PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS* IN PRAGUE AND IN OXFORD

I.
In Prague

During the visit of Dr Kathy Wilkes to Prague in May 1980 we discussed the lecture that the Master of Balliol gave in my seminar in April of that year. I told her that Anthony Kenny maintained that Socrates was a good man but a poor philosopher, whereas Plato was a dubious character but a great philosopher, with which I disagreed: 'I told him that he seemed to divide Plato's dialogues into those which are not up to his standards of great philosophy, and those which are up to them, identifying the historical Socrates with the first set of dialogues, the second set with Plato. I said that I do not make any such cut through Plato's dialogues.' I added that I did not find in Plato anything inconsistent with the ancient story that the *Phaedrus* was Plato's first dialogue. Kathy exclaimed 'It can't be!' I suggested that we should read the dialogue together. On her returning to Oxford Kathy obtained a grant for that purpose, and so we spent four weeks in July and August 1980 reading the *Phaedrus*, my last weeks in Prague before going to Oxford.

The weather was lovely, and we read almost the whole dialogue in Stromovka, a beautiful park, once a game reserve of the Czech kings. During our reading I could not find any argument directly supporting the ancient tradition that the *Phaedrus* was Plato's first dialogue – preserved by Diogenes Laertius iii. 38 – but we found strong internal evidence in support of a related tradition, according to which Plato wrote the *Phaedrus* during Socrates' lifetime – in iii 35 Diogenes speaks of Socrates reaction to Plato's reading of his dialogue *Lysis*.

What is the evidence? Socrates ends his second speech on Love with a prayer to Eros. He prays that Lysias may be turned to philosophy as his brother Polemarchus has been turned to it (257b). This follows Socrates' assertion that those who devote themselves to philosophy live a blessed and harmonious life here on earth (256a-b). We know that Polemarchus died at the hands of the Thirty Tyrants in 404 B.C., five years before Socrates' death. To declare him an exemplary follower of philosophy (*Phaedr*. 257b) after his death, would in his reader's minds be in direct conflict with Socrates' insistence that true philosopher would live in blessedness and harmony here on earth, for the ancients believed that a man's life can be considered as good only if it ends well, and the end of Polemarchus in the hands of the Thirty was anything but good.

In the years that preceded my invitation to Oxford philosophers I was steeped in Herodotus, whose *Histories* I read with the German commentary by Heinrich Stein (Berlin 1870), and so I was well prepared to discuss this point. The statement that we 'should refrain from attributing happiness to any man during his lifetime, for it is necessary to see the man's end', as attributed to Solon, was first brought to my attention by Aristotle, who focuses his attention on its paradoxical nature in the 1st Book of the *Ethica Nicomachea* (1100a10-11). Then, Herodotus made it clear to me that Solon's dictum caught the imagination of the Greeks; it provided him with a framework for the rule of Croesus, the king of Lydia in the first book of his *Histories*, and in a sense, for his *Histories* in their totality:

> 'In the course of time Croesus subdued all the people west of the river Halys … When all these nations had been added to the Lydian empire, and Sardis was at the height of her wealth and prosperity, all the great Greek teachers of that epoch, one after another, paid visits to the capital. Much the most distinguished of them was Solon the Athenian,

> the man who at the request of his countrymen had made a code of laws for Athens (i. 29. 1) … Croesus entertained him hospitably in the palace, and three or four days after his arrival instructed some servants to take him on a tour of the royal treasuries and point out the richness and magnificence of everything. When Solon had made as thorough an inspection as opportunity allowed, Croesus said: "Well, my Athenian friend, I have heard a great deal about your wisdom, and how widely you have travelled in the pursuit of knowledge (*philosopheôn*). I cannot resist my desire to ask you a question: who is the happiest man you have ever seen? (i. 30, 1.-2)'

Solon answered by giving a few examples of men, who were of moderate means, did memorable deeds, were well regarded by their fellow-countrymen, and ended their lives splendidly.

