defined sector of the personality but permeates the self, "private" and "public." The distinction between those two spheres does not correspond to some actual di-

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vision within concrete life. However useful it may be for some practical purposes, the distinction is ultimately artificial to the philosophical mind. Plato's awareness of the intimate and organic connection between the individual soul and politics is an example of his attending to the dynamic, complex reality of lived life rather than setting abstract and reifying definitions and categories in its place.

According to the Greek view, those interested in the health and well-being of society have every reason to be concerned about the character-formation and other education of the individuals in it. In the *Republic* Plato describes protracted education and self-discipline as necessary prerequisites of public virtue. The heavy emphasis on physical education in the early stages might seem out of place in a scheme designed to promote the rule of reason, but gymnastics, besides making the body the supple instrument of the soul, helps train the will. It teaches the basic self-discipline without which a higher and more demanding moral-intellectual discipline is not conceivable. For Plato, sound rationality is indistinguishable from self-mastery and from the personality's becoming ethically oriented. Socrates speaks of the need "to ensure that only men of steady and disciplined character shall be admitted to philosophic discussions."<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's concern about the sound habituation and education of the young is, among other things, another example of the classical assumption that what is today called "private" life has social-political consequences. The "private" and the "public" are for the Greeks ultimately different manifestations of the same ethos.

*"Private" and  
"public"  
different  
aspects of the  
same ethos.*

One does not have to agree with Plato and Aristotle in all specifics on this issue—they disagree among themselves—to recognize the large and important element of truth in their understanding of the sources of political morality. In fact, it is entirely consistent to endorse this insight and to insist that the two Greeks, especially Plato, do not sufficiently understand and appreciate individual personhood and the need for individual freedom and privacy. Sometimes when modern liberalism tries to deny the close relationship between private and public morality, it may be doing so out of a desire that is in itself admirable, to protect

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books; 2nd. rev. ed., 1987), 353 (539d).

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privacy, but it nevertheless reveals some of its most glaring deficiencies: letting simplistic constructs hide the subtle interconnections of human life itself. From a generally classical point of view, some types of modern liberalism look like self-serving ideology, sometimes even like rationalizations for debauchery.

*Plato often  
relies on  
human self-  
experience.*

Most of what is persuasive in the *Republic* can be attributed to Plato's giving weight to the evidence from man's historical existence, to his reflecting on human self-experience—not just the ordinary experience of average people, but the *extraordinary* experience of individuals who have broadened and deepened their life through exceptional moral-intellectual effort. Who can read Plato's account of the imperfect regimes and the personality types that dominate them—all of these understood against the background of the aristocratic form of self-mastery—without recognizing real life and admiring Plato's discernment of permanent features of human nature and politics? Timarchic man, oligarchic man, democratic man, tyrannical man, and aristocratic man in so far as the portrait is drawn from general experience rather than from idealistic projections—these personalities, defined by their type of self-discipline or lack thereof, constitute a phenomenology of the human. Argue with Plato's terminology, parts of his descriptions, or with how he relates personalities to particular societies, and you are still looking deeply into real potentialities of human nature and politics. The author is not speculating in the abstract but is philosophically articulating concrete experience—his own and that of humanity in general.

That these parts of the *Republic* should be among the most engaging and perceptive is paradoxical in that Plato, in his official theory of knowledge, puts no stock in the world of particular phenomena. There can be no knowledge, he claims, of what is particular and historical. Concrete phenomena belong to the unintelligible flux. Knowledge is possible only of ahistorical universals, of "forms" or "ideas." The rest is shadows and unreality. Luckily, Plato thoroughly violates his own epistemology in philosophical practice, his account of the imperfect regimes and characters being a striking example. He conveys universality through particularity.

Luckily, in the *Republic* Plato also violates the disdain for poets and imagination that he expresses in the same work. Much of the dialogue is itself poetical in the broad sense. The *Republic*

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without its literary dimension would have been an entirely different and probably far less influential work. Try picturing it without the central figure of Socrates, the other discussants, the dialogue form, and, more generally, without its experiential texture. Imagine in its place a densely argued, prosaic philosophical text. The *Republic* owes much of its power to Plato's bringing insight alive through concrete imagery.

