THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLATO’S STATE ABSOLUTISM.

BY PROF. A. R. WADIA, B.A. (CANTAB.), BAR-AT-LAW.
(Department of Philosophy, Maharaja’s College, Mysore.)

To understand the thought of a philosopher it is always necessary to be clear as to what exactly is the purpose he has in mind. Plato’s thought has sometimes suffered in public estimate whenever this elementary principle has been lost sight of. Too much emphasis has been laid on his doctrine of Ideas, and thanks to the general misinterpretation of the doctrine that has been prevalent since the days of Aristotle himself, the whole of Platonism has been enveloped in a nebula of mysticism. Far from being the central pivot of his system the knowledge of Ideas is a mere means to the end of social regeneration. With the passion of an intellectualist Plato believed in the necessity of knowledge to do anything whatever; he recognized no knowledge but the knowledge of the essences of things, and he sought to study these essences under the nomenclature of Ideas. He was often lost in the contemplation of them; he was often tempted to rest in their balmy atmosphere as befitted a poet. But he never failed to respond to the call of humanity, and he was a true disciple of his great master in feeling that there is no end so worthy as serving humanity. There is a compulsion laid by him on all true philosophers never to shrink from the duty of being leaders of men, and if they fail in their duty they are condemned to the penalty of being ruled by men, immeasurably their inferiors. Political philosophy in the widest sense of the term, as including ethics, is the real fulcrum, the real palpitating heart of Platonism. Herein he displays a profound insight, for he recognizes that morality is not the concern of an individual qua individual, but that it essentially involves for its birth and growth a social organism. Through the individualistic concentration on individual souls to which Europe got attached through the influence of Christianity, the profound interrelation of ethics and politics was lost sight of, till Hegel once again established it in the last century.* But man as essentially a social or political animal

* In actual practice owing to the deep political instincts of Europe this divorce between the claims of morality and the claims of political life was considerably modified.
marked the starting point of the highest ethical thought of ancient Greece, and he who overlooks this renders himself incapable of comprehending any part of Platonism. It is the necessity of the State to human life that makes him reverence it with all the depth of filial piety. In the Crito Socrates is made to ask: "Has a philosopher like you failed to discover that our country is more to be valued and higher and holier than mother or father or any ancestor, and more to be regarded in the eyes of the gods and of men of understanding? Also to be soothed, and gently and reverently entreated when angry, even more than a father, and either to be persuaded, or if not persuaded, to be obeyed? And when we are punished by her, whether with imprisonment or with stripes, the punishment is to be endured in silence; and if she lead us to wounds or to death in battle, thither we follow as is right; neither may any one yield or retreat or leave his rank, but whether in battle or in a court of law, or in any other place, he must do what his city and his country order him; or he must change their view of what is just; and if he may do no violence to his father or mother, much less may he do violence to his country."*

In ancient Greece the highest private virtue was friendship. Plato like Socrates never tires of singing the praises of friendship, an intimate communion of two souls which know not the barriers of sex or rank or age. A friend is one of the highest goods which constitute material happiness. Socrates admits having a passion for friends and he would "greatly prefer a real friend to all the gold of Darius, or even to Darius himself". Thus it is that the highest state itself comes to be pictured as a community of friends where "friends have all things in common,"† as in the Republic and even as 'a community of lovers, so that the mutual regard of the lovers may prevent them from committing any act of dishonour and encourage them to "emulate one another in honour"."‡

But such a close intimacy among citizens can only be possible in a small city-state, whose growth both in space and in population is rigidly checked. No wonder that the imperialism of Pericles did not appeal to Plato. A large state was

† Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 121: the Laws.
a contradiction in terms to the conception of the state as a community of friends. In the *Laws* he restricts the number of households to 5,040, any excess to be got rid of by wholesale emigration, and foundation of new colonies, while the population of free-born citizens alone in the Periclean Athens (Attica) has been estimated at 90,000 to 270,000 during the century preceding Plato’s activities, *viz.*, 530-430 B.C. In a huge concourse individual acquaintanceship is practically impossible, and Plato as a political Puritan would not sacrifice the friendship of citizens to the glory and pomp of a powerful state: “There is no greater good in a state than that the citizens should be known to one another.”

