

The Open Society and the Open Universe

Introduction

We live in the midst of a world seemingly indifferent to our struggles. For most of mankind, through most of history, life has been a struggle against the constant threat of starvation, disease, and violent death. Our options were – and were perceived to be – very limited. Faced with such insecurity, it has always been tempting to retreat from the terrifying contingencies of our lives into the seeming citadel of the walled city, the closed society, and the predictable universe. And, at times, no price seemed too great to pay for safety, and no price too high to pay for certainty.

It is the contention of this work that both the security and the certainty we think to purchase by this retreat into the walled city are an illusion – a very dangerous illusion.

In spirit, this work is a defense of the open mind, the open society, and the open universe. It is a defense of contingency and a repudiation of certainty. As such, it is also a defense of pluralism, liberty, and the good. In form, this work is a series of critical reflections on Plato's *Republic*. In it I attack the fundamental presuppositions of Plato's thinking. In stripping the *Republic* to its conceptual skeleton, I am, I know, doing a disservice to Plato the poet and Plato the philosopher. To isolate and analyze the bare structure of Plato's thinking is in some ways like trying to capture the intricate living richness of a Michelangelo by means of the lines and rectangles of a Mondrian. It is, however, necessary to strip *The Republic* to its conceptual bones in order to understand its logic, and in order to understand that, however poetically splendid and emotionally elevating the Platonic vision, it is fundamentally and fatally flawed.

Plato's *Republic* was the first, the finest, and the most influential visions of Utopian society produced by western philosophy. More than any other single work, *The Republic* has provided the philosophical underpinnings for the enemies of pluralism and liberty. And it has done so in the name of the good. Living in the midst of bitter civil war, Plato dreamt of perfect peace and happiness in a frictionless and factionless society. A truly fine and just city – a kallipolis. On Plato's account it is only in such a just city that a just man can thrive; it is only in such a city that the good and the true and the beautiful can be salvaged out of the chaos of the human condition; and, it is only in such a city that we can achieve protection from our enemies without, and from our enemies within. And even, as some Platonists argue, if we cannot actually create such a city in fact, the city-in- speech can serve as a model toward which we should strive.

I will show that, in the interest of creating a perfect society – even a city-in-speech – Plato is willing to sacrifice not only pluralism and liberty, but also the good itself. And, I will

argue that it is the open society that provides the best hope for happiness and for peace. Therefore, only an open society can possibly be a just society – even if we define justice, as Plato does, in terms of happiness, fulfillment, and peace.

Critics of Plato's view of the rational unified reality and the rational unified city – and there have been many such critics since Aristotle and the Sophists – have generally been accused of denying and undermining the good. Barricaded behind *The Republic*, the Platonists have taken and held the moral high-ground. And most modern critics have tended to concentrate their attack on the oversimplifications and consequent dehumanization implicit in utopian thought. Although I agree with their conclusions, my methods are somewhat different. In this work I will use tools generally appropriated by the Platonists themselves – mathematics and purely abstract reasoning. Much as I admire Plato as a philosopher and as a poet, my purpose, in this work, is to show that a coherent plan for utopia, in any form, is *a priori* impossible, and, thus, most of the traditional ways in which utopian thinking have been defended are both invalid and irrelevant. I mean to strike at the roots rather than the branches of utopian thinking.

In *The Republic* Plato set out to create a model city-in-speech – a plan for the perfect city. Plato's kallipolis is conceived of as a best possible society where happiness, goodness, beauty are realized, and in which all parts of the body politic work together in perfect harmony for the common good.

At its core, Plato's plan for the kallipolis is based on what Isaiah Berlin calls "the monistic presupposition." The ethical monist, according to Berlin, claims:

The possibility and desirability of a single plan or overarching theory of the good;

Administered from a single source of control;

By means of the perfect cooperation between the members of the city working in unity toward fulfillment of the common good.

In this work, I argue against each of these three monistic claims. There is no single plan possible nor would such a plan be desirable even if it were possible. The very possibility of the creation of such a plan, let alone its implementation, is, I show, a fallacy in the logic of the good.