Much of Plato's description of the human moral predicament is anchored, then, in familiarity with the potentialities of actual human life. His emphasis on the tension between higher and lower in the soul is not based in abstract theory or definition; his rendition of the tension has the authority of something concretely experienced—although philosophers can certainly disagree about the precise nature of this dualism. A moral nihilist will simply deny the distinction between good and evil and the existence of *eudaimonia*, the special harmony of happiness, but the nihilist is here not up against abstract ideas merely but against the experience that they express.

*An element of moral realism.*

Because of this rootedness in the concrete and the actual Plato could not espouse the kind of moral utopianism that characterizes Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Plato's phenomenology of the human soul includes the potential for evil, the latter being most starkly and vividly represented in the *Republic* by the diabolical "master passion," which consumes tyrannical man. While Rousseau simply decrees the goodness of man and blames evil on external causes, Plato knows—how, if not from direct experience of self and humanity in general?—that man's central problem is the struggle within between higher and lower. Favorable social-political conditions can assist but never take the place of the proper self-mastery. Plato may be criticized for having an overly rationalistic conception of how this ordering of the soul may be accomplished but not for fundamentally distorting man's moral predicament.

### *Society Transformed*

Plato succumbs to a different and highly questionable strain of reasoning and imagination when designing the ideal republic and discussing who should rule. He does not merely contemplate new possibilities for politics, which is to be expected of anyone

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trying to improve upon whatever exists, but proceeds in sometimes flagrant disregard of what is historically known of man and society. His doing so is perhaps consistent with his epistemological disdain for history, but it runs contrary to his taking his bearings by actual human life in so much else of his writing. He is torn between respecting and spurning this evidence.

Already Aristotle objected to Plato's disregarding too much the evidence of experience. Aristotle complains, for example, that Plato is perversely preoccupied with the complete unity of the *polis*, that his proposal for having the Guardians share spouses and children will spread human affections too thin, that abolishing private property for them is counterproductive, and so on. But there is a larger, more general tendency in Plato's political idealism that deserves as much attention as the specifics of his plan for remaking society.

Plato insists that the *polis* must be ruled by the very best, suited to the task by moral-intellectual merit, by a special form of spirituality. Lengthy and elaborate education and self-education and testing will prepare them. Only those who survive "continuous trials in childhood, youth, and manhood unscathed, shall be given authority."<sup>2</sup> If the aristocratic men and women do not take charge of the state, the task will fall to unworthy men, which is to betray the principle of justice. Only the aristocratic philosophers can be fully committed to the good of the whole, for only their souls are turned to the very source of goodness. Because they are devoted to the universal rather than the particular and are rising above petty loyalties and jealousies, it is natural that they should live without private property, sharing everything. Distractions from the universal good should be minimized.

Plato does not conceive of the *Agathon* as a personal deity, and the philosopher-rulers do not precisely constitute a priestly caste, but it seems appropriate to view the ideal republic as a form of theocracy. The *polis* is to be governed by those who are closest to the divine, which is seen as a force pulling the individual away from ordinary life. One may view the Guardians proper as members of a kind of religious-philosophical order. Plato's view of how the transcendent affects the soul resembles how in Christianity God calls some few individuals to a life of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 180 (414).

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otherworldliness or holiness. Persons of that kind turn from worldly concerns and live apart from others. They manifest their longing for the divine by living communally without personal property. Despite the obvious differences between Plato's philosopher rulers and the Christian *religiosi*, the similarities indicate a commonality in regard to the understanding of how the highest human longing affects the relationship to others and the world.

