

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Summary/ Abstract: This is a Chapter summary of Durant's (1926).
The Story of Philosophy, Chapter 1, Plato.
My lesson: Athenians of 3000 years ago thought of and experienced ideas and problems we have today!

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Socrates and Plato

Reading Source: Durant (1926) *The Story of Philosophy*, Chapter 1: Plato
(Simon & Schuster, 1926, 2005, p.5—40)

(A) Context

p. 5 Good condensed outline in 3 pages

- | ● Athens in the south
- 7 ● Sparta and Athens joined to stop Persians (490 – 470 BC)
Growth of Greece: maritime fleet → trade
- Greek ideas
Democritus (460 – 360 BC) – atoms
Epicurus (342 – 70 BC)
Sophists – traveler teachers to solve problems
(cf: Durant has a book on life in ancient Greece)

R: They have the tradition of traders not to believe too much faith:

centers of varied intercourse; where there are a thousand faiths we are apt to become sceptical of them all. Probably the traders were the first sceptics; they had seen too much to believe too much; and the general

According to Durant, there are two schools of thought in political theory:

- (1) Nature is good, civilization is bad, men are born equal, law to control and rule the weak.
- (2) Nature is beyond good or bad: men are born unequal, morality as to limit the power; power is good (R: beware of his lens).

judgment-seat of reason. In politics they divided into two schools. One, like Rousseau, argued that nature is good, and civilization bad; that by nature all men are equal, becoming unequal only by class-made institutions: and that law is an invention of the strong to chain and rule the weak. Another school, like Nietzsche, claimed that nature is beyond good and evil; that by nature all men are unequal; that morality is an invention of the weak to limit and deter the strong; that power is the supreme virtue and the supreme desire of man; and that of all forms of government the wisest and most natural is aristocracy.

Critias is pupil of Socrates and uncle of Plato.

p. 8 (B) Socrates

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- (1) He had a crowd of young followers in Athens
 - (2) He moved from science to philosophy
what is virtue? What is the best state?
 - (3) Milieu
 - (a) Sophists brought down polytheistic faith and emancipation of “the temples and the sacred groves.” (p. 9) What new religion / moral codes?
 - (b) Athens was defeated by Sparta. It shows the absurdity of democracy and there is urge of minority rule by the intelligent aristocracy.
 - (4) The alleged Socratic position on political rule:

Good, intelligent, virtue, wisdom, educated, cooperative, harmony.

If, for example, *good* meant *intelligent*, and *virtue* meant *wisdom*; if men could be taught to see clearly their real interests, to see afar the distant results of their deeds, to criticize and coördinate their desires out of a self-cancelling chaos into a purposive and creative harmony—this, perhaps, would provide for the educated and sophisticated man the morality which in the unlettered relies on reiterated precepts and external control. Perhaps all sin is error, partial vision, foolishness? The intelligent

R: It appears many of Plato’s ideas are already here.

p. 11 The death of Socrates:

- (1) Background:

Imagine the reaction of the popular party at Athens to this aristocratic gospel at a time when war seemed to require the silencing of all criticism,

³Cf. Voltaire’s story of the two Athenians conversing about Socrates: “That is the atheist who says there is only one God.” *Philosophical Dictionary*, art. “Socrates.”

⁴Plato’s *Protagoras*, sect. 329.

and when the wealthy and lettered minority were plotting a revolution. Consider the feelings of Anytus, the democratic leader whose son had become a pupil of Socrates, and had then turned against the gods of his father, and laughed in his father’s face. Had not Aristophanes predicted precisely such a result from this specious replacement of the old virtues by unsocial intelligence?⁴

Then the revolution came, and men fought for it and against, bitterly and to the death. When the democracy won, the fate of Socrates was decided: he was the intellectual leader of the revolting party, however pacific he might himself have been; he was the source of the hated aristocratic philosophy; he was the corrupter of youths drunk with debate. It would be better, said Anytus and Meletus, that Socrates should die.

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- (2) Quotes on Plato (age 28) recording Socrates's calm death at age 70 (399 BC), a courageous "apology" as "the first martyr of philosophy, proclaimed the rights and necessity of free thought, upheld his value to the state and refused to beg for mercy... (p. 11) "He disdained to make the appeal."
- (3) My reflection
 - (i) Durant told a genuine story, but all along presenting in 19th – 20th century knowledge and understanding
 - (ii) In a sense, Socrates died of democracy – the mob tyranny. It paved way for Plato's work (*The Republic*), proposing utopia where philosopher-king should rule.

p. 13 **(C) Plato in Progress**

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- (1) His scorn for democracy

He was twenty-eight when the master died; and this tragic end of a quiet life left its mark on every phase of the pupil's thought. It filled him with such a scorn of democracy, such a hatred of the mob, as even his aristocratic lineage and breeding had hardly engendered in him; it led him to a Catoic resolve that democracy must be destroyed, to be replaced by the rule of the wisest and the best. It became the absorbing problem of his life to find a method whereby the wisest and the best might be discovered, and then enabled and persuaded to rule.

