



# The Enlightenment



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## Plato – Greek Philosopher – 428 BCE – 348 BCE

For about ten years I have had the privilege and pleasure of belonging to a small group called the Plato Society that meets once a month to discuss the contents of books on philosophy and other related subjects. During my time of attendance we have looked at three books by Plato, namely *The Laws*, *The Symposium*, and *The Republic*, which is probably the best known of Plato's numerous dialogues.



Plato

*The Laws*, Plato's last and longest dialogue, describes in rich and fascinating detail a Utopia to be founded in Crete in the middle of the fourth century BCE. *The Symposium* examines the varieties of love in ancient Greece and culminates with Socrates extolling the virtues of the love of wisdom. But neither of these dialogues provided me with a satisfying understanding of what Plato was really all about. On the other hand, *The Republic* did help, at least to some degree, in this regard.

The Republic begins with the participants in the dialogue attempting to define justice, but not arriving at a firm conclusion. It goes on to describe the ideal city state consisting of three classes of citizens, the producers (craftsmen, artisans, merchants, farmers, etc.), auxiliaries (warriors), and guardians (rulers), each possessing the required aptitude and skills for their position. The rulers must undergo a rigorous education process including the study of philosophy in order that they will become philosopher kings, so to speak. Plato then digresses into a series of three analogies, the allegories of the sun, the line and the cave, along with his theory of forms. This is all heavy stuff and beyond the scope of this brief account, but could be a topic for a future *Enlightenment* article. He next compares four types of imperfect societies, Timarchy (think Sparta) Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny. (Neither Socrates nor Plato were admirers of the Athenian direct democracy). Plato then proceeds with some derogatory remarks about poets, and ends by relating the myth of Er, describing the path of the soul after death.

A challenge presented in Plato's dialogues is to discard aspects that would not be acceptable in today's democratic societies, and ferret out the concepts that would be helpful. The remainder of this *Enlightenment* attempts to define philosophy and suggest a couple of areas where it could be useful.

## President's Remarks

Our annual Wolf Hall event held on June 11 featuring Dan Barker was a great success. Speaking to an audience of 200, Mr. Barker recounted how he spent 19 years as a well-known Evangelical Christian preacher in the United States before losing his faith in 1984. He talked about how his belief in God and the supernatural, based on a literalistic interpretation of the Bible, became increasingly untenable as he read books on science and other scholarly topics over a period of several years. He also spoke about his current work as co-president of the Freedom from Religion Foundation



**HALA Board With Dan Barker**

promoting the separation of church and state in the U.S., and talked about how one can live a moral life without believing in God. His presentation was informative, humorous, thought-provoking, and inspiring, and he handled some hecklers in the audience with aplomb. All-in-all, I think this event more than fulfilled our goal of making Humanism more visible in the broader London community. I wish to thank all those who helped in organizing and promoting this very successful event. Now we're looking forward to our annual summer potluck picnic, which will be held this year on July 20 in the lovely park-like grounds at the home of Will and Linda Sanderson in the village of Sparta. This will be an opportunity for members and friends of HALA to get together for an enjoyable time of "fun, food, and fellowship" before we break for the summer.

~ Rod Martin

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The Humanist Association of London and Area meets at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, 505 Dundas Street in London, on the second Wednesday of the months September to June inclusive at 7:30 p.m. Please use the rear door off the parking lot. *The Enlightenment*, edited by Don Hatch, is published quarterly in January, April, July and October. Special issues are published from time to time. Please note: We reserve the right to edit and publish articles at our discretion.

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## What is Philosophy and Why it Won't Go Away

Ancient Greek philosophy can conveniently be slotted into two periods, the pre-Socratic and the post-Socratic. The pre-Socratics were concerned about how the world works, or in other words, they were early scientists attempting to explain the universe they observed around them. They asked question about the essence of things such as:

- From where does everything come?
- From what is everything created?
- How do we explain the plurality of things found in nature?
- How might we describe nature mathematically?

Thales, reputedly the father of Greek philosophy, declared water to be the basis of all things. Anaximenes considered fire, wind, clouds, water, and earth to be what combined to make up what we see around us. The atomists Leucippus and Democritus believed everything was made of small particles that combined in different ways to form different objects. The Pythagoreans regarded the world as being in perfect harmony.

The pre-Socratics lived in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. In the fifth century BCE, philosophy took off in a different direction when Socrates became more concerned about how humans should live the good life, rather than trying to figure out how the world works. Philosophy came to be defined as a love of and a search for wisdom, intertwining truth, beauty and goodness. But the great Socrates never left any of his pearls of wisdom in writing, so we are left with the dialogues of Plato (and the writings of a few others) to inform us about the thoughts and teachings of Socrates who is a participant in 25 of Plato's 26 dialogues, being absent only in *The Laws*, Plato's last work. Plato himself does not appear personally in the dialogues, but he is really there along with Socrates, sometimes making it difficult to know which of the two is actually speaking.