But there is a sharp difference between Plato and the mainstream of historical Christianity with respect to politics. While Plato would put individuals with the otherworldly longing to govern the *polis*, Christianity traditionally has steered them away from politics as being unsuitable to or even incompatible with their special calling. Making the distinction between the things of God and the things of Caesar, Christianity has argued that different orientations and abilities are proper to each. It was early in his papacy that Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this tradition and reminded priests and religious that they do not belong in politics, at least not as political practitioners.<sup>3</sup>

*Christianity separates things of God from things of Caesar.*

A central reason for separating the religious and the priests from politics is that in Christianity it has been considered hard to reconcile complete loyalty to the ways and needs of the divine kingdom with handling the ways and needs of worldly government. Thus Aquinas points out the importance of keeping "spiritual and earthly things . . . distinct."<sup>4</sup> Priests and statesmen may serve the same ultimate end, but their different primary functions call for different emphases and abilities. According to Dante, the "supreme pontiff" is entrusted with the task of leading men to "life eternal"; the emperor is concerned with their "temporal happiness." There is a division of ends within proper human life. Dante writes:

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<sup>3</sup> On the distinction between religion and politics, see Claes G. Ryn, "The Things of Caesar: Notes Toward the Delimitation of Politics," *Thought*, Vol. 55, No. 219 (December 1980). When John Paul II first visited Nicaragua it still had a Marxist government. He was met on the tarmac by members of the government, including a famous priest. The priest knelt to kiss the Pope's ring, but the Pope pulled his hand away and waved it over the priest's head in a scolding fashion, as if saying, "Why have you, a priest, not returned to your role as a priest?"

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, I, 14, in *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*, Paul E. Sigmund ed. and transl. (New York: Norton & Norton, 1988), 27.

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Twofold . . . are the ends which unerring Providence has ordained for man: the bliss of this life . . . and the bliss of eternal life . . . . These two . . . man must reach by different ways. For we come to the first as we follow the philosophical teachings . . . and we come to the second as we follow the spiritual teachings which transcend human reason . . . .<sup>5</sup>

Agathon  
hard to  
combine  
with  
politics.

Contrary to the mainstream of Christianity, Plato is determined to blend not only the things of God and the things of Caesar but the life of philosophy and government, this in spite of the fact that, on his own showing, it is exceedingly difficult to combine the longing for the *Agathon* with politics. The dynamic of the religious-philosophical life, as Plato describes it, is to detach the individual from politics and from worldly concerns in general. Politics is a particularly grievous distraction from transcendent Truth. Those who have felt the pull of the *Agathon* want to spend all of their time in contemplation. As Socrates says, "It won't be surprising if those who get so far are unwilling to involve themselves in human affairs." "The intellectuals will take no practical action of their own accord, fancying themselves to be out of this world in some kind of earthly paradise." Still, to avoid the sorry spectacle of rule by inferior men, the noble ones must be dragged into the cave to do their political duty. For the sake of the good of the whole, they must be "compelled" to show some "care and responsibility for others." This means that they must be made to interfere with the movement of their souls by virtue of which they are happy. While ruling they are not quite themselves and long to return to "the realm above." Nevertheless, Plato insists that only men and women who "have sight" of "the form of the good" can act rationally in public affairs.<sup>6</sup>

The political idealism of the *Republic* has proved mesmerizing. What could be more suggestive of nobility in the reader than sympathizing with rule by human beings who know and live the Truth, who are uninfected by the sordidness of ordinary politics, and are so uninterested in power that they do not even want to take part in government? How else instill a sense of the common good and bring about justice in actual politics than by linking politics, theoretically and practically, with the transcendent, the

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<sup>5</sup> Dante, *On World Government (De Monarchia)* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 78.

<sup>6</sup> *Republic*, 321 (517c), 323-24 (519c-520b).

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latter understood as the very antithesis of partisanship and ambition? The Platonic ideal may be too high, but straining to achieve it could only lift the level of politics. To many, the objections of Aristotle have seemed mundane and trivial in their practicality and “realism” and also somehow beside the point—to say nothing of Machiavelli’s purportedly brutal and cynical rejection of idealism.

### *Platonic Transcendence and Politics*

Many of Plato’s admirers argue that his political scheme must not be taken too literally. The *Republic* is not a roadmap for practical politics. It sets before us an image of perfection, which, even if it cannot be realized, imparts the lofty spirit of good. The main purpose of the Platonic ideal is to found justice in the soul of the individual. And just persons may elevate politics.

