

CHAPTER VI

PLATO'S SYSTEM OF PHILOSOPHY

Editor's Note: This is an address delivered before the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy at Oxford, England, in September, 1930. The address was written and delivered in English. Since the committee decided to print the addresses in the Proceedings in the respective native languages of the members, the English original was translated into German. See PLATO'S PHILOSOPHISCHES SYSTEM in the Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy, pp. 426-431, Oxford University Press, London, 1931. Reprinted by permission.

IT is now generally admitted that the seventh of Plato's epistles, containing his autobiography, is genuine. It must have been composed in 354/353 B.C. From this document it appears that at the time Plato held certain views concerning the true essence of things which he deemed by far the most important of all his speculations and which he held to be the only solid foundation of a virtuous life, but which he had never put, and did not intend ever to put, into writing, for reasons there specified at length.

There is hardly any doubt that these views coincided, on the whole, with the tenets set forth in Plato's lecture *On the Good* (of which some extracts have been preserved) and always referred to as being essential to Platonism by Aristotle. They were also briefly summarized by Theophrastus and, indeed, were closely akin to all that is known about the teaching of the so-called First Academy, that is, of Plato's immediate disciples.

It is the total of these views that will here be styled *Plato's system of philosophy*. It has been most fully described by Léon Robin and has recently been discussed by Werner Jaeger, Erich Frank, Julius Stenzel, A. E. Taylor, and W. D. Ross. Its details are not easily grasped, but its rough outline stands out boldly and enables us to say, in a general way, what sort of a system it was.

In his *Metaphysics* Theophrastus says that Plato "linked up things with ideas, ideas with numbers, and from the numbers proceeded to the ultimate principles", or elements. (6b11 Usener=III 13 Ross and Fobes).

An *idea*, according to Plato, is the unchanging essence of a quality as also of all the individual things partaking in it and thereby forming

a class. It is one in number and, since the essence of a quality is necessarily free from any extraneous admixture, and, in so far, pure and perfect, Plato held it to be, moreover, a model-specimen, or archetype, of all such individuals. It is just the recognition of ideas and their distinction from things that is mostly supposed to be the most significant feature of Platonism.

But Theophrastus goes on to tell us that Plato, as he "linked up" things with ideas, so also "linked up" ideas with numbers. Aristotle, too, states more than once that Plato held "the ideas to be numbers". Here, indeed, we must assume that either the words "to be" or else the term "numbers" is employed in a wider than the usual sense. It is hardly doubtful, for instance, that Plato recognized ideas of the Odd and of the Even. Yet neither of these is a definite *number*, although they refer to numbers or, at any rate, pertain to the numerical realm. Again, in his *Timaeus*, Plato himself "links up" the idea of fire with the tetrahedral shape of its particles; yet this is not itself a "number"; it is what Aristotle terms a "magnitude", that is, an entity "generated" from number, but not itself identical with it. Hence, when it is said that Plato held the ideas "to be numbers", this must probably be understood to mean that they may be explained by, or derived from, numbers. Theophrastus concludes his summary by saying that Plato "linked up" numbers with, that is, "generated" them from, the "ultimate principles". No doubt, these ultimate principles are no other than those ultimate "elements" about which Aristotle (*Metaph. A 6*) says that because Plato held them to be the ultimate "elements" of all numbers, and therefore of ideas also, he considered them as the ultimate elements "of all things" as well. We know, more or less, what they were like. They were two in number, termed "the One" and "the Great and Small" (or "the indefinite Dyad"), respectively. And, speaking generally, it seems clear that "the One" stood for definiteness and precision, "the Great and Small" for indefiniteness and variability. Hence, when Plato declared that number was "generated" from the Great and Small by the One, we may suppose him to have meant that number comes into being when indefinite quantity assumes a definite value. Is this doctrine, then, to be understood merely as a piece of rational mathematics (A. E. Taylor)? That may be pronounced highly improbable. We learn from a fragment from Hermodorus, one of Plato's immediate disciples, that "the One" stood for everything that is "equal and permanent and harmonious", whereas all other things are "unstable and formless, and unlimited and unreal" (*Simplic. in phys. 248, 8 Diels*). And Aristotle

himself says (Metaph. A 6) that Plato considered "one of the elements to be the cause of Good, the other that of Evil". Evidently, then, the ultimate elements are first principles, not of mathematics only, but of cosmology and ethics as well. They are, in truth, the ultimate principles from which "all things" may be derived.

Indeed, Plato's system of philosophy is a *system of derivation*. His main concern was to show that things are conditioned by ideas; ideas (and probably we might add: souls as well, comp. Theophrastus Metaph, 6 b 2 Usener=III 12 Ross and Fobes and Xenocrates frg. 60 Heinze) by numbers (including magnitudes); numbers by the ultimate elements. And Aristotle tells us (Metaph. D 11) that when Plato declared that one thing B was derived from, or generated by, another thing A, he thereby meant to state that A was prior to B "naturally and essentially", in the sense that "A may be conceived without B, but B cannot be conceived without A". But what did this "natural and essential" priority imply? Simply that A precedes B from a logical point of view? Or also that B actually depends on A for its being and its reality? Or even that B is evolved from A by a process in time? I should think that what Plato had in mind was primarily the logical posteriority of B; but a posteriority which, at the same time, implied an element of real dependence (and this is what Plotinus emphasized); and did not absolutely exclude evolution in time, as is shown by the term "generation" and by the cosmogonic imagery of the *Timaeus* which, indeed, was understood as mere imagery by Xenocrates, but not by Aristotle.

