Chapter 5: Democracy and Property in Athens[1]

Western political philosophy begins, like so many other traditions, in Athens at the end of the fifth century BC, shaped by specific historical conditions at the moment when Athenian society was at a stage of transition. Centuries before, the collapse of the Mycenean Empire had been followed by the 'Dark Age', when even writing was forgotten.[2] (The epics of Homer look back to this time.) With the revival of civilisation, about 800 BC, communal life in the Greek settlements began to be organised in independent 'city-states'. (Strictly speaking, neither 'city' nor 'state' in their modern meanings quite fit. We shall use the term '*polis*' to denote this social form.) Each *polis* had its own form of organisation, and that of fifth century Athens was the most advanced, for here the citizens democratically governed themselves.

When the Athenians talked about *demokratia*, 'rule by the people' (the *dêmos*) they did not just mean the election of 'representatives', to rule on behalf of the electors, but actual, direct rule by every citizen. An Assembly, which actually took decisions, voted on all major issues, passed laws and voted on foreign policy. When it met, about once a week, every citizen could have his say, speaking for as long as he liked - until people got bored with his speech and pulled him off the platform. When the Assembly voted for war - that happened quite a lot - they knew precisely who was going to have to fight, for the citizens were themselves the army and navy and they elected their commanders. In the courts, the judges who implemented the laws were chosen by lot.

Who made up the body of citizens? Most eighteenth and nineteenth century writers, including Engels and Hegel, thought that the citizens were people who didn't work. Today, many people think otherwise,[3] estimating that the majority of citizens were ordinary peasants and artisans. If you had to leave your work to attend the Assembly or the court, you got some money in compensation. There was no government, as we know it today. A Council, chosen by lot, was given the job of preparing the business of the Assembly. In fact, there was no politics in the modern sense, that is, no institution separate from the rest of social life. 'Economics' [*oikonomia*] meant the management of a household. (*Oikos* was the household, of husband and wife, parents and children, and master and slaves, and the *oikonomos* was the master of the household.) What was good for each citizen, was good for the whole community [Latin '*com munis*' = 'serving together', Greek *koinonia*], and *vice versa*. Otherwise, the Athenian type of democracy would not have been possible.

Of course, we mustn't idealise this picture.[4] Citizens were exclusively adult males who had been born in Athens. (Resident aliens - including, by the way, Aristotle the Macedonian - had certain rights, but could not be citizens.) So over fifty percent of the population just didn't count: women were classified with slaves by many thinkers. Over the previous two centuries, money had come to play an increasing part in Greek life, and Athens was an important trading centre. So, by the fifth century, there was already considerable inequality in wealth and in land ownership. Some wealthy men, with the time and money to spend on their education, were unduly influential in swaying the decisions of the Assembly.

Most important, there was slavery. However, the story that Ancient Greece was a 'slave society' is misleading. It seems that earlier estimates of the numbers of slaves might have been exaggerated. (Some people liked to believe that without a massive proportion of slaves, democracy was impossible.) In any case, an Athenian slave in the fifth century should not be confused with, for example, a slave in Rome, and certainly not a nineteenth century plantation slave in the United States. Slaves were prisoners-of-war, many of whom worked in the households of wealthy Athenians. (Slaves in the silver mines, who were brutally over-worked, were the exception.) Nonetheless, even the most developed democracy co-existed with money, inequality, slavery and the oppression of women. During the 4th century, the contradiction between property and democracy sharpened, individual self-interest became more and more opposed to the life of the community as a whole, and the *polis* broke up.

We must also take account of war, widely accepted among the Greeks of this time as the most honourable way of life. The *polis* established its identity by fighting its neighbours. While there was unity between citizens of the *polis*, relations with other cities were governed almost exclusively by local self-interest. (This is how Thucydides reports an Athenian telling the men of Melos that they were going to kill them all, if they didn't give in to the greater power: 'You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you. ... Our opinion of gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can.' (**History of the Peloponnesian War**, Book Five.)

Many of the tragedies and comedies of the fifth century expressed Athenian pride in the democratic tradition, especially after Athens played the major part in defeating the Persian Empire's attack in 490-480. This was the event which opened the way for Athens' economic supremacy and prosperity, as well as its cultural and intellectual flourishing. But eventually, the Athenian *polis* was brought to an end by war. The Athenian Empire got itself embroiled in the war with the Spartan military dictatorship, the Assembly bungled the whole thing, and Athenian democracy was destroyed.

