

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY



Thorstein Veblen bedeviled his professors at Yale, where this portrait by Edwin Child now hangs. But radicals relished his harsh attacks on "conspicuous consumption."

"Social Gospel," which preached salvation via work for the common good. His 1888 novel, *Looking Backward*, forecast the fall of capitalism in the year 2000 and the rise of a nationalized economy tended by a contented workers' army. The revolution's guide would be an old spiritual impulse: brotherly love.

Bellamy's so-called natural Christianity supplied Veblen with a convincing revolutionary force. Brotherly love, a corollary to what he elsewhere called "the instinct of workmanship," would be the wellspring of social change. Veblen skirted brotherly love's Judeo-Christian origins by dating it back to "the golden rule of peaceable savages."

Natural Christianity fades from Veblen's later writings, as does revolution. Leathers reckons that the rise of progressivism may briefly have aroused in Veblen an uncharacteristic feeling of optimism. But ultimately, Veblen lost hope of changing man's "pecuniary" mind.

Plato's Tragic Ruler

"The Unhappy Philosopher: Plato's *Republic* as Tragedy" by John D. Harman, in *Polity* (Vol. XVIII, No. 4, 1986), Thompson Hall, Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass. 01003.

Who shall rule the people? Plato (428–circa 348 B.C.), born to a powerful Athenian family, spent most of his years far from politics, sheltered in the Western world's original groves of academe. (He founded the Academy for natural and human sciences, often considered the first university, in about 387 B.C.) Yet an early brush with political life must have caused him to

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ponder such civic questions long before they became the central problem of his dialogue *The Republic*. For at age 24, with ripe ambitions, he had nearly joined a corrupt political faction that would soon, when it came to power, condemn his beloved teacher Socrates to death.

In *The Republic's* mock discussion between Socrates, the rationalist Parmenides, and the Pythagorean Timaeus, Plato shows that a ruler leads the worst life, because politics requires the use of lies. The best and therefore happiest life is that of the philosopher, who lives in pursuit of knowledge and observance of truth. Yet, strangely, Plato also warns that "unless the philosophers rule . . . there is no rest from the ills for the cities . . . nor, I think, for human kind."

This apparent contradiction has puzzled scholars. Is the *Republic*, as its 1968 translator Allan Bloom recently suggested, a black comedy in which the philosopher foolishly tries to create a good and just city (*kallipolis*) in a corrupt world? Harman, an assistant professor of political science at St. John Fisher College, argues instead that *The Republic* is a tragedy.

Plato's philosopher knows that he cannot create a *kallipolis*, says Harman. Yet he must try because "he cannot logically avoid it." As the least desirous of all men for political power, he alone may be trusted not to abuse it. He rules "for the city's sake," as though ruling were "a drudging chore." In making this tragic sacrifice, he honors his principles and may even reawaken the trust of a citizenry made "suspicious" by bad leaders.

To judge by the laurels awarded to Plato by his student, Aristotle—who called him "a man whom it is blasphemy even to praise"—Plato would have ruled well. However, the noble Athenian did not believe in senseless sacrifice. In times when "the masses" were so "frenzied" that philosophers felt themselves "alone like a man among wild beasts," he thought it best to retreat. During Athens's despotic era, that is what Plato did.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

The Salt Peril

"The Most-Craved Crystal: Why Humans Consume Salt in Such Excess" by Derek Denton, in *The Sciences* (Nov.-Dec. 1986), New York Academy of Sciences, 2 East 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

What do beef, pretzels, raw fish, and human flesh have in common?

Salt.

Once a rather scarce delicacy, sodium chloride has become, in the United States and other countries, almost an abused substance. Why? Denton, a researcher at the University of Melbourne, Australia, argues that man has not learned to regulate his craving for this essential nutrient, now so abundant.

Human beings do need salt. Sodium is vital in maintaining body temperature, in regulating body chemistry, and in producing milk. Salt deprivation can lead to fatigue, nausea, dehydration, coma—and death.

The body speaks up when it needs sodium. Hence salt cravings. Expec-