

PLATO'S SECRET

RUPERT C. LODGE

ONE of the most fascinating of all questions in the history of philosophy is the question of "Plato's secret." That he had a "secret," and that he would not tell it himself, or let anyone else tell it for him, is well known. From his own time to the present day, interpreters of his work have attempted to discover and publish it to the world. His pupil Dionysius, who attempted to explain it in writing, was promptly disowned by the Master, who said that, if anyone could formulate it in words, he could do it himself; but the thing could not be done, and should not be attempted. In his later years, he himself gave a lecture on "The Good," which was supposed to refer to his secret. But the lecturer kept the secret dark; and there were as many opinions as to its nature as there were intelligent students present.

In modern times, scholars are pretty well agreed that there is a "secret," that it has to do with the creative essence of the ideal theory, that it is somehow connected also with the personality of Socrates, and that there is a difficulty about formulating it, a difficulty connected with Plato's distrust of the written word. But there the agreement ends; and there are still nearly as many theories as to its nature and significance as there are scholars.

Some scholars think that it was with good reason that Plato never told his secret; that he found it profitable to his reputation to keep his holy of holies *mysterium summum*; and that there is, in reality, no answer to his riddle, the universe and the ideas being fundamentally irrational. Others believe the secret to be mystical, apprehensible only in some supra-rational intuition, and to represent Plato's personal religion, a contemplative attitude toward "the good," which cannot be expressed in terms of dialectic. Others interpret the ideal principle of good logically, or ethically, or it may be aesthetically, or psychologically, or in terms of mathematics or of metaphysics; and each interpretation is taken as excluding the others. Finally, we have the recent view that Plato's secret is none of these, but is simply the personality of the living Socrates, which cannot be reduced to any formula, but is merged with the living personality of Plato.

This last view is the most plausible; and yet, is this the whole truth? It throws light on much which had remained obscure in

Plato's work; and yet, is the obscurity entirely removed? Let us consider whether, taking this as our starting-point, we cannot go further.

Concretely, Plato's secret may be regarded as "Socrates made young and handsome", Socrates living and working among the sophists, the scientists, and the citizens, philosophizing and turning others into philosophers: passing on to them his own spirit of self-criticism and creative speculation, and turning them into "friends of ideas."¹ The "secret," that is to say, is the Socratic spirit itself, passed on from generation to generation, not by some symbolic laying on of hands, but by living and working with the Master. That is why Plato uses, as his medium of expression, not description or narration, but dramatic representation: so that we too can live and work with the Master, sharing his experiences with him, and participating in his spirit. That is why, even at the present day, whether we are ourselves learning to appreciate the philosophic spirit, or to pass it on to our pupils, enriched, as it is, with so many centuries of continuous reflection and speculation, cooperative personal intercourse seems so essential; and that is why, if we are thrown upon books rather than persons, we find few books in philosophic literature so helpful as precisely these dramatic portrayals in which Socrates converses and still lives. Plato's secret is a living and personal secret. But is it necessarily confined to Socrates and his contemporaries? Is it not imparted to all those readers of the *Dialogues* to whom Plato still does something, kindling anew in them the philosophic spirit?

A different way in which Plato's secret receives expression is in such formulations of the highest good as "goodness of character," "the life of the philosophic guardian," "philosophy," and "the life of the mind," "happiness," "religion," and "participation in the life of the immortals." Such formulations, in the *Dialogues*, represent, one and all, the living spirit of philosophy, which may be passed on to others and possessed by them. These formulations contain no explicit reference to the historic Socrates; and yet, they clearly remain concrete qualities of living persons. Does not this mean that "Socrates and those like him," i.e., all persons who live in the spirit of philosophy, are in possession, whether aware of it or not, of Plato's secret?

And here a further question will be asked. Cannot this process of abstraction be carried even further? Cannot logical analysis

¹ Under the term "friends of ideas" I understand Plato to include, primarily, "Socrates and those like him," i.e., the members of the Academy which Plato founded, who were known in antiquity simply as "the friends." But, in a secondary sense, I understand him to include members of the Pythagorean, Eleatic, and other "schools," particularly in so far as they were "idealistic." Does not the term include further, all whom he could recognize as philosophers?

abstract entirely from the personality, whether of Socrates or of any other subjective individual, and formulate in objective and impersonal concepts the fundamental elements involved in "the philosophic spirit" as such? It should not be beyond the range of our powers to discover a scientific definition of the essence of happiness, mind, guardianship, immortality, and the rest. A good deal of Plato's work in the *Dialogues* consists, surely, in defining, at least approximately, just these terms. In fact, to put the matter in a nutshell, the principle of ideality, or "idea of good," formulated abstractly in the Sixth Book of the *Republic*, has usually been regarded as the essence of Plato's secret. And when we look closely into the matter, we seem to discover that abstract formulations of "the mean" and "the excellence of the whole," discussed in the *Dialogues*, can be equated with the principle of ideality. In the end, we cannot deny that the principle of ideality is manifested in every single "idea," and the question forces itself upon us as to whether, if we have eyes to see, Plato's secret does not smile out at us from every page of his writings, even when the discussion is impersonal and abstract.