- (2) Plato in exile (399 – 387 BC). He travelled a lot, may be to Egypt and Italy, returning at age 40.
- (3) Plato opened his Academy, "Let no man ignorant of geometry enter here." (p. 27)
- (4) "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy Plato", Emerson (p. 16)
- (5) *The Republic* is his main treatise.
- (6) R: I flipped through the following pages and found that Durant is bringing into 20th Century ideas to interpret.
Plato: communism (p. 15), psychoanalysis (p. 23), eugenics (p. 15), indiscriminate mating (p. 31), birth-control (p. 15)

Ideas of modern philosophers are all over the place: Russell (p. 27), Spinoza (p. 26), Bergson (). Nietzsche (p. 15). Surely Plato covers most human endeavor, but not in the 20th century context. Better reconstruct him in 400 BC.

p. 16 (D) Plato's Ethical Problem (in *The Republic*)

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- (1) It was presented in a discussion between Socrates and a few people, notably Thrasymachus (a sophist – witty, teacher, problem solver), Thrasymachus, on justice. Thrasymachus said,

“Listen, then,” says the angry Sophist, “I proclaim that might is right, and justice is the interest of the stronger. . . . The different forms of government make laws, democratic, aristocratic, or autocratic, with a view to their respective interests; and these laws, so made by them to serve their interests, they deliver to their subjects as ‘justice,’ and punish as ‘unjust’ anyone who transgresses them. . . . I am speaking of injustice on a large scale; and my meaning will be most clearly seen in autocracy, which by fraud and force takes away the property of others, not retail but wholesale. Now when a man has taken away the money of the citizens and made slaves of them, then, instead of swindler and thief he is called happy and blessed by all. For injustice is censured because those who censure it are afraid of suffering, and not from any scruple they might have of doing injustice themselves” (338–44).

- (2) My Reflection:

- a) Thrasymachus is right to point out 2500 years ago that:
- (i) Might is right.
 - (ii) Justice is in the interest of the strong.
 - (iii) Law to protect staus quo
- b) Callicles argued that:
- (i) “Morality is an invention of the weak to neutraliza the strength of the strong” (p. 17)
 - (ii) People asked for equality when they are weak.
 - (iii) “They praise justice only because they are cowards.” (. 17)
 - (iv) Thucydides was quoted, “ Right... is only in question for equals in power; the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must” (p. 17)
- c) These great Greek thinkers seem to have said what Nietzche did 2500 years later (Superman). The global politics today merely repeated Greek history and
- d) When Chinese government stresses “ruling the country by law” (依法治國), it hasn’t realized that law is ridiculed and challenged by Thrasymachus in ancient Greece.

p. 18 (E) Plato's Political Problem

- 20
- (1) Durant quoted Plato's ideal society utopia of simple life (with food, clothing, cooking, wine, children, fire, bean, cheese, olives, salt, cabbage and onions)——living a simple life "in peace to good old age." (p. 18)
 - (2) But utopia didn't come because of greed → rivalry → war → class → income gap (unequal wealth) → aristocracy → oligarchy

He answers, because of greed and luxury. Men are not content with a simple life: they are acquisitive, ambitious, competitive, and jealous; they soon tire of what they have, and pine for what they have not; and they seldom desire anything unless it belongs to others. The result is the encroachment of one group upon the territory of another, the rivalry of groups for the resources of the soil, and then war. Trade and finance develop, and bring new class-divisions. "Any ordinary city is in fact two cities, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich, each at war with the other; and in either division there are smaller ones—you would make a great mistake if you treated them as single states" (423). [A mercantile wives" (548). These changes in the distribution of wealth produce political changes: as the wealth of the merchant over-reaches that of the land-owner, aristocracy gives way to a plutocratic oligarchy—wealthy traders and bankers rule the state. Then statesmanship, which is the co-

- (3) Democracy comes through revolution

merest exposure may bring serious disease (556). "Then democracy comes: the poor overcome their opponents, slaughtering some and banishing the rest; and give to the people an equal share of freedom and power" (557).