I: In the first chapter, I deny the possibility of an overarching theory of the good which maximizes all legitimate goods. Plato's monistic system is possible only if all goods are commensurable with each other in the sense that they can be mapped onto a single scale so that in each instance the sufficiently knowledgeable planner is able to choose between alternatives based on which alternative is the best. That choice, according to Plato, can be made entirely on the basis of knowledge of the Good. It is simply a question of expert knowledge. In fact, I will

show, goods are not commensurable and they are often in contradiction with each other – both contingently and conceptually.

That is not to say that goods are merely relative. While I am a pluralist, I am not an ethical relativist. I believe that judgments about the good are grounded in the nature of things, and are not simply the result of human conventions. As a pluralist, however, I know that there are a multiplicity of genuine and, therefore, absolute goods, and that this multiplicity cannot be reduced to a single scale or a single formula.

It is the necessity of the single scale that inevitably defeats even the most noble of Utopian experimenters. In the end, the different visions of monistic republics are remarkably similar. They each, in effect, invalidate any commonly held human values which are found to be inconsistent with the establishment of a single scale – *any* single scale. In this respect Plato's *Republic* can be used as a model for Rousseau's Social Contract, John Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay Colony, Lenin's Russia, Khomeini's Iran, Mao's China, or Huxley's *Brave New World*. Plato, like all monistic utopians, can eliminate contradictions in the Good, both contingent and conceptual, only by legislating most traditional human values out of existence. Thus, for example, there is no room in Plato's kallipolis for Homer or flute music, for grief and for love, for family or for freedom of thought. There is only room for the monistically defined good poetry, good music, good human emotions, and good family relationships and these are defined entirely in terms of the overarching theory of the good not in terms of the goods we ordinary human beings understand. Least of all can Plato allow any freedom of speech which might result in genuine conflict in the community. For the monist, conflict, is the ultimate evil.

For the monist there is one plan and perfect harmony in pursuit of the good. For the pluralist, as I define that term, there is no possibility of a single overarching plan of the good, and goods are multiple in every society and even in every individual. And so it follows that there are a multiplicity of valid ways to be good men and women and to build good communities.

II: In the second chapter I argue that harmony in a healthy society is not achieved through perfect cooperation. On the contrary, the regulation and health of the state, in so far as it is modeled on the regulation of the healthy body, requires multiple centers of control each acting independently of the other and often acting in opposition with each other. In so far as harmony in the city is like harmony in the body, it is achieved through multiplicity and independence. This chapter offers a critique of Plato's analogy between the health of the body and the health of the state. I show that Plato's argument is fundamentally flawed because he totally misunderstood the nature of biological balance. Biological harmony is not the result of one plan and one center of control. Nor is biological regulation and harmony maintained by perfect cooperation of the parts under the guidance from a single source – whether that control is intelligent or otherwise.

Taking the homeostatic regulation of glucose in the blood as a representative example, I show that biological control is achieved by checks and balances, agonists and antagonists, forces and counter-forces rather than by central guidance and near perfect cooperation between the parts.

The need for opposing forces is not a result of an imperfect evolutionary process. The mathematics of control systems is entirely general and does not distinguish between mechanical, electronic, biological, or social systems. The introduction of antagonists or damping counter-forces is characteristic of any adaptive feed-back system because any such system will necessarily tend toward at least two sorts of error -- steady-state error and oscillation. The fine-tuning of a system with a single control mechanism in order to reduce steady-state error will tend to increase the amplitude of the oscillations, and these oscillations, if undamped by counter-forces, will kill the organism. Furthermore, dampening is virtually the only protection such systems have against deterministic chaos.

For the pluralist, planning, or the exercise of reason, is a powerful tool for human survival, but while the monist believes in the possibility of a single rational plan in which the good is maximized, the pluralist, committed to a far greater degree of individual and group liberty of action, believes that a better state will be achieved by many plans and planners operating largely independently and often in opposition to each other. Where the monist sees chaos and irrationality in such multiplicity, the pluralist sees balance and the invisible hand. Thus, even were we to accept the validity of the analogy between health of the body and the health of the state, we would not choose Plato as a guide to the healthy society -- we would be far better served by Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, or even Michael Walzer. In adaptive systems, multiple automatic control mechanisms are far more effective than any single central plan no matter how benevolent or enlightened. Even reason itself, on this account, is best understood as a constantly adaptive mechanism for survival.

