Bryan Magee

the great philosophers

THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

An Introduction to Western Philosophy

BRYAN MAGEE

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It is owing to their wonder that men
now begin, and first began, to philosophise.
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This sense of wonder is the mark of the
philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin.
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PREFACE

BRYAN MAGEE

PREFACE

In the English-speaking world philosophy is not part of the mental furniture of most people, even most of those educated at universities. I suppose a majority of intelligent men and women regardless of education read novels and see plays; they take a newspaper-reading interest in politics, and through that and their work-experience pick up some economics; many of them read biographies, and thereby learn some history. But philosophy remains a closed book, except to the few who make a study of it. Partly this is due to the fact that in the twentieth century the subject has become professionalised and technical. Partly it is due to excessive specialisation in all subjects – British education in particular is open to the criticism that it does not carry general education to a high enough level. Partly it is due to Anglo-Saxon pride at not being too concerned with abstract ideas. Whatever the reasons in full, most well-read Anglo-Saxons are familiar with the names of the great philosophers throughout their adult lives without ever knowing what their fame rests on, what indeed any of the famous philosophers is famous *for*.

Why are Plato and Aristotle household names more than two thousand years after their deaths? A similar question can be asked about certain philosophers of more recent times. The answer, of course, is that their work is part of the foundations of Western culture and civilisation. But how? This book offers the beginnings of an answer to that question.

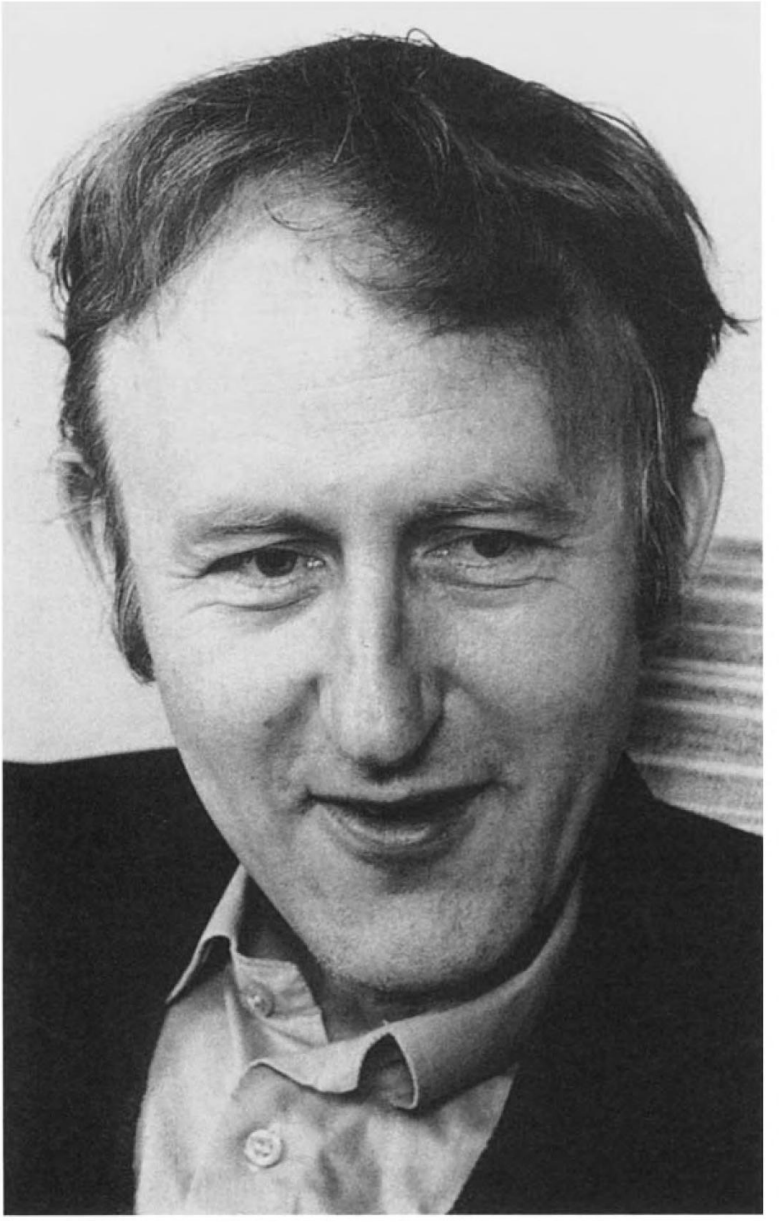
If you were to go to a university to study philosophy you would almost certainly find that the core of the curriculum was about the nature, scope and limits of human knowledge, something which – after the Greek word 'episteme' meaning knowledge – is called epistemology. For most of the subject's history, certainly in recent centuries, this has constituted its main preoccupation, and for that reason it dominates university courses, and dominates this book. But subsidiary branches of philosophy can be fascinating too. For some people the most interesting of all are moral and political philosophy; but there are also aesthetics, logic, and philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, and many others. Several are touched on in this book; but in the nature of things it has not been possible to do justice to them all in so short a space; so for clarity's sake I have stayed close to the central stream of the subject's development and followed that through, and looked at subsidiary aspects of it only when they compelled attention. Resisting temptations to digress was difficult, for there were so many things I would like to have included but, alas, could not find the space for.

The book is based on a series of television programmes first transmitted by the BBC in 1987. It does not consist merely of transcripts of the programmes: the contributors and I started with those but then treated them with the irreverence that we would treat any first draft. The chief point which I as editor reiterated was that the book would have a life of its

own independent of the television programmes, and therefore that we should take the trouble to make it as good as we could in its own right, unconfined by what we had said on the screen. The contributors responded with improvements at every level, from detailed polishing to radical restructuring. The need to publish the book at the time that the television programmes went on the air meant that the complete manuscript had to be rushed to the publishers immediately after the last of the programmes, which happened to be the one on the American Pragmatists, had been put on tape. This was particularly hard on the protagonist in that programme because he wanted to recast his whole contribution, whereas the exigencies of time were such that responsibility for seeing it to the press had to be undertaken immediately by me in London, he being in New York. He gave me detailed notes and guidelines, and I did my best, but that is the one discussion in the book for which we would have liked more time.

The television series was prepared and put on tape over a period of two and a half years, but the most important decisions were the earliest: how to divide up the subject matter and which contributors to invite. Different and equally defensible answers were available to both questions, and on both I went through changes of mind. During this period I conducted running consultations with a private think-tank consisting chiefly of Bernard Williams and Isaiah Berlin but including also Anthony Quinton and John Searle. As often as not these four gentlemen would give me four incompatible pieces of advice on the same issue, and for that reason alone they can none of them be blamed for the decisions I actually took. But their help was beyond price, for it meant that every decision was subjected to critical evaluation by someone other than myself and compared with viable alternatives before being adopted. I extend my warmest gratitude to them all. I want to thank also the producer of the series, Jill Dawson, who managed the very extensive administrative arrangements involved, as well as directing studio crews and cameras in most of the programmes. Lastly I would like to thank Susan Cowley for her typing of the manuscript and David Miller, of the University of Warwick, for his reading of it and his many useful suggestions.

Bryan Magee
March 1987



PLATO

Dialogue with MYLES BURNYEAT

INTRODUCTION

Magee Any attempt to tell the story of Western philosophy should begin with the ancient Greeks, who produced not only the first but some of the very greatest of Western philosophers. The one whose name is most familiar is Socrates, who died in the year 399 BC. But there were outstanding Greek philosophers before him, some of whose names are also widely known, for instance Pythagoras and Heraclitus. And there were others too of comparable calibre – the first of all being Thales, who flourished in the sixth century BC.