Transcendence, understood in a rather romantic manner, has been in vogue among many political theorists in the last few decades. It has been invoked among them not as a reality chiefly relevant to the religious life of otherworldliness and most familiar to individuals of exceptional spiritual character but as a power that can and should animate politics and political philosophy. Although these advocates of a closer connection between politics and the Beyond have usually been vague as to the specifics of how the two might be joined, they have left the impression that a nobler, more spiritual type of politics would result from the union. A generally Platonic pattern of thought and imagination has been in evidence. The work of Eric Voegelin has been influential. In his study of Plato and Aristotle Voegelin assesses the extent to which they know the Truth, by which he means “the world-transcendent *summum bonum*, experienced as an orienting force in the soul.” Voegelin finds Aristotle deficient. His speculation “ends in a serious impasse, both practically and theoretically.” Voegelin writes in summary: “The philosopher who is in possession of the Truth should consistently go the way of Plato in the *Republic*; he should issue the call for repentance and submission to the theocratic rule of the incarnate Truth.”<sup>7</sup>

It may seem presumptuous, then, to suggest that there is some-

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<sup>7</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 362-63.

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thing disingenuous and inappropriately appealing about the Platonic way of linking politics and the transcendent.

When Plato contends that political morality depends upon statesmen's being attuned to the transcendent realm, a reader generally accepting of a moral standard beyond the human appetites of the moment is likely to nod in agreement. Unless there is a universal good that can guide the statesman in reason or conscience, what would be the source of public virtue? But Plato's conception of the relation between politics and the transcendent has a highly questionable aspect and seems in actuality to undermine political morality by disconnecting it from politics as we know it.

The first requirement of real political morality, and of morality generally, must surely be that it makes a practical difference, that it advances good in the world where politics is practiced. A morality that never came to fruition or always failed would be a contradiction in terms and politically irrelevant. A philosophy setting forth such a morality would be a diversion from the actual needs and opportunities of life.

*Public virtue  
not for the  
present.*

A striking feature of the virtue of Plato's philosopher rulers and probably a source of its popularity is that it is not made for the present or for any other historically known circumstances. Socrates tells us so repeatedly. Not only does he doubt that his ideal political scheme will ever be realized, but he indicates that the nobility of the true philosopher does not mix with existing social life. It is too exalted. As Socrates says, "There is no existing form of society good enough for the philosophic nature." That nature is undermined by and cannot become manifest in present circumstances. It would be different if philosophy "could find a social structure whose excellence matched its own." "Then its truly divine quality would appear clearly." If it has to exist in "alien soil," it commonly degenerates.<sup>8</sup>

Since Plato assumes that all existing political life is precisely "alien soil," does public virtue have to await the disappearance of the corrupt society? It must. For the philosophers to be able to function, Socrates asserts, it is necessary first to "wipe the slate of human society and human habits clean." The philosophic artists, Socrates informs us, are "unwilling to start work on an in-

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<sup>8</sup> *Republic*, 293 (497b).

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dividual or a city, or draw out laws, until they are given, or have made themselves, a clean canvas.”<sup>9</sup>

How noble this unwillingness to compromise high principle, some will say. But wherein does the nobility consist? How does Plato’s moral idealism enhance the quality of politics? Not at all, it seems—until society has somehow shaped up, which, Socrates concedes, could happen only by “divine chance.” Platonic public virtue will become operative only at some uncertain future time, if ever. Is such an indefinite suspension of action a feature of political morality? What, specifically and concretely, makes Plato’s political morality moral? Indeed, what proof is there of its existence other than Plato’s high-sounding text? If, as Plato believes, genuine political good has yet to make an appearance in the world, it is difficult to test whether his vision is more than a figment of his imagination. Indeed, there is no avoiding this troubling consideration: Plato’s moral-political norm is conceived in such manner as to have to stay where it originated, in the imagination. By Plato’s own reckoning, attempts to realize true justice are futile given the perversity of the world. The difficulty—nay, the impossibility—of realizing the ideal only proves its nobility. Plato’s moral vision would appear to be romantic in a bad sense: it captures the imagination and seems to elevate the spirit, but the alluring possibility that it contemplates is illusory and subversive of the ability to act in the world as it is. Platonic moral idealism induces a postponement of action and claims nobility for this same passivity. Though morally infertile, the political idealist can enjoy warm self-applause.

