

AN INVITATION TO A LECTURE ON SOCRATES AND PLATO THAT CANNOT BE PRESENTED AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

Allow me to invite you to my virtual public lecture on ‘Socrates, Plato, and the Laws of Athens’ on my website. The text of the lecture accompanies the recording. In the lecture I view Plato’s *Apology* and *Crito* within the framework of his political aspirations prior to and after Socrates’ death. This approach allows me to view these two dramatically closely linked dialogues in a new light.

The *Apology* and the *Crito* in their mutual tension and interaction form the framework within which legislative and political thought and practice at its best have moved ever since. This fact has been obscured by Platonic scholars because of their placing the writing of all Plato’s dialogues after Socrates’ death. All this is well explained in my Lecture, but in my Lecture I do not consider the reasons that may have led George Grote to initiate this dating of Plato’s dialogues. He was not only a great Platonic and Aristotelian scholar, he was an MP and a member of the council which set up the faculties and the curriculum at UCL. He spoke with authority:

‘Plato did not publish any dialogues during the life of Socrates. An interval of fifty one years separates the death of Socrates from that of Plato. Such an interval is more than sufficient for all the existing dialogues of Plato, without the necessity of going back to a more youthful period of his age.’

Plato was to be a model for high-school and university education, so there was a danger that he would be emulated by students writing about their teachers, politicians writing about their fellow politicians while they were still alive. Grote and his contemporaries were acutely aware of the danger involved because of Lord Byron’s satire on his contemporaries, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, first published in 1809, with many subsequent editions, scandalous consequences, and the talk of the whole of educated Europe. And so Platonic scholars created a model: As long as Socrates lived, Plato was his faithful disciple and wrote nothing about him; when Socrates died, ‘the death of Socrates left that venerated name open to be employed as spokesman in his dialogues,’ as Grote puts it. In order to present the Socrates-Plato relationship in this manner, Grote misrepresented Plato’s own autobiographic reflections, thus promoting distorted views of Socrates and of Plato.

I hope you will join me in asking: Why can’t the lecture on ‘Socrates, Plato, and the Laws of Athens’ be presented at Oxford University?

Why have I singled out Oxford University? In 1978 I invited Oxford dons to my philosophy seminar in Prague, and they responded positively to my invitation because of our interest in Plato, as Dr Wilkes, the first Oxford visitor, told me in 1979. In 1980 I came to Oxford at the invitation of the Master of Balliol College. Oxford University is one of the most important universities as far as Classical Studies and Ancient Philosophy are concerned.

I sent the “Invitation” to philosophers and classicists at Universities in the English speaking World and at Universities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. I have received the following responses.

From King’s College London: “With regard to Oxford University, I believe they have the right to invite or not invite people as they see fit.”

From Princeton University: “For the most part, when philosophers do not pay attention to such an argument, it is because they do not think it is very good. I advise you to stop all these public annoyances, and to work harder on your philosophy instead.”

The response from King’s College brought me back in memory to the Communist Prague of 1979. In August of that year Friedrich Ebert Stiftung offered me 1000 West German Marks a month in support of my work. I received the letter on a Friday. Elated, I went to the Philosophy Institute. I told the secretary: ‘I should like to honour the offer by producing work of as high a quality as I possibly can. It would be of great help to me if I could inform philosophers at your Institute about my work, and learn from them about their work.’ The secretary responded: ‘There is nobody today to talk to. Come on Monday. Radovan Richta [the director of the Institute] will be here.’ I came on Monday. The porter stopped me: ‘You cannot go any further.’ – Didn’t Radovan Richta and the other philosophers at the Philosophy Institute have the right ‘to invite or not invite people as they saw fit’?

The response from Princeton University brought to my memory the Letter that Radovan Richta wrote to Professor A. Diemer, the President of the International Federation of Philosophy Societies, shortly after I had arrived to Oxford (published in the Communist Party cultural weekly *Tvorba* on October 15, 1980): ‘It is self-evident that Mr Tomin would not find the means to live for a single week if he were interesting merely for what he did in philosophy ... I think that the people who supported and visited Mr Tomin will find in a short time and on the basis of their own experience that there has been no case of “suppression of freedom of philosophers in the CSSR”, but rather that it was a case of one person who wanted to profit from the hopes of some circles to intensify the world crisis and to poison efforts at international cooperation.’