If the pre-Socratic philosophers can be said to have had one common concern it was an attempt to find universal principles which would explain the whole of nature. In today's language, they were as much concerned with 'cosmology' or with 'science' as with 'philosophy'. Socrates was in conscious rebellion against them. He maintained that what we most need to learn is not how nature works but how we ourselves ought to live, and therefore that what we need to consider first and foremost are moral questions. He never, so far as we know, wrote anything: he did all his teaching by word of mouth. Since none of the writings of any of the pre-Socratic philosophers has come down to us directly, this means that all we know of any of the philosophers I have mentioned so far is what has come to us second-hand, through the writings of others – though I ought to stress that this does include some long summaries and a good many direct quotations. Even so, the first philosopher who *wrote works which we actually now possess* was Plato. He was a pupil of Socrates: in fact it is from Plato's writings that most of our knowledge of Socrates derives. In his own right, however, Plato was beyond any question one of the greatest philosophers of all time – some think the greatest. Therefore, if we have to pick an arbitrary starting point in what is after all a continuous story, a good one to choose is 399 BC, with the death of Socrates and the subsequent writings of Plato. Let us, then, begin there.

Plato was about thirty-one when Socrates died, and lived to be eighty-one. During that half-century he founded his famous school in Athens, the Academy, which was the prototype of what we now call a university, and also produced his writings. Nearly all these take the form of dialogues, with different arguments being put into the mouths of different characters, one of whom, nearly always, is Socrates. Most, although not all, of the dialogues are called by the name of one of the people to whom Socrates is talking in them: thus we have the *Phaedo*, the *Laches*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Theaetetus*, the *Parmenides*, the *Timaeus*, and so on. There are more than two dozen of them – some of them twenty, some eighty, a couple of them 300 pages long. The most famous of all are the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, but all the most interesting ones are available nowadays in paperback translations. The best are regarded not only as great works of philosophy but also as great works of literature:

Plato was an artist as well as a thinker – his dialogues have aesthetic form and dramatic quality, and many connoisseurs regard his prose as the finest Greek prose ever to have been written. Discussing his work with me is one of the leading authorities on Plato in the English-speaking world, Myles Burnyeat, Professor of Ancient Philosophy in the University of Cambridge.

DISCUSSION

Magee You regard, I know, Plato's whole career as a creative philosopher as having somehow been launched by Socrates's death. How did that come about?

Burnyeat I think that Socrates's death in 399 BC must have been a traumatic event for a lot of people. Socrates had been a spell-binding presence around Athens for many many years, much loved, much hated. He had even been caricatured on the comic stage, at a public festival, in front of the whole populace of Athens. Then suddenly the familiar figure is not there any more. The reason he is not there is that he has been condemned to death on a charge of impiety and corrupting the young; the cause of his death was even more distressing for those who loved him than the death itself. He had had a lot of devoted followers and some of them, amongst them Plato, began writing Socratic dialogues: philosophical conversations in which Socrates takes the lead. It must have been like a chorus of voices saying to the Athenians, 'Look, he's not gone after all. He's still here, still asking those awkward questions, still tripping you up with his arguments.' And of course these Socratic dialogues were also defending his reputation and showing that he had been unjustly condemned: he was the great educator of the young, not the great corrupter.

Magee The death of Socrates was not just something that got Plato going and then, later, was put behind him, was it? In a sense the whole of Plato's career has to be explained with reference to Socrates – or, at least, it *can* be.

Burnyeat I think it can. To keep alive the Socratic spirit for Plato meant to go on doing philosophy in the way Socrates had done it. The first result is a group of early dialogues – the most important of them are the *Apology, The Crito*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Laches*, the *Charmides*, the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* – which depict Socrates discussing the sorts of questions he was interested in, very largely moral questions. But then, since to do philosophy in the Socratic way means to do it by thinking philosophically, the process gradually leads Plato to develop his own ideas both in ethics and in other areas of philosophy. So there is an evolution in the picture of Socrates. From the gadfly questioner of the

early dialogues he gradually turns into someone who expounds weighty theories in politics, metaphysics and methodology. That's the Socrates of the middle-period dialogues: the *Meno*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

Magee In short, in the early dialogues Plato is dealing with subjects that interested Socrates, dealing with them in Socrates's way, and very often, no doubt, putting into Socrates's mouth what Plato knew to be Socrates's opinions. But as the years go by the momentum of Plato's enterprise carries him into dealing with subjects that interest him, Plato, and dealing with them in his own way, and expressing his own opinions – but still mostly through the mouth of Socrates.

Burnyeat I think that's right. Wherever he can plausibly present the ideas as the outgrowth of thinking about Socrates's ideas, they get put into the mouth of Socrates. And I think it's very important that the historical claim that Plato makes about Socrates is that this is a man who thought for himself and taught others to think for themselves. So if you want to be a follower of Socrates, that means thinking for yourself and, if necessary, departing from ideas and areas that Socrates had marked out as his own.

Magee Those early dialogues, in which Socrates is dealing with moral questions, have a certain characteristic pattern. Socrates finds himself talking to some interlocutor who takes it for granted that he knows the meaning of a very familiar term, something like 'friendship' or 'courage' or 'piety'; and by simply quizzing him, interrogating him, submitting him to what has become known as 'Socratic questioning', Socrates shows this person, and, even more importantly, the onlookers, that they do not at all have the clear grasp of the concept which they thought they had. This practice itself has played an important role in philosophy ever since, hasn't it?

Burnyeat Yes indeed. And these very works are still widely used to teach philosophy, and to introduce philosophy to people who want to know something about it. You start with a familiar and important concept – it's always a concept that is important in our lives – and you get people to realise that there are problems in that concept. They try to think about it; they produce an answer; Socrates shows the inadequacy of the answer. You end up not with a firm answer, but with a much better grasp of the problem than you had before. Whether you are a twentieth-century reader or an ancient reader, you have been drawn into the problem; you are left still wanting to get the answer, and feeling that perhaps you can contribute.

Magee It has to be said that after more than two thousand years we are still puzzling about the meaning of 'beauty', 'courage', 'friendship' and other such terms. Have we made any progress?

Burnyeat 'Yes and no' must be the reply, mustn't it? Plato, I think, would be very firmly insistent that even if he did know the answers, if he told us them they wouldn't do us any good. I mean, it's in the nature of these questions that you have to puzzle them out for yourself. An answer is worth nothing unless it has come through your own thinking. And that's why these dialogues are so successful as instruments for drawing you into philosophy.

Magee In those early dialogues (to which we are still confining ourselves, for the moment) one thing Socrates keeps saying is that he has no positive doctrines to teach – that all he is doing is asking questions. There seems to me something disingenuous about this claim: certain unmistakable doctrines do, it seems to me, emerge from below the surface of these dialogues. Would you agree?

Burnyeat Some doctrines do emerge, not very many. One highly significant group of ideas comes out in the *Apology*, for instance, when Socrates claims that to a good man no harm can come either during his life or after his death; and again in the *Gorgias* when he argues at great length that injustice harms the doer and justice benefits the doer. What Socrates is saying is that the only real harm is harm to the soul. You may lose all your money or be paralysed by disease, but that is nothing compared to the damage done – by yourself to yourself – if you lead an unjust life. Conversely, there is no gain like that which a good man has from the practice of the virtues, and consequently no loss that he would reckon as harm except the loss of his virtue.

Now this is a group of ideas which Socrates is very emphatic about; on certain points he will even claim to have knowledge. It is also an area where Plato never reneges on Socrates. He remains convinced of the truth of the proposition that injustice harms the doer and justice benefits him.

Magee So provided your soul remains untouched, worldly misfortunes can't do you any damage of really deep and lasting significance.

