

Political Philosophy and the "Mortgage of the Polis"

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KARL POPPER HAS WRITTEN that "an intellectual revolution always looks like a religious conversion."¹ Certainly the validity of this observation is particularly evident with respect to the intellectual revolution known as "philosophy." As John Burnet has written, in ancient Hellas, philosophy is "dominated from beginning to end by the problem of reality (*to on*)." Often misconceived as "intellectualist" in character, Greek philosophy is in truth based on the soul's pre-intellectual openness to divine Being, which is to say, on the existential virtue of faith. To use Burnet's words, Greek philosophy rests on "the faith that reality is divine, and that the one thing needful is for the soul, which is akin to the divine, to enter into communion with it."

The fragments of the presocratic thinkers are littered with references to the divine ground of all existing things. To cite but a few examples, Anaximander wrote of "the Boundless" (*to apeiron*) as the "origin" (*archē*) of all existing things (*ta onta*). Existing things eventually "perish into that from which they were born," while the *archē* remains enduringly real. To turn to another presocratic philosopher, Xenophanes evoked his experience of the "one god...in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought." Here the philosopher sings of the one, transcendent, extra-cosmic god who is qualitatively distinct from the intra-cosmic gods of the myth. Xenophanes was especially concerned to "purify" the language of the traditional myths, so that the new language of philosophy symbolizes the radical transcendence and uncreated, ground-like quality of the divine reality.

The presocratics, of course, experienced God not only as remote and wholly other than man; they also experienced the reality of the act in which they were engaged: *viz.*, *participation* by their own thought in the divine thought. Through this experience of sharing in divine reality in a manner unique among created "things," man became conscious of the human condition as a process moving toward his immortalization. Both Heraclitus and Parmenides symbolize the experience of man as the mortal who is being pulled (if he will only open himself to it) toward immortalization by the divine presence in his soul (*psyche*). In his great poem on Being, Parmenides symbolizes human life as a continuous struggle to ascend from the darkness of unreality to the Light of pure Being, or, to use Eric Voegelin's translation of *to on*, to "the Is!" Thus, in the presocratics, the distinguishing characteristic of humanness is man's capacity to respond in the lucidity of self-conscious thought to the noetically luminous movement of divine presence in the soul. In summary, with the presocratics philosophy emerges as the noetic mode of openness toward transcendent, divine reality.

It remained for Plato in his *Symposium* to bring out the truth that philosophy is a mode of openness to reality grounded in love for the god who moves the searcher to undertake his quest. It also fell to Plato in the parable of the cave, to portray philosophy dramatically as a conversion (*metanoia*) of the soul from appearance to reality. It is philosophy's distinctive contribution to experience the existential conversion from appearance to reality from a certain critical distance: the distance of

"reflection on reflection" or the noetic self-consciousness of the psyche as a process in tension between the poles of closure and openness, light and darkness, life and death. The great symbol of human life as existence in the *Between (Metaxy)* is bequeathed to us by Plato.

Philosophy, then, is a conversion (*metanoia*) of the soul from non-reality to reality, an erotic reaching out toward divine reality, a knowing questioning and a questioning knowing, a form of noetic self-awareness, a way of life, a response to the pull of immortalization, a theophany and a revelation of the divine presence. Philosophy is not an abstract term but a symbol representing a complex of experiences occurring in the Greek world beginning in the 6th Century B.C. against the background of the break with the compact symbolism of the myth culminating in the Platonic dialogues.

As a mode of openness and a process of self-consciously seeking and questioning after the truth of existence, philosophy is much more than logic or epistemology or clear, analytic "ideational expression" (to use Eugene Webb's phrase).² The level of ideational expression is only the surface of what for the philosopher is a rich experience of participation in multi-dimensional reality. Above all, philosophy rests on a "fundamental experience" of the differentiation of the ground of being from the mythical world of the cosmos full of gods. To read a fragment of Parmenides or a Platonic dialogue as if it were a kind of propositional argument or legal brief is to miss the most important level of meaning which the document suggests.

Philosophy today is often confused with the "privileged knowledge" of an elite of academic experts called "philosophers." These so-called philosophers, however, often embrace doctrines which are the very antithesis of philosophy understood as a mode of openness to divine reality, doctrines such as

an externalizing conception of being, an immanentizing concept of man, the belief in the dichotomy between facts

and values, and a tendency to deny genuine cognitive status to modes of knowing not of the form exemplified in the natural sciences. Collectively these doctrines have a common feature...: a tendency to conceive of reality in such a way that it seems reduced from a mystery in which we are overwhelmingly involved to a problem we can master. (Eugene Webb)

Philosophy is not the private preoccupation of a happy few. It is not an indulgence by Epicurean aesthetes or an idiosyncratic language for twentieth century academic intellectuals. Philosophy is not the study of texts as an end in itself or of great thinkers of the past frozen and mummified into idols. Philosophy is a communal, public, communicable, teachable, learnable enterprise, a power in its own right and a mode of openness to reality available alike to the powerful and the powerless.