That Plato held and taught a doctrine of the general character just described during the last years of his career has hardly ever been disputed, although it has often been overlooked. Nor could its close relationship to speculations ascribed to the Pythagoreans escape notice. Hence, it has frequently been supposed that Plato succumbed to the influence of Pythagorean absurdities when he had grown very old, or was even on the point of falling into dotage. But the facts do not admit of such an interpretation.

It appears from the autobiography that Plato must have professed one and the same doctrine ever since he came to Syracuse in 366. Now, if this is so, we are justified in looking out for its traces in the dialogues composed after that date.

Indeed, in the *Timaeus* the ideas of fire and the other elements are "linked up" with "magnitudes" and, no doubt, the doctrine referring to the "generation" of number is the only clue to the strange narrative, in that same dialogue, concerning the "making of the soul". In the

Philebus, again, the passage on the "mixture" of the limit and the unlimited certainly refers to the "generation" of things from the "Great and Small" by the "One". And when we are told, in the same work, that the main elements of "The Good" are "measure, and the measurable, and the due", and that, next in order, come "the symmetrical and beautiful and perfect and sufficient" (Jowett), that apparently confirms Aristotle's statement that Plato held the One (which, according to Hermodorus, stood for "the equal and permanent and harmonious") to be the cause of Good.

But can we really stop short at the year 366 and are there no traces of the "system" in earlier dialogues?

The second half of the *Parmenides* turns entirely on "the One" and "the other than the One". The doctrine of ideas, as propounded by Socrates, that is, without any mention of the "ultimate elements", is criticized by Parmenides who emphasizes the necessity of starting with "the One" and the "other than the One". Must we not, then, suppose this to mean that the doctrine of ideas needs revision in the direction pointed to by Parmenides, that is to say, that ideas need being "linked up" with numbers and, through these, with the "ultimate elements"?

Was Plato, then, ignorant of "the system" until he wrote the *Parmenides*? Another explanation appears to be more plausible. Probably Plato never put a doctrine into the mouth of Socrates which he knew to have been foreign to him, namely views which he did not hold to be conclusively derivable from tenets expressly professed by Socrates. Now, in the *Republic* we are told that the man who opens men's eyes to the dazzling splendor of the ideas is killed by those who cannot stand it (517a). In other words, the doctrine of ideas was, according to Plato, virtually contained in Socrates' effort to determine the nature of the Good, the Just, the Beautiful, and so forth. But Plato was most likely aware of the fact that Socrates never "linked up" these ethical values with numbers or with the "ultimate elements" (comp. Aristotle, *Metaph.* M 4) and this is probably the reason why he put the first express mention of the "elements" into the mouth, not of Socrates, but of Parmenides, who had really been concerned with "the One". But this does not, of course, prove that Plato himself had no notion of the "system" until he composed the *Parmenides*.

Indeed, in the *Republic* (506 de), Plato makes Socrates say that it would be too great a task, just now, to determine what the Good may be in itself. Does that not seem to imply that Plato even at this comparatively early stage of his career was not satisfied with con-

ceiving the Good as an idea, but was already prepared to explain its nature more precisely by identifying it with the One? But more than that. Plato's conception of the virtuous soul and of the well constituted city seem to be closely bound up with the doctrine of the One. Virtue and justice are explained to mean order and harmony in the soul as well as in the city, or due symmetry and proportion of their parts. Now, these, according to Hermodorus, and even to the *Philebus*, are also the essential constituents of the One and the Good. Hence, by being just and orderly the soul and the city participate in the One and the Good and this is just why, in the autobiography, a truly virtuous life is said to be inseparably bound up with insight into the highest truths of philosophy. Indeed, Plato's conception of virtue and good government, as set forth in the *Republic*, seem to presuppose the view that the Good may be defined as order, stability, symmetry and harmony and to embody its application to the soul and to the city. And, in fact, "asymmetry" is used as a term of blame in the *Gorgias* already (525a).

At what time of his life, then, may Plato's "system" have originated? One circumstance must not be overlooked. Plato was not the only follower of Socrates to identify the Good with the One. That very tenet was characteristic likewise of Euclid of Megara and of his school. That may remind us of the fact that Plato is reported to have fled to Megara after Socrates' death (in 399) and that it was only after this that (in 388) he visited Italy and there came to know Archytas and other Pythagoreans. Hence, Ast and K. F. Hermann may, after all, not have been entirely wrong when they referred the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* to a "Megaric period" of Plato's career. These dialogues do not, indeed, seem to have been composed before the decade extending from 370 to 360; but, for all that, they may have grown from a germ sown some thirty years earlier.

Let us now sum up what has been said. Plato's system of philosophy is not propounded in his dialogues in so many words, but it underlies them at least from the time of the *Republic* onward. It is a derivative, and it is also a dualistic system. But its dualism means more than the mere recognition of the chasm between the eternal calm of unchanging essences or patterns and the perpetual flux of the objects of sense. Plato was a dualist in another, and perhaps in a more profound, sense too. To him the ultimate forces active in the universe—in the sphere of the objects of pure thought as well as in that of sensuous experience—were: a principle of unity, identity, stability, order, reason, precision, harmony and symmetry, and an antagonistic

principle of duality, change, lability, disorder, irrationality, confusion, discord and asymmetry. In the realm of the eternal essences both forces are, indeed, discernible, but here they are, as it were, petrified: the ideas are the products of their interaction, but, in them, no further change may take place. Within the realm of the heavenly spheres, also, the triumph of reason and order is assured. But in the world of change and of becoming these two forces are engaged in everlasting strife: indeed, every change on earth, in our own breast as well as in the city, is only just one phase of this all-embracing struggle. It is, indeed, the struggle between Good and Evil. But to Plato, Evil meant "the unstable, the formless, the unlimited"; Good meant order, precision, symmetry, and proportion.