So Plato, Aristotle and other founders of political philosophy were concerned about the problems of an organism which was already in terminal crisis. When the *polis* was in its prime, citizens knew the difference between what was just and what was unjust. But when the economic contradictions increasingly broke up the harmony between the individual citizen and the collective life of the *polis*, these great thinkers found it necessary to ask their questions about the vanishing community. They were certainly not satisfied with describing the way humans lived: they could not separate such an enquiry from the question: what forms would make it possible to live well? They were not trying to return to the past they knew that was out of the question - but attempting to confront, in the realm of thought, the conflicts which were tearing the *polis* apart. How could community be compatible with inequality in property and in power?

(a) Plato's Ideal *Polis*

The hatred of the aristocrat Plato for democracy is quite blatant. He happily blames it for all the troubles afflicting Athens in his time. Early on in his most celebrated dialogue,[5] the **Republic**, we encounter all of the forces breaking up Athenian democracy. The dialogue begins in the Piraeus, the commercial centre of Athens. We meet a slave in the first few sentences, and money is not long in putting in an appearance. All of these institutions of inequality are accepted as given, and Plato, through his mouthpiece Socrates, tries to grasp

their implications for political life. Socrates asks the aged Cephalus, a wealthy arms manufacturer, whether his great wealth consoles him for old age, and receives a wise and balanced answer. But this is not much use philosophically, for Plato will soon explain that he is after a timeless truth, not individual opinion. Soon Cephalus departs (lines 328-331) and leaves Socrates and his friends to conduct their quest for the meaning of Justice (*dike*), more accurately 'right conduct'. This is no criticism of the old man, but illustrates Plato's contention that philosophy is only for certain people. The rest of us must try to live justly, but it is not necessary for us to know what Justice is. The rest of the dialogue takes place in Cephalus' house.

First, Socrates pretends to take justice to be a characteristic of the individual. Then he tries out the suggestion that it is synonymous with 'giving every man his due'. If this is interpreted as meaning that 'the just man should harm his enemies and help his friends', it has to be rejected. Next we encounter the objectionable Thrasymachus, a fourth century Thatcherite (336). He is a Sophist, one who philosophises for a fee, indeed, he gets paid for his part in these proceedings. He noisily defends the idea that Justice is no more than 'what is in the interest of the stronger party', rejecting everything else as sentimental rubbish. (The kind of world recommended by Thrasymachus, a world of greed and self-interest, was, no doubt, presented by Plato as a caricature. For us today, however, it is only too familiar as a realistic portrait of the world we live in.)

Socrates easily ties him in knots. He contends that governing is a special skill, requiring special training, like practising as a doctor or a musician. In any case, the ruler who feathers his own nest is not a true ruler, as judged by the ideal. But Glaucon, from here on Socrates' chief interlocutor, is not satisfied. This is not because he agrees with Thrasymachus' absurd attitude, but because he thinks the arguments against it have not gone deep enough. Supported by his brother Adeimantus, Glaucon now presents a more carefully worked-out case for self-interest as the basis for social life, a kind of 'social contract', so that Socrates can deal with it on a deeper level. (357) 'Self-interest is the motive which all men naturally follow if they are not forcibly restrained by law and made to respect each other's claims'. (359)

As becomes increasingly clear in the course of the dialogue, the aim of the enquiry is to free ourselves from mere 'opinion' (*doxa*), and to open the way for knowledge (*episteme*). Such knowledge is universal and unchanging, and only because of this is it binding on all free-thinking citizens. The justice sought by Socrates does not reside in particular instances of just behaviour, or just persons, or just constitutions. Such examples can never be more than pale reflections of the Just itself, something eternal and universal. Only this 'Idea' is real Justice. To grasp such a reality demands close attention, the kind of philosophical journey on which Socrates leads his young companions.