Philosophy and the Open Society

As a mode of openness to divine reality, philosophy implies that mankind is a universal community transcending space and time and bound together by the experience of divine presence. Man indeed is "defined" by the philosophic experience as the creature capable of self-consciously participating through his own *nous* (or intellect) in the divine *nous*. Philosophy implicitly teaches that every human being who has ever existed or will exist is in principle capable of participation in the divine reality, and that this capacity is the distinguishing mark of humanness. This implicit teaching is not always brought out by the Greek philosophers, who at times forget that they are talking about man as such and not about upperclass Greek males. Accordingly, (to revise a well-known formulary) man is by nature a universal animal, or an animal who exists in the open society embracing all mankind from its unknown beginning to its unknown end.

The early, so-called "presocratic"

philosophers were apparently so much in awe of their newly experienced encounter with the "one god," that they were unable to bring out the political implications of their discovery. By the time that Plato and Aristotle began to write about what they called "politics," however, they were so confined in their experience of life in the *polis* that they crammed the universalism of philosophy into the narrow confines of the Greek city-state. Burdened with this "mortgage of the polis,"* Plato played with the idea of establishing the great philosopher as a ruler of a visible city or, failing that, to certify him as a drafter of legal codes for the citizens of future generations to follow. Inasmuch as the Greek *polis* was founded on slavery, Aristotle even went so far as to put forth his infamous concept of human beings who are "slaves by nature." Women, too, were deprived, by Aristotle of their rightful humanity according to the prejudice of the times. Man, he proclaimed was "by nature an animal intended to live in the *polis*." In this statement, he also in effect deprived everyone but the Hellenic peoples of true humanity, for only the Greek-speaking peoples lived in *poleis*.

The mortgage of the *polis* prevented Plato from drawing out the magnificent universalism implicit in the famous passage about the "city in speech" at the end of Book IX of the *Republic*. Glaucon volunteers that, if the health of the soul is the philosopher's first concern, then "he will not willingly take part in politics." "Yes, by the dog" replies Socrates: "indeed he will, in his own *polis* he certainly will." The philosopher's "own" *polis*, it turns out, is the one which Socrates and Glaucon have been founding "in speech" throughout their long conversations about justice. This "city in speech" cannot be found on earth, but

perhaps there is a pattern of it laid up in heaven for him who desires to see it and seeing it to settle in it. It makes no difference whether it exists now or ever will; the politics of this city only will be his and none other.

Here Plato strains dramatically to turn around from the unreal politics of the visible polis to the real politics of the universal, open society of mankind. However, in the end, the paradigm (or pattern or model) of the philosopher's—and hence of everyone's—true city turns out to be just another *polis*, with the difference that this one will be ruled by philosophers. Augustine and other Christian writers who have seen this passage as prefiguring the "city of God," may in fact have been seeing what they wanted to see. The "politics" which the Platonic Socrates commends is not that of the universal community of mankind but rather the "politics" of the philosopher's private self, into which he is permitted to withdraw as a consolation prize for not having won power in a *polis* situated in the phenomenal world.

Plato's manner of argument and the design of the *Republic* have occasioned disputes about his intentions which have lasted over the centuries. Literalist interpreters have branded him either proto-fascist or a utopian forerunner of Communism. Much of this pointless, needless debate (needless from the vantage point of philosophy, that is) has been caused by Plato's inability to overcome the mortgage of the polis and to set political philosophy on the only footing worthy of itself: the open society.

Instead of founding political philosophy as an activity devoted to criticizing regimes and doctrines from the perspective of mankind as an open society, Plato and Aristotle left political philosophy with nowhere to go. With the disappearance of the polis as an effective power unit, philosophy itself disintegrated into rival dogmatic schools, with the empty cosmopolitanism of the Stoics emerging as the most influential of these schools. (It is perhaps no accident that the word *kosmopolites* was coined by the Cynics, whose enormous influence on Stoicism needs emphasis.) As J. M. Rist has observed, "It is certain that, when Diogenes [the founder of the Cynic school] called himself a 'cosmopolitan' he meant it

negatively: he did not belong to any particular city (*polis*).” For the Cynics, the “brotherhood of man” became confined to include only the so-called “wise” or “free” man declared to be such by the Cynic sages. Everyone else was sub-human—*i. e.*, a “fool.”

