



The Open Society and Its Enemies - Volume One: The Spell of Plato

Karl R. Popper

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Popper was born in 1902 to a Viennese family of Jewish origin. He taught in Austria until 1937, when he emigrated to New Zealand in anticipation of the Nazi annexation of Austria the following year, and he settled in England in 1949. Before the annexation, Popper had written mainly about the philosophy of science, but from 1938 until the end of the Second World War he focused his energies on political philosophy, seeking to diagnose the intellectual origins of German and Soviet totalitarianism. The *Open Society and Its Enemies* was the result.

In the book, Popper condemned Plato, Marx, and Hegel as "holists" and "historicists"--a holist, according to Popper, believes that individuals are formed entirely by their social groups; historicists believe that social groups evolve according to internal principles that it is the intellectual's task to uncover. Popper, by contrast, held that social affairs are unpredictable, and argued vehemently against social engineering. He also sought to shift the focus of political philosophy away from questions about who ought to rule toward questions about how to minimize the damage done by the powerful. The book was an immediate sensation, and--though it has long been criticized for its portrayals of Plato, Marx, and Hegel--it has remained a landmark on the left and right alike for its defense of freedom and the spirit of critical inquiry.

The Open Society and Its Enemies - Volume One: The Spell of Plato Details

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Jackson Cyril says

'Critical enquiry is good. Totalitarianism stifles critical enquiry. Therefore totalitarianism is bad. Plato advocates totalitarianism. So Plato must also be bad.' One reading of Platonic thought, and a nice critique of it.

John Gurney says

Popper brilliantly shows how Plato was no friend of democracy or freedom (the "open society"). This highly influential work is fascinating, yet, highly readable.

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Clif says

Have you wondered what Plato was all about or had trouble reading through his lengthy works? Get this wonderful book where an outstanding author does the hard work for you, then lays out the gist of Plato's thoughts in clear, easily and quickly readable prose.

Behind our societies lie influential ideas, philosophies about the best way to organize humanity. In a few cases, the general public might be able to associate a person with an idea - Marx and communism, Jefferson and American democracy - but for the most part the philosophers whose thoughts deeply impact the way things are remain unknown. Too many think of philosophy as irrelevant to daily life; the verbose and complex musings of pointy headed intellectuals that have no impact. Nothing could be further from the truth. Neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism are philosophies that have driven America into a ditch, yet few citizens would be able to say anything about what these two philosophies are about, who the proponents have been or how the philosophies came to be.

Ideas drive civilization. The only reason this is not clear to us is that we are concerned with the details of getting on with our lives. We're all deeply embedded in ideas made real whose lifetimes far exceed that of a human being. It's easy to have no perspective as we live out life under one system and know no other. Things

appear the way they are with no alternative. This is a problem. If you don't know how something works, how can you begin to fix it? If you can't fix it, it deteriorates until tyranny and then revolution follow, bringing a new idea in on a tide of blood. Democracy in particular is a work always in progress. A democracy where the citizenry drops out, loses interest, becomes cynical, hands over power to the powerful who are more than willing to take it. But I am speaking of current events. To the book.

The ancient Greeks are acknowledged to be the founders of Western thought, the thought that comes down through history to the present day in America and Europe, and they put democracy into practice. One of these ancient Greeks, Socrates (d. 399 BCE), is a name most of us have heard as well as that of his pupil, Plato, and of Plato's pupil, Aristotle, who tutored Alexander the Great.

Plato, the founder of the first academy and a prolific writer, left his thoughts well documented. Our knowledge of Socrates comes mostly from Plato, who often in his writings put words into the mouth of Socrates in addition to detailing the Socratic method. Plato has never been far from the thoughts of the powerful in the Western world ever since.