It would have to be admitted that Aristotle, although himself a believer in city-states, was right in criticizing Plato’s view as making no adequate distinction between a mere household and a state. In the *Statesman* Plato explicitly admits that a large household is comparable to a small state and that both are governed by the principles of a common science, which he speaks of as royal or political or economical science. Political Science itself is defined in the same dialogue as the art of rearing men collectively, and in the *Menexenus* government is spoken of as “the nurture of men”.

Plato’s insistence on the smallness of a state is not intelligible apart from his conviction, from which he never swerved, that the goodness of a state ought to be estimated only in terms of the good life it makes possible. “The mere preservation and continuance of life,” he says in the *Laws*, “is not the most honourable thing for men, as the vulgar think, but the continuance of the best life while we live,” and the best life is measured in terms of “freedom from avarice and a sense of justice—upon this rock our city shall be built.”

He was painfully aware of the conflicts of petty individual and class interests, which constitute so much of political life, and make the very name of politicians a bye-word for chicanery and demagogy. Plato condemns all partisan politics in unmeasured terms: “According to our view such governments are not polities at all, nor are laws right which are passed for the good of particular classes, and not for the good of the whole state. States which have such laws are not polities, but parties, and their notions of justice are simply unmeaning.”

---

∥ Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 89. ¶ Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 119. $ Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 98.
He would have the very best of states possible, where the interests of the state as such reign supreme and command the loyal homage of all its children. A man’s life at its best is the life of virtue, and the life of virtue is possible only within a good state. A corrupt state is a moral tragedy and it would be the duty of a virtuous man to prefer to be an outlaw rather than "bow his neck to the yoke of slavery and be ruled by inferiors". Better the yoke of exile than the citizenship of a state "which is likely to make men worse". Plato had the courage of his convictions to practise what he preached. His beloved Athens had proved guilty of persecuting Socrates and thus sinning against philosophy. She had not proved herself a great moral state. He never forgave her for this sin, and after the death of his guru he left Athens in disgust and courted the trials of a willing exile for a number of years. He was a Puritan, and unless we realize this, the whole spirit of his political philosophy will tend to be grossly misconstrued.

That the state is a moral institution, that its claims are prior to the claims of its individual members, that the rulers should rule in the interests of the whole state, that there should be perfect harmony between the various individuals and the interests of the state—all these have been the common political platitudes for ages, but like so many other platitudes they have remained very often but words and never crossed the threshold of mere theory. The genius of Plato is to be essentially found in his daring proposals which seek to make these platitudes living realities. The foremost of these proposals is his rigorous State Absolutism.

The significance of this absolutism comes out, when we realize that it does not merely refer to the supremacy of the state in war or legislation and administration of a general character. It refers rather to an absolute government of men, controlling marriages and births in a way which treats with contempt the likes and dislikes of individuals. In the Republic Plato bewails the oddness of the public apathy towards questions of marriage and birth. He bitterly complains that more care is bestowed on the breeding of animals than on the breeding of human beings. Nothing is so difficult as statesmanship, nothing more in need of knowledge, and yet the highest offices in the state are bestowed on those who have neither the gift nor the knowledge of statesmanship. This is the burden of Plato’s complaints scattered all through the

various dialogues. He wants a higher type of rulers, a higher breed of men, a race of men who can keep alive the flame of genuine statesmanship and rule accordingly. Hence it is that the most private details of life he would have rigidly scrutinized, and if possible legislated about by the rulers. In the Laws occurs a passage which crystallizes his feelings in a perfectly unambiguous manner: "He who imagines that he can give laws for the public conduct of states, while he leaves the private life of citizens wholly to take care of itself; who thinks that individuals may pass the day as they please, and there is no necessity of order in all things; he, I say, who gives up the control of their private lives and supposes that they will conform to law in their common and public life is making a great mistake." Plato was true to his word and both in the Republic and to a lesser extent in the Laws he draws a statuesque picture of the citizens breeding at the sweet command of the Guardians, or at least marrying only under the supervision of female overseers specially appointed, all children born of unions not so sanctioned being treated as bastards and not allowed to grow up. In the domain of art and in the domain of education the will of the sovereign rulers is law. The genius of poets is tied to the chariot wheels of the state and dare not manifest itself except in the beaten tracks of approved poetry. So too in education a child like a machine has to go through a set course year after year. Plato has a horror for change, though he himself was a rebel of rebels. His Republic is fashioned and chiselled so rigorously as to look a picture of perfection to be handed down from generation to generation in its pristine purity, and woe to him who would change the modes of prescribed music, for "when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them".*