The source for much of the material in this issue of *The Enlightenment* is Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's recent book, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*. One of her aims in the book is to present the case that much of Plato's philosophy (although not all) is as relevant today as it was 2400 years ago. She notes that if the pre-Socratic philosophers came to life and attempted to sit in at a contemporary scientific roundtable, they would be completely lost, because science has made so many advances, particularly in the last 500 years. But as she demonstrates by having Plato "brought back to life," and participating in discussions at several venues in the United States, Plato would have little trouble holding his own. The venues include Google headquarters at Santa Clara California, a radio panel discussing "How to Raise an Exceptional Child," and an interview with an obnoxious TV host à la Bill O'Reilly. In all cases Plato would more than hold his own as Goldstein cleverly uses quotes from the various dialogues to allow Plato to make his points. The conclusion: Plato (and Socrates) have much to offer us if we will only look for it.

As an added bonus, a significant part of Goldstein's book renders an historic account about life in ancient Athens, and also provides an outline of philosophical thought during that period. Much of the material that is relevant today is secular in nature, but religious concepts do creep in, often in the form of dualism. Plato apparently believed in the existence of a soul that might possibly survive in some form of afterlife, and without question this dualism spread into nearby Palestine influencing both Judaism and Christianity. And after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, the secular philosophy of the Greeks, along with the

stoic philosophy of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, were both left behind until their rediscovery during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods.

But as things turned out, the philosophy put forward by Enlightenment period philosophers, including Spinoza, Hume, Descartes, Voltaire, the French Philosophes, Kant and others, remained the purview of intellectuals and never filtered down to the masses. In fact for many, the philosophy of Kant is quite difficult to grasp and is still being debated today. And some of the more recent philosophers including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Habermas and some others are difficult for even academics to fully comprehend.

Nevertheless, philosophy is here to stay and in *Plato at the Googleplex*, Goldstein lists seventeen instances where Plato's (and Socrates') philosophical thinking is relevant today. Here are a few of them:

- When we disagree over whether the one percent really contributes more to society than the ninety-nine percent and whether, if they do, their contributions should be recognized in the form of increased privileges or increased obligations, then Plato is there.
- When we argue over whether ethical truths are inextricably tied to religious truths, then Plato is there.
- When we wonder whether reason is sufficient – or even necessary – to guide us through life, or whether there are occasions when we should abandon reason and go with our hearts, then Plato is there.
- When we wonder whether we should instill in our children a discontent with the ordinary so that they will be inspired to be extraordinary, then Plato is there.
- When we wonder why virtue so often seems to go unrewarded, with good people suffering while bad people prosper and get tenure, then Plato is there.
- When people ponder the moral shape of history, whether humankind is making moral progress or only finding more efficient ways of expressing savagery and ruthless self-regard, then Plato is there.

But even though philosophy has not gone away, it is still largely a discipline followed by academics, although there have indeed been philosophers who have made practical and useful contributions to society as a whole. The English philosopher John Locke immediately comes to mind. It was his concept of the separation of powers in government that was a basic influence in the formation of the U.S. Constitution. The challenge facing us now is to extract the good qualities in philosophy that can be of practical use at the grass-roots level in helping make the world a better place. I think this can be done and a few suggestions how appear on pages 5 and 6, but first a look at how Plato attempted to separating morality from religion as suggested in the second point above. (DAH)

## **Where Does Morality Come From?**

A challenge for inquisitive scientists is to look for and discover previously unknown natural phenomena, and then proceed to express their discovery in the form of mathematical equations. Isaac Newton's laws of gravity and motion immediately come to mind, as does Albert Einstein's relationship between energy and matter expressed as  $E = mc^2$ . However, when it comes to morality, as far as can be determined, there is nothing "out there" in the natural world waiting to be discovered. Consequently, there has been a tendency, particularly among followers of monotheistic religions, to believe that ethical and moral guidelines have been delivered from on high, and then codified into scripture in such forms as the Ten Commandments, or have been expounded by biblical prophets on behalf of their God.

On the other hand, those individuals who do not believe in a supernatural deity will reason that moral guidelines do not come from on high, but must realistically originate in the minds of humans who give serious thought to these matters. One of the earliest philosophers to wrestle with the relationship between theism and morality was Plato in *Euthyphro*, one of his earlier works. Euthyphro was a seer and religious expert, a self-proclaimed authority on all things holy. Plato has Socrates ask Euthyphro, “Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?” Socrates also asks, “How can something be good just because someone ‘up there’ feels like calling it good?” If something is good it is good, there is no need for approval of the gods or God.