Karl Popper writes his book (this one is part one of two) to warn us of the danger in Plato's thoughts, so widely venerated over the ages, as they are a prescription for totalitarianism, the enemy of the open society. The open society is one where individuals are free to determine their lives and to make their own decisions. The closed society is one where individual life is important only in how it contributes to the strength of the state. The closed society dictates to the individual a life with an assigned status and function.

Plato wrote at a time when Athens, a democracy, had recently been defeated by totalitarian Sparta in the 30 year Peloponnesian Wars. At this time of anxiety and insecurity, Plato, a sympathizer and admirer of Sparta, lays out a prescription for the ideal state in his *Republic* a work founded on the desire for stability and a fear of change. Plato, a pessimist, believed that there were perfect Ideas and Forms, that, once put into use could not help but degenerate from the originals. He seeks to hold back this degeneration as much as possible by the creation of a state that rejects change, demands adherence to order above all things, and forbids novelty which can only hasten decay.

Popper, drawing evidence from all of Plato's work, makes the case that the good of the state is what Plato considers to be justice. Humanity is to be divided up into the rulers, the guardians and the masses (including slaves) that are to stay in their places through the generations, all serving to maintain the stability of the state with no chance of moving from one class to another. Eugenics is to be used to keep the human stock from deteriorating. Lies to the public by the rulers are perfectly ok in the service of maintaining a national myth to rally around.

With thorough analysis and frequent quotes, Popper indicts Plato in his own words, stripping away the fog of veneration to reveal the harsh ideal that laid the foundation for the kind of thinking exemplified by that of Hitler's National Socialism. At the heart of Popper's work is his rejection of what he calls historicism, the idea that there is a historical tide in human events that dictates the future, that we are all floating on a sea of inevitable societal change that will take one form and then another heedless of the individuals that make up the mass, that there is a fate, a destiny to societies. Popper sees this as mythological nonsense, but immensely influential and quickly embraced by those thinkers who long for a structure underlying human existence, a meaning, a reason that makes sense of history and that allows prophecy.

I have long known of Popper as he is widely admired and quoted but never could get hold of his work. Public libraries don't have his books and only a nearby university library did. Thanks to Amazon I found used copies of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* for a pittance. What I have been missing! Volume II moves on from Plato to deal with Hegel and Marx to do the same with them - taking apart their grand designs to show the danger within. He mentions in volume II that to avoid a huge book on historicism through the ages he skipped over the long period between Plato and Hegel. I wish he hadn't because I would

eagerly read it.

David says

Popper was perhaps unfashionable for loathing Plato, but I can see where he's coming from. Plato's Republic would have been a dehumanising hell on earth if ever it was instigated. But I feel Plato in his talking about the different classes of society being strictly controlled had in mind the warring factions of the psyche rather than an actual society, so he's off the hook as far as I am concerned. I liked his discussions of Hegel's historicism, however, and of the ways in which historicism with its emphasis on grand goals ultimately leads to totalitarianism.

Kyle van Oosterum says

An incredible work on Plato yielding one of the most important interpretations of his philosophy of all time. We tend to idealize the great Athenian philosopher but Karl Popper, a philosopher of science, sets the record straight with this scathing indictment of his philosophy and its cruel implications. Plato, necessarily was an enemy of democracy due to his best friend and tutor Socrates having been democratically elected to be executed. He fought through his philosophy to restrain such a system from existing and established classes which are akin to the Feudal System of the Middle Ages. He was certainly an enemy of the Open Society, who believed it just to have classes remain where they are. Here is Karl Popper's lasting quote:

"What we want is to moralize politics and not politicize morals." - Karl Popper.

Ted says

Popper is a pretty persuasive writer, a real scholar. I was a bit skeptical when I started this book, since I had always held Plato in pretty high esteem. But Popper brought together a lot of what I already knew in a way that made me rethink some of my opinions.

I would like to read the other volume of The Open Society and Its Enemies, on Hegel and Marx, but don't yet have it.