True, the death-like immobility of the Republic has been considerably modified in the Laws. He recognizes in the Statesman the impossibility of laying down "a rule which will last for all time,"† and so in the Laws‡ he points out the desirability of searching out saints and sages who are capable of modifying the laws as the need arises. Passages could even be found where Plato's nature appears to rebel against a despotism that kills all liberty. If he complains that the fault of Athens was too much liberty, he attributes

the ruin of Persian nationality to the despotism of their kings, which diminished the freedom of the people and infused so much fear into them as to destroy friendship and community of feeling.* Even, however, if we accept with Plato the true principle of government to be that "the wise and the good will order the affairs of his subjects,"† admitting thereby the truth in the modern conception of forcing men to be free, even so there remains the weakness of the Platonic polity that the individuality of an average citizen has been ruthlessly sacrificed to the Moloch of State Absolutism. State Absolutism is justified only in so far as it tends to foster the moral individuality of the citizens, and there can be no individuality without the chance of initiative, and the citizens of the Platonic Republic are too statuesque to develop a real individuality.

There is, however, a saving grace in the State Absolutism of the Republic: it lies in the uncompromising emphasis which he lays on the absolute necessity of having at the head of affairs only those whose intellectual and moral worth had been tested and proved beyond the possibility of doubt. In the choice of the Guardians worth alone counts. Even from the ranks of the barbarians they may be chosen,‡ and thus in the interests of morality he transcends the usual Hellenic antipathy to barbarians. It was a strong faith in him unshaken by popular doubts and prejudices that finds expression in an immortal passage in the Republic: "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and the princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures, who pursue either to the exclusion of the other, are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils,—no, nor the human race, as I believe,—and then only will this state have a possibility of life, and behold the light of day."§

The aristocratic absolutism of Plato comes to us with all the greater shock, as we have been accustomed to the growing spirit of democracy ever since the French Revolution. But he lived at a time when the failure of Periclean democracy to maintain itself against the militarism of Sparta was still rankling in his mind. He felt convinced that democracy would always degenerate into lawlessness and anarchy; he doubted the capacity of an average man to be a real politician in the

---

good sense of the term, for his politics rested on the inequality of natural endowments. Some are born with gold in their soul, some with silver, and others with brass or iron. It is only the golden-souled that are fit to rule, the rest are but fit to obey. The inherent distinction between free men and slaves is transferred to the distinctions among free men themselves. Those who were unfit to rule, were at least to be fashioned into good men by their betters, and this was the whole justification of the Platonic absolutist aristocracy.

It is, however, remarkable to note that advancing years modified Plato’s antipathy to democracy, and the Zeit Geist breaks out in the Laws. The aristocracy of intellect and virtue is to be maintained, but only on the suffrage of the citizens at large. The state is to realize a mean between monarchy and democracy. The equality aimed at is the proportionate equality of justice. Thus the system of absolute equality, ensured by the custom of lot, is to be modified by election. The Guardians of the Laws, thirty seven in all, are to be elected in three stages. First of all, those who are horse and foot soldiers or have seen military service, are to nominate those, who are thought to be worthy of being guardians. The first three hundred of those nominated are to be voted on by the citizens. The first hundred of these are again to be voted upon; the thirty seven, who get the highest number of votes, become the Guardians of the Laws.* Likewise the Council of Three Hundred and Sixty gets constituted partly through election and partly through lot. Each of the four classes of citizens, formed on the basis of property, selects its candidates. Out of these the citizens are to elect 180 out of each class. Out of each of these 180, 90 would be elected by lot and thus a council of 360 would be formed. These curious devices of election show the acumen of Plato. In modern democracies the principle of election by lot has been absolutely given up, but the election through stages forms a part of constitutional machinery in several countries, especially in connection with the election of the President of the United States of America. Modern democracies in several respects lag behind Plato’s. We are accustomed to the practice of electing persons to representative or consultative bodies, but do not dream of electing executive officers or military officers. Plato, however, is even prepared for this. The Guardians nominate several men as worthy of being generals, and those who are of the

* Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 133.
age for military service proceed to elect generals out of the panel furnished by the Guardians. Cavalry officers are elected in the same way. Finally, priests and wardens are all subject to election.* The democracy, which Plato had run down so vigorously in the Republic, comes after all to be reinstalled in the Laws in all the glory of a victorious political creed. But even here political rights are pictured as responsibilities which the citizens dare not shirk. Certain classes of voters are obliged to vote; if they fail to do so, they render themselves liable to be fined fifty drachmas and to be considered bad citizens. Attendance at the assembly is compulsory for the citizens of the first two classes.† Even in private suits all citizens are expected to have a share: “for he who has no share in the administration of justice, is apt to imagine that he has no share in the state at all.”‡ Suggestions like these go far beyond the demands of modern democracy. In criminal cases we may venture to rely on the judgment of the jury of “twelve shopkeepers”, but in complex civil suits we cannot afford to trust to the judgment of mere men in the street. The destinies of armies and navies cannot be entrusted to the mere favourites of soldiers. Perhaps these restrictions are inconsistent with the basic principles of democracy, but they suffice to point out the limitations of democracy. On the other hand, the strict equality in the eyes of law, which we regard as the primary attribute of democracy, is not recognized by Plato. For the same offence different punishments are meted out to strangers, slaves and freemen, thus violating what Prof. Dicey has so happily spoken of as the Rule of Law. Even the spirit of Plato was not proof against the subtle prejudices of his age and the philosopher found himself constrained to introduce an element of aristocracy into democracy, and the democracy of the Laws turns out after all to be an aristocracy of free men. True, the inspired wisdom of a few guardians has yielded place to the experience of free men. The autocracy of the Guardians has been metamorphosed into the vote of democratic free men. But the aristocratic bent of Plato’s mind even in his old age left him a democrat of an aristocratic type. The Laws represents a compromise suitable to the needs of men, but he makes no secret of the fact either in the Statesman or the Laws that his heart was set on the state as delineated in the Republic. This explains perhaps why the paradoxes of the Republic are

the common stock-in-trade of the readers of Plato, while the more reasoned conclusions of his *Laws* are apt to be brushed aside as the compromises of a disappointed old man. We may, therefore, once again revert to the daring speculations of the *Republic* and leave the shady recesses of the *Laws*.

Nothing in the *Republic* has met with so much disapproval as the community of wives. In every historical community that we know of, the institution of family has had a most sacred character, and family can only be built upon marriage. Plato's attack on the whole conception of family was due to two chief reasons. If the state is regarded as a community of friends, and friends are expected to have everything in common, the community of wives follows clearly as a logical conclusion. But apart from this abstract logical consistency there was another consideration which had particular weight with him. He wanted the Guardians of the State to be thoroughly disinterested, to be wholly devoted to the welfare of the State, and he knew as a matter of experience that the existence of a family often militated against their duty to the State. Thus it is that he daringly recommended the heroic remedy of doing away with families altogether. It has to be noted that his communism seems to be restricted to the class of guardians only, yet the whole trend of the argument in the fifth book of the *Republic*, coupled with his recognition of the three classes of children with golden, silver, and brass souls, and the possibility that golden parents may not breed golden children and brass parents may breed golden children, is to show that the communism, in order to fulfil the aims of Plato, cannot possibly be confined only to the guardians. Once free from the trammels of wives and children, property would lose all its attractions and the guardians would be the devoted servants of the State. No student of history will fail to admit that there is an element of truth in Plato's diagnosis of the influence of families on public affairs. The whole history of India specially illustrates it, while the dynastic considerations of European monarchs often ended in disastrous wars. There is one particularly instructive anecdote we recall in this connection, which we came across in an interesting little book "Anecdotes of Lord Nelson" by Lieut. Parsons. Admiral Prince Carracioli of the Neapolitan fleet was charged with the offence of deserting his king and leagueing with his enemies. The admiral had but a brief defence. After speaking of "the cowardly desertion of his subjects by the sovereign himself"
he proceeded to say to his judges: "It is known to you, gentlemen, that my patrimonial possessions lay in the city and that my family is large. If I had not succumbed to the ruling power, my children (here his emotion was shown by the altered tone, the quiver of the lip and the suffusion of the eyes; he quickly conquered his emotion and continued in the same stern tone) would have been vagabonds in the land of their fathers. Gentlemen, some of you are parents and I appeal to your feelings: let each of you place yourself in my situation and say how you would have acted; but I think my destruction is premeditated, and this court anything but a court of justice. If I am right, my blood be upon your heads and upon those of your children." Needless to say such an emotional defence availed nothing, and the Admiral Prince was condemned to be hanged like a felon. Plato could not possibly have been ignorant of the deep play of family emotions in public affairs. If the end alone could justify the means, and if the means were possible, perhaps by now the institution of marriage and family might have become fit objects of antiquarian research. But carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, Plato did not sufficiently realize the strength of human passions, which would reduce the community of wives to the level of low haunts.