Burnyeat That's right. But there is another group of ideas where Socrates does not claim knowledge and where Plato eventually is going to renege on Socrates. This is the group of ideas summed up in the statement that virtue is knowledge. In these early dialogues, when somebody is asked 'What is courage?', 'What is piety?', 'What is justice?', sooner or

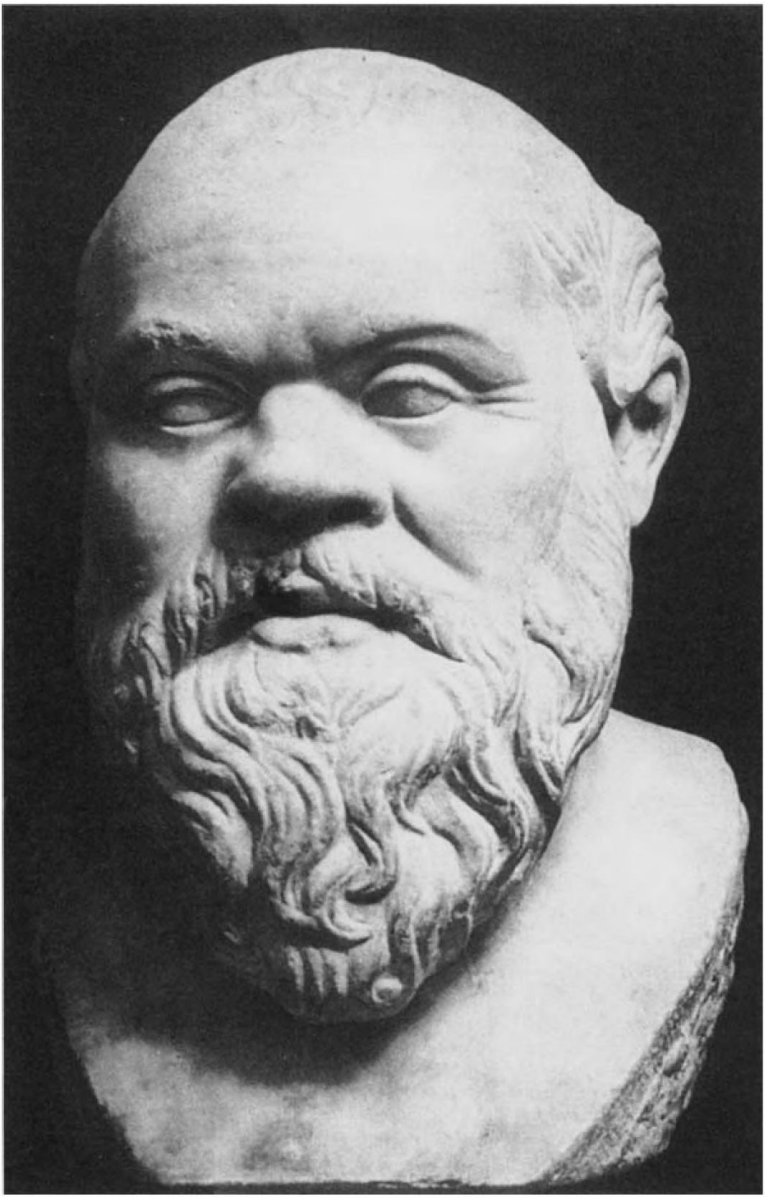
later as the discussion proceeds the idea emerges that this virtue, be it courage, piety or justice, should be regarded as a kind of knowledge. This suggestion is as strong and paradoxical as the first group of ideas, because common sense – and I mean common sense then as now – ordinarily supposes that it is one thing to have the wisdom to know what it is best to do in a given situation, quite another to have the courage to do it if it involves danger and difficulty, or to have the temperance to resist an easier option instead. Wisdom is one virtue, one quality to admire in a person, courage is another, and temperance a third. And a man may have one of these and not the others, or each of them to different degrees. But if courage just is this knowledge of what it is best to do, then that kind of contrast cannot arise. If I do not do the right thing, it cannot be that I knew what I should do but lacked the courage to carry it out. Rather, if I lacked the courage, I lacked the knowledge; I did not know what the right thing to do was. So any wrongdoing that I do is done in ignorance: done because I did not know it was not the best thing to do. But anything that is done in ignorance is done involuntarily. So, to sum it all up in the slogan for which Socrates is famous, 'No one does wrong willingly'.

Magee For us living in an age after Freud it is scarcely possible to believe that all the sources of action are in the conscious mind, or are even in principle available to the knowledge of the agent. So I don't think anyone nowadays could believe in that particular doctrine of Socrates's.

Burnyeat Well, I think the first thing to be said is that most people did not believe it then either. Socrates was deliberately and knowingly going against common sense. In the *Protagoras* he actually describes his position on courage as one that is contrary to the belief of all mankind. The other side of the coin, though, is that still today there are philosophers who argue vividly that the only thing we have, as it were, to put us into action is our beliefs about what is good and bad; if they won't do the job, what else can there be? There are a lot of people who still find it very hard to acknowledge that there is such a thing as the will or other forces than the cognitive at work in human action.

Magee The dialogue form in which Plato chooses to write gives rise to two important but perhaps insoluble problems. First, to what extent is this the historical Socrates whose views we are being given, and to what extent a dramatic character created by Plato? After all, every one of the dialogues was written after Socrates's death. Second, what are the author's own views? Virtually every opinion expressed is put into the mouth of a character other than Plato.

Burnyeat I think that there is a sense in which we need to worry about



these questions and a sense in which we don't. The sense in which we don't need to worry is that Plato's portrait of Socrates makes the claim: here is a man who thought for himself and who could overthrow long-cherished conclusions if it turned out that they were wrong, and he taught others to do the same. So, if Plato comes to think there is more to virtue than knowledge, though knowledge remains the most important factor – and he does come to think this – then it is completely in keeping with the Socratic spirit to throw over the doctrine that virtue is knowledge and produce a better view of his own in the *Republic*. On the other hand – and this is the sense in which we do need to worry about the questions you raised – it is most important that we notice what is happening when Socrates in the *Republic* says something incompatible with what Socrates said in the *Protagoras*. It is vital to notice that we are getting a new view and how it connects with all the other concerns of the *Republic*: how it makes for a much more complicated picture of moral education, and how it makes possible a new vision of an ideal political society. The important thing is the search and the process of inquiry, but the process must be followed with an alert understanding of where we've got to from where.

Magee In other words, because our assumptions and beliefs are open to perpetual questioning, 'conclusions' don't have any special status. They are merely staging posts on the road to further inquiries.

Burnyeat Yes, I think that is something Plato believed very strongly.

Magee And is demonstrating to us by his practice.

Burnyeat Exactly. And I think he would claim that that was what it was to keep the Socratic spirit alive.

Magee As happens more often with creative artists than with philosophers, it is usual to divide Plato's output into three periods: early, middle and late. So far in this discussion we have confined ourselves to the early dialogues. If we now move forward to the middle period we find Plato for the first time beginning to put forward positive ideas of his own, and of course to argue for those ideas. Which would you say are the most important of Plato's positive doctrines?

Burnyeat I think one has to single out two above all: one is the Theory of Forms, the other is the doctrine that learning is recollection, the idea that to learn something is to recover from within your mind resources of knowledge that you had before you were born.

Magee Let us take the second of those first. A lot of people, when they

first hear the suggestion that we are born knowing things, will think it sounds bizarre. But ideas closely related to that have been permanent in our Western culture. Modern idealist philosophers have argued that there must be innate knowledge, or innate ideas. Most of the great religions, I take it, believe something of the sort. Today we even have an eminent thinker such as Chomsky arguing that we are born with a whole grammar programmed into our minds. So a belief of this kind, if seriously argued, is entitled to serious consideration. What was Plato's version of it?