> 'Croesus was vexed with Solon and snapped out: "But what about my own happiness? Is it so utterly contemptible that you won't even compare me with mere common folk like those you have mentioned?' (i. 32. 1)
> Solon replied: 'You are very rich, and you rule a numerous people; but the question you asked me I will not answer, until I know that you have died happily. Great wealth can make a man no happier than moderate means, unless he has the luck to continue in prosperity to the end … Whoever has the greatest number of the good things I have mentioned, and keeps them to the end, and dies a peaceful death, that man, my lord Croesus, deserves in my opinion to be called happy. Look to the end, no matter what it is you are considering.' (i. 32. 5 – 9, tr. Aubry de Sélincourt, Penguin Classics, 1973)

Fifty chapters later, Herodotus returns to Solon when he describes the defeat of Croesus by the Persian emperor Cyrus. Put on a pyre, Croesus 'remembered with what divine truth Solon had declared that no man could be called happy until he was dead … he sighed bitterly and three times, in anguish of spirit, pronounced Solon's name.' (i. 86. 3) Cyrus wanted to know why he did this; Croesus told the story about Solon to Cyrus' interpreters, which made Cyrus realize how instable all human things are. It made him change his mind and give orders that the flames should be put out (i. 86. 6)

The story, as it stands in Herodotus, cannot be historically true, for Solon gave Athens his laws in 594 BC, when he was Archon, and went for his ten year travels (Herodotus i. 29. 2) in the years 593-583 BC, that is a generation before Croesus came to the throne, in 560 BC. But this does not diminish its importance, on the contrary, it underlines the profound influence that Solon's poetry exercised on human minds with its emphasis on the vicissitudes of human life. Stein in his *Commentary*, in his note on Herodotus i. 32, quotes the closing words of Sophocles' *King Oedipus*:

> 'Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: this was Oedipus, greatest of men; he held the key to the deepest mysteries; was envied by all his fellow-men for his great prosperity; behold, what a full tide of misfortune swept over his head. Then learn that mortal man must always look to a man's ending, and none call happy until that day when he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace.' (Translation E. F. Watling, slightly adapted, Penguin Classics, 1967).

I do not remember discussing this matter in any depth with Kathy that summer of 1980 in Prague; I only remember the elation I felt when I realized the significance of Solon's dictum for the dating of the *Phaedrus* on that occasion. Kathy Wilkes might have argued that all this was irrelevant concerning the dating of the *Phaedrus*, for Socrates in the *Phaedrus* challenges

Solon's dictum by his declaring that those who pursue philosophy live a blessed and harmonious life here on earth. She could argue that this challenge gains in importance with every further testimony to Solon's influence, for which she could refer to Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 928-9), Sophocles (*Trach*. 1-3), and Euripides (*Heraclidae* 863-6, *Andromache* 100-2, *Troiades* 509-10). Furthermore, she could argue that Polemarchus ended his life by drinking hemlock at the hands of the Thirty, as Socrates did at the hands of the democrats; this did not prevent Plato from describing Socrates as a man who attained true happiness in the dialogue devoted to Socrates' last day (*Phaedo* 58e).

I could object to such arguments that there is no indication in Plato's works that he viewed Polemarchus' death on a par with Socrates' death, and that Plato's description of Socrates' death in the *Phaedo* as a blessed culmination of Socrates' life in philosophy stands in sharp contrast to Lysias' description of the circumstances in which his brother died:

> 'Polemarchus received from the Thirty their accustomed order to drink hemlock, with no statement made as to the reason for his execution: so far did he come short of being tried and defending himself. And when he was being brought away dead from the prison, although we had three houses amongst us, they did not permit his funeral to be conducted from any of them ... some twisted gold earrings, which Polemarchus' wife chanced to have, were taken out of her ears by Melobius as soon as ever he entered the house.' (Lysias, *Against Eratosthenes*, 17-20)

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It took me another twenty years before I returned to this matter; by coincidence it was again in Prague, during my stay there in 1999-2000 for which the Jan Hus Foundation, based at Oxford University, provided the funds. In an article written for *The Classical Quarterly* I contrasted the pictures of Polemarchus in the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*:

> 'although Polemarchus figures in the *Phaedrus* only at the end of Socrates' second speech on love, when Socrates prays to Eros that Lysias may turn to philosophy, as his brother Polemarchus has, the philosophic status thus attributed to him is as high as can be, for if Lysias were to do so, Phaedrus could then love him unreservedly, their lives being fully devoted to philosophy (*Phaedrus* 257b1-6). Polemarchus is here represented as someone who has fully appropriated Socrates' views on love expressed in the Palinode', whereas in the *Republic* Polemarchus 'enters the discussion only briefly in the first book. He is unable even to keep track of his own answers to Socrates' questioning, let alone to defend his proposed definition of justice. "I don't know any more what I have said', he complains (*Rep* i. 334b7). His performance in the *Republic* can be judged according to the criterion laid down in the *Phaedrus*: a philosopher is a master of dialectic and can therefore always defend his knowledge with valid arguments (*Phaedrus* 276e-277a).' (Julius Tomin, 'Plato's Disappointment with his Phaedran Characters and its Impact on his Theory of Psychology', *CQ*, vol. 50, No. 2, 2000, p. 379)

Plato's negative description of Polemarchus in the *Republic* goes even further. Polemarchus begins by defining justice as doing 'good to a friend' and 'evil to an enemy' (332a-b), which Socrates rejects, arguing that it is unjust to harm anybody under any circumstances (335e5). Although he finds himself comprehensively refuted and renounces his thesis, Socrates points out to him that his definition of justice befits either a tyrant, or 'a rich man who thinks he has great power' (336a6-7). After the death of his father Polemarchus was to become, as his eldest son and heir (331d8), by far the richest man in Athens.