Richta’s words were prophetic. On November 18, 1989 (the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia began on November 17, 1989) *The Independent Magazine* published ‘The Pub Philosopher’, which Nick Cohen – at present a distinguished contributor to *The Observer* – opens with the words: ‘The judgments passed by Oxford dons on Julius Tomin seem outrageously brutal ... Professor of Ancient Philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, impatiently brushed aside the suggestion that the Conservatives’ reduction in funding for British philosophy since 1980 might explain why there was never an academic post for Tomin at Oxford. “That’s not the point at all.” He said. “He would not be accepted as a graduate here, let alone be given a teaching job. He’s like a recalcitrant student who can’t

admit he's wrong ... even if Tomin's views were not baloney, there are no interesting consequences.” Nick Cohen ended his article by quoting Rude pravo, ‘the mouthpiece of the Czech Communist Party’: “Even in a public bar words can earn money. The recipe for this was found in Britain by the Czech emigrant Julius Tomin. Since 1980, when he emigrated, he has struggled as hard as possible to keep going since no university has shown any interest in him. Only now he has found an audience interested in his disputations – namely a public house in Swindon. No other milieu will put up with him.”

In 1984 the *History of Political Thought* (vol. V. No. 3) published my article on ‘Pursuit of Philosophy’, from which I quote:

‘My discussion with Anthony Kenny on the right pursuit of philosophy took place in Prague in April 1980. At that time my philosophy seminar had been harassed by the Czech police but we still managed to meet. The arrival of the master of Balliol was anticipated with great expectations. Some expected a catastrophe which would definitely finish my seminar. I could not imagine the police interfering once Kenny was granted the visas. That is why I hoped for a breakthrough. If the police refrained from harassing us in this case they would hardly interfere on future occasions. My aspirations would have been fulfilled. Prague would have had a place where once a week young people could come and openly discuss philosophy. That would have given us strength to be as free as the physical parameters of the situation allowed, free enough, I felt – even without a possibility to travel abroad, to publish and to speak in public – to confront the system with a problem of governing a society with free people in its midst. I hoped the regime could grow up to the task and so get positively transformed without falling apart in the process. Hoping for the continuation of my seminar I hoped for the optimal development in our country. Our philosophy seminar was a step on the road towards a society which would maintain the social and economic framework of socialism but would allow free development of individuals.

Kenny arrived at our apartment about half an hour before the actual beginning of the seminar ... Kenny chose to talk about the pursuit of happiness in the *Nicomachean* and the *Eudemian Ethics* ... He would begin the talk by presenting some texts from the *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Would I have a look at the passages in Greek? I was relieved when I saw the *Nicomachean* passage (10th book, 1177a12-1177b6). In my text it was heavily underlined and marked by an exclamation mark. Though I had not read the text for years I was confident that little would be needed to get it revived in my mind. I began to sweat when I saw the lengthy passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1218b31-1219a39). I had never read the *Eudemian Ethics*. I would have loved to go through the text together with Kenny and benefit from his help, but there was no time for it. The students began to arrive. I excused myself and retired to the kitchen. I barely managed to read the text once when my wife summoned me to open the seminar.’

Dr Kenny opened the seminar with the words: ‘Julius would you translate these two passages into Czech, one from the *Nicomachean* and one from the *Eudemian Ethics*. For in my talk I will refer to them.’ And so I translated the passages sentence by sentence, reading each sentence aloud in Greek and then translating it into Czech. This gave me a tremendous

advantage for the ensuing discussion, for I had both texts strongly imprinted in my mind. When I finished translating

‘Kenny began with the *Nicomachean* passage. There, he argued, happiness consists in the contemplative activity and philosophy becomes thus the primary source of happiness. For the *Eudemian Ethics* to which he came afterwards happiness consisted of an ideal functioning of every part of the soul. Kenny argued that the *Eudemian* conception was critical of the *Nicomachean* conception. Let me quote from his book: “A person who organized his life entirely with a view to the promotion of philosophical speculation would be not wise but cunning, not *phronimos* but *panourgos*. The type of person whom many regard as the hero of the *Nicomachean Ethics* turns out, by the standard of the *Eudemian Ethics*, to be a vicious and ignoble character.’ (p. 214)

We arrived at the point where I had to exchange the role of an interpreter for the role of a discussion partner: In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle considers the life in philosophy to be the source of happiness because the activity of intellect is the highest one. Why should I see it opposed to the ideal functioning of the other parts of the soul in the *Eudemian Ethics*? May not Aristotle be pointing in the direction of the theory fully developed in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he says in our *Eudemian* passage: ‘The End (telos) is the best as being an End, since it is assumed as being the best and ultimate, for the sake of which all the other things exist?’ (1219a8-9) In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle puts forward reasons why philosophy is the accomplished source of good life, he points to its being most continuous and independent of external circumstances. Even if deprived of exchanging ideas with his colleagues (*synergoi*) he may continue doing philosophy (1177a12-b1). This is especially important for us in Prague who may face imprisonment every day. It further reminds me of Socrates. In the *Apology* he says: “as long as I live and as long as I am able to I will not stop doing philosophy.” (29d)

Kenny did not oppose the “Socratic” interpretation of the *Nicomachean* passage. He questioned instead the philosophic credentials of Socrates. Wouldn’t I consider Plato a much better philosopher? I could not accept the question as simply as that. How can I accept that Plato was a better philosopher if Plato is full of Socrates? It would prejudice my reading of Plato. While reading the dialogues I try to understand what was Socrates’ philosophy that it gave him strength to do philosophy “as long as he breathed” (29d). But should I not better return to my role of an interpreter? – At this point dozens of uniformed and plain clothed policemen stormed into the room.’