Burnyeat Plato's version was that the knowledge is part of the essential nature of the soul. It is knowledge which your soul possessed before you were born. (This was the period in which he came to believe that the soul exists before birth, its embodiment in our present world being just one of a series of reincarnations.) But I think that to understand the theory of recollection it is necessary to go back to those early Socratic discussions about the definitions of moral concepts.

Let us take the *Laches*, where the question is 'What is courage?'. Laches, the general whom Socrates has asked for a definition of courage, suggests that courage is a kind of endurance. Socrates then asks him some further questions, as he always does when he has been given a definition. He says, 'Is courage invariably a fine and admirable quality?' 'Yes,' says Laches. And then Socrates takes him through a number of examples of endurance where Laches agrees that endurance is not admirable at all, maybe very foolhardy . . .

Magee Pig-headedness, for example . . .

Burnyeat Yes, pig-headedness. Or it may just be morally neutral as when a financier keeps on spending money, enduring the losses because he knows he is going to get a profit in the end. So if endurance can be bad or morally neutral, but courage is always good, then courage cannot be equated with endurance; not even with endurance guided by knowledge. That is a typical pattern of Socratic discussion.

Logically, all that has happened is that Laches has been shown that his beliefs are inconsistent. If we take all his answers together, they contradict one another. This means that they cannot all be true, but it does not by itself tell us *which* of Laches's answers is false. Yet Socrates typically presents the situation as one in which the definition proposed by his interlocutor – here, Laches's proposal that courage is a kind of endurance – has been refuted and shown to be false. In practice, therefore, he takes Laches's secondary answers as either true or somehow nearer the truth than the definition. They are made the basis for refuting the definition and saying 'That's the answer which must be discarded as false'.

Magee You've said something now that is of permanent importance to all serious thought. We all tend to make the assumption that discussion can get at the truth, yet it has no special power to do that. The most that discussion can show us is that our conclusions either are or are not consonant with our premisses. However, even if they are, it still does not follow from this that they are true.

Burnyeat I suppose we are very attached to the idea that by discussion we can get at the truth, although if you think about it, it is actually quite hard to justify. Socrates does not try to justify it. He just asks his questions, gathers the answers to reveal a contradiction, and claims to have refuted the definition. But if one set out to give a theory of what he is doing, then one would have to produce something like the idea we have both pointed to, that everyone has within him the means for making the true vanquish the false. And that is exactly what Plato does in the *Meno*. He produces, as it were, a theory of Socratic or philosophical discussion according to which we all have latent within our minds the knowledge of the correct answers to these questions 'What is courage?', 'What is justice?' and the rest. That knowledge, deep back within us and not immediately accessible, is what enables us to knock down all the wrong answers and show that they are wrong. That knowledge is what is gradually emerging in the stretch of discussion where, as we saw, one thing that Laches says is used to show that some other thing that Laches says must be false.

Magee From previous conversations with you I know that, in your opinion, the doctrine you've just expounded yields the basis for the other of the two most significant doctrines of Plato's middle period, the Theory of Forms. This is far and away the most influential of all Plato's doctrines; indeed, it is what the word 'Platonism' has largely come to mean. Can you explain it?

Burnyeat These Socratic discussions we have been talking about are centred on the quest for a definition: What is the definition of courage? of beauty? of justice? Now, if we have latent within us the knowledge of the answers to these questions, and we have that knowledge independently of and prior to our experience of the world we live in, the world where we use our senses and go around from place to place; if our knowledge is prior to all that, and independent of all that, then surely *what* we know – justice, beauty, courage – must itself be independent of and prior to the empirical world we are now existing in. This latter thesis is the fundamental assertion of the Theory of Forms: justice, beauty and the like exist independently of and prior to all the just actions and just persons, all the beautiful objects and beautiful persons you can find in the sensible world. Beauty

and justice exist on their own and apart. That is the Theory of Forms.

Magee The theory that there is another world than this, an ideal world in which everything exists that gives value and meaning to our present world, has had incalculable influence on the whole of our culture, hasn't it?

Burnyeat Yes.

Magee On Christianity, to take only the most important example: the influence of Platonism on Christianity has been prodigious.

Burnyeat That's correct, yes. But I think one should be careful of using phrases like 'the world of Forms' or 'another world'. Plato uses them but the contrast he has in mind is not, as one might have thought, a contrast between one set of particular things and then another set completely like it except more perfect, more abstract and located somewhere else, in some heaven somewhere. His contrast is between the particular and the general. Those questions, 'What is justice?', 'What is beauty?', etc., are general questions, questions about justice and beauty in general. They are not questions about the here and now. That is the contrast we need to understand.

There is a passage in the *Phaedo* where Socrates maintains that to do philosophy is to rehearse for death. It is in fact to practise being dead. [Laughter] Why? Well, because being dead is having one's soul separate from the body, and in doing philosophy you are, so far as you can, separating the soul from the body, precisely because you are not thinking about the here and now where the body is. For if you are asking 'What is justice?' with reference to justice anywhere, any time, justice in itself, you are not asking 'Who did me wrong today or yesterday?' If you are asking 'What is beauty?', you are not asking 'Who is the most beautiful person in this room?' And if you are not thinking about the here and now, then, in the sense Plato is interested in, you are not here and now. You are where your mind is, not because you are in some other particular place but a better one, but because you are not in place in that sense at all. You are immersed in generalities. So, it is all right to use the phrase 'the world of Forms', provided one understands it to mean the realm of invariable generalities.

Magee These middle-period dialogues we're talking about now – the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* – were written by Plato at the height of his powers. So I think this is a good moment for us to pause and consider their literary and other aesthetic qualities. Why are they regarded as supreme works of literary art?

Burnyeat They are so alive. Other philosophers have tried writing dialogues, in both ancient and modern times – Xenophon, Cicero, Augustine, Berkeley, Hume. But the only name on the list who comes anywhere near Plato is Hume. And I think this is because for Hume, like Plato, it's the process of philosophical thinking that counts at least as much as the answers. With Xenophon or Berkeley it is all too clear that you are reading somebody who cares about the answers, not the process of journeying toward them. Where Plato is concerned, we have to add his great mastery and range of language, from high-flown, imaginative descriptions to austere analysis or jokes and witty repartee. Add that he is terribly good at making crystal clear the most difficult thoughts. You can go on adding. In the end one is left saying that he is an artistic genius as well as a philosophical one.