Socrates' rebuke acquires additional significance in the light of the fifth book of the *Republic*, where Socrates says in his opening words that since he has accomplished his presentation of the good and true city, he is about to explain the four evil forms of constitution in due order. At that point he is interrupted by Polemarchus who grabs the garment of Adeimantus (Plato's brother, incidentally) and whispers so loudly, that even Socrates can hear him: 'Shall we let him [i.e. Socrates] off, or what shall we do?' Adeimantus explains that Polemarchus complains that Socrates is about to cheat his audience of a very important part of the story: 'as if it were self-evident to everybody what Socrates meant when he said that in the matter of women and children friends have all things in common'. Adeimantus argues that this theme does indeed require a proper explanation, and thus prompts Socrates to embark on the most important part of the *Republic*, the outline of the city ruled by philosophers, to which books five, six, and seven are devoted. In the subsequent narrative, Socrates in the fifth book presents the principle of sharing property as a test by which a man's fitness for philosophy is judged; philosophers will not tear the city to pieces by differing about 'mine' and 'not mine', each man dragging his acquisitions into a separate house of his own (464c-d). Only those who pass this test may be allowed to touch philosophy (474c1), those who are not suited may not even touch it (474c2). Polemarchus could not pass this test. Notably, Polemarchus is given no opportunity to re-enter the discussion directly; this should be seen in the light of the third book, where Socrates says that a just and decent man would not willingly introduce into his narrative an unworthy person, except only briefly when such a person would perform something good (396c-d).

There is strong evidence that the conviction that a man truly devoted to philosophy attains true happiness and lives a blessed life here on earth was Socrates firm conviction, and that it was shared by Plato and Socrates' other disciples even after the death of Socrates. As concerns Plato and Socrates, what Socrates says in front of the jury chimes with his Phaedran proclamation: 'Nothing will injure me, not Meletus nor yet Anytus – they cannot, for a bad man is not permitted [*ou themiton*, i.e. 'not allowed by the laws of God and men', as Liddell & Scott put it, J.T.] to injure a better man than himself.' (Plato, *Apology* 30c9-d1, tr. Jowett) And as far as Socrates' followers are concerned, Isocrates in his critical onslaught directed against them testifies to it that they shared Socrates' view on this, for in his pamphlet *Against the Sophists*, with which he opened his own school of philosophic rhetoric a few years after the death of Socrates, he proclaims:

> 'If all who are engaged in the profession of education were willing to state the facts instead of making greater promises than they can possibly fulfil … who can fail to abhor those teachers, who … straightway at the beginning of their professions [*en archêi tôn epaggelmatôn*; note that at the end of the *Phaedrus* Socrates' exhortations to Lysias and other rhetoricians and writers are referred to by the verb *apaggellein* (278e8,) and those directed at Isocrates with the verb *exaggellein* (279b2)], attempt to deceive us with their lies … For I think it is manifest to all that foreknowledge of future events is not vouchsafed to human nature … that for mankind this power lies in the realm of the impossible. But these professors have gone so far in their lack of scruples that they attempt to persuade our young men that if they only study under them they will know what to do in life and through this knowledge will become happy and prosperous (*dia tautês tês epistêmês eudaimones genêsontai*). (Isocrates, XIII, 1-3, tr. G. Norlin)

That Isocrates' criticism in *Against the Sophists* is directed pre-eminently against Plato becomes clear in his *Antidodis*, written in the year 354-3 BC when he was eighty two years old (and Plato was seventy three), in which he fully endorses his early criticism (see *Antidosis*

193). There can therefore be no doubt that the Phaedran conviction concerning a life of a true philosopher, which so profoundly and radically challenges Solon's dictum, was Plato's conviction and that as such it survived both the death of Polemarchus, and the death of Socrates. But while we can see from the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*, that Socrates last days and the way he died strengthened his conviction that Socrates was a philosopher, and as such attained true happiness that did not desert him to his end, the *Republic* testifies to it that after Polemarchus' death Plato abandoned his Phaedran conviction that Polemarchus was a philosopher.

