REBELLION OR REVOLUTION? AN INTERPRETATION OF THE PLATONIC-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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From Spinoza to Dewey, various thinkers have insisted that liberal democracy is the regime most conducive to the Socratic spirit of free inquiry. Communist and nazi thinkers make similar claims for their regimes. However communists find repressive regimes necessary now to eradicate bourgeois prejudices which prevent a truly free, rational society. Although Hitler accepted Wilson's doctrine of self-determination for all men, he insisted that only Aryans were truly men and therefore capable of being free, enlightened citizens. Thus liberal democrats, communists and nazis share the belief that their regimes would win support from all reasonable men, however differently they interpret what it means to be reasonable. Each claims to rule for the benefit of all men and not merely for the citizens of their particular regime. The final communist classless society is scheduled to embrace all humanity; Hitler condemned narrow patriotism in the name of a master race recruited from the true humanity available in all nations; American democracy is dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. The present paper is an interpretation of the origin and consequences of the global orientation common to all modern politics.

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Modern scientific technology serves modern governments, providing the theoretical and practical tools to implement their respective global goals. Its encouragement of the search for universally valid results helps to make its global application a moral necessity. Thus Einstein's physics and Freud's psychology are meant to hold true for all men. Even communists and nazis, who censure bourgeois or Jewish failings in these theories, agree that genuine scientific theories are valid for all men, although they disagree on what it means to be a man. In this way, modern science supports the conviction that what men have in common is more important than the things dividing them. It thereby encourages acknowledgement of a human good, a good common to all men.

Probably Plato was the first philosopher to suggest legalization of a religion emphasizing the priority of universal to particular goods. His dialogues abound with complaints about interlocutors who answer with particular goods when asked for universal goods. He denies that particulars exist or

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that they exist as more than shadowy imitations of universals; his idea of man is not Athenian or Spartan, but common to all men. Plato’s noun, idea or eidos, is taken from the aorist tense of the verb to see. Here the aorist concentrates upon the gist, the sum and substance or goal of an action. Thus Heidegger correctly translates idea as Aussehen, the look something has when it is seen for what it is. Something may have many different looks or mere appearances; its idea is the look it has, when its cardinal point, its heart and soul, is uncovered. Consequently the idea of something need not be immaterial. For example, Democritus called material atoms ideas, contending that they were what anything looked like, if seen for what it is by nature.

The chief concern of all Platonists is knowledge of the idea of the good, for that alone would enlighten men as to how (or whether) to live. In the Republic (504D9–509C2), Plato notes that the goodness of all knowledge and action remains problematic, until a man knows what good they are to him. Although he insists on the necessity of knowing the idea of the good, he also contends that it is beyond knowledge and even beyond being. Since apprehension of this idea is the main goal of all Platonists, they are divisible into skeptics or dogmatists, depending upon whether they believe themselves adequately knowledgeable about it. Thus Cicero and Montaigne are skeptical Platonists, while Aristotle, Marx and Dewey are dogmatic Platonists. From the beginning, passages from Plato’s dialogues have been used to support either camp. Whatever their disagreements on the nature of the good life, all dogmatic Platonists agree that they possess an adequate grasp of it and that it is essentially the same for all men. Insofar as scientific and philosophic thought after Plato encouraged theoretical discovery or technological implementation of goods common to all men, it justifies Whitehead’s description of it as (dogmatic) footnotes to Plato.

Contrary to the dogmatists, skeptical Platonists believe that satisfactory comprehension of the idea of the good is unlikely and probably impossible. Contemplating the various opinions about the good life, skeptics have found no adequate reason for preferring one over another. Indeed they share the inability of Socrates (Apology, 29A4-B6) and Hamlet to determine whether it is better for men to be or not to be. Thus they find practically insuperable difficulties in making choices which seem self-evident to most men; e.g., between slavery and freedom or between peace and global atomic destruction. Most importantly, skeptical Platonists find questionable the dogmatic Platonists’s contention that the idea of the good is universal or common to all men. Are tribal or civic moral sympathies better than global moral orientations? Spartans and Aztecs answered this question negatively almost prior to raising it. They were convinced that their community’s gods or moral autho-

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2 The word idea is used in this sense throughout this paper, especially in reference to the idea of the good.

3 This is the meaning of the distinction between skeptical and dogmatic Platonists throughout this paper.