

HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

THE BIRTH OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN GREECE

All civilizations are necessarily concerned with political wisdom, with events, and with applicable rules of conduct. Clearly, all political wisdom is implicitly bound up with morality and metaphysics, but the originality of Greece consists of having, at a very early stage, made this relationship explicit, and of having sought a world-picture in which politics would be directly linked to a general philosophy: Plato and Aristotle are examples of this. In addition, once created, political philosophy was to maintain its place in almost all modern systems of thought, but the rediscovered emphasis of political thought assures it today of a prominent position in all countries where, for example, Marxists or liberals confront one another. The beginnings of such a mode of thought therefore deserve some attention.

These origins are explained by a characteristic trait of Greek civilization. It can be described in two complementary ways. One can say that far from retreating into problems of being, religion, or morality, the Greek philosophers are almost all interested in political problems. Or, one can also say that the men preoccupied with political understanding—orators or historians—almost all tried to translate their experience into philosophical terms.

There is no reason why this should surprise us. In the small

Translated by Rosanna Rowland.

early Greek cities, there was no separation of subjects, or compartmentalization of the intellectual world. A man of politics or of war would write tragedy, history or philosophy, and there would be an exchange of ideas from one work to another without specialized distinctions. The effect of this original unity was to disappear only with time: even in the 4th century B.C. philosophy, history and politics, although distinct, remained closely related.

Originally there had to be the same common interest in political events, and the same desire to consider them from the most general point of view. Here too, the circumstances were fortunate, since the small size of the city-state made evident from the outset the bond between the individual and the community, and also since democratic freedom—established even more easily in such conditions—opened the way for discussion that gave birth, through continual evolution, to the concepts and tenets that allowed the formulation of systems.

The vocabulary became increasingly exact, as a few examples will illustrate.

The Greek word for political regimes is *politeia*, which originally referred to the status and the duty of the citizen. One would grant the *politeia*, that is to say: the rights of citizenship. One would participate in the *politeia*, that is to say: in political life. But, a city is also distinguished by a particular *politeia*, which is a system of values and customs, of character and institutions, which gives it its own distinct personality as against others. From the end of the 5th century B.C. the word is used in a narrower sense, to mean the different systems of government—monarchy, oligarchy, democracy—from which originate different usages. One can distinguish three, four, then five, and finally six. At the same time, the description of these “systems” begins to include more about their institutions, and to isolate rather more clearly what are the conditions of good government. In the 4th century B.C. Aristotle, finally using the word with a particular meaning made current by the critique of a certain kind of democracy, refers thereby to a moderate democracy totally subject to the rule of law: “Where the law does not hold sway, there is no *politeia*” (*Politics*, 1292 a). This kind of evolution suggests a consistent progress in analysis and exactitude.

In the same way, the word *nomos*, meaning ritual and custom

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(and even the musical mode), becomes by the 5th century to mean the written law determined by the city. The *nomos* was thus opposed from the start to the old laws of more or less religious origin and always handed down by a law-giver, the *thesmothetai*. But it would take an eternity to distinguish what law of relationship can be found in the fact that its first meaning was "custom." Hardly had this been made clear when the Athenians were to come up against another difficulty: that of distinguishing in principle between the law proper and mere popular decree, between the *nomos* and the *psephisma*. Here again, in theory as in praxis, the idea gains sharper definition by the practical application of a common thought, creating what is called a 'dilemma'.

In the same vein—one could cite infinite examples—the notion of liberty (*eleutheria*) was at first a concrete and self-evident notion; the free-man was opposed to the slave. Then the "free-men" themselves realised that they were not really free when arbitrarily treated by a despot: the 'freedom' of a city was then seen to be as much a function of its political regime as of its national independence. But at this point began a comparison of all the different governments not ruled by the whim of one man, and by no means did they seem to accord freedom the same priority. Euripides actually defined freedom as the right to participate in the popular assembly (*Supplikes*, 438: "Liberty exists wherever the herald asks: 'Who has any plan to propose that is for the good of the state?'""). However, a concept is also defined by its limits. From the end of the 5th century there were complaints of the disorders attendant upon too great a degree of liberty, even though the freedom of the citizen had never, even in Athens, been defined in terms of a relationship between the individual and the state. This prepared the way for Plato, who considered the democratic state to be doomed because it "becomes intoxicated on absolute freedom" (*Republic*, VIII 562 c), or equally for all the thinkers appealing to the prerogative of law. Yet at the same time was also being prepared the road to that 'inner freedom' which philosophers demanded for the wise, and which was to survive the disintegration of the city-state. Here again, the concept became more precisely and finely defined in the heat of debate and through the trials of experience.