The realization that he had been so wrong about Polemarchus had a profound effect on his views on the knowability of human souls. In the article written in Prague in 2000 I wrote:

> 'In the *Phaedrus* knowledge of individual souls was an integral part of the project of scientific rhetoric. In the *Gorgias*, where Plato rejects on moral, psychological and ontological grounds any pretensions of rhetoric to be a science, the very possibility of adequate knowledge of individual souls is rejected, for the body both of the perceiver and of the person perceived presents an insurmountable barrier to such knowledge (523c-d) … He discusses the matter when he tackles the problem of judges in the *Republic*, for they must be able to obtain knowledge of the souls of malefactors in order to pass correct judgement on them, so that they can either cure them or relieve society of their existence. Plato says that a young man of noble character is totally unfit for this task, for he has no paradigms of vices in his soul (409b).' (*Op. cit.* p. 383)

But how could Polemarchus' untimely death have caused such a change in Plato's view of him? The answer can be found in *Against Eratosthenes*, where Lysias in describing the greed manifested by the Thirty displayed in their confiscation of Polemarchus' property divulges information concerning his riches:

> 'They had seven hundred shields of ours, they had all that silver and gold, with copper, jewellery, furniture and women's apparel *beyond what they ever expected to get*; also a hundred and twenty slaves, of whom they took the ablest, delivering the rest to the treasury (19).' (Tr. W. R. M. Lamb)

There was enough family property left outside Attica that Lysias after escaping the Thirty could arm the democrats and thus help secure the defeat of the aristocrats. It was against this background that Plato in the first book of the *Republic* introduced Polemarchus' father Cephalus with his mind all preoccupied with religious matters and with his own self-righteousness. All those who heard Lysias giving his speech *Against Eratosthenes*, and all those who subsequently read it, would have immediately known that Cephalus' lack of interest in wealth was a dissimulation. Asked by Socrates whether he inherited property or acquired most of it himself, he answered: 'Acquired?! … I shall be glad if I leave to these my sons not less but a little more than I received' (330a-b). Asked what was the greatest good that he derived from his wealth, he replied that it was the sweet consciousness that he lived his life in accordance to justice and piety:

> 'The great blessing of riches, I do not say to every man, but to a good man, is, that he has had no occasion to deceive or defraud others, either intentionally or unintentionally, and when he departs to the world below he is not in any apprehension about offerings due to the gods or debts which he owes to men.' (331a11-b5, tr. B. Jowett).

Asked by Socrates to clarify the concept of justice involved in his musing about the greatest good that he derived from his wealth, Cephalus passes his argument over to Polemarchus, his heir in every respect (331d8, e1), and retires to make the religious sacrifices.

Concerning the ensuing discussion on justice between Polemarchus and Socrates, I wrote in my article in Prague:

> 'Lysias' speech provided Plato with material which he could use in presenting to Lysias [who is sitting in the audience, *Rep*. 328b4] his brother Polemarchus as a model, however far removed from the model he represented in the *Phaedrus*. For Lysias says concerning Eratosthenes: "even to discuss this man with another I consider to be an impiety, *if it were to benefit him* (*epi men toutou ôpheliai*, 12. 24). But I consider it as a holy and pious action to address this man, *when it is to harm him* (*epi de têi toutou blabêi*, 12. 24)". Lysias acts here according to the principle which Plato puts into the mouth of Polemarchus in the *Republic*. Plato emphasizes the correspondence by echoing Lysias' words when Socrates quotes Polemarchus' definition back at him as '*benefiting friends*' (*ep' ôpheliai tôn philôn*) and '*harming enemies*' (*epi blabêi tôn echthrôn*, 334b5). By presenting Polemarchus in the *Republic* as a man who under pressure of Socrates' questioning renounced the conception of justice adopted by Lysias, Plato gave retrospectively at least some positive meaning to the end of the Phaedran Palinode, where Socrates prays to Eros that Lysias may follow Polemarchus' example.'

In the *Laws*, the work of his old age, Plato directs another ray of light on his Phaedran misjudgement of Polemarchus when he says that 'to honour with hymns and panegyrics those who are still alive is not safe; a man should run his course, and make a fair ending, and then we will praise him.' (802a1-3) In the *Laws*, any alien found to possess more property than that which is allowed to third class citizens has to leave the city within thirty days, and if he does not, his property is confiscated and he himself sentenced to death (915b-c). It is difficult to believe that when Plato conceived of this law, he refrained from thinking of those two prominent aliens, Polemarchus and Lysias.