As a kind of thought experiment, he begins to invent an ideal *polis*, although the first prototype version turns out to be rather less than ideal. It consists of citizens with different skills, peacefully making the various things the community needs to live, and exchanging the products of their labour. 'Society originates because the individual is not self-sufficient', says Socrates. (369) There has to be a division of labour - although it is quite different from the kind we shall meet in later centuries. 'Will a man do better working at many trades or keeping to one only?' asks Socrates: his criterion is not which way will produce more stuff, but which will produce a result of better quality. Ethical considerations are never absent here. There are also traders, to market the goods produced by the others. These are men who are not fit for any productive activity. But where is Justice to be found in such a set-up? 'Really, Socrates', Glaucon comments, 'you might be catering for a

community of pigs.' (372)[6] Here, Plato expresses two things: boundless contempt for ordinary people and awareness that commerce is incompatible with the ancient virtues.

Socrates pretends to answer by bringing some luxuries into the picture; then doctors and other professions; and finally, soldiers. 'If we are to have enough for pasture and plough, we shall have to cut a slice off our neighbours' territory ... and that will lead to war.' (373) Now, the soldiers called the 'Guardians', the watchdogs of the *polis*, emerge as a governing class. In the course of the dialogue their selection and training becomes the chief issue, as some of them are transformed from fighters into 'Philosopher Kings'. (The rest are called 'auxiliaries', who work as soldiers and policemen under the direction of the Guardians proper.)

Those who undertake the control of the *polis* have to be philosophers, who are familiar with those Forms whose reality turns out to be Plato's central answer to the mess into which the everyday world is entangled. They must be unencumbered by property or family, and even their sex-lives are eugenically controlled by the Rulers.

Plato does not see the need to justify this inequality between rulers and ruled. As far as he is concerned, it is obviously the way things have to be. Justice is eventually going to reveal itself to centre on 'everybody doing his own proper job'. So, even though all the work of the Guardians must aim 'to promote the happiness ... of the whole community' (420), the running of the *polis* is going to concern only specialists in Justice. 'In that way, the integrity and unity of both the city and the *polis* will be preserved,' says Socrates. (423) Ruled like this, the *polis* 'will obviously have the virtues of wisdom, courage, discipline and justice' (427), for 'the desires of the less reputable majority are controlled by the desires and wisdom of the superior minority' (431). Included in the inferior portion are 'children, women and slaves', and 'the less reputable majority of so-called free men'.

On one issue only does Plato approach a modern liberal view: he considers that women with the necessary ability should be eligible for education as Guardians. (Less able women he can't be bothered about.) The Guardians, and only the Guardians, are trained as Philosophers, 'Lovers of Wisdom'. To rule justly, they must know Justice. But a startling paradox emerges, for one of the main jobs of these 'Lovers of the Truth' turns out to be telling lies to lesser beings.

And surely we must value truthfulness highly. For if we were right when we said just now that falsehood is no use to the gods and only useful to men as a kind of medicine, it's clearly a medicine that should be entrusted to doctors and not to laymen.
Yes.
It will be for the rulers of our *polis*, then, if anyone, to deceive citizen or enemy for the good of the state; no one else must do it. If any citizen lies to our rulers, we shall regard it as a still graver offence than it is for a patient to lie to his doctor, or for an athlete to lie to his trainer about his physical condition.
So philosophy is impossible among the common people.
Quite impossible. (494)

The Justice for which Plato is searching belongs to the 'real' world of unchanging objects, that is, it is an ideal. The quite different world of ordinary life is necessarily one of imperfection and change.

Hard as it may be for a state so framed to be shaken, yet, since all that comes into being must decay, even a fabric like this will not endure for ever, but will suffer dissolution. In

this manner: not only for plants that grow on earth, but also for creatures that move thereon, there are seasons of fruitfulness and unfruitfulness for soul and body alike, which come whenever a certain cycle is completed, in a period short or long according to the length of life of each species. (546)

Here is a problem which, as we shall see, recurs throughout the history of philosophy. If you can demonstrate that a way of life is necessarily the best possible one, then any change must necessarily mean decline. This is the subject of Books IX and X of **The Republic**. Here, Socrates successively examines four inferior forms of state. First we are given Thrasymachus' favourite, 'timocracy', where ambition and greed hold sway, then oligarchy, democracy and despotism, Plato shows how his best of states holds the possibility, even inevitability, that it will degenerate into one or other of these inferior forms.

Finally, Socrates, now concerned only with 'the intelligent man', decides that, since such people are in short supply, his plan for the ideal *polis* is really unattainable.