The very criteria defining a good political system gained their firmness in the course of such discussion. In the most unpretentious of trials the litigants learned to argue for justice or welfare, and if possible, the two at once; and the conflicts of ideas, for which history and tragedy made way, themselves began to play upon the relationship between the two notions: here it was easily shown that virtue was the best plan. The critique of tyranny, and equally that of imperialism, availed itself of this idea, and, in reciprocation, helped to support it. Here, the radical positions of Socrates and Plato found their points of departure, so much so that in this area too the tools of systematic analysis were gradually forged.

These debates, which were carried on in real life, were able to serve as a starting point from which thought developed in different directions, according to how one sought to explain history, or even transcend it. This common root explains why only in Greece were the two directions less divergent than elsewhere. In Athens, political history was created by both historians and philosophers, and the exchange between their two view-points is the real key to their attitude. It is for this reason that the departmentalisation of knowledge, which makes "writers" of some and "philosophers" of others, runs the risk of crippling the study of these works.

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In Greece, history always developed more or less directly out of the wider implications of political ideas: indeed, it was born the day when, instead of writing genealogy or local history, men started asking themselves about the nature of the principles that governed the unfolding of events.

Herodotus himself confirms this, although he—the first real historian and not an Athenian—was the most curious about simple facts: concrete, diverse and anecdotal. This did not prevent him from attempting to distinguish the underlying significance of the various encounters he describes, either in the course of his narrative,¹ in the words of his speakers, or in his

¹ As is shown in the recent book by H.R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*. Philol. Monographs, 23, Cleveland, 1956 (p. 374).

own comments. When, in his prologue, he refers to the basic insecurity of the human condition, which in his work is shown to be the thesis of Solon, Croesus, and Artaban, he is already formulating a general idea on human destiny as a perspective for his story. When, by the example of the Spartan king exiled to the camp of Xerxes he explains the differences between Greece and Persia, and when the Spartan tells how Greece is poor but law-abiding and thereby gains a voluntary discipline which must vouchsafe its ultimate victory, (VII, 103-104), he is already expanding a political difference into a broader conflict with more general implications.

Such became the avowed intention of Thucydides, who in his introductory chapter states his desire to create a work for whoever wishes "to understand clearly both past events and those, which, by virtue of their human character, will in the future show similarities and analogies" (I, 22, 3). The abstract nature of his speech in which justice is opposed to self-interest, imperialism to unpopularity, marine to terrestrial force, links each particular event to a clear analysis of the basic conditions and invariables of political life. Thus the account unfolds as a confirmation of the predictions made by the orators, hammered out by debate and evaluation, and throughout the work a process of simplification makes each lesson clear within the continuity of the account. Thus the narrative becomes philosophical: one cannot forget that Hobbes was raised on Thucydides, for whose translation he was responsible.

At least Thucydides does not single the law out: he simply allows it to appear in the course of his narrative. He provides us with the arguments, and with their subsequent outcome, but draws no conclusions. Isocrates, on the other hand, who was not an historian but rather the author of political discourses informed by history, did not hesitate to formulate general rules which he corroborated historically, (for instance, the power of the sea is deadly, virtue brings goodwill, and success accordingly, etc...). In his works a free interpretation of history is used to support general principles that offer practical guidance: if he has no actual philosophy, he at least holds a theoretical position from whose height he can survey all the political options.

To clarify this process of intellectual elaboration, which leads from story to theory, one may refer to something that the Greek

historians themselves thought to be most peripheral—that is, theory about the internal governments of the cities. Herodotus and Thucydides recorded wars; Isocrates dedicated all his political discourses, except one, to non-Athenian politics. Any concern with domestic government constitutes an almost casual element in the works of all three, and it is therefore all the more striking to see there an increasingly clear and precise portrayal of the ways of Athenian democracy.