- (4) Degeneration from democracy to tyranny – mob politics

But even democracy ruins itself by excess—of democracy. Its basic principle is the equal right of all to hold office and determine public policy. This is at first glance a delightful arrangement; it becomes disastrous because the people are not properly equipped by education to select the best rulers and the wisest courses (588). "As to the people they have no understanding, and only repeat what their rulers are pleased to tell them" (*Protagoras*, 317); to get a doctrine accepted or rejected it is only necessary to have it praised or ridiculed in a popular play (a hit, no doubt, at Aristophanes, whose comedies attacked almost every new idea). Mob-rule is a rough sea for the ship of state to ride; every wind of oratory stirs up the waters and deflects the course. The upshot of such a democracy is tyranny or autocracy; the crowd so loves flattery, it is so "hungry for honey," that at last the wildest and most unscrupulous flatterer, calling himself the "protector of the people" rises to supreme power (565). (Consider the history of Rome.)

- (5) R: with the above thought, Plato proposes rule by the wisest – philosopher-king

(6) Reflection

I salute to the insight of Plato. He is pointing to the demise of democracy, explaining the rise of Hitler, Trump and Putin. History simply repeats itself. When American Independence (1776) and French revolution (1789) championed for revolution and democracy, we shouldn't take it as the best form of government. We should study the Greek history of democracy and should not be ignorant of its misgivings.

p. 20 (F) The Psychological problem

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(1) According to Durant, Plato sees Human Nature with 3 sources:

- Desire (instinct / impulse)
- Emotion (courage / ambition)
- Knowledge (neuron / intellect)

Human behavior, says Plato, flows from three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge. Desire, appetite, impulse, instinct—these are one; emotion, spirit, ambition, courage—these are one; knowledge, thought, intellect, reason—these are one. Desire has its seat in the loins; it is a bursting reservoir of energy, fundamentally sexual. Emotion has its seat in the heart, in the flow and force of the blood; it is the organic resonance of experience and desire. Knowledge has its seat in the head; it is the eye of desire, and can become the pilot of the soul.

(2) R: cf modern psychology

Bain	Intellect	Emotion	Will
Dewey	Cognition	Emotion	Volition
		● Affection	● desire
		● Pleasure – pain	● impulse
		● feeling	● will

(3) 3 kinds of man

- Desire – industry – worker
- Emotion – courage – power – soldier
- Knowledge – truth – philosopher

(4) Rule by philosophers

Now just as effective individual action implies that desire, though warmed with emotion, is guided by knowledge; so in the perfect state the industrial forces would produce but they would not rule; the military forces would protect but they would not rule; the forces of knowledge and science and philosophy would be nourished and protected, and they would rule. Unguided by knowledge, the people are a multitude without

R: In this sense, Plato's Human Nature is a footnote of his utopia. He championed rule by reason / intellect, not by force or emotion.

p. 22 **(G) The Psychological Solution**

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(1) According to Durant, Plato’s solution to the 3 types of man, (as I expect it), is to create a society of 3 tiers, each for its strengths. So is his training.

p. 22

(2) Plato urges for physical, athletics, gymnastics, plus music.

Music → harmony and rhythm → justice

“can he who is harmoniously constituted ever be unjust?” (p.22)

p. 22

(3) R: The busy life of a carpenter in Athen – no time for rest and medical treatment
Nice comparison with 20th century man

cure them. But this is an absurdity of the idle rich. “When a carpenter is ill he asks the physician for a rough and ready remedy—an emetic, or a purge, or cautery, or the knife. And if anyone tells him that he must go through a course of dietetics, and swathe and swaddle his head, and all that sort of thing, he replies at once that he has no time to be ill, and that he sees no good in a life that is spent in nursing his disease to the neglect of his ordinary calling; and therefore, saying good-bye to this sort of physicians, he resumes his customary diet, and either gets well and lives and does his business, or, if his constitution fails, he dies and has done with it” (405–6). We cannot afford to have a nation of malingerers and

p. 23

(4) Plato on dreams – crime, incest, “wild beast nature”

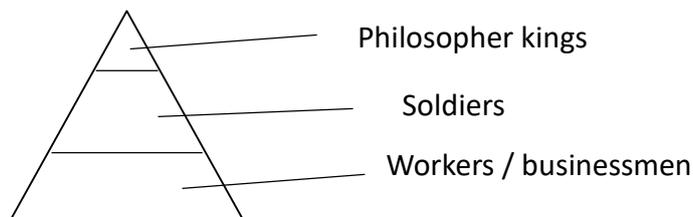
p. 24

(5) A nation to believe in God

p. 25

(6) The training and selection

Durant indicated that Plato favor equal opportunity and open competition for selection of the best in a pyramid of



p. 25

(7) Training of philosophers

Training by age of 30, they study and debate the doctrine of ideas.