'Perhaps', I said, 'it is laid up as a pattern in heaven, where those who wish can see it and found it in their own hearts. But it doesn't matter whether it exists or ever will exist; it's the only state in whose politics he can take part'. (592)

Plato seeks the best form of community, and thinks he has found it in the propertiless, highly organised life of the specially-selected, scientifically bred and philosophically trained Guardians. Everybody else lives at a lower level, busily making things and exchanging them to keep the *polis* going. Only the Guardians know the Forms, above all the Form of the Good, and this, Plato alleges, gives his ideal *polis* its objective foundation. Thus his solution to the contradiction between the individual and the common good is situated 'in heaven', out of the reach of ordinary men and women. Indeed, the final section of the dialogue deals with the immortality of the soul and the structure and origin of the universe. The citizens for whose wellbeing the Guardians were supposed to be responsible, seem to have been forgotten. While the Guardians philosophise, *hoi poloi*, are left to make shoes or money, in Socrates' first city, the city 'fit for pigs'. This is the only way forward, Plato is certain, although without much optimism of success.

The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers. (473)

(b) Aristotle

Aristotle was Plato's most celebrated pupil, but his outlook differs in many ways from that of his great teacher. While Plato's celestial 'Ideas' exist outside the existing world, only dimly and imperfectly reflected in it, Aristotle seeks the Forms in that world itself. His investigation of human life, which involves a great deal of empirical research, for example, classifying all the constitutions known to him, is based on the assumption that the human is 'by nature' a city-dweller, an 'animal of the *polis*', (*zoon politikon*). 'Man, when perfected, is the best of animals; but when isolated from law and justice, he is the worst of all.'

Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is not a member of a state is either

a bad man or above humanity; ... he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts. ... He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god. (**Politics**, 1253a)[7]

This famous characterisation has two sides, however. It not only stresses that human sociality is natural. It also applies this idea only to Greeks: 'barbarians don't qualify. The *polis* is part of the great organism of nature, so that justice has a natural basis. However, the way any particular *polis* functions must be decided by convention, and by the decision of rulers.

Aristotle's **Politics** seeks to understand the different kinds of 'association' or 'community', of which the *polis* is the highest form. 'Every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good.' (**Politics**, 1252a) The task Aristotle has set himself is to find the best way this may be achieved. 'Our purpose is to consider what form of political community is best of all for those who are most able to realise their ideal of life.' (**Politics**, 1260b.) So <u>what</u> is best and <u>what</u> is ideal are the crucial questions. That is why the book must be taken together with the **Ethics**, which at its outset stresses the importance of studying politics as a science. To be a good man, you must live in a good *polis*. (Women don't count.) Studying politics, which aims to discover 'the good for man', puts us in touch with something which stands above the individual.

But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community (*polis*) which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at a good in a greater degree than all the rest.

But that does not tell us how the *polis* ought to be governed. Self-rule in society[*isonomia*] is a natural property of humanity. Aristotle believes in the importance of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), and argues that this is only possible within the *polis*, a 'state which has a regard to the common interest', 'a community of free men'. (**Politics**, 1279a) Nonetheless, he does not regard Athenian democracy as the best way to organise. While not as violently opposed to it as Plato, Aristotle will classify it as one of the inferior forms of constitution. Power ought best to be in the hands of the 'best people' (*aristoi*).

All of this assumes that the *polis* is a divided unity. What unites it? And what divides it? The **Ethics** devotes two whole books, (Books VIII and IX), to the problem of friendship (*philia*). Aristotle quotes the old Greek saying: 'friends have all things in common', and believes, remarkably, that 'where there is friendship, there is no need for justice'. But this linking of community and friendship only applies where there is equality between the friends. If they are unequal - for example, where one is rich, the other poor - a way of measuring their respective rights has to be found.

So Aristotle must also examine those elements which make the inhabitants of the *polis* <u>un</u>equal. Aristotle thinks of the *polis* as made up of component associations, called households, within which a master rules his wife, his children and his slaves. In each of the three pairs: man/woman; parent/child; master/slave, the first must govern the second.

That which can foresee by the exercise of mind is by nature lord and master, and that which can with its body give effect to such foresight is a subject, and by nature a slave; hence master and slave have the same interest.