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Ogan says

An essential book for the person who is looking for the roots of hatred of individualism, human intellect and human creativity. Plato was the first in line to openly and intellectually declare war on the individual, his poisonous ideas in time fueled many dangerous ideologies including mainstream religions and K.Popper, being the knight defender of egalitarianism, freedom of thought and expression and individualism shows us, NO reveals us how Plato, so called hero of philosophy was actually a monster, who stole from Socrates and bastardized what he learned eventually turning them into weapons against people like Socrates, the gifted individuals.

Yes, we can see Plato had identified how a society works and how it is managed, he understood the nature of power and state. Because he knew-how, he also knew how to turn these bastions of civilization into dystopian prisons, weapons of individual destruction (as opposed to mass destruction).

Any idea or ideology that holds the mass over the individual, any idea that seeks to silence the alternatives, any idea that bases itself on the power of the masses and proposes collectivist solutions IS AN IDEA OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION, it is cancer, and Plato was one of the flag bearers of this toxic mindset.

To hell with him.

Majd says

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Rene Stein says

Knihu jsem poprvé ?etl p?ed 20 lety a dnes jsem si ov?il, že dílo K. R. Poppera nejen mistrn? demaskuje totalitární tendence v Platonov? dile, ale i brilantn? analyzuje sv?t, ve kterém je prezidentem USA izolacionista Trump a v ?eském politickém mikropanoptiku rejdí t?eba sm?šný kmenový v?dce Robješek, národní závist a nenávisť k individuálnímu podnikání živí postSTBácký žoviální oligarcha Babiš podáváním EET ve smrtelných dávkách a ob?ma sekunduje poslední typicky ?eský samuraj Okamura, kterého by do blanického vojska za tvrdé verbální boje s imaginárními migranty v ?eských luzích a hájích naverboval a s láskou adoptoval snad i svatý Václav. Jak Popper dokazuje, tyhle figurky na historickém orloji p?icházejí a odcházejí a silné demokratické instituce jejich nihilistické p?sobení tlumí. Nejhorší pro otev?enou, humanistickou, na volném obchodu založenou a demokratickou spole?nost jsou lidé, kte?í postupnou a nutn? nedokonalou nápravu sou?asných problém? chtějí ?ešit stupidním utopickým sociálním inženýrstvím ve svatém jménu neznámé, ale ur?it? lepší budoucnosti, nebo návratem k idealizované a spíš sm?šné národní minulosti. Make všechny Platonovy intelektuální perverze i v 21. století great again. Nebo snad ani radši ne!

hayatem says

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However, since he seems to be firmly opposed to collectivist societies, it seems strange that he doesn't mention at all societies that can be collectivist and altruistic. I hope that this will be addressed in Volume II.

As to ethics, he suggests replacing the typical utilitarian doctrine of maximizing happiness with minimizing suffering. I tend to agree with Popper here. That being said, he continues onto a particularly lengthy exposition on the demerits of "scientism" in ethics. That is, he attacks the notion of using scientific methodology too acutely in ethics and emphasizes the impossibility of drawing conclusions about values from facts. There is some truth in both of these claims, but the extent to which these practices must not be applied to ethics has been drawn into question by, among others, Sam Harris in his book *The Moral Landscape*. One may forgive Popper, however, because he was well aware of the horrors that came of a rigid adherence in applying the naturalistic (more often than not) fallacy to society, ie; social Darwinism.

Oh, and as a final criticism, the notes are *extensive*, probably as long as the text proper considering the size of the font. It's always appreciated when an author explains him or herself as thoroughly as possible, but I think Popper could have done a much better job at incorporating the ideas in the notes directly into the text. It gets annoying have to flip back and forth between the text and the notes so often.

I still really enjoyed reading this work, and Popper's overall indictment of historicism is as convincing as ever. I'm looking forward to reading Volume II.

