PLATONISM, MORAL NOSTALGIA, AND THE ‘CITY OF PIGS’

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I. Ethical Reconstructionism

Open an introductory book on Plato from the nineteen thirties, and you are likely to see something like the following:

What makes ancient Greece important for us is that it was faced by essentially the same political, philosophic, and religious problems as ourselves..... our age, like theirs, is one in which all the foundations are breaking down.... I speak here not only, or chiefly, of political shocks, but of what underlies them, the overturn of ideas. Everything is now being questioned, right and wrong, religion, philosophy, marriage, property, government. So was it also in the Greece of Plato; and that is how and why he came to write as he did..... He was trying at once to uproot and to resettle. So that he is in some respects the greatest of revolutionaries, in others the greatest of reactionaries. (Dickinson 1947, viii-x)

The author here is Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson; the book, Plato and His Dialogues, was first published in 1931 after having been written for BBC radio. Or consider Richard Crossman’s 1937 Plato Today, likewise derived from a series of radio talks:

It is no exaggeration say that it is world war that has made Plato intelligible to us. For us, too, the old traditions are breaking down; art has lost touch with the life of the people, democracy is in danger. We, too, are standing on the edge of the abyss, and philosophy has become a matter of life and death instead of a matter for polite discussion.... Now, when our civilization has reached a crisis similar to that in which he lived, we are able to see him as he really was... a revolutionary reformer who could find no political basis for his reforms. (Crossman 1959, 14-15)

This phrase ‘revolutionary reformer’ is somewhat misleading, for Crossman holds that Plato’s aristocratic outlook gave his project a ‘counter-revolutionary’ twist. Thus “the political programme of the Republic is rooted in the past and is at bottom the rationalization and justification of Reaction” (Crossman 1959, 170-2).

I will refer to this general line of interpretation as the reconstructionist reading of Plato. To abstract a bit from particular authors, I take the essential premise of this reading to be that Plato sees his time as one of profound moral and political disorder. More precisely, he sees it as an After contrasted with a more virtuous Before. Back in the good old days—back when when the center still held—religious tradition, moral unreflectiveness and austere economic conditions all helped to sustain a more decent and upright society. I will refer to this view as moral nostalgia. A key corollary to it in the reconstructionist reading is that
Plato diagnoses the collapse of the old morality as having had at least partially intellectual causes. The ideas of scientists and sophists have brought moral corruption as the price of intellectual progress—a charge reminiscent of that presented, at least on a naive reading, by Aristophanes in the Clouds. In the face of this crisis, Plato’s agenda is twofold. In ethics, he seeks to establish the reality of objective moral truths against the trendy immoralist or moral sceptic, via the theory of Forms; in politics, he provides the blueprint for a virtuous society with a stable system of moral education. Both projects involve much that is new—if the old ways had been entirely right, they would not have been vulnerable to corruption—and in the Republic, where they are largely carried out, they turn out to involve radical innovation.

Reading Dickinson and Crossman, one might guess that reconstructionism belonged strictly to the generation traumatized by World War I and the upheavals which followed. But in fact the reconstructionist reading seems to have emerged from late-nineteenth-century readings of Plato as a Hegelian conservative (cf. Barker 1959, vii-viii, 85-6). Its influence in turn has extended far beyond popularizers like Dickinson and Crossman; and it is far from dead today. Among more recent interpreters Julia Annas shows some sympathy for the view that Plato a conservative was concerned with “the erosion of confidence in familiar moral values” and rise of moral scepticism (Annas 1981, 8). At the same time Annas insists that “If he reinstates ordinary moral views, it is on a new basis which is remote from anything that the ordinary person would dream of. When we look at the proposals for society that made the Republic notorious, it is hard not to think of him as revolutionary” (Annas 1981, 9).

This analysis of Plato’s thought as an amalgam of ‘conservative’ and ‘revolutionary’ (or ‘reactionary’ and ‘revolutionary,’ or ‘Conservative’ and ‘Radical’) is the hallmark of the reconstructionist readings which interest me. My concern, I should emphasise, is not with what proportions of the two we should see at work in Plato’s thought; that I take to be a question about which version of reconstructionism to prefer. Rather, I want to ask in a more general way whether it is helpful to view Plato in terms of this framework at all. Arnold Schoenberg once said, “I am a conservative who was forced to become a radical”: the question I want to consider is whether Plato is even the kind of conservative Schoenberg was.

Reconstructionism as I have defined it is of course a very sweeping interpretive framework. It is hard to know how to argue for or against it with precision, which is perhaps why interpreters have tended either to assume reconstructionism or ignore it. A full assessment would have to tackle the

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1 For other varieties of reconstructionism, see Field (1930, 91), Dodds (1937, 1959), Cherniss (1936, 446; cf. Grube 1935, 3) and, for an extreme and idiosyncratic version, Popper (1945), vol. 1. Cf. also Rist (1999): this paper was my starting point for considering the question of reconstructionism, and my comments on it (Barney 1998 (2)) deal with some related issues.