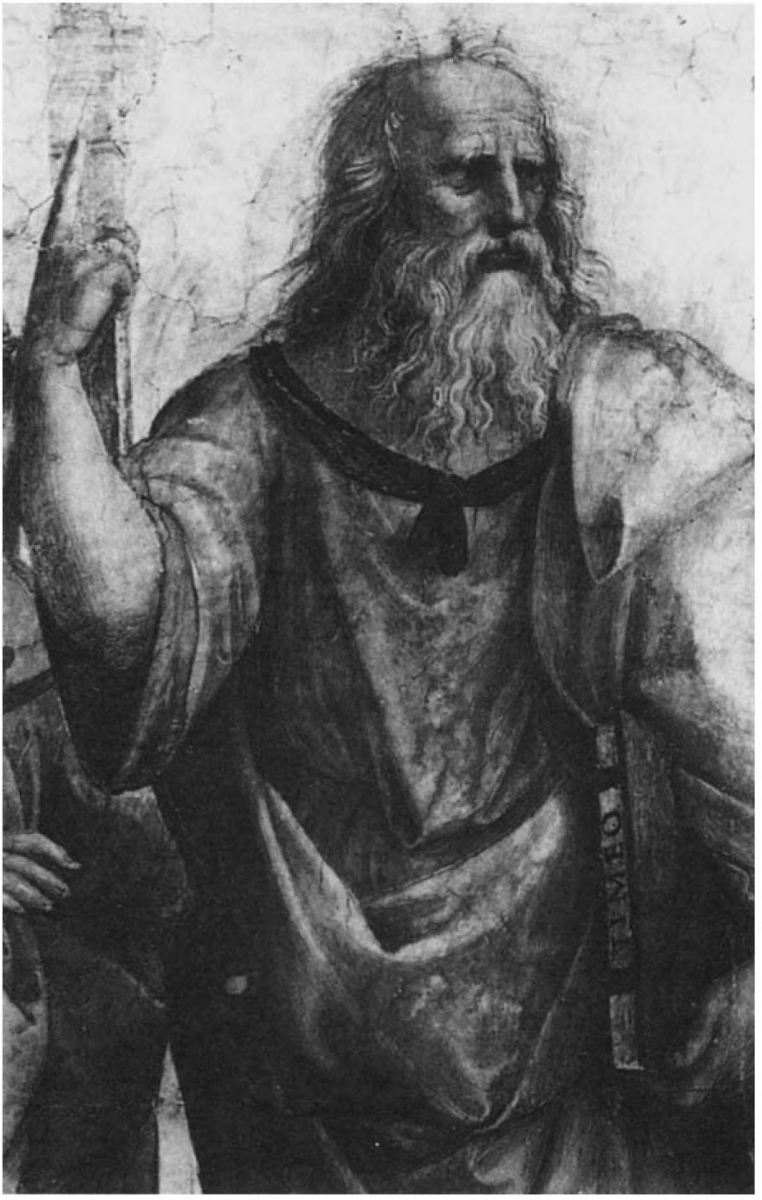
Magee Do you share the traditional view that his masterpiece is the *Republic*?

Burnyeat Yes, I do.

Magee Why?

Burnyeat I think because it is in the *Republic* more than anywhere else that Plato makes good his belief that every question is connected with every other; the inquiry need never stop, because every 'conclusion for now' leads on to the next problem. Thus he begins with a straightforward question, 'What is justice?', a familiar Socratic kind of question. That leads on to the question 'Is justice a benefit to its possessor?' The central task of the *Republic* is in fact to show that justice is a benefit to its possessor; it is what you need most of all if you are to be happy, whereas the unjust man is the most miserable of all creatures.

But to show all this he finds that he has to give a theory of human nature. He divides the soul into three parts: this is where he reneges on Socrates's thesis that virtue is knowledge. Virtue turns out to involve more than knowledge, though knowledge must be in control. And the idea that knowledge is something that can and should be in control of the non-rational factors in the soul also makes possible the idea of a whole society in which knowledge is in control. So we get a political theory which depicts a new and better way of life in society. At the same time, the emphasis placed on the idea of knowledge being in control raises the question, 'What knowledge should be in control, and what is knowledge anyway, and why is it better than opinion?' So we are given a theory of knowledge, and the theory of knowledge broadens out to become an inquiry into the sciences. There is an elaborate discussion of mathematics. A whole vision of what it would be to have a full understanding of the



world we live in is produced in order to support the claim that this understanding really is what should be in charge of ourselves, both individually and in society; this understanding will bring the benefits of justice both to the individual soul and to society at large.

With so much growing out of this one question 'What is justice?', the only natural conclusion is the vision of the after-life and the myth of Er at the end of the book. You might say that the *Republic* enacts a conviction that inquiry really does not cease until death.

Magee The *Republic* is such a rich book that it is not feasible for us in this discussion to pursue the individual strands that go to make it up. But it is unquestionably one of the most influential books in the whole history of our culture, and I hope our discussion will stimulate some people to read it.

Let us move on now to Plato's later dialogues. Just as the move from the early to the middle-period dialogues revealed one change of character, so the move from the middle to the late dialogues reveals another. Suddenly, they become less literary, less dramatic, less colourful, and more what we in our own time might call analytic, even academic. Why is that?

Burnyeat In my view they are not actually less dramatic. What happens is that the irony and imagery and other artistic resources which in previous works went into depicting the people undertaking the discussion are now devoted to bringing alive the ideas and arguments themselves. Very often they are ideas and arguments that are familiar to us from Plato's own earlier works, such as the *Republic* or the *Phaedo*. One of the extraordinary things about Plato – he may have been the first writer in history able to do this – is that he established a relationship with his readers such that when writing one work he can take it for granted that his readers have read his previous works. He uses the relationship not only to make allusions and build up resonances, but also to create surprises when he departs from his readers' expectations. But what he most splendidly does with it is conduct a sort of public self-scrutiny of his own earlier ideas, relying on us the readers to recognise them, but saying, so to speak, 'Don't get too enthused by the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. It was all very fine stuff, I know, but those truths, if truths they were, are no good to you or to me if we can't defend them against criticism. And maybe they weren't truths anyway. Maybe they were all wrong. So let's take a few of them and subject them to really hard analytical criticism.'

Magee If you had to single out one of the later dialogues for special mention, which would it be?

Burnyeat The prime example is the *Parmenides*, where the tables are

turned on Socrates. Socrates puts forward the Theory of Forms as he stated it in the *Phaedo*. It is unmistakably the *Phaedo*, not only from the content, but also because there are verbal echoes of the *Phaedo* which Plato clearly expects his readers to pick up and say to themselves, 'Gosh, the Socrates of the *Phaedo* is now on the receiving end of the questions.' And in fact old Parmenides, who is quizzing Socrates in this dialogue, produces a series of objections and criticisms of the Theory of Forms which many philosophers, from Aristotle onwards, have thought to be quite devastating. But Plato does not tell us the answer. He produces the criticisms, through the mouthpiece of Parmenides, and leaves us to decide for ourselves whether they are fair or unfair, and if they are fair, what we should do with the Theory of Forms.

Magee A dialogue which some people think is late and others think is of the middle period is the *Timaeus*. It stands aside from the others, partly because it contains more cosmology and science than philosophy, but mostly because it also contains a wonderfully poetic creation myth – not all that dissimilar to the one in the Book of Genesis. Why did Plato produce such a thing? What I have chiefly in mind in asking that question is this: do you think he believed in his creation story literally, in the way one must assume the ancient Hebrews believed in the Book of Genesis?

Burnyeat I myself think that he did not believe it literally. The question was controversial in ancient times, but Plato's closest associates took the view that Timaeus's narrative of the divine craftsman imposing order on chaos is a vivid way of presenting an analysis of what Plato took to be the fundamental structure of the whole universe. He wanted to see the entire universe as the product of order imposed on disorder, and by order he meant above all mathematical order. This, of course, is very different from the Book of Genesis. Plato's divine craftsman is mathematical intelligence at work in the world.

Magee So it's really a poetic way of explaining the intelligibility of the world, which has been a mystery for reflective human beings from the earliest times until now?

Burnyeat Right. And of course such a very general proposition as the proposition that the whole universe is the product of imposing order on disorder is not something you can prove either in general or in all its detailed ramifications. Plato is well aware of this; it is a further reason for his clothing the proposition in a myth. All the same, the myth served as the guiding inspiration for something that Plato was very serious about indeed: a research programme for which he enlisted at the Academy the leading mathematicians of his day. Every advance in geometry, in mathe-

matical astronomy, in mathematical harmonics, even a medical theory which exhibits disease and health as resulting from the proportions between the constituent elements in the body – each such step forward is further proof of something Plato cared deeply about, the idea that mathematical regularities and harmonies and proportions are what explain things. And since these mathematical harmonies and proportions are for Plato the prime examples of goodness and beauty, this is a scientific research programme which is designed to show that goodness and beauty are the fundamental explanatory factors in the world at large.