*Platonic  
idealism  
suspends  
moral action.*

Admirers of Plato will here rise up in protest. This criticism, some will contend, fails to appreciate the subtlety and high spirituality of Plato’s philosophical quest. That quest centers not so much on matters of government and politics as upon justice in the individual soul, upon the movement of the soul towards the Good. The practical applicability of Platonic political justice is the wrong issue to raise. What counts is that those who are capable of absorbing Plato’s vision will be morally lifted by the movement of the soul towards transcendent Truth.

But the question remains: How is the Platonic transcendent helpful to morality? One possible answer is that it restrains the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 297 (501).

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*Aristotle provides for actual politics.*

lower appetites and allows man's higher nature to manifest itself. But how, *in the concrete*, how, specifically, does the kind of transcendent reality posited in the *Republic* boost moral leadership where it is needed? Aristotle, too, sees moral-intellectual discipline as of the essence of public virtue. But whereas Plato explains political morality by designing an ideal republic, Aristotle's sense of moral direction steers him away from what might be ideally the best. It yields concrete and specific ways of improving real societies. For Aristotle, what is morally normative is wholly compatible with action in the here and now. He is not discouraged from considering the higher possibilities of politics because most circumstances permit only of limited moral progress. Whatever the flaws of Aristotle's moral-political philosophy, it is politically relevant—ready to go, as it were.

Yet Voegelin chastises Aristotle for becoming bogged down in the particulars of immanent existence. How, then, does Plato's way of linking politics and the transcendent make his conception of public virtue superior to that of Aristotle? How can it improve the moral quality of politics? It seems paradoxical in this context that the *Republic* suggests a basic incompatibility or tension between politics and morality. Here it makes little difference that Plato's Beyond might be seen as transcending the Greek context of the *polis*, for Plato indicates repeatedly that the transcendent Truth makes politics seem irrelevant or positively harmful. Socrates says:

The true philosopher . . . whose mind is on higher realities, has no time to look at the affairs of men . . . His eyes are turned to contemplate fixed and immutable realities, a realm where there is no justice done or suffered, but all is reason and order, and which is the model which he imitates and to which he assimilates himself as far as he can.<sup>10</sup>

And again: "It won't be surprising if those who get so far are unwilling to involve themselves in human affairs."<sup>11</sup>

The "model" that the true philosopher "imitates" is thus not attuned to the world of politics but to a sphere that bears no resemblance to it. The effect of the transcendent Truth is not just disinterest in politics but losing touch with ordinary life and, yes, becoming politically inept. Even in the most favorable circum-

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 296-97 (500b).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 321 (517c).

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stances, those described in Plato's own plan for justice, the true philosopher must, precisely because his mind is on the transcendent, be expected to flounder when asked to turn his attention to politics. You will not think it strange, Socrates asserts, that "anyone who descends from contemplation of the divine to human life and its ills should blunder and make a fool of himself . . . while still blinded and unaccustomed to the surrounding darkness . . ." <sup>12</sup>

Rather paradoxical. Knowing transcendent Truth is the necessary qualification for ruling, but the effect of that enlightenment is to turn the person into a political blunderer, at least initially—even in *ideal* circumstances.

Again, how does Plato's transcendent Truth morally benefit actual statesmanship? Plato intimates that, as a practical matter, we have to expect the world, including politics, to continue pretty much as it is, that is, to remain full of low motives and imperfections. If such be the case, it remains unclear how Platonic moral idealism can help improve the moral quality of politics. Socrates points out that in politically discouraging times—and when are they not discouraging?—the true philosophers understand that "political life has virtually nothing sound about it." Since there is nothing they can do about this situation, they withdraw and "live quietly and keep to themselves." They are "content to keep themselves unspotted from wickedness and wrong in this life, and finally leave it with cheerful composure and good hope." <sup>13</sup>