Herodotus, above all, spoke of tyranny, with which he had been acquainted in Ionia and against which he had often fought. Yet the problems of other governmental systems interested him sufficiently to introduce into his history a whole discussion between the Persian conspirators on the respective merits of each. This was even at the expense of historical probability, for his Persians of 522 B.C. fight it out with all the shrewdness of 5th century Sophists. Merits and demerits of three kinds of government are compared point by point. He also takes care to mention how easily a nation is deceived (V, 78: “We must conclude that it is easier to deceive many men than just one,”) but also the extent to which liberty imbues men with the enthusiasm to serve a cause which is truly their own (also V, 78: “It is on the mass rather than the individual level that the advantage of equality becomes manifest... In bondage, they willingly conducted themselves indolently, knowing that they were laboring for a master, whereas once freed, each found it to be in his own interest to finish his task enthusiastically;” c.f. V, 66, 1 and V, 91). In the flush of victory over the Medes, the merits of political freedom—limited by the law, as Demaratus reminds us—constituted a fresh and joyful discovery, whose echo we find in other writings, from Aeschylus up to the Hippocratic treatise *Of Airs, Waters, and Places*.

Fifty years after this victory, Thucydides is still celebrating the beauty of the democratic spirit in the funeral oration which he attributes to Pericles. This is a stirring and still famous elegy (II, 37: “Our political system takes no one else’s laws for its model...”) It is also cleverly subtle; the author makes clear that this fine democracy is not purely and simply the authority of the crowd. It is rather defined by the ability of each individual, irrespective of his social status, to enter into the competition of city life and from which the city benefits. “Is it a matter

of who receives what? The law gives unto each according to his need, with impartiality, whereas when it comes to titles, if we make distinctions in any field this does not merely signify membership of a certain class, but merit—which alone enables us to obtain honours.” Indeed, this careful definition defends the Periclean regime against the criticisms that were increasingly aroused by democracy. Thucydides very clearly states the two dangers that it was to entail for the city. He shows how the people surrendered to irrational passions, and how the leaders, squabbling among one another and dependent upon popular favor, were reduced to the use of mere flattery and thus destroyed the city. This idea is proclaimed in Chapter II; 65—one of the few where Thucydides makes a personal judgement, one with wide implications—while still taking into account the conduct of the whole war, right up to the final defeat. It is also confirmed in the continuation of the story, which even after the death of Pericles does not cease to rebuke the twin error in each episode. The repetition of the analysis would, on its own, force our attention towards this: the reiteration of the same theme and the same phrases makes it still more obvious. Furthermore, one should not be surprised—as have been so many critics—to see, towards the end of the work, the same Thucydides praising a period of moderate democracy in which, following brutal conflicts between partisans of democracy and oligarchy, was briefly established a government generally called the “Ancestral Constitution.” In a phrase, certain details of which are difficult to interpret, Thucydides speaks very specifically of balance and compromise: “A reasonable balance was indeed established between the aristocrats and the people, and this was the main reason why the city was able to extricate itself from a deteriorating situation” (VIII, 97, 2).² Between the fine democracy of Pericles and this attempt at reconciliation a most instructive coherence was established, by a thorough analysis of the mistakes of Athens.

² The bibliography of this phrase and the regime suggested by it is very full. Among recent studies may be mentioned: A. Fuks, *The Ancestral Constitution, Four Studies...*, London 1953; G. Donini, *La posizione di Tucidide verso il governo dei Cinquemila*, Turin 1969; and very recently: G.M. Kirkwood, “Thucydides’ Judgement on the Constitution of the Five Thousand,” *Journal of Philology*, 1972, pp. 92-103.

As it happens, we find that the regime defended by Isocrates, in the only discourse that he wrote on domestic politics, the *Areopagitica*, specifies the same principles of balance and the same reforming tradition. He wished for a return to the constitution of earlier times, which had fostered the greatness of Athens. This, the example of history teaches: "were we to change our government, it is obvious that, by the same logic, the situation that obtained for our ancestors would recur for us; for similar or analogous events result necessarily from the same politics" (78). We must therefore revert to the regime of bygone days, in which, with phrases worthy of Plato, Isocrates explains that there held sway, not the equality "that gives the same to everyone," but that which distributes "to each according to his needs" (21). The lesson which is so transparent in the writings of Thucydides, is here separated and developed into an immediate program of action.