Magee How does this fit in with the *Republic*? I ask that because when you were talking about the *Republic* a moment ago, one of the things you brought out very clearly was that it constituted, in a sense, a fully worked-out philosophy. If this is so, how does what Plato says in the *Timaeus* fit into it?

Burnyeat I think it fits as a hand fits into a glove. What you have in the *Republic* is the sketch of a programme for a scientific, above all a mathematically scientific, understanding of the world. In the *Timaeus* Plato begins to carry it out, do his share of the work. Indeed the *Timaeus* was the dialogue people went to for *the* statement of Plato's philosophy both in antiquity and for a long time afterwards. It is a comparatively more recent trend to take the *Republic* to be the major work of Plato. For a long time it was the *Timaeus*.

Magee The cosmology and science in the *Timaeus*, then, are the practical working out of some of the possibilities canvassed in the *Republic*?

Burnyeat Yes. The *Timaeus* presents itself in its introduction as a discussion which, dramatically speaking, is a continuation of the discussion in the *Republic*. What is more, the research programme, as I called the *Republic*'s recommendations for progress in the mathematical sciences – this programme was actually carried out by the leading mathematicians whom Plato gathered in the Academy to demonstrate the power and scope of mathematical order. From their efforts stem many of the greatest achievements of Greek mathematical science down to Ptolemy. Ptolemy's astronomy is the ultimate descendant of the astronomy done in the Academy with the backing of Plato's recommendations for the sciences. And since mathematical order is the expression for Plato of goodness and beauty, these sciences which show us the world as mathematically intelligible are simultaneously sciences of value. That is how the metaphysical aspects of the *Republic* – everything that makes up the content of the understanding which the philosopher-rulers must acquire – can simultaneously be the foundation for a radical new kind of politics.

What the philosophers are learning before they come to rule the rest of us are sciences of value as well as fact.

Magee You are known as an expert on one of the later dialogues in particular, the *Theaetetus*. Why do you take a special interest in it?

Burnyeat Because I find it endlessly exciting and I have never plumbed to the bottom – every time I go back to it there seems to be more to discover. It is a dialogue which Leibniz translated, Berkeley wrote quite a lot about, Wittgenstein quoted – in short, a dialogue which philosophers have always found stimulating.

Magee What is it about?

Burnyeat The question is 'What is knowledge?' and the dialogue is the kind of Socratic discussion that went on in the earlier dialogues, but on a much grander scale. Three answers are given: knowledge is perception, knowledge is true judgment, knowledge is true judgment together with an account. Each of these answers is knocked down in true Socratic style. We are not told what Plato thinks knowledge is at the end, but we have learnt such an enormous amount about the problem and about the ramifications of the problem that we go away feeling the richer rather than the poorer.

Magee No consensus has been reached to this day as to what the precise nature of knowledge is; but I suppose the nearest we come to a generally accepted view is remarkably close to what you have just said: the judgments that constitute knowledge must be derived ultimately from perception, but we also have to be able to provide a rational justification for them.

Burnyeat Ah. You have now produced an interesting solution to the problem we are left with at the end of the dialogue, when all of those answers have been knocked down one by one. Socrates has refuted the thesis that knowledge is perception, refuted the thesis that knowledge is true judgment, refuted the thesis that knowledge is true judgment with an account. And now you are suggesting that perhaps we can get a definition of knowledge by somehow putting all the elements of the three separate definitions together into one, making a theory of knowledge yield the definition of knowledge. That would be a highly suitable response to this kind of dialogue – to suggest a definition of one's own in terms of what one has learnt from the dialogue.

Magee Before we bring this discussion to an end we must say something

about the after-life of Plato's ideas. His philosophy, after all, has been as influential as any in the whole of history. Can you give some indication of what the main lines of that influence have been?

Burnyeat I think it is important to remember that in the ancient world there were two philosophies opposed to materialism. Materialism itself took the form of the Atomism held by Democritus and later by Epicurus. Plato and Artistotle are both anti-materialist philosophers. Both are opposed to the idea that everything – life, order, mind, civilisation, art, nature – can be explained as the outcome of the movements of particles of matter subject just to the laws of motion and their own nature. But Aristotle's opposition carries the war so far into the enemy camp that it is actually very hard to reconcile the Aristotelian philosophy with the modern scientific enterprise, which has much to say about atoms and the movements of particles of matter and the like. Presumably it was no accident that when the modern scientific enterprise got going, it did so by throwing away the Aristotelianism which had so dominated the Middle Ages. Platonism, by contrast, is much easier to reconcile with the modern scientific enterprise, which is why, I think, Platonism lived on in the Renaissance and later, after the death of Aristotelianism. Platonism is a philosophy you can use or be influenced by if you are seeking to show how scientific and spiritual values can be reconciled. If you want to do justice to the complexities, where materialism is giving too simplistic a story, Plato is the philosopher you can go to for ammunition and help.

Magee For us in the twentieth century there is something peculiarly contemporary about the fact that, in the programme it puts forward for acquiring an understanding of the world, Plato's philosophy gives a central role to mathematical physics.

Burnyeat Yes. What Plato aspired to do, modern science has actually done. And so there is a sort of innate sympathy between the two which does not hold for Aristotle's philosophy.

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ARISTOTLE

Dialogue with MARTHA NUSSBAUM

INTRODUCTION

Magee Our view of the philosophy of the ancient world is dominated by the writings of two figures, Plato and Aristotle. Plato is the first philosopher whose works have come down to us in the form in which he wrote them, and Aristotle was his star pupil. There is an extraordinary line of personal succession here, for just as Aristotle was a pupil of Plato, so Plato had been a pupil of Socrates. It is doubtful whether there has been to this day another philosopher whose influence has exceeded that of any one of these three.

Aristotle, son of the court physician to the King of Macedon, was born in Stagira in 384 BC. He was sent to Athens to be educated, and at the age of seventeen became one of the pupils at Plato's Academy. He stayed there for twenty years, until Plato's death in 347 BC. He was then uprooted, and spent his next twelve years in political exile. During this period he was primarily absorbed in biological researches (and was even, for a short period, tutor to Alexander the Great). Then he returned to Athens, and for a further twelve years taught at a school which he founded himself, the Lyceum. Then he had to go into exile again – but died only a year later, in 322 BC, at the age of sixty-two.

Only about one-fifth of Aristotle's work has survived, but even that fills twelve volumes and touches on the whole range of the available knowledge of his time. Sadly, all those works which he himself prepared for publication – and which were praised throughout antiquity for their beauty of style – have been lost. All we have is what he wrote up from his lecture notes, and this has none of the literary art of what we possess of Plato's writings. Even so, there can be no doubting the quality – or the influence – of its content. Discussing it with me is someone who established a reputation very young in Aristotle scholarship, Professor Martha Nussbaum, of Brown University in the United States.

DISCUSSION

Magee Perhaps the best way to start is by your quickly drawing a sketch-map for us of the ground covered by Aristotle's output as a whole.

Nussbaum We have here a philosophical achievement of tremendous range and complexity. We have fundamental work in logic and all the sciences of his day, including especially the science of biology, where his contribution was unmatched for a thousand years. Then work on the general foundations of scientific explanation; work in general philosophy of nature; work in metaphysics, including the questions of substance, identity, and continuity; work on life and the mental faculties. And finally we have terrific work in ethics and political theory, and work in rhetoric and the theory of literature.

Magee It is an amazing fact, isn't it, that over this incomparable range he

was regarded as *the* authority for hundreds of years during the Middle Ages? In fact the greatest philosopher of the late Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, used to refer to him simply as 'the philosopher'.

