

Plato and the Spirit of Modernity

by E. Christian Kopff

IN C.S. LEWIS'S *THE LAST BATTLE* the world of Narnia begins to dissolve and disappear. The Pevensie children are confused and frightened, but Professor Kirke, now Lord Digory, reassures them that the Narnia and the England they had known were only shadows compared to the reality they were about to experience. Then he mumbles to himself: "It's all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what do they teach them in these schools?" The Professor's irritation is understandable, but Plato did play an important role in 20th-century literature, science, mathematics, philosophy, and even politics. Yet the standard picture of that century, indeed, of the modern world as usually conceived, is un-Platonic. For German classicist Arbogast Schmitt in his recently translated book *Modernity and Plato: Two Paradigms of Reality*, "modernity since its earliest beginnings in the fourteenth century can be described as an anti-Platonic age."

Schmitt's book is part of a German debate on "modernity," which is supposedly characterized by a belief in experience or sensation, the individual, the empirical world,

and science, as opposed to abstract thinking, universals and absolutes, the transcendent, and tradition. Actually, every theme of the first group can be discovered somewhere in classical antiquity or the Middle Ages, and the second group continues to exist and sometimes thrive in the modern world. It is hard, however, to deny the feeling, debated in German-speaking countries and simply assumed in English-speaking ones, that there is a chasm between the ancient and the medieval, on the one hand, and the modern or truly modern, on the other. Schmitt shows how much "modern" thinkers have lost by turning away from what they believe to be ancient or, even worse, medieval.

For Schmitt Plato is a symbol of what the modern world has rejected, though he concedes that often Aristotle would serve just as well and, occasionally, even better. In addressing the moderns, he concentrates on Descartes and Kant, but acknowledges that he could have reached similar results by studying Locke. He actually begins by discussing the debate in the late Middle Ages between realists and nom-

inalists. Realists argued that universals, general concepts, exist *really*, independent of human thought, either transcendently (Plato's view) or immanently in the examples of the universal or species (Aristotle's view). Nominalists, on the other hand, believed that general concepts—beauty and truth, or cats and dogs—are just names, constructed by humans and existing only in the minds of individuals. Led by thinkers like Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, the forces of nominalism “win,” and the modern age begins.

Readers familiar with the conservative canon will recognize this narrative, because it forms the beginning and foundation of that conservative classic *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), by Richard M. Weaver. In the 1940's the free-trading individualists and grim anticommunists of the day were firing their heavy artillery at FDR's New Deal. A few years later Russell Kirk's *Conservative Mind* (1953) took aim at the 18th-century French Revolution. For Richard Weaver the decisive event in the decline of the West took place in the 14th century: the rejection of Plato's Theory of Ideas and acceptance of William of Ockham's nominalism.

Like Macbeth, Western man made an evil decision, which has become the efficient and final cause of other evil decisions. Have we forgotten our encounter with the witches on the heath? It occurred in the late fourteenth century, and what the witches said to the protagonist of this drama was that man could realize himself more fully if he would only abandon his belief in the existence of transcendentals. The powers of darkness were working subtly, as always, and they couched this proposition in the seemingly innocent form of an attack upon universals. The defeat of logical realism in the great medieval debate was the crucial event in the history of Western culture; from this flowed those acts which issue now in modern decadence.

Weaver's belief in absolutes led relativist leftists to accuse him of being an “authoritarian” who wanted to trample on freedom by imposing his absolute values on them. As we now know, it is liberals with their speech codes and political correctness who actually trample on free expression, not traditionalists like Weaver. In *The Conservative Crack-Up*, R. Emmett Tyrrell mocks the charge as bogus, and he is quite a good mocker. He goes on, however, to criticize Weaver's view:

The harmful side effect of Weaver on conservatism was not his encouragement of authoritarianism but

his encouragement of a sense of political futility similar to that inhering in [Albert Jay] Nock. If, as Weaver was to assert, “the dissolution of the West” began in the late fourteenth century when Western man made the “evil decision” to accept the nominalism propounded by William of Occam (d. c. 1349), what the hell could be done about it?

For Tyrrell, Weaver's “writings were more likely to move his readers to political despair than enthusiastic, back-slapping action.”

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The objection is clearly and vigorously stated and deserves an answer. If materialism is true and there is no transcendental reality, then human action and thought, like all other material processes, are ruled by the laws of physics, among them the Second Law of Thermodynamics. That is why things are getting worse. The universe is cooling down, and jazz is followed by rock and roll, which is followed by rap. If, on the other hand, mind and spirit are real and can shape matter—if ideas have consequences—then we can use our reason to reach an understanding of truth and employ rhetoric to persuade people of the truth. We can inspire Americans demoralized by the entitlement programs of the New Deal and the Great Society; we can convert them from secularism to religion. We do not have to be satisfied with providing a moderate version of whatever socialist nostrum the Democratic Party is peddling. Weaver's history lesson has practical consequences.