Obviously, Isocrates' treatise does not present any evolution of thought in relation to Thucydides—it falls far short of that!—it remains summary and hardly profound. Its interest lies above all in its confirmation of the existence of the crisis, and in the solutions that were beginning to form in his works.

This crisis was to be pondered upon throughout the 4th century—whether at the level of simple reforms, which was Isocrates' concern, or on the philosophical plane, which entailed a reconsideration of the very ends of politics. The response of the orator only makes complete sense in contrast to that of Plato.

However, it would be a serious simplification of matters to draw a straight line from the actual debates and their historical consequences, to their transposition into Platonic philosophy. It would also be unjust not to remember that certain philosophers had already provided the tools for this first reading of events, which Thucydides bequeathed us in its most thorough version. These philosophers were the Sophists, who styled themselves above all else as masters of reasoning, and whose status as wandering strangers led them quite naturally to consider problems in their most general aspect: Athenian political life claimed their help without limiting their horizon. In fact, the debate on the best form of government in Herodotus presents all the characteristics of a Sophist debate, and it has often been

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considered as reflecting their influence.³ The very concepts used by Thucydides, and the art of contrasting arguments, which provided the framework of his analyses, had been made fashionable by those self-same Sophists, several of whom were thought to have been his teachers. Protagoras had been linked with Pericles, and he had himself written a treatise *On Government* (*Peri Politeias*).

This explains in great part the theoretical nature of the arguments exchanged, and the fact that one finds them used by many of the Athenians of that time. The arguments for and against democracy appear in the *Supplikes* of Euripedes as well as in Herodotus, not to mention the oligarchic pamphlet of uncertain date handed down under the name of Xenophon, and Aristophanes certainly echoes the critique of this kind of regime. Furthermore, texts such as the *Anonymous of Iamblichus*, now lost, or even the discourse of Thrasymachus, of which we possess one lone page, show that the debate was easily and repeatedly taken up at every turn.

This indirect influence of the Sophists is so great that one might even be tempted to go back to their lost works and see them as the true source of political philosophy. They certainly held opinions on the subject, and Plato was without any doubt directly indebted to them. After all, he attacked them unceasingly and defined his own position in relation to theirs. Aristoxenus, it seems, even claimed that the principle of Plato's *Republic* was already contained in the *Antilogies* of Protagoras (cf. D.K., Protagoras, B5).

However, to link Plato directly to the Sophists and to them alone would ultimately deracinate his thought and pervert his image. Between him and them there is an equally great divide. True, the Sophists were philosophers and wrote about politics: but they never seem to have constructed complete systems. These philosophers were above all masters of the art of disputation—which implies a tendency on their part to place method before doctrine, and practical effect before theory. Even if they did have

³ To speak of influence by Protagoras, as do the text-books, is perhaps hazardous: cf. the discussion in H. Apfell, *Die Verfassungsdebatte bei Herodotus*, III, 80-82, Diss. Erlangen 1957 (p. 89), P. Brannen, "Herodotus and History: The Constitutional Debate," *Tradition*, 1963, pp. 427-438; and cf. K. von Fritz, *Die griechische Geschichtsschreibung*, I, Berlin 1967, pp. 309-318.

clear political ideas, this very attitude prejudiced their firmness, and even if they did, as one can believe, attempt to offer some remedy for the city's crisis, Plato and his contemporaries saw them primarily as men ready to defend all arguments, and to this extent as being at least indirectly responsible for that crisis of values, proclaimed in all the writings of the age, which made the plight of the city so serious.⁴

Now it is really to this crisis that Plato was responding, and he did so by effecting a decisive shift in the attitudes prevalent till then, those of the Sophists just as much as those of the historians and politicians.