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activity. Or the world without Ideas would be a heap of book-titles fallen haphazard out of the catalogue, as compared to the same titles arranged in order according to their classes, their sequences and their purposes; it would be the shadows in a cave as compared with the sunlit realities without, which cast those fantastic and deceptive shadows within (514). Therefore the essence of a higher education is the search for Ideas: for generalizations, laws of sequence, and ideals of development; behind things we must discover their relation and meaning, their mode and law of operation, the function and ideal they serve or adumbrate; we must classify and coordinate our sense experience in terms of law and purpose; only for lack of this does the mind of the imbecile differ from the mind of Caesar.

p. 28

(8) Real life test

The final test at age 35 – 50 to compete in the real world to become real wise rulers of the state

R: Age is an interesting issue. Socrates and Plato lived up to 70 and 80 respectively, but the average life expectancy is much shorter in Greece?

p. 28 **(H) The Political Solution**

32 Durant summarized Plato's ideas in the following:

p. 28 (1) Ruled by the best

R: i.e. Elitist rule suits Greece

p. 29 (2) The age problem (flexible intelligence at age 50)

Plato noted and answered it

p. 30 (3) The communal philosopher-king and communal wife

p. 31 (4) Equality of sex

p. 31 (5) The eugenic society

p. 32 (6) The issue of politics

(i) Control of overpopulation

(ii) Management of foreign trade

(iii) A large navy

(iv) Avoid civil war

(v) Control of business interest

(limited to 4 times of average possession)

(7) Guardians, soldiers and economic class

So our political structure will be topped with a small class of guardians; it will be protected by a large class of soldiers and "auxiliaries"; and it will rest on the broad base of a commercial, industrial, and agricultural population. This last or economic class will retain private property, private mates, and private families. But trade and industry will be regulated by the guardians to prevent excessive individual wealth or poverty;

(8) A perfect society of harmony

they permit him to monopolize luxury. In short, the perfect society would be that in which each class and each unit would be doing the work to which its nature and aptitude best adapted it; in which no class or individual would interfere with others, but all would cooperate in difference to produce an efficient and harmonious whole (433-4). That would be a just state.

(I) The Ethical Solution

- p. 31 (1) Plato: "Justice is the having and doing what is one's own"
- p. 33 infallible revelation. What does the definition mean? Simply that each man shall receive the equivalent of what he produces, and shall perform the function for which he is best fit. A just man is a man in just the right place, doing his best, and giving the full equivalent of what he receives. A society of just men would be therefore a highly harmonious and efficient group; for every element would be in its place, fulfilling its appropriate function like the pieces in a perfect orchestra. Justice in a society would a kind of Darwinian sanction. Where men are out of their natural places, where the business man subordinates the statesman, or the soldier usurps the position of the king—there the coördination of parts is destroyed, the joints decay, the society disintegrates and dissolves. Justice is effective co-ordination.
- (2) R: In this sense, Plato's justice is socially defined, for a harmonious society of just at the right place. It is strikingly similar the Chinese version (各盡所能 · 各取所需 · 君君 · 臣臣 · 父父 · 子子...)
- (3) Justice is the strong and harmonious
- p. 33 forever: Justice is not mere strength, but harmonious strength—desires and men falling into that order which constitutes intelligence and organization; justice is not the right of the stronger, but the effective harmony of the whole. It is true that the individual who gets out of the place to
- (4) Jesus, Nietzsche and Plato on Power and Morality
- p. 34 norm of conduct becomes the welfare of the group. Nature will have it so, and her judgment is always final; a group survives, in competition or conflict with another group, according to its unity and power, according to the ability of its members to coöperate for common ends. And what better coöperation could there be than that each should be doing that which he can do best? This is the goal of organization which every society must seek, if it would have life. Morality, said Jesus, is kindness to the weak; morality, said Nietzsche, is the bravery of the strong; morality, says Plato, is the effective harmony of the whole. Probably all three doctrines must be combined to find a perfect ethic; but can we doubt which of the elements is fundamental?

(J) Durant's Criticism

- p. 34 (1) European History (middle ages) are the realization of Plato's society
35 (Ruled by clergy / knight / serfs)
- p. 36 (2) The power of tradition (monogamy) makes communal living impossible.
- (3) The puritanical guardians are excluded from economic gain – against human nature.
(power without responsibility → tyranny)
- p. 37 (4) The history of the church.
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(5) Plato and Dionysius

Plato went to Syracuse, Sicily to help Dionysius, who later rejected him and sold him as slave, only to be rescued by his students.

(6) R: Plato in his historical context:

Athenian democracy fails and Plato proposes a elitist-led just society (aristocracy). So there are rulers and the ruled. Now, modern political philosophy from Locke and Rousseau gave an opposite view in a different historical context of the new rising bourgeoisie and new aristocracy. Men are born free and equal. There should be no rulers. We come together voluntarily to form society and elect our leaders. We (the people) are the boss. The “rulers” are servants. Kick him out when he did a poor job, thus ruled “by the people, of the people, for the people”