So far as Plato himself was concerned, he would never have countenanced such a degradation. He had full faith in the wisdom and the restraining influence of the guardians, who alone were to bring about the desired unions. The individuals, on the other hand, were expected to be continent and to obey the commands of the guardians. Plato minimised the dangers of any excess of any possible bestiality in human relations. His noble character gave him a faith in humanity, which made his suggestion appear realizable. Referring to the strange customs of lovers, he says in the Symposium: "The truth, as I imagine it, is that whether such practices are honourable or dishonourable is not a simple question; they are honourable to him who follows them honourably; dishonourable to him who follows them dishonourably."* In the Republic itself he says, "Licentiousness is an unholy thing, which the rulers will forbid,"† and in the Laws occurs a lengthy disquisition on the difference between true love and licentiousness, wherein he

---

† Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 152.
declares that the love of the soul is the purest, and proceeds to say: "Our citizens ought not to fall below the nature of birds and beasts in general who are born in great multitudes, and yet remain until the age of procreation virgin and unmarried, but when they have reached the proper time of life, are coupled male and female, and lovingly pair together and live the rest of their lives in holiness and innocence abiding firmly in their original compact. Surely we will say to them: you should be better than the animals."

I have been lingering on these expressions of Plato to shield him against the charge of immorality, for he cannot be convicted of licentiousness, but only of a melancholy failure to appreciate the moral worth of families as a training ground in social responsibility and the cultivation of the softer human virtues. Apart from the standpoint of our own particular customs, we do not think of branding polygamy and polyandry or even the alleged promiscuity of certain Australian tribes as per se immoral. It would be equally unfair to apply the term to Plato. In fact this essential morality comes out when we compare his communism with the crude licentiousness of modern communist views that have been advocated at times by extreme anarchists. The absolute freedom of marriage and divorce that is insisted on by many in our own times, or the communism on the basis of free love can only be regarded as the unfettered freedom given to the wise and the foolish alike to be the slaves of their passions. Individual likes and dislikes find no place in Plato's communism, which is wholly controlled by eugenic considerations. The anarchy of individual free love is as opposed to the basic principles of Platonic politics, as the reflected light of the moon is opposed to the native luminosity of the sun. It is the amiable weakness of great souls to imagine that what is easy to them is easy to all. Mr. Edward Carpenter and Ellen Key, who have done so much to expose the rigour of conventional marriage and ventured to emphasize the claims of marriage based on love, resemble Plato in their hermit-like simplicity of character. Yet there live men and women, who in the name of their teachings, traduce the spirit of their work and desecrate the very nobility of love. Licence is not love, and bestiality cannot be masked under the guise of love. Plato realized

this and thus was moral in the highest sense of the term. Lesser individuals, anarchic and licentious, may fool themselves and seek to fool the world with the specious pretensions of free love. But the spirit of Plato is proof against them. His communism is a dream dedicated to the spirit of the state as an undying embodiment of humanity at its highest.