Maria Borland says

Popper begins 150 pages of endnotes with an apology for those books he was unable to consult due to wartime (WWII) conditions. This sense of humility and thoroughness pervades Poppers work. Any satisfying soundbites - 'what we want is to moralize politics and not to politicize morals' - are invariably preceded by pages of meticulous argument and textual reference. A careful avoidance of polemic and generalisation enhances Popper's case against historicism and essentialism as they appear not only in Plato and his successors but also in Marx and some strains of Liberalism. Popper thoroughly dissects Plato's fascism and its legacy, meanwhile advocating a piecemeal social engineering with a democratic base of power. A protectionist society that ensures freedom through state control that is institutionalised but never absolute and never absolutely permanent.

He agrees with Plato that it is perhaps ridiculous to argue that we are all born equal. Yet, unlike Plato, he does not believe that this natural inequality correlates with an unequal division of rights. On the contrary, one of society's primary aims is to protect those weakest and most vulnerable from persecution and exploitation by those who may have certain hereditary or contextual advantage. In this way, liberalism and state interference are not opposed to each other; in fact, 'any kind of freedom is clearly impossible unless it is guaranteed by the state.' A democratic state is therefore an association with rational ends, neither an object of worship nor an oppressor.

He highlights the stark contrast between the Socratic and Platonic ideals as that between 'a modest, rational individualist and that of a totalitarian demi-god'. An Austrian with Jewish origins who left Austria in 1937 during the rise of Naziism, Popper's arguments have a peculiar pertinence. However, many of Popper's side observations, including Plato's legacy to education - stating its purpose (in opposition to Socrates) as that of forming future leaders, and studying for the sake of career - seem to have direct contemporary relevance.

Drawing parallels between Plato and Marx, eugenics and Pythagorean mysticism, Popper's ultimate target is historicist and essentialist thinking. The fact that he can draw on both recent and ancient tragedies to support his explication of the dangerous consequences of such philosophy enhance the urgency and compassion of

this extraordinary book.

Steve Evans says

This is one of the most important books written in the 20th century, taken with its second volume - a searching analysis of the modes of thinking of "development" that takes in Plato, Hegel, and Marx. The best edition is this one, that keeps more detailed analysis in wee tiny print in appendices - but be sure to get the full Monty as much of this is fascinating.

People have tried to defend Plato against Popper's savage attack on his political theories, but it's pretty hard really. Plato was politically very conservative, a defender of autocracy and worse in real life and a theorist of its defence. Because of his defence of Socrates he seems to be a defender of freedom, but this really isn't so - the implied criticism in Plato's defence of Socrates was of democracy, not the right of free speech.

Popper made it clear that outside the arena of politics he admired Plato, and so do I. The Symposium is a great dialogue that awakens our sense of what it is to love and if Plato's idea that we should love the idea more than another human being opens the doors to later tyranny (it does), it is nonetheless a beautiful work. But the politics - ugh, and Popper does a demolition job that was long overdue.

Holger Kiik says

Maailmakuulsa filosoof Karl Popperi (1902-1994) väga huvitav poliitfilosoofiline sissevaade ühe suurima antiikfilosoofi Platoni ebameeldivamasse külge: väidetavalt totalitaristlikku ja fašismi kalduvasse poliitikateooriasse ning selle veenvasse ja peidetud esitusse Platoni teostes. Seda arusaama esitleb Popper tulenevat Platoni muutumatuse, ühiskonna raudse ühtsuse ja selge klassiühiskonna ülistamisest üheseltmõistetava ja ainuõige headuse, tõe, õigluse, õnne jmt. allikana (siin võite ära tunda äärmiselt päevakajalised ühiskondlikud vaidlused moraali absolutistide ning relativistide vahel, konservatiivide ja liberaalide väärtushinnangute või perspektiivide lahknevuse jne). Popper esitleb Platonit mõttevabaduse vastasena, eugeenikuna ja dogmaatiliste tabudega suletud "hõimuühiskonna" kuulutajana, kus valitseb üks tõe ja õigluse, mis on samastatud "oma koha teadmisesega" (valitseja koht on valitseda, orja koht on orjata). Puudutatakse nii usku ajaloo paratamatusse liikumisse, utopistlikku ja järk-järgulist ühiskonnainsenerlust, kollektivismi, riigi eesmärki, (anti)humanismi, üksikisiku vabadusi ja õigusi jpm. Oma selge ja otsese esitusviisi poolt ja äärmiselt päevakajalise temaatika poolest sobilik kõigile ideoloogiate filosoofiliste eelduste huvilistele, poliitikahuvilistele jne. Seda 1945. aasta raamatut lugedes on kindlasti võimalik tunda ära päevapoliitikas kasutatavate argumentide alusväärtusi ja fundamentaalseid arusaami ühiskonna ideaalkujust ja soovitatavast kulgemissuunast, millele need argumendid tuginevad.

