

### THOMAS WHITE ON PLATO AND UTOPIA.

The *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Oct. 1982, pp. 329-354) published an article by Thomas I. White on the subject « Pride and the Public Good : Thomas More's Use of Plato in *Utopia*. » The article complements others by Mr. White which have probed the relation between More and classical philosophy (for summaries, see *Moreana* 55/142 and 58/104-105). It takes its theme from the following words of Hythloday :

Pride is too deeply fixed in men to be easily plucked out. For this reason, the fact that this form of a commonwealth -- which I should gladly desire for all -- has been the good fortune of the Utopians at least, fills me with joy. They have adopted such institutions of life as have laid the foundations of the commonwealth not only most happily, but also to last forever, as far as human prescience can forecast. (*CW* 4, p. 245).

Hythloday reasons that since pride cannot be exorcised from the soul, its effects must be muted by laws and institutions. As we learn in Book I, that is why he spurns to be a counsellor -- he sees more hope in changing the structure of government than in changing the personal characteristics of the men involved. Hythloday's reservations must be kept in mind if one is to reckon accurately the extent of More's debt to Plato. Like Hythloday, Plato saw little chance of successfully serving the commonwealth with counsel so long as the recipient of the counsel is a self-interested prince. (See the *Seventh Epistle*). Also like Hythloday, Plato seems to have despaired of changing the motives of the prince ; his late dialogue the *Laws* directs those who seek justice to remember the inevitable frailty of their rulers, and build institutions which will work regardless of whether the men in power possess virtue. Communism is the pre-eminent example -- and Plato and Hythloday make common cause across the centuries when they argue that communism alone can secure the public good, since only under communism are avarice and material ostentation wholly impossible. The article takes a further step and suggests that, in this regard at least, Hythloday was speaking with the true voice of Thomas More. Its conclusion, then, is that Plato and More were in strategic agreement, holding it more effective to reform institutions than to advise rulers, and seeking a form of government in which the public good is independent of the personal characteristics of those who wield power.

A few criticisms are in order. There are familiar difficulties with identifying the views of Hythloday and those of More, so it is surprising to find, not only that the difficulties are not addressed in the article (no one can do everything at once), but that they are scarcely even mentioned. Ignoring them gives the conclusions drawn an air of greater certainty than they deserve : In addition, I would like to suggest that certain discrepancies between Hythloday and Plato

ought to receive closer attention. One perhaps of no great consequence appears when Hythloday says : « This wise sage [Plato]... easily foresaw that the one and only road to the general welfare lies in the maintenance of equality in all respects » (*CW4*, p. 105). The theory of virtues in the *Republic* assumes that the elements of the state are not natural equals, but that one class is permanently fitted to rule and another to obey. Temperance is agreement between the classes as to proper function of each (*Rep.* 432). « Equality in all respects » therefore claims far too much. Even if we translate the phrase, with Mr. White, « equal allocation of goods, » Hythloday is overstepping the truth ; for the *Republic* (which Hythloday's unspecified allusion to Plato would presumably have brought to mind) proposes communism only among rulers and warriors.

Another discrepancy has to do with the Platonic ideal of a philosopher-king. Hythloday does not object when More praises the ideal, remarking only that if a king fails to turn to philosophy it is useless to give him counsel (*CW4*, p. 87). Neither party bothers to recall the reason why Plato advanced his ideal. In the *Republic*, a philosopher is anyone who aspires to love beauty and truth as they are in themselves, and not only as they appear among concrete particulars. Philosophers alone can reach to unchanging truths -- not because the truths are specialized or arcane, but because to know them one must be possessed by the yearning for wisdom. Love precedes knowledge. A philosopher, in his maturity, apprehends a pattern of the good and the just which both fits each particular experience and goes beyond it, re-presenting out of the flux of events that which is permanently worthy. This pattern he repairs to « as with a painter's eye » (*Rep.* 484), making it the model for whatever he creates. If the philosopher happens to be a king, he uses it to order the laws, molding them into the best imitation that conditions allow of perfect justice. This is the ruler's proper art -- and woe falls to king who lacks such a pattern ! Plato likens him to a mutineer on a ship, who, disdainful to navigate by the stars, has no notion where to sail except those given him by passing hopes of gain (*Rep.* 488).

Whether Plato is right or wrong, it should be plain that in the *Republic* he takes a different attitude toward politics from that which Mr. White ascribes to Hythloday. To be a philosopher-king is a moral state, one which has everything to do with the personal characteristics of those who rule, and little or nothing to do with institutions. Of course Plato may have changed his opinions between writing the *Republic* and the *Laws*. If so, it is only another instance where Hythloday fails to understand him, for Hythloday gives every appearance of subscribing to the ideal of the philosopher-king and not noticing that it clashes with his larger program. He treats the ideal like a sweet and harmless dream. So it is, if it is only an ideal. But Plato (here I must read between the lines) would have insisted that it has been often achieved -- never to perfection, of course, but in measure whenever a ruler pursues notions of justice and right which transcend the pressures of the moment. Plato resolutely refused to work only *en logois*. In this respect he is a remarkable contrast to Hythloday. Hythloday begins with high ambition ; he wants to « uproot from the king's soul the seeds of evil

and corruption » (*CW4*, p. 87) and « pluck out » pride from the commonwealth. Finding his goal impossible, he piles derision on any effort to cultivate virtue in a single man, and turns to what he styles institutional reform. He alleges Plato for his master. Yet Plato was nothing if not patient -- an author of dialogues rather than treatises -- and held, what is remarkable for a teacher, that virtue and perfect knowledge cannot be taught because they require conversion of the whole soul (*Rep.* 518). If they cannot be taught by men, how much less by institutions ? When Plato speaks of the rectification of motives, he presents the person who undergoes change as the initiator of action, not its passive recipient. Becoming good is like freeing a timorous man, the reasonable part of the soul, from the ravages of beasts (*Rep.* 589) ; it is like leaving a cave and walking toward the sun (*Rep.* 514f.). Never can one man do it for another. Though most people need to be led out of the cave, their own feet tread the ascent.

*Utopia* is often described as a book of ironies. Surely among the ironies we must count Hythloday's use of Plato, which seizes the letter with gusto, but never pauses to trace the errant ways of the spirit.

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Normand Poirier writes from Washington D.C. : « With great delight I have read Erasmus's sketch of Dean Colet. André Godin's translation is splendid. I long had wished to know more of Colet because of his relationship to More and this work has made it possible. »

September 30, 1983

The formation of conscience on God's judgements, using More as an example, is the theme of a sermon preached by the Bishop of Arlington at the « Red Mass » (for the legal profession), celebrated at St. Matthew's Cathedral, Washington D.C. Bishop Keating, whose own cathedral has Thomas More for its titular patron, invites his congregation to examine with him « the marvelous conscience of St. Thomas More. » (From *The Catholic Standard*)

October 13, 1983

In *The Tablet*, Terence Morris questions « Mrs. Thatcher's Law » by appealing to historical precedent :

The Act of Supremacy... was no less « lawful » than any of the legislation passed by a Thatcherite parliament. But neither St Thomas More nor St John Fisher, nor the Abbot of Glastonbury, nor many others who thereby won the crown of martyrdom would attest to it. As More proclaimed at his trial, a law which is unjust is not a law at all.