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Philosophical evolution consists, in effect, of the *a priori* elaboration of complete thought-systems from pre-conceived goals, and it is pleasing to note that this same movement was the product of the conjuncture. Socrates himself had not done it. He had wanted to arrive at a rigorous definition of the virtues and goals of mankind. He remained intransigent on the question of both means and ends. This demand led him to take no part in political life, and, when it did involve him, not to retreat before extreme attitudes that might prove dangerous for him. He had, however, accepted the city that was his, and had chosen to die in order to obey its laws. Plato, on the contrary, having first wished to use political action, was soon so shocked by the sight of the disorders and injustices accumulated by successive governments, that he decided to renounce politics and think along different lines. In relation to this, the account of the seventh letter represents the clearest witness: "I finally understood that all real states are badly governed, for their legislation is almost irremediable, without strenuous preparation linked with fortunate circumstances. I was then irresistibly led to the worship of the true philosophy, and to declare that by its light alone can we recognize where justice lies in public and private life" (326 a). The very idea of a government of philosophers, formulated in the

⁴ On the indirect nature of the influence of the Sophists, cf. my book on: *La loi dans la pensée grecque des origines à Aristote*, Paris, Les Belles-Lettres, 1971 (p. 267).

following phrase, excellently illustrates the radical alteration of direction and level.

Equally, Plato immediately rejects the grounds used in the previous century to praise the quality of governments—namely ability in conquest, or in the maintenance of power. This turnabout is forcefully proclaimed in the *Gorgias* and in many other texts: henceforth the sole ideal is justice, and the only goal is to make men better. Furthermore, all the great men of the Athenian state—even those praised by Thucydides, such as Themistocles and Pericles—are included in the rebuke. The best regime is that which brings justice to power, for she alone constitutes happiness. Now, all politics is to be reconsidered in the context of this principle; and just as Plato declares in letter VII a wish to follow “the true philosophy” (*ortbe*), so he now understands the basis of “true politics.” It is really this which clearly distinguishes the *Gorgias*, in which we see Socrates attack those “who claim to be expert at politics” (519 c), and proudly declare: “I believe myself to be one of the few Athenians, if not the only one, who cultivates the true art of politics (*hos alethos*) and the only one who puts it into practice.” (521 d). This “true philosophy” and this “true politics”—the one being the reflection of the other—open the new path which is the beginning of political philosophy, and it is remarkable that it should be so constituted, after and because of the failure of Athenian democracy.

Such a response implied a recourse to abstract thought which was no longer simply extracted from the events observed in the political sphere: between those laws that Thucydides seems to distinguish and Plato’s universal principles lies the whole difference that separates the observation of reality from the pursuit of the Good.

At last there was not merely a co-ordination between the observation of facts and the art of analysing them: politics now reflected a morality that was based upon a metaphysic and took its place among the various sciences that give meaning to the universe. When Socrates, like the Sophists, confined his interest to the conduct of human affairs, Plato took up once more the ontological tradition and enriched it with the recent advances of knowledge.

When the occasion arises, the *Gorgias* cites the Pythagorean

vision of the *kosmos* for its defense of justice: "The sages, Callicles, state that heaven and earth, gods and men, are bound together by amity, the respect for order (*kosmioteta*), moderation and justice, this is why they call the universe the 'order of things' (*kosmon*), not the 'disorder' or 'unruliness' (517-518); and Plato advises Callicles not to "neglect geometry." Certainly, this mental leap was common in Greece. Anaximander and Heraclitus were already using the word *justice* to mean the order that rules the flux of the elements or the movement of the stars, and Sophocles or Euripedes freely drew arguments for moderation from the great cycles of the heavens. But Plato himself takes such suggestions to their absolute limits, and for him every argument, no matter how political and concrete, must be in accord with a world-system.

His *Republic* consequently gathers in everything under the same unity: the spiritual faculties just as much as the classes of the city, education and knowledge, the Good and Ideas, and finally a cosmogony into which are introduced the motions of the planets, life and death, spirits and the hereafter. True politics implies a coherent system and a philosophy in the broadest sense.

The continuity with earlier thought is not broken, however. It is always present, even if only by way of contrast, as the above mentioned theme serves to show.

Plato only mentions democracy because he speaks of the various possible forms of government; and he only speaks of these in reference to justice, which is his starting-point and which he takes as his basic standard. On this level the difference between a good and a bad democracy become vague, and Plato's moral demand is too absolute to be so easily satisfied. It should also be added that, being born at almost the same time as Pericles' death, he had above all known and undergone the excesses of such a regime: thus he speaks with a different voice. However, just as his analysis of tyranny recapitulates themes already discussed in the 5th Century, so his condemnation of democracy seems like a reaction to the traditional elegies. The phrases used by the Pericles of Thucydides recur in Book VIII of the *Republic*: yet they serve no longer to preach the virtues of democracy, but rather to ridicule the apparent abuse of it. Even down to details of expression, the "true philosophy" is set up as a reaction against the judgements of the historians and statesmen of the previous period.