How noble of them, some might say. But, if they are the sole hope of politics, how very discouraging for politics! If Plato were here merely pointing out that wise and scholarly persons often prefer to stay away from politics, there would be little reason to object. Precisely because of their predominantly contemplative orientation, good philosophers do not ordinarily have the kind of practical aptitude, experience and robustness that is needed in a statesman—however well some of them may, as philosophers, *understand* the world of political practice. But Plato is here not explaining the special and limited sense in which philosophy can be said to be "impractical." He is illustrating the incompatibility of politics and moral nobility, the latter being indistinguishable from philosophy. He is drawing attention to the purported no-

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 321 (517d).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 292 (496c).

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bility and serenity of those who but for the badness of the times would be given unlimited political authority. Their unwillingness to participate in politics is a sign of their moral superiority.

*Platonic  
statesmanship  
presupposes  
abolition of  
politics.*

You might think that, for the transcendent to be a boon to politics, it should somehow equip statesmen for insightful, resourceful, inventive action in the world where statesmanship takes place. But no. Transcendence, as understood by Plato, makes the individual recoil from human affairs generally and from politics in particular. Knowing the Truth is to become politically incapacitated. The noble ones can function only in the special protective environment of the just republic. In that state—note this well—politics has in effect already been abolished. There is no need there for leaders to contend with and accommodate clamoring and diverse interests, no need to overcome obstacles and negotiate pressing circumstances. The world known in human experience has been replaced by a society made to order for the noble ones. Nothing stands against the authority of the philosopher-rulers. All others in the just *polis* are their pliant wards. Politics has been replaced by administration of the just plan. In that kind of society—but in that society only—real public virtue can manifest itself.

*A desire  
to escape.*

In what sense is a political morality moral that can reveal its nobility only after politics has ceased and circumstances have been made “worthy” of it? Indeed, could the Platonic transcendent be practically efficacious in any aspect of human life? When is life wholly without politics so that it might offer no resistance to morality? In one form or another, politics is an inescapable part of *all* human relationships. These always involve a give and take and a need to bend and improvise. In general, human existence requires an ability to handle hurdles, limits and complications. A morality that is not attuned to such a world may be in practice not an aid to living but an escape from actual responsibilities—an escape seemingly designed to let the retreating person keep his self-respect.

In the end you have to ask: Are political thinkers and practitioners who try to model their souls on Platonic justice noble, or are they just holier-than-thou, concealing behind a sanctimonious and pretentious posture that they have little to contribute to the health of politics?

Plato shows a marked reluctance to deal with the needs of

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ordinary social and political life. History with its diversity, imperfections and change makes him uncomfortable, even disdainful. Aristotle, in marked contrast, reacted against a good that is placed too far beyond the concrete opportunities of life. One does not have to be an unqualified Machiavellian to sympathize with Machiavelli's impatience, in the *Prince*, with thinkers who have "dreamed up republics and principalities which have never in truth been known to exist" or to applaud Machiavelli's intention "to say something that will prove of practical use to the inquirer."<sup>14</sup> Platonists may claim that their political idealism is all about the soul turning towards good, but, curiously, the experience of transcendence said to result from that turning does nothing to strengthen political morality. Does then this apolitical, ahistorical transcendence not at least ennoble private life? It is not clear that it does, for private life, too, as was just shown, has to contend with the politics that permeates all historical existence. What is clear is that the ahistoricism of Plato's notion of transcendence involves a reluctance to engage human existence as it is. It induces melancholy and passivity, leaving both public and private-personal life morally in the lurch.

*Ahistorical  
idealism  
disdains  
actual life.*

That Plato has still contributed much to moral philosophy has already been discussed at some length. Those contributions were made possible by a willingness to let concrete human experience speak and inform. But a different tendency of thought and imagination frequently overpowers the other: It is clearly on display in Plato's political idealism, which shows ahistoricist speculation and vision downplaying or dismissing the limits of actual life. It might be objected that the Ultimate Good, the *Agathon*, is for Plato a matter of experience, and indeed it is. He so describes it. The point of what has been argued here about Plato's political idealism is not to deny the reality of transcendence in every sense or to deny that it lacks an experiential basis. What has been suggested is that there is something highly problematic about Plato's interpretation of transcendence and especially about his way of relating it to politics. His ahistoricism, as connected with the longing for an "otherworldly" Beyond, disconnects the transcendent from the world of practice and the concrete. Because he never-

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<sup>14</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 90-91.