Although the representatives of middle and late Stoicism attenuated or even rejected the early Stoic dichotomy between a small minority of wise men and a vast majority of “fools,” not even such thinkers as Panaetius and Cicero carried the potential recognition of mankind as an open society under the one god to the point of criticizing slavery or other violations of human dignity in Roman society. Rather, their overriding consideration appears to have been to adapt “philosophy”—here reduced to a kind of “foreign learning”—to the practical needs of governing the far-flung Roman ecumenic (world-wide) empire. Rome itself was conveniently held to be the universal “city of reason”; Cicero has his “philosopher” say that there is no need to look afar for the true city of man as Plato did, because republican Rome with its perfect institutions lies under their very noses.

Christianity’s contact with the classical world resulted in an inevitable tension between revelation and philosophy as distinctive, yet interrelated modes of openness. Revelation is a “pneumatic” mode of openness; philosophy is a “noetic” mode. Unfortunately, the Stoic concept of philosophy as a form of “natural reason” distinct from faith (a preintellectual disposition of openness) greatly influenced the conception of philosophy as such held by most Christian writers, to such an extent that Christian thinkers found it necessary to defend themselves for philosophizing at all. Instead of philosophy aiding Christian writers to discern and noetically to articulate the universalism (as distinct from the ecumenicity) of the Christian message, a constricted notion of philosophy was pressed into the service of Christianity as a temporally conditioned sociological force. The impressive exceptions to this

rule—such as Augustine’s distinction in principle between the *Civitas Dei* and the visible Church, and Aquinas’ evocation of Christ as head of the single body of all mankind from its beginning to its end—either lacked sufficient philosophical development or were misguidedly pressed into the practical ecumenic needs of the medieval *sacrum imperium*.

The travails of what goes under the name of political philosophy in the modern period are too well-known and too numerous to mention in detail. Beginning with Machiavelli, and continuing through Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, political philosophy is mortgaged either to the nation-state or to a false “universality” claimed on behalf of an international “class” of “proletarian” insurrectionists. It is necessary only to recall the original Greek experience of philosophy as a turning around from non-reality to reality, a loving search for attunement with the divine ground, a response to the pull of immortalization, a theophany, and a kind of revelation, to recognize immediately how unphilosophical most of modern “philosophy” is. In modern thought, the idea that politics is the struggle for power to achieve world-immanent concupiscential objectives is generally taken for granted, and writers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes at least are brutally honest in their refusal to sugarcoat the “war of all against all” with a layer of specious “spirituality.”

The Obfuscation of the Political Dimension and the Birth of Political Philosophy

A political philosophy worthy of the name would offer an understanding of the political which integrates spirit and power within the context of the open society of universal mankind. By its openness to mankind’s symbolic creations wherever they may be found, such a science would at once demolish the parochialism animating much of Western “political science,” wherein the nation-state continues to be regarded as the fundamental political unit

and where the clash of opposing interests for "who gets, what, when, and how" is taken as characteristic human "behavior." It matters little whether the writer be a secular liberal-pluralist or a radical Marxist: in either case, the essence of politics is supposed to be "power," and by power one means the ability to control other people by various means to the advantage of oneself and one's allies. The no-nonsense understanding that politics is power has led to the result that most of mankind's history has been rendered either unintelligible or irrelevant. Lord Bryce's judgment that the Middle Ages were "essentially unpolitical" is a particularly egregious piece of ignorance that has been widely accepted in courses and textbooks on political thought. In many ways, the Middle Ages were *more* political than our own, not less, to the extent that the universality of Christian symbolism leavened the practical ecumenic structure of empire.

Either the politics of the pre-modern past is ignored—or it is reduced to the "no nonsense" language of bargaining, mobilizing resources, protection of vital "interests" and all the rest. The idea that human communities might actually have been formed around symbols of universal spiritual significance and that the symbols could be related to each other in a meaningful fashion seems to have been ruled out as ridiculous from the start by the modern sages of what is with only considerable charity called "political science."

A philosophy of politics grounded in the reality of the open society would abjure alike the sentimental self-deception of humanistic "love" and the philistine fascination with what is infelicitously called the "authoritative allocation of values." It would be a philosophy which recognizes the reality of what Plato called the "Between" of human life but which also refuses to be dragged into the mud and muck of power by those who cannot seem to see beyond their spiritual noses. Nor would it become petrified in philology, as if the work had all been done already and that the history of texts is a substitute for doing philosophy. A

political philosophy worthy of its name would recognize that the present offers untold opportunities for what Aristotle called "the philosophy of man" (*he philosophia perita anthropina*).