Nussbaum Yes; and I think this gives us a great difficulty in approaching Aristotle's thought. We're so used to thinking of him, as you say, as an Authority, as *the* philosopher, Dante's 'master of those who know', sitting on his throne. And I think this prevents us from seeing that Aristotle was really one of the most flexible and open-ended of philosophers, one who sees philosophy as an ongoing attempt to attend to all the complexities of human experience, who never rests content, but is always searching for ever more adequate ways to bring that complexity into his thought.

Magee Across this great range of output, is there any unifying factor, any consistent mode of approach, that one can point to?

Nussbaum Yes, I think there is. Aristotle tells us that 'in every area' the philosopher has got to begin by setting down what he calls the 'appearances'; then, after working through the puzzles that these present us with, he must come back to the 'appearances', saving, as he puts it, the 'greatest number and the most basic'. To show you what this means, let me give you an example. Suppose you're a philosopher working on the problem of time. Now what you'll do, according to Aristotle, is begin by setting down the 'appearances' about time, that is, what appears to us to be the case concerning time. Under this heading he includes not only our perceptual experience concerning temporal succession and duration, but also our ordinary beliefs and what we say concerning time. It's important to stress this, since his notion of 'appearances' has sometimes been misinterpreted in a rather narrow way: he has been taken to mean data of perception merely, or 'observed facts'. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding has made its way into many standard English translations, so that it's hard for the reader to appreciate sufficiently Aristotle's tremendous interest in ordinary language and belief. Now: you'll set all this down, then you'll see whether it presents you with any contradictions. If you find contradictions there, then you go to work sifting and sorting things out. If you can't remove the contradictions, you'll try to decide which of our beliefs are actually more basic and more central than others; and you'll preserve those and then get rid of the ones that conflict with them, so you come back in the end to ordinary discourse with increased structure and understanding.

Magee Time, or anything else, isn't the same as what we say about it.

Does Aristotle make a clear distinction between the world and our discourse about the world?

Nussbaum Well, as I said, his notion of 'appearances' is a broad and general notion of experience, of how the world strikes us. This covers both our perceptual experience of the world and our ordinary sayings and beliefs. It's a broad conception, and one that admits of a lot of further subdivisions; certainly Aristotle is perfectly prepared to say that sometimes we will rely more on the experience of our senses and sometimes more on ordinary beliefs and sayings. But I think he's right to think that there's a general unifying notion here. His idea, which I believe to be a very plausible one, is that perception, like belief, is interpretive and selective; the way we perceive things is an inseparable part of our conceptual framework, and of the manner in which, as human beings, we make sense of the world.

Magee Isn't there a danger that this approach might turn out a little unadventurous? If he always starts from the familiar, and always returns to it in the end, isn't the whole of his philosophy confined to the surface of things – the surface both of the world and of our experience – when what we need is more like what Plato gives us, a philosophy that gets behind the surfaces (or below the surfaces) to a deeper, more underlying level, compared with which the surface is, indeed, superficial?

Nussbaum I think you're right to bring Plato in here. It's certainly true that for Plato, and a great part of the Greek philosophical tradition that preceded Plato, the dominant image of philosophy is one of 'going behind' or getting 'out there'. Plato imagines the philosopher's mind walking to the rim of the universe and staring beyond at a transcendent reality that's above and beyond our experience. But Aristotle would, I think, have two things to say about that. First of all, he would say that our ordinary experience is an object of tremendous wonder, richness and beauty in its own right. We do not *need* to go beyond it in order to find something that's worth doing philosophy about. Then, second, he would say that actually we never *can* coherently go beyond our experience: the only project that we can really undertake and meaningfully pursue is the investigating, the mapping, of the sphere of our experience. Now let me give you an example of how he argues this point. There is a fundamental principle in Aristotle's thought which he calls the Principle of Non-Contradiction. This is the principle that contradictory properties cannot apply to the same subject at the same time in the same respect. For example, my dress cannot be both blue and not blue at the same time in the same place in the same respect, and so forth. Now Aristotle says, plausibly, that this is a very basic principle; in fact, 'the most secure

starting point of all'. It's so basic that we seem to use it whenever we think and speak. Now how do we go about justifying such a fundamental principle, one that is the most basic of all, as he puts it? If we can see how he handles this problem, we can get a clearer understanding of his claim that philosophy must confine itself to experience. In *Metaphysics* IV he tells us that we can't justify the Principle of Non-Contradiction from outside our experience because we use it in all our experience, in sorting out experience. But, he now says, suppose that an opponent challenges it. There *is* something we can say to such a person. First of all, Aristotle says, you must find out whether the opponent is prepared to say anything to you, anything definite at all. Now, suppose he doesn't say anything: well then, Aristotle says, you can dismiss that person: because 'a person who doesn't say anything, in so far as he doesn't say anything, is pretty well like a vegetable'. Well now, he continues, suppose on the other hand the opponent does say something, and it's something definite. Then, says Aristotle, you can show that person that in saying anything definite at all he or she is in fact making use of the very principle that is being challenged – because in order to make a definite assertion you've got to be at the same time ruling something out, at the very least the contradictory of what you asserted in the first place.

Magee It is easy to see how fundamental logical principles such as this are inherent in all our discourse, but not how they could provide a foundation for the kind of knowledge about the world that Aristotle was seeking.

Nussbaum What Aristotle is eager to say here is only that we cannot provide, for any principle, a foundation that stands altogether outside of our discourse and our conceptual scheme. If the very most basic principle is internal to experience in this sense, and not, as Plato would have it, 'out there', then this must all the more be true of principles we use that are less firmly grounded than the basic ones. Principles are justified by their position in experience, by the role they play inside experience, not by anything completely external. What is completely external cannot enter into our discourse and thought, and thus cannot be anything to us at all. Aristotle gives further support for this position when he elaborates his general account of discourse. This account holds that we can designate a thing in speech only when it has actually impinged on the experience of one of us, of at least some part of our linguistic community. For example, he says, we can designate thunder in speech (refer to it, we might say) only when someone has heard a noise in the clouds. At that point, on the basis of that experience, we are able to use the name 'thunder' to refer to that noise, even if we don't yet know anything about what the noise is and what caused it. And from that starting point we can begin asking 'What is that noise we have been hearing there? What explains it?' And we can

then go on to inquire about what it really is. But now suppose we tried to stand altogether outside of our experience and to talk about, even to base our inquiries and explanations upon, some entity or entities that actually had never entered the experience of any human being at all. Then, says Aristotle, the problem will be that because these items do not have any connection with experience, we cannot refer to them or talk meaningfully about them. Let's take for example Plato's Forms. These are entities that exist completely on their own; as such, in their own pure nature, they have never entered our experience. And yet all genuine understanding of the world is supposed to be based on them. To criticise this enterprise, Aristotle takes as his example the Form of White, which is said to be just pure whiteness: not the white *of* anything, not the colour *of* any body, but just unattached pure white, out there, 'itself by itself'. To go on talking like that, Aristotle now says, is not only unhelpful and unexplanatory, it is meaningless nonsense talk. We cannot refer to pure unattached whiteness, since white in all our experience is the colour *of* some body. At this point he gets rather rude with Plato and brusquely says, 'So goodbye to Plato's Forms. For they are no more meaningful than singing "La la la" – they have nothing to do with our speech.'

Magee If Aristotle thinks that profitable inquiry has to confine itself solely to the world of actual or possible experience, what, specifically, is 'philosophical' about it? Does not the whole of his programme fall under the rubric of what we now call science?