Schmitt avoids politics and prefers discussing the intellectual basis of the anti-Platonic commitment of Ockham, Descartes, and Kant. For Plato and Aristotle, for instance, the mind can perceive the objective truth of beauty and truth; their fundamental intellectual commitment is to the principle of noncontradiction. For Ockham and Kant the individual achieves self-evident perception of empirical objects through intuition. (The intellect is for less self-

evident concepts.) Descartes finds our one self-evident experience in consciousness: Knowledge aside from the *cogito* is secondary and subjective. From these different sources individualism, subjectivism, and ethical emotivism have characterized modernity significantly and distinctively. The Platonic vision did not disappear, however, with the triumph of nominalism. The explicit Platonism we find in 20th-century English teachers like C.S. Lewis and Richard Weaver is part of a tradition that runs through the modern period. Renaissance humanists in Florence loved Plato and wrote on him. In the 17th century the Cambridge Platonists, who today are read by only a few, were admired, but Plato's commitment to interpreting the natural world by mathematics also inspired Kepler, Galileo, and Newton.

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In his essay on "The Significance of Beauty for the Exact Sciences," physicist Werner Heisenberg argued convincingly that the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century was based on a return to Plato by these great mathematizing scientists. About his own early research Heisenberg reports (in another essay), "I was gaining the growing conviction that one could hardly make progress in modern atomic physics without a knowledge of Greek natural philosophy." The great Austrian mathematician Kurt Gödel shook up the academic world by proving for any computable axiomatic system powerful enough to describe the arithmetic of the natural numbers that, one, if the system is consistent, it cannot be complete ("incompleteness theorem"), and two, the consistency of the axioms cannot be proved within the system. The proof that mathematics cannot provide the basis of its own validity has often been taken to support relativism, but this was not Gödel's opinion. He shocked Bertrand Russell when he met him at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton by confessing himself a Platonist. The fact that mathematics is not a closed, axiomatic system that can validate the truth of its results does not mean that there is no foundation for truth, only that truth, beauty, and justice exist above mathematics, as in the vision of knowledge found in the simile of the Line at the end

of Plato's *Republic* VI. That is why great mathematicians like Henri Poincaré and G.H. Hardy speak of the beauty of mathematical formulas.

For biologists Michael Denton and Craig Marshall, "Protein folds found in nature represent a finite set of built-in, Platonic forms. Protein functions are secondary adaptations of this set of primary, immutable, natural forms." Schmitt discusses carefully and critically how these views and those of Heisenberg and his students agree with and, in part, contradict Plato's views as expressed in works like *Timaeus*. Thinking within a general Platonic framework can be and *has actually been* productive of significant results in biology, physics, and mathematics. Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* and Lewis's *Abolition of Man* show the importance of Plato in ethics and politics. In creative literature we can mention Lewis's fiction and the novels of Iris Murdoch, whose scholarly writings have explored the significance of Plato for today's philosophical problems. Schmitt shows why the anti-Platonic "turn" (*Wende* is the favorite German expression for our clumsier "paradigm shift") has marginalized Plato in academic philosophy. One of Schmitt's undoubted achievements is establishing Plato's continuing importance.

ON THIS SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC, classicist John M. Rist, after a series of books exploring and interpreting ancient philosophers, has gone on to argue for Plato's enduring significance. The most accessible for the average reader is his brilliant lecture *On Inoculating Moral Philosophy Against God* (1999), in which he argued that, for Christians interested in philosophy,

we should find that it is not just any philosophical framework within which Christian thinkers can work, but a version of the system of Plato, adapted and reformed particularly in the areas of what we should now call theory of action by the much more detailed labours of Aristotle, while still, in respect of the importance of a providential and transcendent God, in essence and in core Platonic.

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Rist has continued to develop his insights of 1999. *Real Ethics: Reconsidering the Foundations of Morality* (2002) begins with a memorable excoriation of the hypocrisy of his philosophical colleagues, who want to retain the social advantages of religion and morality while building careers on

undermining their intellectual foundations. The essays in *What Is Truth? From the Academy to the Vatican* (2008) explore what a critical evaluation of Plato's and Augustine's insights can contribute to traditional theological problems and the political situation of the Church of Rome. In *Plato's Moral Realism: The Discovery of the Presuppositions of Ethics* (2012) Rist returns to the genre of historical interpretation to survey Plato's dialogues not only to establish Plato's position, but in search of answers to modern dilemmas. His conclusion is modest but challenging.

What I have tried to argue is not that moral realism can be defended, but that Plato believed—and I agree with him—that only some version of the transcendental moral realism he developed over time offers any possibility of an honest defense against

moral nihilism, whether explicit or logically implicit, whether that of Athens in the fourth century B.C. (which he specifically tried to defuse) or of twenty-first-century Cambridge, Boston, or Mecca.

The tradition-challenged nihilism of the academy has seeped down into the ethical thinking and practical morality of ordinary citizens and politicians, and has not been without consequences for STEM subjects and creative literature. Arbogast Schmitt and John M. Rist remind us that we cannot start from scratch. The way forward, as C.S. Lewis told his radio audience in 1943, is to go back to where we took the wrong turn. It will be a long journey, but the reward will be worth it. It is the only way to get home.

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