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theless makes transcendence the source of political morality, his idealism offers little more to practice than scorn and animosity towards whatever now exists. Plato's transcendent threatens to become an avenue of escape, his political idealism being perhaps the best example.

*Political Morality: Ideal or Real*

Consider, then, the overall moral effect of the political idealism of the *Republic* on a person under its influence. The dialogue encourages the reader to withdraw from the shadowy, ignoble present to an ahistorical world of eternal perfection. What really matters always lies far beyond the actual. The *Republic* does not incline one to look for opportunities in the mundane surroundings of ordinary life. Why bother to think about or prepare oneself for acting in a world that counts for so little in the end? The belief that what deserves the allegiance of human beings is especially far removed from politics was later shared by St. Augustine, whose reputation as the Christian Plato is generally well deserved. Aversion to the actual world is taken by Plato as a sign of moral nobility. Plato himself participated briefly in politics, and his reaction is telling: "I concluded that it was difficult to take part in public life and retain one's integrity, and this feeling became stronger the more I observed and the older I became." "I was disgusted and withdrew myself from the prevailing wickedness."<sup>15</sup> The *Republic* transmits to the reader this same attitude toward politics. In contrast with what ought to be, the actual looks demeaning and hopeless.

Much in Plato's moral philosophy does help the reader to understand what, concretely, morally benefits self and others: It orients the person to actual opportunities and assists him in acting on them. But Plato's political idealism is vitiated by a desire to prescribe for society apart from what is historically plausible. It points the person away from real possibilities and thus discourages action. Plato's admirers have questioned some of the specifics of his political scheme, but the general tendency of his political moralism has proved alluring. The upshot of the argument here presented is that the ahistorical, romantic strain in Plato's

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, Walter Hamilton, transl. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), "Seventh Letter," 325.

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thought has weakened rather than strengthened the case for moral universality in politics.

There is no presumption in what has been argued here that Platonic political idealism is flawed because it does not turn philosophers into political activists. Though some philosophers may well have political ability, and though real wisdom among them will obviously include understanding of the needs and ways of practice, it is only to be expected that genuine philosophers will ordinarily prefer their own intellectual orientation and specialization to politics. It is Plato who insists on connecting the contemplative life—the contemplative life conceived, furthermore, as separating thinkers from the historical world—with politics. For him, only philosophers at their best are suited for political leadership. This flattery of philosophy is misguided, especially as Plato extols an ahistorical conception of philosophy. The complaint properly directed against Platonic political idealism is twofold: that as philosophy it clouds and distorts political reality, and that, in so far as it also influences practice, it either discourages moral action entirely or liberates action in the here and now from moral constraints by insisting on a political standard that is clearly unattainable and therefore irrelevant.

To sum up the implications of this critique for political thought: A moral philosophy that is not adjusted to man's historical existence and does not concern itself with the needs and opportunities of actual politics is a form of evasion of responsibility using moralism as a cover. This is not a case of good motives somehow selecting the wrong means. The motive—claiming nobility for moral passivity and evasiveness—is itself questionable. The motive and the means are consonant. A romantic conception of transcendence shows itself politically akin or helpful to what it claims to despise. Allegedly elevated political norms and ideals that produce reluctance or inability to act morally in real situations are allies of open immorality. Requiring the virtuous to keep their hands "clean" of the mundane assists those ruthless and energetic political actors who are only too happy to take advantage of persons too "noble" to stand up to them. Politically gifted individuals with a potential for real political morality may not be attracted to romantic political idealism in the first place, but, to the extent that they are, that idealism will tend to disarm and discourage the kind of virtue that might have made

*Nobility  
claimed for  
moral  
passivity.*

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a difference in practice. Idealistic moralism leaves politics to people lacking in moral scruple. Precisely because abstract, disembodied, idealistic, romantic notions of morality tend to render morality confused and ineffective, one has to question their claim to be moral.