To this question, the answer is not entirely simple. It is doubtless true that *if* we have eyes to see, i.e., if we are endowed with the Socratic spirit, Plato's secret smiles out at us from every page of his writings. But it is a secret smile, visible only to initiates, to those who are truly friends of ideas. The logical analyst, as such, with his external and impersonal technique, notes that Socrates attempts to discover logical definitions, impersonal formulations of this or that virtue or excellence. The analyst may even, as Aristotle does, think that the search for concepts and definitions, in the limited field of ethics, constitutes the characteristic activity of Socrates. But, if he is merely a logician, his investigations conclude with the strange result that Socrates's attempt always ends in failure. If the *Charmides* represents an attempt to discover a logical definition of "temperance" or "self-knowledge," it certainly ends in admitted failure. If the *Laches* is understood as an attempt to define "courage," it too ends in admitted failure. So too the First Book of the *Republic* registers a failure to define the nature of "justice," the *Theaetetus* registers failure after failure to define the nature of "knowledge"; and every one of the characteristic "Socratic Dialogues" concludes with a similar confession of "Socratic ignorance," an admitted failure to establish logical definitions of the excellences investigated.

This is an astonishing result; so astonishing, that nine-tenths of Plato's modern interpreters refuse to accept it. They prefer to

assume that Socrates is being "ironical," that he really knows the answers to his questions, and does not need the cooperation of his interlocutors to help him out. They treat him as the ideal teacher, who encourages the pupil to think for himself, and never "tells" him the answer. In some cases they make no pronouncements about *Socrates*, but are convinced that Plato at any rate knows the answer, and that he furnishes hints which are intended to indicate, to the careful reader, just what the right answer is.

The assumption, which lies at the base of all such interpretations, that a writer like Plato has constructed a textbook of elementary philosophy, consisting of problems or questions to which there are "right" answers, and that a modern teacher can publish a "key to Plato," a set of "right" answers, to be pasted into the back of the book and utilized tutorially, is a typical example of what might be called "the schoolmaster's fallacy." The whole attitude of mind involved is alien to Plato's spirit. We can see this when we realize that, even where an answer which the commentator regards as "right" is given, it is treated by Socrates in exactly the same way as any other answer. The interest is not in the answers or definitions put forward, but in the discussion; not in the rightness or wrongness of the conclusions, but in the spiritual growth effected by cooperation in research, in the life of Socratic friendship.

It takes something more than logical analysis, however shrewd and thorough, to realize that the essence, so vainly sought in the quest for formal definitions, is so completely present in the persons of those engaged in the quest. Not only is Socrates himself a perfect living example of the excellence in question; but those engaged with him in the quest, his philosophic comrades, are also living examples of the vital qualities which can never be depersonalized. Charmides, discussing "modesty" with Socrates, participates directly in the idea of modesty; and in their conjoint search for self-knowledge, he is already in process of becoming reflective. Laches and Nicias, joining with Socrates in the search for the essence of courage, while failing to agree upon an impersonally satisfactory formula, are clearly developing and deepening their own participation in the living essence of courage. Theaetetus, unable, like Socrates, to define "knowledge" in a way which will withstand criticism, is, even as he fails, almost the personification of the knowledge-seeking and knowledge-finding spirit, entering into the deepening process of shared experience which is the living essence of knowing.

Plato's secret, which cannot be told, is like a virtue which cannot be defined. It is what links Socrates and his interlocutors,

as they develop and grow before our eyes, and indeed add us to their number, when we too fall under the spell. Plato's secret is not abstract and logical, a definition in words, but is concrete and vital, the spiritual growth which comes with the deepening of shared philosophic experience. To the reading of Plato's Dialogues we may come as strangers. But when we have once yielded to their charm and have become, like Plato himself, disciples of Socrates and interlocutors in his conversations, we too have become initiates. We too have become members of that spiritual Academy of Friends whose creation is, precisely, Plato's secret and his great achievement. Wherever there is shared philosophic experience, wherever mind meets with mind in spiritual growth, whether in reading the *Republic* and *Theaetetus*, or (tell it softly) in studying the *Essay on Human Understanding* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Plato's secret still exercises its power and leads us more deeply into the life of the real spirit.