If his communism of wives has been deservedly treated as a dream, futile and useless, his noble insistence on the equality of the sexes has come to be realized even after twenty-three centuries. In the history of feminism Plato heads the list, a feminist before his time. The position of the Athenian women was low. Becker in his "Private Life of the Ancient Greeks" quotes from Demosthenes: "It was enacted that anything that man did by the counsel or request of a woman should be null." No wonder if under conditions like these the growth of Athenian women was stunted. Plato was conscious of this; he was conscious also of a woman's weakness, and was thus constrained to class her with children and slaves. But this, very degradation made him realize what a tremendous waste of humanity was involved in this artificial suppression of the genius of womanhood. In the Republic and in the Laws he passionately pleads for women's right to equal education and equal participation in the pursuits of life. Music and gymnastic are to do for women too what they do for men. The toils of war and the defence of their country are to be shared by women too. They are to be entitled to all the posts to which men are entitled. In short, the barrier of sex is to be broken down. His argument proceeds on a curious analogy: for the work we expect to get from animals we do not distinguish the sexes. We use the horse and the mare alike; a dog or a bitch equally makes a good watch-dog. On this analogy, a woman is to be judged only from the standpoint of her ability to fill a post. This is, indeed, feminism of a most advanced kind. But even in the twentieth century when so much has been done for the elevation of the softer sex it is possible for us to pause and inquire if Plato in his iconoclastic enthusiasm did not go much too far. He does not appreciate the long infancy of human children, and the care and the devotion this requires of mothers. Equal participation in professions and politics, though theoretically perhaps justifiable, always tends to have a disastrous effect on family
life as such. But such considerations do not carry any weight with the Plato of the Republic, for he has already dispensed with family life. Through his innovations, the question of the procreation of children has been rendered very precarious. His very devotion to the state has led him to civic suicide, and the measures he recommends for the effective continuity of the citizens truly may be described as desperate. His extreme zeal to prevent a mother from knowing her child and vice versa makes community of children possible. But the means suggested to bring about this result constitute the weakest point in the whole of Platonism. The hymeneal gatherings bringing together suitable partners under the direct supervision of the guardians partake more of mere animal breeding than is consonant with the worth or dignity of humanity. The community of children makes the relations of parents and children, or of brothers and sisters, absolutely unmeaning. Yet Plato retains the terms so that all who took part at a certain hymeneal feast stand in the relation of parents to all the children born within a certain period after that gathering, and all such children stand in the relation of brothers and sisters to one another. Attaching a certain artificial importance to these hypothetrical relations, he recognizes the possibility of incest, but all the children of such incestuous marriages are to exist in the state. For the sake of the pure nuggets of gold, we so often find in Platonism, a certain amount of dross may have to be tolerated. But, apart from toleration, it would be unfair to press this point, as in the Laws the whole question of communism is tacitly put aside, as if Plato himself felt, if not the absurdity, at least the impossibility, of his suggestions.

Readers of modern feminist literature cannot but be familiar with the idea of creche and foundling homes. It is an ingenious device whereby mothers, wedded or unwedded, can leave the responsibility of rearing their children to nurseries established by the state or private agency. Take another step of depending on restaurants for all meals, and the extinction of family life is complete: the soulless reign of expert thoroughness. The idea of a state nursery really originated in the first of modernists: Plato himself. It was the logical conclusion of a regime where no child was allowed to know its parents. The state alone was the father and the mother of children, and had to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and educating them. But here again there
is a great moral difference between Plato and the modernists of to-day. The latter regard children as hindrances to the individual development and pleasures of men and women. The former advocates the community of children with a view to doing away with the tie of private affections, which have often stood in an unhealthy competition with the ideals of the state, and with a view to bring them up as loyal citizens of the state.

The community of property advocated by Plato in the Republic has met with a more sympathetic response from the generations after him. Its ethical motive is beyond question. The only hitch is the practical one of realizing it. Even in his own age the idea was brought forward by Aristophanes in his Ecclesiazusae. It seems so equitable and simple. But it fails to take account of the human instinct of acquisitiveness, the unequal capacity of the human beings to work. The initial human inequality of endowments continually tends to assert itself and prevents the realization of an artificial equality. Or if the physical force of the community of the state rigorously maintains this equality, it only ensures a sterility of intellectual powers, an equality in misery, not in the highest goods of life. Under such conditions humanity itself suffers, and the wings of the soaring human spirit are clipped so that they have but the will to grovel on the earth.