III: Thus far we have been concerned with monism as an ethical doctrine. But Plato grounds his monistic thinking in a philosophy of reality. For Plato reality itself is a single totally coherent system – eternal, unchanging, certain. Similarly, modern utopian planning is grounded on Enlightenment rationalism. The 17th century Enlightenment rationalists were committed to two distinct monistic principles: the monistic presupposition which holds that all bona fide goods are compatible, and therefore utopian social planning is logically possible, and monistic determinism according to which all of the physical universe is a single system deducible from a relatively small number of "natural laws." For the Enlightenment scientist, the laws of nature are eternal, unchanging, certain. Any uncertainty is an illusion begot by our own ignorance of those laws. Laplace's Demon is a close cousin of Plato's philosopher king. Chapter Three is a critique of the second Enlightenment monistic principle which applies to the physical universe – it is a

critique of determinism. It is this second monistic principle on which the modern scientific enterprise is based. Enlightenment science, and physics in particular, is monistic and Platonic in the sense that the Enlightenment philosopher insists on certain and immutable natural laws, and seeks to achieve a single scientific theory of everything by legislating out of reality anything which cannot be translated into the master theory.

I argue that we have excellent reasons for questioning the deterministic presupposition. First, it is clear that whether or not the world is determined, the phenomenal world is too complex to allow for deterministic thinking to have a great deal of practical impact on the social sciences or on individual conduct. In practice, we are pluralists if not in theory. Secondly, although some deterministic scientific theories have proven a fruitful way of predicting some phenomena, the deterministic presupposition in the social sciences has not in fact increased the accuracy of our predictions. In addition to the argument from complexity, there is strong evidence to suggest that the empirical world is not determined, and that there is no single science into which all other forms of scientific knowledge can be translated. If the phenomenal world is not determined then, I will argue, liberty and free choice can be defended metaphysically and not only in terms of our day-to-day experience of choice. Individual human choice is not simply a psychologically-based illusion – a mere epiphenomena of automatic and predetermined bodily movements. Individual choice – and hence liberty – are real.

IV: For the pluralist, achieving a good life is a matter of identifying the many goods and wisely balancing them in our actions. That is, achieving a good life is not simply a matter of knowing the good, as the monist claims, but of choosing the good. In order to explore what it means to balance goods rather than to know the good, I suggest a new interpretation of the Protagorean maxim "Man is the Measure of the Good" in the fourth chapter. Although my interpretation rests heavily on 20th century theories of measurement, I believe that it is consistent with the spirit of Protagoras and that it could serve as a philosophical basis for an ethics which accepts, as a given, the reality of many legitimate but conflicting values. This analysis is based on a detailed analogy between "measure" as applied to space and "measure" as applied to the good. Plato's arguments against "Man the measure" are directed against the legitimacy of relative concepts in general -- they are not arguments specific to the measure of the good. I argue that to say "Man is the measure of the good" need not mean that there is no good any more than to claim that because the application of any geometry must rest on the choice of a physical measure, it follows that there is no space. Every human choice is an assertion of the good.

V: In the fifth and final chapter I begin to look at what pluralistic thinking teaches us about how we should lead our lives – particularly with respect to how we as individuals and as

groups pursue social and economic goods. In so far as conclusions can be drawn from this study, it is clear to me that both political and economic liberty are essential to the well-functioning of human adaptive systems. The best and most adaptable forms of human organizations are pluralistic at their core. And the best and most adaptive human beings are pluralistic at their core.

And so, for example, as a pluralist, I see goods even when they conflict; and I acknowledge my needs and responsibilities as a human being, a woman, a wife, a mother, a teacher, a thinker even when these needs and responsibilities conflict -- as they generally do. Plato, from his hard won citadel of philosophical monism looks out over the city and sees solutions to the problems which define the human condition. Like the vast majority of men and women who dwell in the streets of the city – the men and women who try to live their lives in accordance with relatively ordinary codes of good and bad, truth and falsehood – I see better choices and worse choices but few opportunities to transcend the human condition and reach certainty. In the conduct of my life I see choices and not solutions.

Plato sought to transcend the contingencies and limitations of the common human experience. I do not. The purpose of this undertaking is to philosophically justify the good in a world which remains contingent and uncertain. And so, unlike Plato, who believed he could see through the complexities and contradictions of this world to a reality of great simplicity, I look and see not the one but the many. And, in exposing fundamental errors in Plato's monistic thinking, I believe I can set new philosophical foundations for both pluralism and liberty.