Saumitra Thakur says

Karl Popper's a rockstar for his work in the philosophy of science, so I was thrilled to discover this title by him at a used book store. I didn't know that Popper was an associate of Von Mises, Hayek, and others in the Austrian circle. His work has a distinct voice from theirs, and his perspective on free society's much more inclusive than, say, Hayek's. Popper makes a compelling case for societies that embrace flux (including flux of social institutions, norms, social classes) and he reasons, compellingly, that checks and balances make for good government (more than primary economic liberty, say, or unchecked representative government). He also makes a compelling attack on historicism, here defined as political philosophies that take for granted a particular arc to history, which I found reasonable.

I stopped this book about halfway because it felt low yield for me personally, but I'd recommend the book to people who want a slightly different take on liberalism. Popper's larger points're reasonable and well made early on in the book. They're friendly points to me, so while they helped me come to terms with my beliefs better they did little to challenge or develop those beliefs. Much of his work in the first half of this book focuses on dissecting Plato's later writing. The second half focuses mostly on Hegel, who Popper argues extends into the modern era the same bad historicism that undermined Plato. It's a valuable academic contribution, impeccably researched and constructed, but the material had little relevance to me right now.

Randal Samstag says

Popper's anti-Platonist tract is slander from start to finish; the book that inspired Ronald Levinson to write a 645 page rebuttal (*In Defense of Plato*). In much of Popper's writing he is a fitting follower of Sextus Empiricus, but here, in a perhaps-understandable post-Hitler and post-Stalin rage, he descends to dogmatic fiction. For example, on the very first page Popper counter-poses two quotes, one from Pericles that "Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it" to a passage from the *Republic* that says ". . . to his leader he shall direct his eye and follow him faithfully." The second passage that he is quoting comes from a reference to military discipline, but Popper quotes it as if it were a general recommendation for political organization. It gets not much better from here.

Matthew Harbowy says

Popper's *Open Society and its Enemies* is devoted to a crushing polemic against Platonism. Plato's *Republic* is described as a detailed defense of what Popper calls "Closed Society", which is taken to be totalitarian in all its forms.

Platonism is hard to summarize concisely, but roughly amounts to an ontology (that is, the study of reality) which is grounded in the concept of the "form", that of an idealized and unchanging entity which is the pure, unadulterated essence of all objects in reality. Platonism then distinguishes right and wrong (deriving its ethics from an ontological basis) as being based in what is eternal, and what is subject to decay or corruption, as the eternal object most closely corresponds to its ontological form, and that which decays or is corrupt is constantly moving away from its form. Popper's argument is that Plato, in the *Republic*, says that forms of government which are directed and led by an educated minority of philosopher-kings, and in which there is no class struggle because each caste, including that of slaves, knows it's place. Plato is shown to be arguing a form of reverse-evolution: that the justification for this position is the concept that all of society is a decayed version of a past, "golden" era. Popper refers to this position as "historicism", a yearning for the good old days when tyranny was just and slaves knew their place.