*Christianity  
more sensitive  
to immanent  
manifestation  
of trans-  
cendence.*

This criticism of Platonic transcendence and political idealism is not a criticism of every possible conception of transcendence or idealism or even of every aspect of Plato's own understanding of the two. In Christianity the distinction between the things of God and the things of Caesar has offered some protection against ethereal ideas of political morality. Christianity has also been more sensitive than Platonism to the possibility that transcendence might have a close connection with history. One obvious reason is the central Christian belief in the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh. This idea was bound to create greater sensitivity to the possibly immanent manifestations of transcendence—though Christian thinkers have, on the whole, been strangely reluctant or incapable of fully exploring the philosophical implications of that notion, probably because of the persistence of ahistorical ways of conceiving the transcendent. The abstractionist, anti-historical tendency in Western thought has made the notion of transcendence strongly susceptible to ethereal imagination and to the kind of pious-appearing moralism that is in reality an excuse for moral passivity, not to say immorality.

Unless supplemented or mixed with other elements, transcendence understood as separate from the historical world of practice leaves the transcendent empty. It invites individuals to fill the emptiness with whatever personal desires and dreams they would like to consider divinely sanctioned. Rather than inducing self-criticism and humility, such diffuse transcendence inspires spiritual conceit, investing the political and other preferences that the person already holds with high spiritual significance. This kind of "spirituality" may be in practice not very different from what motivates an openly immoral individual: doing and believing as one pleases. The frankly immoral person simply does not feel the same need to dress up his motives.

Needless to say, Plato himself had considerable moral and philosophical resources that balanced and counteracted this danger. Traditional Christianity, with its moral realism and stress on

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the need for self-criticism and repentance, provided an even more powerful antidote to conceited notions of transcendence. Not only did it stress the stubbornness and pervasiveness of sin, but it viewed the transcendent as only indirectly related to politics. A thinker like Thomas Aquinas, who was highly influenced by Aristotle in regard to worldly matters, did not expect politics to be guided by special transcendent illumination but by what he called natural law, a normative power seen as immanent in the created world, though simultaneously a part of God's purpose. A strong sense of the Beyond was associated in Christianity primarily with individuals of exceptional religious piety, strength and concentration rather than with persons participating in or theorizing about politics. Today, what will restrain morally pretentious political idealism?

Critics of Platonic political idealism are sometimes accused of wishing to lower the moral standards of politics. Aristotle is one such thinker, interested as he is in making political morality a going concern. Machiavelli, with his demand that political action be efficacious, is widely regarded as the most cynical violator of high ideals. But even the Framers of the U.S. Constitution have been accused of neglecting moral virtue because they adjusted their work to human nature and politics as they tend to be in actual life. Leo Strauss complains of a "lowering of the sights."

But it is moralistic ahistoricism, specifically political idealism of the Platonic type, that lowers the moral sights. It does so by setting up a standard that is so remote and so empty that it cannot be acted on here and now. The person adhering to the standard need do nothing political in the present, is morally off the hook. An insufficiently recognized purpose of Platonic hypermoralism, and undoubtedly a source of its great appeal, is that it gives high marks for just standing aside. It is comfortable and comforting, self-applause for do-nothings. Defining public virtue in such a way as to make it inapplicable to all real politics leads, in practice, to politics becoming less virtuous than it might be. Hence, it *lowers* our sights.

*Platonic idealism lowers moral expectations.*

Raising the sights of politics would require clearing away excuses for moral passivity and would require increasing the awareness that even the worst situations can be improved. Surely, real morality is forever looking to enhance concrete human existence.

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It wants to act, here and now—not some other time. Real political morality, like all genuine morality, is attuned to history, to the world in which it must function. It is acutely aware of the obstacles to virtuous action, in self and others, but it is eager to make the best of the circumstances it faces. Ideals that distract us from moral opportunities that are actually available damage both theory and practice. To criticize such ideals is not to lower the sights of politics but to raise them.