There can be *philia*, he thinks, even between master and slave, although, he admits, this friendship is somewhat different from the friendship of equals:

Where the relation of master and slave between them is natural, they are friends and have a common interest, but where it rests merely on convention and force the reverse is true. (**Politics.** 1255b)

A little further on, Aristotle explains how this works:

The rule of a master, although the slave by nature and the master by nature have the same interests, is nevertheless exercised primarily with a view to the interest of the master, but accidentally considers the slave, since, if the slave perish, the rule of the master perishes with him. (**Politics**. 1278b)

(Two thousand years later, this idea finds an echo - implicitly critical of Aristotle, although he is not explicitly acknowledged - in the 'Master and Slave' episode in Hegel's **Phenomenology of Spirit**.)

In the **Ethics**, Aristotle worries over the problem at some length. Somehow, he knows he must combine friendship with the relations of power. He seeks to escape from this difficulty through his conception that slavery in particular and social divisions in general are natural. 'It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter, slavery is both expedient and just.' (**Politics.** 1255a)

Although this is obvious to Aristotle, he notes that others disagree with him. Moreover, he acknowledges, not all who are enslaved ought to be so.

For there is nothing common to the two parties; the slave is a living tool and a tool a lifeless slave. *Qua* slave, then, one cannot be friends with him. But *qua* man one can; for there seems to be some justice between any man and any other who can share in a system of law or be a party to an agreement; therefore there can also be friendship with him in so far as he is a man. Therefore while in tyrannies friendship and justice hardly exist, in democracies they exist more fully; for where the citizens are equal they have much in common. (**Ethics**, 1161b.)

Occasionally, Aristotle gives us a glimpse of another way of living. Near the beginning of the **Politics**, he dreams of a world where labour is not drudgery:

For if every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others, like the statues of Daedelus, or the tripods of Hephaestus, which, says the poet, 'of their own accord entered the assembly of the gods'; if in like manner, the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves. (1253-4.)

And at the end of Book IX of the **Ethics**, we get a cameo picture of what a life of friendship is like:

And so some drink together, others dice together, others join in athletic exercises and hunting, or in the study of philosophy, each class spending their days together in whatever they love the most in life; for since they wish to live with their friends, they do and share in those things as far as they can. (1172)

If friendship is one cement holding Aristotle's *polis* together, the exchange of property forms the other essential aspect. But are these two things compatible? Can exchange be just? It is to answer this question that he tries to work out how there can be 'just proportion' between exchangeable goods of different kinds. (We must not read into Aristotle's words meanings drawn from our own world. In the community he is meditating upon, *dike* means both justice as legality and also justice as fairness, *metadosis* means not only barter but also sharing, while *chreia* means not only demand for goods, but also need.) In the **Ethics**, (1133) Aristotle explains how the link formed by the exchange is what holds the association together. And yet, without equality, exchange would be impossible, and this demands commensurability between goods of different kinds. Aristotle can't find an answer which satisfies him - nor does he pretend to - so money is brought into the story as a makeshift to fix the crucial break between exchange and justice.

Aristotle even derives a definition of justice from these exchange relationships: 'We have now defined the just and the unjust,' he says after his discussion of exchange. (1133b) The fact that Aristotle is unable to reach the views of modern political economy is thus crucial for his attempt to resolve the fundamental contradiction between the individual and the common good. Particularly important - and much misunderstood - is Aristotle's distinction between *oikonomia* and *chrematistic*.[8] The former, the science of management of the household, aims at a balanced programme of production and commercial exchange with the rest of the *polis*: this is the 'natural' way to acquire wealth. The latter, the use of money to make money, is unnatural, growing beyond all bounds. Its very worst form is usury [*tokos*]. 'The most hated sort, and with the greatest reason, is usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural object of it. ... Of all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural.' (**Politics**, 1258b)

Though Aristotle was a little more moderate than his teacher in his criticism of democracy, he agrees that it has a major flaw: it might give poor people, who were in the majority, the chance to take the wealth away from rich ones, and this would never do. Towards the end of the **Politics**, after examining various forms of constitution, and always distinguishing 'constitutions' from monarchies, he discusses the best form of state**,** spelling out some of his disagreements with Plato. Social ills do not arise from a reasonable level of self-interest, as Plato had said, but from 'the depravity of human character'. (1266b) The *polis* should be run by men of property. Production should be left to slaves, as well as free artisans, where the latter group, even though they may sometimes be quite well off, should not be accepted into citizenship. Even where they are citizens, says Aristotle, they should not be rulers, 'for no man can practise excellence who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer'. (**Politics**, 1278a)

The citizens must not lead the life of artisans or tradesmen, for such a life is ignoble and inimical to excellence. Neither must they be farmers, since leisure is necessary both for the development of excellence and the performance of political duties. (**Politics**, 1328)

He is very practical on such matters, as always.

