

DIALOGUES OF POLEMARCHUS

BY LEE EPSTEIN

I, POLEMARCHUS, was present at the discussions which Plato purports to have recorded and which took place between his teacher, Socrates, and several others. From love of his teacher, whom the Fates have seen fit to honor with martyrdom, Plato has been moved to change many of the facts. I have here set down the dialogues as I remember them, beginning about that place in the discussion that Plato reaches at the middle of Book Five. Up to this place, Plato's account has been more or less true, save for the fact that he has Thracymachus depart at the brink of defeat. This is an apparent ruse to protect his master by not telling what actually happened.

At this point Thracymachus interrupted Socrates, saying, O! Socrates, you make us rash promises and you give us back our own words chewed over. By dint of clever manipulations you show us something which we never see, and you throw us off from the quest of the real essence of the Truth.

I promise nothing. I merely tried to show that there was a problem, and then tried to solve it along with you.

Aye, but by our questions with hidden implications, you could prove anything. I bow to your superior skill as a Sophist, but as a philosopher—tell your nurse to get you a coral string to chew lest you chew the eternal truths to shreds with your Sophistry. Do you believe that there is such a thing as Truth?

Certainly.

And that Truth exists independent of belief in it? I mean that if everyone in all Greece believed a lie, the truth would still exist anyway?

Of course.

And that if one man did not believe the lie, he would know the truth?

Yes.

Do you believe also that there is such a thing as good?

Most assuredly.

And that even though everyone in the world did wrong, there would still exist good, as an idea or a concept?

I think so.

And that if one man did not do wrong, he would know good?

Aye.

How then, do you reconcile the idea of a basic good and a basic truth, independent of acceptance or denial, to your idea of justice, which (you say) can exist only in a perfect state? If it is possible for the whole world to be untrue, or evil, and for one man to be true or good, how then is it impossible for one man to be just while the whole world is unjust?

Socrates was silent.

If only one man were alive, then according to the definition you have given us, he must be unjust. You maintain that justice is a positive virtue—a characteristic of the just state. I maintain that it is a negative virtue. It is the absence of a fault. It is the pursuance of a course of action which will hurt no one unnecessarily, and which will involve nothing mean or cruel. Of necessity, then, a man living alone would be just, for it would be impossible for him to be unjust to any but himself. However, his intentions to himself would always be just, and an act intended justly is a just act. Mind, I am making no definitions, but merely naming some of the characteristics of justice. I have learned many of your tricks, Socrates.

Be that as it may, you have not shown wherein my definition is false.

Your definition, pray? And was that a definition? Let us suppose that I asked you the way to Sparta. If you replied that I should set out, and that when I reached Sparta I should find myself there, would you call these directions?

Assuredly not.

How, then, can you say that you have given me a definition of justice when you say that justice will be the characteristic of a just state?

But I showed you the way to make the just state. If I said, in directing you to Sparta, go this way, then that, and then, after so many hours walking, you would be in Sparta, you would call these good directions, would you not?

Perhaps, if they took me to Sparta.

Well, when I told you to do this, and that, and then, after certain results were achieved, you would have justice, have I not given you good directions for the achievement of justice?

Ah, Socrates, a great power for circumlocution is yours. You did tell us that a just state would educate our children as soon as they were old enough to leave their mother's breasts, and that people would be divided into three classes. Does justice, then, consist of child-maintenance, or of division into classes? In a word, you told us some of the characteristics of a just state, but you did not tell us where we could find justice in the state—where we were to find the just methods of achieving these ends.

At this moment Glaucon and Adeimantus interposed, saying that they, too, had noticed this deficiency, but had not spoken lest they appear dull and stupid.

The true, philosopher, answered Socrates, is never afraid to speak lest he be thought stupid. He knows that doubt is the beginning of all knowledge. He is not afraid to confess his ignorance in order to open the path to newer truths. He is like an apprentice to a

That is all very well, Socrates, but answer our objections. Tell us where we can find justice in the state.

Observe, Thracymachus, the world about you. You will see that everything is divided into the realm of the real and the unreal. (Here followed the long speech reported by Plato in his *Dialogue on Immortality*) . . . Thus, the essence of justice belongs to the realm of the real—the invisible. I cannot point it out to you, but I can tell you of what it consists. You are right. I told you the characteristics of a just state, and it is in the fulfillment of these characteristics, in the every part of the state performing adequately its functions that justice consists. It is a co-ordination of all the parts to the whole.

It is, then, only in such a state as you outline that justice may exist?

Aye.

I think you make an error. You outlined that state, no doubt, with the ideal of justice always before you.

I did.

Well, you have not told us what that idea was. It existed before the state, if you modeled the state upon it, and it may exist after your idea of the just state changes. You will admit that although there is only one essence of good, at different times we deem different things to be good?

Agreed.

Then, as there must be some essence of justice, may we not at different times think different states to be just? What you have done is to say that the philosopher-king will know what justice is, and from this knowledge will outline principles which will make the state just and good. Justice, you therefore define along with goodness as characteristics of the just and good state. We are still in the dark as to the real meaning of justice or of goodness.

Socrates was silent.

You further set forth the principle that we are not working for the immediate good of the individual, but for that of the state, and that a state which is good and happy will ultimately consist of good and happy individuals, for the individual is part of the state.

So I maintain.

But I do not agree. Is it not true that if, for instance, Niceratus were to give all of his wealth to the state, the state would perhaps be happier?

Yes.

But Niceratus would not be happy. It is perfectly possible to conceive of acts which are unjust to the individual and would bring him sorrow and pain, but which are to what you would call the ultimate good of the state as a whole. What we had been wiser to see is that if we make every individual happy, and treat him justly, surely the state must be a just and a happy one, for the state is the sum of all the individuals.

At this moment, Thracymachus' servant came up and notified him that this cousin from Ithaca had arrived, and was awaiting him at his home, whereupon Thracymachus took leave of all most courteously, saying, I hope to continue later this pleasant discussion.

Bah! said Socrates.