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This alone would be sufficient reason for the re-establishment of the continuity between the two bodies of works, whose different orientation in no way excludes such a logical and chronological relationship. But it is no less important to establish that at a later date the political philosophy thus created was to take up the thread of the consequences of this previous thought to an increasing extent, eventually to the point of complete assimilation.

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We know that, in the *Laws*, Plato outlined a rather more attainable form of government than that in the *Republic*. Now it is a fact that in the *Laws* he rediscovers precisely one of those notions to which the 5th century thinkers had given priority in the discussion selected as an example: the notion of a moderate or mixed government.⁵

It is true that he does this à propos of Sparta and not a democracy, but it is done with a firmness and clearness which make the analysis important. He shows, in effect, how Sparta gradually acquired its institutional equilibrium. The existence of two kings rather than one already pointed the Spartan government in the direction of moderation (*metrion*); the creation from the people of a council of elders "mixed" the reason of maturity with the dynamism of kingship; and to this can finally be added, "as a restraint," the Ephors who oversaw everything—so well that the government was henceforth "mixed and moderate" (III, 691-692 c).

The word "composite" (*sugkrisis*) had been used by Thucydides. The word "mixed" (*summeiktos*), used by Plato, is more suggestive. It reminds us that if the politicians had become aware of the need to combine different principles, only a philosopher could disentangle a universal principle from such an alloy.

Indeed, since Plato's first philosophy considered Ideas only in their absolute purity, the result of his thought, posing the questions of the sharing of Ideas and the structure of Being, later forced him to consider mixtures.⁶ Thus the *Parmenides* poses the

⁵ On the historical thoughts implied in Book III of the *Laws*, cf., among others, R. Weil, *L' "Archéologie" de Platon*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1959 (p. 170).

⁶ Cf. besides, N.I. Boussoulas, *L'être et la composition des mixtes dans le Philèbe de Platon*, Paris, P.U.F., 1952 (p. 203).

problem of the one and the many. The *Politics* defines the role of the sovereign through the analogy of weaving: as the art of intertwining the warp and the weft, that is to say the temperaments and virtues that compensate and support one another. The *Philebus* in the same way introduces the idea that the happy life is a blend, a "mixture," and attempts to define its ingredients. As for the *Timeus*, here he introduces the Pythagorean idea of the mathematical "mean" when occasion arises. One cannot be surprised to see the Plato of Book III of the *Laws* praise a "mixed" constitution, and develop the idea that all governments share two "mothers" (monarchy and democracy, authority and liberty), the harmonious combination of whose influence can alone secure good government (III, 693 d-e). Indeed, at this stage of his thought Plato was able to integrate such an idea into his philosophical system.

Obviously, he makes this neither his ideal form of government, nor even the most easily realizable model; but he does at least present the mixed constitution of Sparta, in which the various powers counterbalanced and combined each other's virtues, as a form of government both historically acceptable and resting upon a sound principle. This means that he is in contact with reality not only because he simply comes closer to it, but because when necessary the very evolution of his metaphysic is informed by some aspect of it.

This dual tendency is found even more clearly in the work of Aristotle. On one hand, Aristotle was much more concerned than Plato with learning about the real, classifying it, with keeping his thought fixed upon it; and he was, unlike Plato, preoccupied with studying and defining the various existing forms of government.⁷ On the other hand, philosophically Aristotle was an avowed theorist of the composite and the golden mean, which he called the *mesotes*. How was it possible for him not to take up again all the previous thought on moderate constitutions, in order to make it more exact? In a purely descriptive treatise—*The Athenian Constitution*—he praised, after Thucydides and Isocrates, the moderate democracy tried in 411; it is true to say that he is our most valuable authority on this government and

⁷ Cf. R. Weil, *Aristote et l'histoire, Essai sur la "Politique,"* Paris, Klincksieck, 1960 (p. 466).