Nussbaum Well, Aristotle does not in fact make a sharp distinction between science and philosophy. But he believes that there is a general search for explanations, and a general account of the structure of explanation, that are common to all theoretical inquiries. (Here he explicitly excludes ethics and politics, which do not, in his view, have this same hierarchical structure.) In his work the *Posterior Analytics*, he provides an account of how the philosopher will search for what he calls *episteme*, or scientific understanding, in every area. In every area of theoretical investigation the philosopher is supposed to find certain principles that are prior, more basic, more securely known than the others; from these, as conclusions of a deductive argument, the conclusions of that science will follow. He believes that we have a faculty by which we are equipped to have insight into the fundamental first principles. I want to pause here for a minute because I think this is also something that has been badly misunderstood about Aristotle. This is a faculty which is called intellect or *nous*, *nous* being one of several Greek words for intellect or mind – a word that is usually associated with intuitive understanding or insight, rather than with discursive reasoning. Aristotle says that it is with this faculty of mind that we grasp first principles. Now for centuries this was

thought to be a special faculty of pure intellectual intuition by which we could step outside the sphere of our experience and apprehend, as it were prior to all experience, the first principles of science. Now I think you can see already why I believe that Aristotle would be opposed to that kind of foundation for science. But in fact recently people who have been working on the interpretation of the *Posterior Analytics* have argued quite successfully that it is also a bad reading of the text – that, in reality, what *nous* is is a kind of insight we get into the explanatory role, the fundamental status, of a principle by our experience in using it to give scientific explanations.

Magee Aristotle was the first major Western thinker to try to map out the separate sciences – in fact he gave to some of them the names which we use to this day.

Nussbaum Yes, I think that's true, and I think his work has still been of importance for people working in those sciences, particularly in the science of biology, where his work on explanation has recently come to be recognised as extremely important and interesting.

Magee Can you give an example of the way he would go about identifying and isolating a subject area as a single field of inquiry?

Nussbaum I'm going to give an example not from one of the sciences, as we think of them, but from a very general inquiry that he conducts in his work on metaphysics: the inquiry into what he calls substance.

Magee Can you first explain the word 'metaphysics', which is bound to crop up in subsequent discussions?

Nussbaum Well, its origin is disappointingly trivial. In an ancient edition of Aristotle's work, the editor put the work that now has the title *Metaphysics* after the work that was called *Physics*: and the editor gave it the title *Metaphysics* because in Greek that simply means what comes after the work called *Physics*.

Magee 'The book after the book on physics'. But because of the contents of that book the word 'metaphysics' has since come to have a special meaning in philosophy, hasn't it?

Nussbaum Well, it's hard to give a single account of this. But roughly one might say, I think, that what metaphysics does is not to isolate one range of things and inquire into just those, but to pursue some perfectly general

questions that might be asked about anything whatever. Questions about identity, continuity, logical form and so forth.

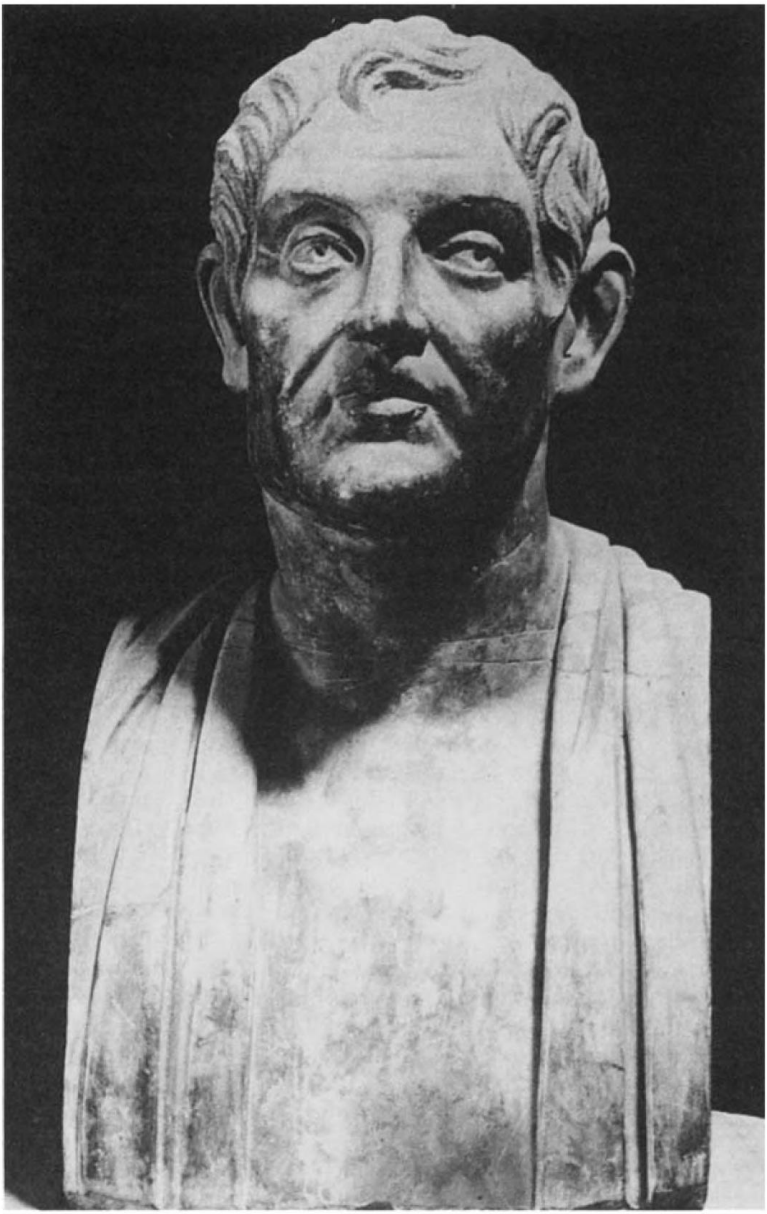
Magee And also questions about such fundamental constituents of our experience as space, time, matter, causality, and so on . . .

Nussbaum Yes . . . questions that pertain to any object at all – whatever exists. Now central in this whole project is the question which Aristotle calls the question about substance.

I want to start here by trying to ask what this question means, because I think we don't very naturally have an intuitive sense about what a question about 'substance' could possibly be. Now if we read what Aristotle writes and try to reconstruct what his questions are, I think we find that there are really two questions which he holds together quite closely in the substance inquiry. The first is a question about change, and the second is a question about identity. The question about change is this. In our experience we come in contact all the time with things that are changing. A leaf unfolds, is green, turns yellow, then withers; a child is born, matures, grows older, finally dies. Now the question is: if we're to talk about these changing things, there still must be some *It* that remains the same while the attributes of the thing are changing. Otherwise it will be very difficult for us to talk about change at all. Change, paradoxically, requires stability. So the question that Aristotle asks here is, what are the more continuous, more persisting things on which we can anchor our discourse about change, things which themselves persist while properties or attributes are changing?

Aristotle's second question is the one that he calls the 'What is it?' question; I've called it the question about identity. It goes like this. Suppose I point at some object in my experience, say Bryan Magee, and I say: 'All right, what is this really?' What I am asking here is: Which among the many properties of you that impress themselves on my senses are the most fundamental ones, the ones that you couldn't cease to have without ceasing to be yourself? Now clearly you could change your jacket, put on a different colour of clothing, and you would still be Bryan Magee. On the other hand it's not so clear that you could cease to be human or cease to be made of flesh and blood without ceasing to be yourself, without in fact being dead. So Aristotle's question about identity is the search for the parts or elements in the thing which do play that very fundamental role, which are what it is to be that thing.

Magee The same parts or elements have to play two roles, don't they? Let me reverse the order of your questions. Question one is: Which are the characteristics that are fundamental and indispensable to any object, in that it is they that make it the object that it is? Question two is: What



Aristotle (384–322 BC)