In spite of all these objections to a complete community of property, nobody living as a contemporary of Plato or nobody living under modern conditions can fail to see that there is something wrong with the institution of property as it has come to be. We cannot but feel that a splendid instrument of human progress has been degraded into an instrument of oppression and torture. Superfluity of wealth in the hands of a few is bad from the standpoint of those who are on the starvation level; it is equally bad for the possessors themselves, as superabundance of comfort and wealth only fosters laziness and leads to a decay of originality, a supercilious contempt for others, and an arrogant snobbishness, which delights in the trivialities of life. These facts constitute a definite limitation to the advantages of private property. The problem in our own day is acute, and even apart from the frantic endeavours of Bolshevism there is a steadily growing feeling against an unrestricted accumulation of wealth, a pitiful legacy of the industrial Revolution and the laissez
faire economists. Taxation of the wealthy has now been recognized as a sound economic principle—except perhaps by the capitalists themselves. Perhaps in the not distant future, as a compromise between radical socialism and conservative capitalism, men may come to realize that any wealth beyond a certain minimum may legitimately be confiscated by the state. In the super-tax we already have the thin edge of the wedge and a mere accident of war legislation may continue to be a permanent legacy to humanity.

We find in the Laws that Plato too was moving in this direction. Abandoning communism of property, he was content with the best practicable alternative of an equal division of land and the maintenance of this equality by rigidly preventing any increase in the numbers of households beyond 5040. Any accumulation of wealth beyond the value of a single lot is to be confiscated to the state. It would have to be admitted that the dignity of labour is not recognized in the Platonic state. Apart from this it realizes to a considerable extent the ideals of a socialistic state. A disciple of Marx has written: "Property in one's own work will be established and with it the holiest and the most unimpeachable right of property which can exist."* Such an idea can find no echo in Plato, for he was an aristocrat enough to believe in the necessity of leisure for a refined intellectual and political life, and a leisure which becomes possible only when those work at agriculture and industries, who are unfit for the joys of intellectual work. Such a claim will be, of course, rejected by thorough-going socialists who are too violently addicted to the dogma of complete equality to tolerate the claims of the leisureed intellectual few. But if socialism is not to end in a glorification of the mediocre and an annihilation of the great, it will have sooner or later to recognize the claims of an intellectual aristocracy. The democratic sympathies of the Hon'ble Mr. Bertrand Russell have not prevented him from anxiously discussing the future of music and literature, science and philosophy. Will these great realms of human spirit be sacrificed to the ruthless imperiousness of mere economic wants? Or will they be allowed to play a vital part in a newer and fresher atmosphere? This is the question anxiously debated by all lovers of socialism who have not lost touch with the soaring flights of human genius. It is, however, a happy augury that already in England the Labour Party has

---

* Quoted in Russell's *German Social Democracy*, p. 168.
felt the need of including within its ranks the brain workers. It is a remarkably healthy move, and when its necessity has sunk deep into the nature of socialism it will have taken a step nearer Platonism and the dreams of Plato may yet come to be realized in the socialistic state of the future.

We shall bring this paper to a close by briefly emphasizing the salient features of Platonism in the domain of political philosophy. A rigid loyalty to the interests of the state as a whole, a fellow-feeling so deep as to obliterate all narrow distinctions between men and men, or at least so deep as never to cause in any one a desire to prosper at the expense of other people; a spirit of equality among the citizens—these are the characteristics of the Platonic state. But all of them are only means to the realization of the moral personality of the state as the mighty instrument of human progress. This is what socialism is groping about. The narrowness of the city-states has been lost during the last twenty-two centuries of imperial politics, and socialism has the means of refashioning the world denied to the narrow range of city-states. The ideal of the city-state is being revived through local self-government, independent yet united with a wider world as represented in a national state or an empire. The city of the near future will combine the advantages of the concentration and friendship of the old city-states with the largeness and the strength of the country-states, and when women are allowed to develop the richness of their nature and are allowed full opportunities to bear and train up citizens in the best way, when the reign of knowledge permeates the humblest heart,—and not one of these is beyond an earnest human effort,—the dreams of the "visionary" Plato will have been realized, and once again the truth of philosophy will find a vindication of its most daring and loyal votary.