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its partisans. He also, like Isocrates and Plato, spoke of the mixed constitution of Sparta (*Politics*, II, 1265 b; IV, 1294 b), and made this idea of the composite one of the foundations of his theory of the "republic" or *politeia*. In Book IV he gives an à priori discussion of the forms that such a composite might assume. He extolls its virtues, and integrating into a general system such thoughts as had till then been encountered only in isolated and random instances, in Euripides for example, he sought its social significance in the importance of the middle-class, which is a stabilizing element in those states where it is sufficiently represented.

After the sudden leap into pure theory, we then progressively return to the concerns of practical reality and to certain solutions that have started to form on contact. On the whole, in this dual attitude of the 4th century B.C. philosophers, one can distinguish the two basic approaches that political philosophy could adopt or combine: the one tends to start from a metaphysic and work downwards to its practical application; the other starts with an analysis of political facts such as they are, and tries to isolate the basic principles. Yet they remained interdependent, on one another and on the problems posed by the politics of the world with which they were involved. If in the final reckoning Plato's response is more alive and radical than Aristotle's, it is only reflecting more strongly, even in the rupture from which it stems, the influence of these problems, inasmuch as they preoccupied the minds of the time in which he matured.

However it may be, this return to the real, which consisted of integrating certain scattered philosophical conclusions into a system, urges that we restore this body of thought to its position of vital importance in the understanding of the theories. Whether it be a matter of system or summary, political philosophy cannot be understood in ignorance of this attempt at analysis which remained so characteristic of Greek thought in the 5th Century B.C.

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The lesson is fraught with practical import. In itself it constitutes one of the relevant justifications for a return to the literary sources of classical Greece, where for the first time we can see

the essential problems whose answers have been sought by the philosophers of all ages. It tempts the historians of philosophy not to neglect this area of thought—too often ignored even in works devoted to Greek political philosophy.⁸ Above all it prompts Hellenists to take this perspective into account, and in so doing justifies one of the modern trends of Greek studies, which consists, through the historical study of words, ideas, and theories, of having restored its firm continuity to this heuristic and analytic movement.

This lesson must itself, however, be accompanied by a corollary: the relationship between the two structures of thought cannot be confined solely to this movement which is so clearly defined up to the 4th century, and to the great philosophies that blossomed from it.

This return to the real which is engendered at the heart of philosophical reflection, was in fact only a start. One cannot talk of exchange as long as it is not carried to the point at which, by a sort of reciprocation, the historical enquiry is in its turn permeated by the theories created by the philosophers.

Without any doubt the Sophists had helped the 5th century historians, orators and politicians to observe and relate the data of experience that they described or discussed. But neither Herodotus, Thucydides, nor, later, Isocrates, had directly inherited a political system proposed by thinkers.

On the other hand, when we jump two centuries and the different intermediaries (now lost for the greater part) who in the course of these two centuries spread and completed Aristotle's ideas, the first Greek historian whose complete works have

⁸ Sir Ernest Baker's famous book, *Greek Political Theory, Plato and his Predecessors* (first published in 1918, but frequently reprinted since then) devotes 13 pages to what preceded the Sophists; and before Plato he recognizes only the Sophists, then Socrates, and the lesser Socratics. In the area selected here for example, E. Ryffel, in his *Metabole Politeion, Der Wandel der Staatsverfassungen*, Berne 1949 (p. 270), keeps to Sophistry, Plato, Aristotle and Polybius.

⁹ This tendency is manifest both in those works which trace one idea or another chronologically and those on the history of values, such as those of A.W. Adkins, of which the most important is: *Merit and Responsibility, A Study of Greek Values*, Oxford 1960 (p. 380). B. Snell's famous work, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, (Hamburg 1948) has done much to encourage research, following, in its whole unity, the development of ideas and the evolution of the way in which man views his existence in the universe.

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been preserved, namely Polybius, had obviously been inspired by these theories and intermediaries.