In writing the *Ethics* and the *Politics* as parts of a comprehensive political science or philosophy of man, Aristotle demonstrated that he grasped the fundamental insight that in a truly "realistic" political philosophy, mind and might must be seen as integrated into a single reality. Yet, by simultaneously separating ethics and politics in his two treatises and also giving so much attention to political science as a "nomothetic" or law-giving science aimed at producing rules for minimizing sedition in the *polis*, Aristotle encouraged the partial misinterpretation of his teaching by writers at the beginning of the modern period. This misreading of Aristotle by Althusius and others in the 16th Century is now accepted as gospel by historians of political thought who should know better. Thus, Quentin Skinner writes that Aristotle and Augustine are utterly opposed in their interpretations of politics, with Augustine arguing that political society is "merely ancillary...to eschatology" as opposed to Aristotle's evocation of the *polis* as a "self-sufficient ideal" implying "no further purposes lying beyond it." (I.50: see also II, 349-50).³

Skinner's history of the emergence of the modern state documents how the modern, reductionist concept of politics can be traced to the recovery of Aristotle in thirteenth century Europe. From William of Moerbeke, who published the first complete Latin translation of Aristotle's *Politics* in the early 1250's, the line runs to Bruno Latini, Dante's teacher and on to Bude, Ponet, La Nove, Lipsius and Althusius in the second half of the sixteenth century.

From the moment when, in the preface to his *Politica Methodice Digesta* (1603), Althusius declares it his ambition to rescue the study of "politics" from subservence to and confusion with theology, jurisprudence, or philosophy, and to return "all merely[!] theological, juridical, and

philosophical elements to their proper places,"[Skinner, II, 342], any possibility for the development of a philosophical understanding of politics vanished.

Thus, Althusius confirms for the modern era the notion that Dante's teacher Bruno Latini had of politics as a purely practical affair concerned with "temporal" government [Skinner, II, 350]. Instead of providing his readers with a philosophical understanding of politics, Althusius offers a "politicized" understanding of philosophy. From there to Marx's eleventh theses on Feuerbach ("Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point now is to *change* it.") is a smaller step than one might have thought.

Although our evaluations of the phenomenon are rather different, I fully agree with Quentin Skinner's conclusion that "any attempt to excavate the foundations of modern political thought needs to begin with the recovery and translation of Aristotle's *Politics*" in the thirteenth century (II, 349). Although it amounts to a considerable distortion of Aristotle's teaching to separate his *Politics* and *Ethics* so neatly, it is nonetheless true that the basis for such a separation lies in Aristotle's teaching itself. The mortgage of the *polis* continues to hang over us today. It is time that we liquidated said mortgage. It is high time to set political philosophy free, thus rescuing both philosophy and politics from the fateful consequences of their enforced separation.

The crisis of the modern state can be

overcome only through the constructive integration of spirit and power, of mind and might, of philosophy and a politics worthy of the name. Said crisis can only be prolonged by indifference and a continued casual acceptance of the separation that may lead to the destructive "integration" of totalitarianism and fanaticism.

In Conclusion

The only conclusion I am able to draw is one that surprises me as much as it may you: that, in the full sense of the term, political philosophy has yet to begin. Yet, it is an inescapable conclusion, once one understands what was the intellectual and spiritual revolution called "philosophy" and the "politics" implicit in that revolution. It was philosophy—the philosophy of the presocratics—which called forth the images of universal mankind as an open society under the one, world-transcendent God. A politics worthy of the name would be grounded on the reality of this open society. A political philosophy worthy of the name would be centered on the reality of the open society of universal mankind. Instead, all of what has traditionally gone under the name of political philosophy has been centered on the *polis* or the ecumenic empire, or the nation-state, or the revolting sect. The responsibilities of our time are immense; it remains to be seen whether those of us who call ourselves political philosophers grasp them.**

*The phrase, "mortgage of the polis," is Eric Voegelin's.

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¹K. R. Popper, "Normal Science and Its Dangers," in I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 57, quoted in Gerald Holton, *The Scientific Imagination: Case Studies* (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 1978), p. 104. See my review article "Karl Popper's Open Society," in *The Political Science Reviewer* (1978), for arguments as to why Popper is not always so perceptive as he was in this quotation. ²Eugene Webb has written a study of Eric Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness, soon to be published by the University of Washington Press. ³Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1978), I, 50. See also II, 349-50.