The Secret Police documents I obtained after the Velvet Revolution indicate that when Kenny’s lecture in my philosophy seminar was allowed to take place, the responsible Police officials had a very different idea concerning its supposed course. The document of the 2nd of April 1980 (ten days before Kenny’s visit in my seminar was to take place) states that ‘the lecture in Tomin’s flat will be attended by 2 politically reliable students with good knowledge of English and of the history of Ancient Greek philosophy from the Faculty of Philosophy at Charles University. In the discussion these two students will emphasize Tomin’s lack of knowledge in philosophy and denounce Tomin’s university as a cheat and waste of time.’

But let me return to the ‘Pursuit of Philosophy’:

‘After the police entered our department forcefully and illegally – they shoved aside my wife who tried to stop them; even in our country there exist definite legal conditions under which police may enter an apartment against the wish of its occupants. They disrupted the seminar, and took Mr and Mrs Kenny away. All the rest of us were then driven to the police headquarters. The prison authorities were not prepared to put up with such a lot of people. We were brought into a big hall which normally serves for meetings of the police staff ... I realized that in the big hall we were left alone. Not a single policeman was with us. Perhaps an atmosphere of so many young people radiating the confidence of doing the right thing drove the police to withdraw to their office rooms. Aristotle required, it seemed, the proof that philosophy could survive in almost any circumstances. For months I had prepared myself to give a course on Aristotle in my seminar. Would people be willing to listen to my introductory talk? They responded as if they came there just for that purpose ... Some of Aristotle’s concepts open the possibility to encompass the whole of intellectual history in one glance from their vantage point. Such is the concept of *thought contemplating thought* which Aristotle coined for the highest intellectual activity, that of supreme God. Homer’s Gods did not know contemplation for its own sake at all. Their thinking was of course superior to that of mortals, but in devising clever schemes, their thinking nowhere transcends a purely instrumental role. Consider, in contrast, Aristotle’s concept of pure self-reflective intellectual activity as the highest End, in order to appreciate the development which the Greeks made between the two. But note that it was Homer who marked the first gigantic step towards Aristotle. In Homer the Greeks could appreciate the experience of living for hours in the realm of the poetic word, thus transcending the actual reality of their daily concerns. At first glance it looks as if the gap between Homer’s Gods and Aristotle’s God consisted in the anthropomorphic shape of the former; Aristotle’s God transcends anthropomorphism reaching into the heights of abstract philosophic speculation. But in fact, Aristotle’s ‘thought thinking thought’ is equally anthropomorphic. Reflect on Aristotle’s ‘thought thinking thought’ when you read his passages critical of Plato; how he must have relished contemplating his teacher’s thought ... It really is not easy to devote one’s life to studying Aristotle just for the greatness of the immediate experience of understanding, and thereby giving up the perspective of building on one’s understanding a brilliant scholarly career with many books attributed to one’s name. Instead of realizing how important it nevertheless is for every civilized nation to have such people and to try to find ways to develop new structures for their development and employment, every possible obstacle is put in their way. When I came to the University as a Junior Fellow, my colleagues asked me what I intended to do, and when I said that my aspiration was to read and understand Plato and Aristotle in Greek, my former teacher of classical philosophy exclaimed: ‘But it cannot be done’. Somehow, it seems, the very thought that there should be people whose sole life task should be to enjoy as fully as possible the treasures of contemplative thought and open the possibility of doing so for others who are capable of such a feat, is unacceptable to those who are responsible for institutional backing of education. Scholars must sweat and toil and pile up their publications; to read many of these productions is, for the most part, committing a crime against one’s own intellect. And all this with Aristotle in the background, who did his best to open up to

mankind the possibility to enjoy activity of free contemplation of what is worth of it. And it is doubly sad to see how all space for free thought is destroyed in socialism, which was destined by Marx to make the leap into the realm of freedom

Let me measure that failure against the background of an Aristotelian concept. Aristotle divided people into free citizens and slaves. Free citizens by nature were all those who possessed active intellect. Slaves were those whose intellect was merely passive. But Aristotle was aware of the social dimension of this division: 'if weaver's shuttles would weave by themselves ... masters would not need slaves' (*Politics*, 1253b33-1254a1). Marx recognized that the development of modern industry created precisely that situation. The time has arrived when human society could provide for everybody's essential material needs allowing everybody free time for intellectual development. Where did that historic attempt to create such a society end up?

A policeman entered the hall. He asked what we were doing. "Philosophy", I replied. Would he join us? The policeman disappeared without a word. In a moment the hall was full of police. The people were shouted at, everyone had to stand facing the wall, nobody was allowed to speak. That was the end of my seminar. We could never meet again.'