The very best thing of all would be that the farmers should be slaves, taken from among men who are of the same race, but not spirited, for if they have no spirit, they will be better suited for their work, and there will be no danger of them making a revolution. (**Politics**, 1330)

The rulers should be soldiers when young and statesmen when older. (**Politics**, 1328b-1329a.) However, he is aware that the inevitable conflicts resulting from the nature of

property make an ideal state of affairs impossible. Instead, Aristotle puts forward a compromise solution, which he calls 'polity' [*politeia*, which also means 'constitution']. This turns out to be a mixture of oligarchy and democracy, best exemplified by Sparta. (1295b).

Aristotle has no conception of a historical process. But, in Book V of the **Politics**, he is concerned with constitutional change, including revolutions, as well as the possibility of avoiding such instability. Aristotle does not accept Plato's arguments that the degeneration of the best form of rule always and necessarily occurs. 'Why does Plato not talk about change affecting the other, lesser state-forms as well?' asks Aristotle. Plato thinks that the tendency of everything to deteriorate over time is the cause of social change. However, Aristotle's explanation of the 'variety of different constitutions' is that, 'while men are all agreed in doing homage to justice and to the principle of proportional equality,' (1301a), they do not agree in their interpretation of the meaning of justice. So it is not only the best form of rule which is subject to change, and Aristotle thinks that each form can turn into each of the others.

In the end, despite all their disagreements, Aristotle's conclusions do not differ so greatly from those of Plato. Near the end of the **Ethics**, he argues that the highest happiness is to be found, not in practical activity of any kind, but in contemplation. Making things (*poiesis*) is essentially servile, subordinate to political practice (*praxis*), thinks Aristotle, and both are below the level of intellectual contemplation (*theoria* - a word derived from that for a spectator at the theatre).

For if the gods have any care for human affairs, as they are thought to have, it would be reasonable and best that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (ie intellect) and that should reward those who love and honour this the most, as caring for the things which that are dear to them and acting both rightly and nobly. And that all these attributes belong most of all to the wise man. (**Ethics**, 1179a.)

Philosophy has begun as it would continue for the next couple of millennia.

(c) The Stoics[9]

With the collapse of the Athenian Empire, the Athenian philosophical tradition went into decline. The *polis* had ceased to be; philosophers no longer thought about the 'common good'; the divorce of ethics and politics was complete. Epicurianism, Cynicism and Stoicism, all turned to problems of individual virtue and personal happiness, but it was Stoicism whose ideas reverberated down the centuries.

But which Stoicism? There seems to be a gulf between the founders of the movement, their leader, Zeno of Tarsus (Citium) (334-262), and his pupil Chrisippus (c280-206) on the one hand, and their later followers in Greece and Rome on the other. They all believe that Nature includes 'right reasoning' - identified with virtue - within its structure. The wise man, the *phronimos*, who is also the virtuous man, is impervious to 'the passions' and acts in harmonious accord with Nature. His life is his own affair, and nobody else's: if it turns out badly, suicide is his own business too. There is a natural law, binding on all humans, independent of the laws of particular states. The course of natural development is predestined, and the sage is indifferent to external circumstances. The only good is individual virtue and the only evil is individual vice.

But each of the founders of Stoicism, Zeno and Chrisippus, had written a ***Republic***, works known to us only through the loud denunciations of later writers. Not only the enemies of Stoicism, but later Stoics, were scandalised by Zeno's idea on the ideal *polis*, and his book was disowned, written off as youthful excess and a reflection of his bad schooling by the Cynics. This reception might have been partly occasioned by his highly permissive views on sexual matters. But his scorn for social convention in general appears to have included radical ideas about property and political power. His *polis* was to have as citizens only wise men and women, who were therefore certain to be virtuous and to despise wealth and glory. Instead of ruling the fools, as in Plato's set-up, the shared right reason of the wise would make money, laws and marriage unnecessary. However, all this was as unlikely of realisation as Plato's ideal, for, as several Stoic texts admit, wise men are as rare 'as the Egyptian Pheonix'.