Indeed, Polybius bases his whole history on the idea that the power of Rome, which so greatly surpassed that of all previous nations and so united what Polybius calls the inhabited world, is explained by its constitution. After having heralded and vindicated it repeatedly, Polybius devotes a whole book to the description. He lays it down as a principle that the unusual merit of this constitution is specifically that it represents the same type of mixed government, in which the various powers control one another.¹⁰

Polybius, like so many others before him, does indeed recall the example of Sparta. But the Roman regime is even more perfect, and its composition is more wisely balanced because of its more natural growth. It combines royalty (represented by the consuls), the aristocracy (in the role of the Senate), and democracy (through the role of the people). Polybius' account is manifestly inspired by philosophical theories, more or less well assimilated and combined. Indeed, he treats things on a very high plane: he speaks of a constitutional cycle; he places them in a biological schema; he even refers back to the very origins of social life. There is no doubt that his theory of the mixed constitution of Rome was born of a similar tradition. Now the theory is found to have become a whole system, worked out in detail. The structure of the historian's account is adapted to fit the composite harmony that he is describing. He shows the sovereignty of each of the three distinct powers in turn, and then their interdependence, which according to him serves as a means of restraint.

The system of reciprocal controls, which did indeed play such an important part in the political life of Rome, could hardly be more succinctly grasped. This is also a convincing example of the value of approaching history via philosophy, and it is to such enlightenment that Polybius is indebted for his broadening of the scope of history, making even the history of institutions an integral part of it. To this also he owes his understanding of

¹⁰ It is always a valuable experience to return to K. von Fritz's celebrated work, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitutions*, New York 1954 (p. 490). The numerous later discussions are lucidly summarized in F. Walbank's short work, *Polybius*, Sather Classical Lectures, 42, Univ. of California Press, 1972 (p. 201).

the indisputable originality of the Roman constitution and the secret of its political workings.

Such a contribution, however, is not without its drawbacks, and perhaps it involves in part a false reading of events. Is there anything of the monarchic about the consuls? It is doubtful: these officials, elected for a limited term, and with equally limited powers, hardly differ from the *Strategi* found in the most radical Athenian democracy. Moreover, in referring to the aristocracy, Polybius conjures up a Rome without consuls (VI, 13, 8). But is the essential nature of a government altered by the presence or absence of a governor? Finally does not Polybius, above all, by following this scheme, risk failing to recognize, and making his readers fail to recognize, the most important element in the political history of Rome: the opposition not of institutional powers, but of different social classes. The conflict between Patricians and Plebeians, and the agrarian problem, fit badly into the framework outlined by Polybius; and the straightjacket inherited from his precursors does not allow him to see them clearly in all their implications. To compare him to Cicero, who nevertheless follows him quite closely in the *De Republica*, is revealing in this respect. It is even more revealing to compare him to modern historians, whose philosophy has, on the contrary, a bias to economics and sociology. This comparison also enables us to gauge the distortion forced upon Polybius by the philosophy upon which he was nurtured, by being seen against a very different outlook, which may perhaps be based upon no less of a distortion.

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For the Greeks there was, then, a kind of exchange between theory and practice, history and philosophy, which enriched both sides. But if the instance of the first movement—that which leads from practice to theory, from history to philosophy—permits a deeper understanding due to a productive partnership, the second movement also enables us to discern certain dangers.

The difference stems partly from circumstances. For it is only artificially and after the event that the first can be called an exchange between specialists; in fact it exists prior to their specialisation; it is the continual development of thought led,

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according to the rhythm of events, along lines that gradually become more distinct and precise. For Polybius, on the other hand, it is already a matter of a received culture, more or less well assimilated, to which he refers in order to analyse new situations and facts. These are Roman facts, considered according to Greek ideas; and well-pleased with the help afforded by such analyses, Polybius looks no further afield, in no other direction, and for no different perspectives.

This is why his example is revealing. From the Sophists, Thucydides had learnt methods of analysis, concepts and arguments, interesting facts, and truths of a general nature. But he had never received from them—as had Polybius, from the philosophers who had directly or indirectly molded him—any system. However, systems require constant revision.

In our own times, when the ties linking philosophy and practice, theory and research, have again become so close, the Greek example serves to remind us that after the success of co-operation there is a danger to history in the form of enslavement to a general system. Indeed, history may be invigorated by the new perspectives offered each time by political philosophy, but it must in turn contribute, by way of a critique, new, awkward, and unexpected information, which can be used in new systems. Without this, it condemns itself to a blindness far more serious than the minor imperfections that can be discerned in a few paragraphs of one book by old Polybius.