Contrast this work with George Soros' *Open Society*, and I am fascinated by the obvious parallel to Popper's

analysis of the "Tyrant's successor problem". Soros' argument in *Open Society* is to expose the blind rhetoric of the cold war, whereby democracies such as the United States argued for years about the superiority of orderly democracy but then, after the fall of Communism, refuse to provide economic and military aid to the Balkan states and to Russia to help foster a nascent open society. Interestingly, he argues (to what appears to be a Clinton era government) that the role that the United States should take is one of "policeman to the world" (using that exact phrase). Interestingly, this is exactly the thing the Bush administration has been accused of being, and Soros had spent quite a fortune trying to prevent Bush from being re-elected last year.

The difference in treatment between teacher (Popper) and student (Soros) parallels in some ways the analysis Popper makes between teacher (Socrates) and student (Plato). For instance, Popper argues that Socrates criticizes democracy, but as an effort to improve it, and makes compelling arguments that Socrates believed in a form of egalitarianism/equalitarianism (for instance, proving that even a slave is capable of reason by teaching the Pythagorean theorem to a slave). Plato, on the other hand, rejects equal rights for people, and seeks to tear down democracy and restore the rule of the philosopher-king. Soros, while arguing often that his philosophy is at odds with his economic behavior, states that he is morally unobligated to invest consistent with his ethics as long as he obeys "the rules". Soros also makes clear the role of the "greater fool" in investing- that as long as you don't believe your own lies, you can make money on the upside while people believe you, and then as you prove yourself wrong, make money on the downside as others catch on. Popper seeks only philosophical ends, yet Soros seems to want the role of philosopher, and king (at least of markets). Popper argues that the Republic is a large argument why the people should make Plato himself the philosopher-king. Likewise, does it not seem that Soros' bullying to get western governments to "save the ruble" (which would have put money in his pocket) is just a philosophical dodge to make him ever-richer, and thus more powerful, in this society where economic might is the apparent source of political power?

Popper's most interesting but least developed point is one of the "paradox of democracy"- that given the choice to vote, people are free to vote in a tyrant. He argues that the system of democracy must be designed to prevent this from happening, but gives no clear reason as to the mechanism for this happening.

To my way of thinking, there are many tyrannies. First, a tyrant or totalitarian government with physical or political might can become sovereign and accrue power and wealth to themselves. Second, an oligarchy of tyrants can through economic might concentrate sovereignty among a upper-class minority. Third, a democracy can become a sovereign tyrant through majority rule- that a majority of citizens can enact rules which benefit the majority to the expense of the minority. The problem of tyranny in modern times has concentrated on the problem of the sovereign minority because this form has been the most common historical form of tyranny. However, as a swelling middle class and democratic institutions take hold, we must not only be vigilant against returning to the evil of the past, but also to be on guard for new forms and modes of the democratic tyranny.

Popper argues, somewhat naively, that a true democracy cannot become a tyranny, but seems to fall on his own sword in that he does not successfully define what a true democracy means. Soros argues against "market fundamentalism", the idea that free markets are an ethical end in themselves, and says that the state must regulate markets to prevent the rise of oligarchy or rule of the rich. Again, to this end, he states there must be a balance between state rule and state repression of markets, without clearly defining how this can be accomplished. Moreover, Soros is adept at continually proving himself wrong, arguing that this is a good sign since Popperian scientific method states that theories can never be proven correct, only incorrect.

To me, the hysteresis between continual tentative theories and their reversal/disproval in short order (which seems to be the end result of Popperian, Sorosian democracy) is no recipe for stable, successful, and ethical government. However, it would seem at some level this solution is very likely the worst, except for all the others. The poverty of philosophy is that it is inept at formulating solvable questions- what I wouldn't give for a new way of thinging about these things, such that answers were more achievable. It is ultimately this form of depression which leads to the root cause of the democratic paradox. People will always prefer a

tyrant with apparent answers to everthing over the crushing indeterminism of true science.
