CHAPTER TWO

PLATO’S POLITICAL ONTOLOGY: ON THE NATURE OF MAN AND REGIME

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One should achieve one of these things: learn the truth for oneself, or, if that is impossible, adopt the best and more irrefutable of men’s theories, and, borne upon this, sail through the dangers of life as upon a raft, unless someone should make that journey safer and less risky upon a firmer vessel of some divine doctrine.

(Cebes to Socrates in Plato: Phaedo 85cd)

But in heaven, I said, perhaps a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn’t make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other.

(Plato: Republic 592b)

Isn’t it quite necessary for us to agree that the very same forms and dispositions as are in the city are in each of us?

(Plato: Republic 435e)

1. INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY

One of the most puzzling problems in both classical and modern political thought is the question of why men become what they are. To explore the answer to this question, we can distinguish between the question of what man is, and the question of how and why man changes. To probe what man is or becomes is to speak of man as man, or the nature of man, that is, his being. To know how and why man changes, his becoming, requires understanding his role and activity in the wider context of a political regime. And if it is possible to have knowledge of human nature, then this will include knowledge about man’s political nature as well as knowledge of the nature and structure of a regime, and the experience of living under a regime. For Plato, the nature of man is related to the nature of the political regime in a particular way – and this concerns questions
about the proper conduct of life and the meaning of justice. For Plato, the questions about human nature concern the manner in which man’s soul is ordered—and the study of the composition and ordering of the soul as a philosophic exercise is a study of its ontology. An understanding of the political nature of man has consequences for how political regimes are ordered and has normative implications for how they should be ordered. The theme of this chapter is the political soul of man, as it is described in Plato’s *Republic*, and the analogous relationship the soul has to the structure of the political regime. I will argue that this analogy between the city and soul, as described in the *Republic*, contains a theory that not only describes the nature of what man is, but also explains why men become what they are. This is a comprehensive ontological theory, of both the being and becoming of the political animal that is man.

If the themes of this volume are questions surrounding the contemporary role of religion in the state, then what does Plato have anything to do with any of it? Why is it helpful to understand what Plato wrote about the three-part soul, to understand contemporary questions about belief, religion and citizenship? There must be something of a particular relationship between what a man believes to be true, what he does, and thereby, what he becomes. What one believes is nothing more or less than that what one accepts as true. A belief, for example, in a particular kind of religious revelation will be accompanied by a particular self-understanding. This in turn plays a part in the way in which man views the order of the world. Regardless of the content or truth of the belief, we can perhaps say that the fact of belief creates a particular ordering in man’s political soul—an ordering that is somehow related to his nature.

We can further distinguish between knowledge and belief: everything that is known to be true is believed, but not everything that is believed is known, with reasonable certainty, to be true. According to Socrates and Plato, it is the role of philosophy to replace opinion with knowledge, while at the same time not despairing about what cannot be known. In Plato’s *Phaedo*, the character Cebes is unnerved by Socrates’ equanimity. Socrates is about to be executed, but the prospect of not knowing what lies beyond death does not scare him one bit. Cebes raises a question that represents a profound human need. While we cannot know for certain the truth about the most important things, life, death and our purpose in the world, is it not better to simply float on belief on the “firmer vessel of some divine doctrine” (85d)? Indeed, faith in faith is an