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## Plato

Evening Lecture, Tuesday 10 September 2019

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1. Who was Plato? What helped him become who he is?

2. In what way does Plato use language to practice philosophy? What is distinctive of Plato's way of practicing philosophy?

Compare Heraclitus, fragment DK18:

'Unless one hopes for that which is not to be hoped for, one shall not find it. For it is hard to search for and to reach through to (*aporon*).'

3. Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*, as one central juncture in his ethics

i. What is the central issue in the *Gorgias*?

What is power? (=to have the ability to do what one wants) Is power good for the one who is powerful? Is it the best thing we can aspire to?

ii. Is doing what one wants: doing whatever seems to one to be good/best?

Can we be mistaken in thinking that something is good for us? What forms can such mistakes take and how radical can they (the mistakes) be?

Is what one thinks to be good a true expression of who one is?

iii. Can one be mistaken about what one wants or do we, on the contrary, know what we want?

Consider the following argument: 'We want something, only on the supposition that it is good. But we can be mistaken about whether something is good or not. Therefore, we can be mistaken

about what we want. And this means that we do not know what we want, unless and until we know what is good for us.'

iv. What follows, in regard to the question: What should be our highest aspiration in life?

4. A broader picture of Plato's ethics, with three crucial junctures and crossroads: POWER (*dunamis*; the dialogue *Gorgias*) → REASON (*logos*; the dialogue *Republic*) → LOVE (*erōs*; the dialogues *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*)

The aim of the *Republic* is to show that there is a way of reconciling the desire for one's own good with the desire for the common good; and that this is the reasonable thing to pursue.

The aim of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* is to show that reason is pointless, even 'mean-spirited', if not based on love, which is a form of irrationality and even madness.

"'There is no truth to that story'—that when a lover [i.e. one in love with you] is available you should give your favours to one who is not in love with you instead, because he is in control of himself while the lover is in a state of madness. That would have been fine to say if madness were bad, pure and simple; but in fact the greatest of goods come to us due to madness, provided that it is given as a divine gift.'" (*Phaedrus* 244a5-8)

If virtue is divorced from the love that is a divinely given madness, it is fake and the opposite of what it makes itself out to be; it is: 'the meanness that is praised by the majority as virtue'. (*Phaedrus* 256e3-257a2)

'Well then, the result of my whole account of the fourth kind of madness is clear ... my conclusion is that this [namely, *erōs*] then reveals itself as the best of all the kinds of divine possession and from the best of sources for the person who is subject to it and shares in it, and that it is when he partakes in this madness that the person who loves the beautiful is called a lover.'(249d4-e4)

I am making available for you, on the website, two things I have written on all this.

VPolitis, 10Sept2019