No wonder that the later Stoics try to distance themselves from such ideas. They come to consider society, if at all, only as a convenience for the individual. As we have seen, this was an argument Plato had combated, but it was to return in modern times as the basis for the ideas of political economy. While the Romans imitated a great deal of the culture of the Greeks, even in the days of the Republic, it was Sparta rather than Athens that provided the model for their political forms and theory. In the last days of the Roman Republic, three centuries after, its origin, Stoicism found a sympathetic echo. influencing many of the writers of that troubled time, notably Cicero (106-43AD), the former slave Epictetus (55-135) and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180).

Amid the decadence and corruption of the Empire, where few voices spoke up for the old Republican virtues, Cicero transmitted the Stoic ideas of unchangeable, eternal and universal natural law. These notions made possible a global view of society. 'This whole universe must be considered a common city of gods and men.' (**Laws**, I, 23.) Roman jurists contrasted the natural law (*jus naturalis*) with the laws or statutes laid down by states, which they called *lex naturalis*. Later in our story, the Stoic idea of personal integrity, independent of society, will often re-emerge in various guises, particularly because it was one of the influences feeding into the emergence of Christianity.

Notes

1. McCarthy, GE: **Marx and the Ancients. Classical Ethics, Social Justice and Nineteenth Century Political Economy** has been very useful, especially on the relation between Marx and Aristotle. However, I part company with the author when he insists on regarding Marx as a maker of theories. Sean Sayers' **Plato's Republic: An Introduction** has also been very helpful. While I have only talked about Western philosophy, we ought really to consider also Indian and Chinese thinkers too, and only ignorance has prevented me from doing this. It becomes increasingly clear that communications between Europe, Asia and parts of Africa were much closer than used to be supposed, so that all developments in the ancient world should be seen as an integrated whole.

2. The Minoan script disappeared, and writing had to be reinvented. So much for the account of Engels, uncritically taken from that of LH Morgan, of a once-for-all transition from 'barbarism' to 'civilisation', in which clan society gave way to 'slave society'. Engels' work **The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State** was a remarkable contribution in its time, but it does not represent the ideas of Marx, as publication of

Marx's **Ethnological Notebooks** showed. The attempt to sustain Engels' authority in the face of the conclusions of modern research marred much work by would-be 'Marxists'.

3. See, for example, the book **Peasant, Citizen and Slave** by Ellen Meiskens Wood**)**. See also **The Athenian Revolution. Essays on ancient Greek democracy and political theory**, by Josiah Ober. Princeton 1996, James L O'Neil **The Origins and Development of Ancient Greek Democracy**, Rowman and Littlefield, 1995, and Arlene W Saxonhouse, **Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists** University of Notre Dame Press. 1996.

4. CLR James' 'Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece in The Future and in the Present', **Selected Writings**. Alison and Busby, 1977, is an example of such idealisation, although a beautifully written one.

5. Except for the word *polis*, I have used the translation by HPD Lee. (Penguin Classics, 1955.)

6. Compare this remark with the passage on 'the spiritual animal kingdom and deceit' in Hegel's **Phenomenology of Spirit**, where he satirises civil society. (Miller Translation, p 237.)

7. I have used the translations in Barnes, **The Complete Works of Aristotle**, giving the traditional page numbers.

8. For a total misunderstanding and muddle, see Fowkes' Pelican translation of **Capital**, Volume 1, pages 253-4 together with footnote 6, and page 267. Marx himself had understood Aristotle perfectly, but Fowkes can't understand either of them.

9. **Stoic Philosophy**, by JM Rist Cambridge, 1969, traces the connections of Stoicism to Plato and Aristotle. Andrew Erskine, **The Hellenistic Stoa: Political Thought and Action**, Duckworth, 1990, and Malcolm Schofield, **The Stoic Idea of the City**, 1991, reconstruct the ideas of Zeno's **Republic**.

Table of Contents