The “Euthyphro Argument” or “Euthyphro Dilemma,” remains one of the most frequently utilized arguments against the claim that morality can be grounded only in theology, and that it is only belief in God and his commandments that stands between us and the moral abyss of nihilism. Indeed, it is considered one of the most important arguments in the history of moral philosophy. We humans must reason our way to morality or we will not get there at all. Relying on fiats, even if they originate on high, will not allow us to achieve an understanding of virtue. And Plato maintains that since religious authorities cannot provide plausible answers on these questions, philosophers had better get working on formulating reasons for the masses that make right answers right and wrong answers wrong.

Unfortunately, the reality is that philosophers have not been particularly successful in this endeavour. Despite the Euthyphro Argument, religious authorities have managed to monopolize moral discussions through the millennia. Oddly enough, in the later years of his life in Book X of *The Laws*, Plato appears to concede that the non-philosophical masses cannot be expected to grasp the required subtle reasoning, and for them there can only be religion as a source of moral instruction. He seems to have foreseen the reality of what was about to happen in the future. Even though he had no idea that Christianity would usurp the secular thinking of the Greeks throughout the Western world, it turns out that he accurately predicted what actually happened.

So now how do non-believers convince the masses that it is time they realize that religions are not, nor should be, the sole custodians of morality, provided we agree that doing so would be of benefit to our democratic societies? And can philosophy be of help? The next article deals with these questions. (DAH)

## **The Future Role of Philosophy**

Philosophy is defined on page 3 as a love of and a search for wisdom, intertwining truth, beauty and goodness. But what good is a definition if philosophy remains in ivory towers and is not used as Socrates would say, as a way of pointing us in the direction of the good life? And why does it sometimes have to be so “gawddamned” complicated that even academics cannot agree on its meanings?

In his fairly recent book *A Brief History of Thought* (2003), French philosopher Luc Ferry suggests that a well lived life should consist of three basic attributes, namely *theory*, *morality*, and *salvation*. By theory he means understanding how the world works, or in other words, knowing how to obtain the education necessary for a person to earn a comfortable living working in a field or occupation of their choice. This

involves accepting a measure of responsibility on the part of each individual to become proficient in a career that suits their aptitude and abilities.

Leaving morality to last and moving on to salvation, for Ferry salvation simply means learning how to die. For those who do not believe in an afterlife, salvation is living life as fully as possible in the here and now, and accepting death as a natural part of the journey of life. We are born, we live and we die.

Morality is the most difficult attribute to deal with. It must start with the teaching of children in their critical formative years. In the past, as noted earlier, religions have played a major role in imparting moral principles to children, but unfortunately children have been learning untruths based on supernatural phenomena, and they have also had instilled into them a sense of fear about what may happen in the afterlife. It is time these religious prevarications ceased with parents and teachers being responsible for ethical and moral instructions to children. But of what should the instructions consist?

My suggestion is that these instructions should be based on the miracle of life in all its aspects. Life *per se* does not begin in the womb. Life began about three and a half billion years ago and has been evolving ever since. Each human is the result of chance happenings occurring over eons and eons, and each living being is truly a miracle. It is a *living* sperm uniting with a *living* ovum that initiates the formation of a live human being. And once born, each human should be entitled to loving parents, food, shelter, clothing, a prosperous society to live in with liberty and justice for all, an education, and an opportunity to enjoy Socrates' "good life." This is what morality should be about; helping to provide environments where all forms of life are considered sacred and where the most unpardonable sin is to destroy another life. Not only human life, but life in general! We must preserve and protect the natural environment in order that our descendants will be able to survive with clean air, food, and sufficient potable water. The challenge for political leaders throughout the world is to provide living conditions that enable *all* their citizens to partake of the "good life." Their first concern must be the welfare of the populace, not their own personal gain. And this is where Plato's philosophy comes into the picture.

In Athens in the fourth century BCE, Plato set up his Academy, the world's first institution of higher learning. One of his aims was to provide prospective political leaders with a grounding in philosophy among other things. Plato recommended that potential leaders (guardians) be subjected to a rigorous training process and a period of practical experience that would not end until the participant was fifty years old. Then the "philosopher king or queen" would be ready to govern in a selfless altruistic manner, being concerned only with the welfare of all citizens, and not in creating wealth or other advantages for himself or herself.

Surely this is one of Plato's greatest recommendations. Political leaders should receive a certain amount of requisite training, including some philosophy, as well as practical experience, before assuming positions of leadership. And then their primary concern must be the welfare of all citizens, not their own personal gain. Have there been any leaders that met these criteria? Perhaps a few, including Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius and Nelson Mandela. If philosophers are to play a useful role in the future, maybe they should be reminded of Socrates' dictum: Philosophy is about living the "good life." (DAH)