

**THE PHILOSOPHER AS  
STATESMAN: A STUDY  
IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC**

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The Philosopher as Statesman: A Study in Plato's Republic by W. Owen Jenkins

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# THE PHILOSOPHER AS STATESMAN.

A STUDY IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC.

BY

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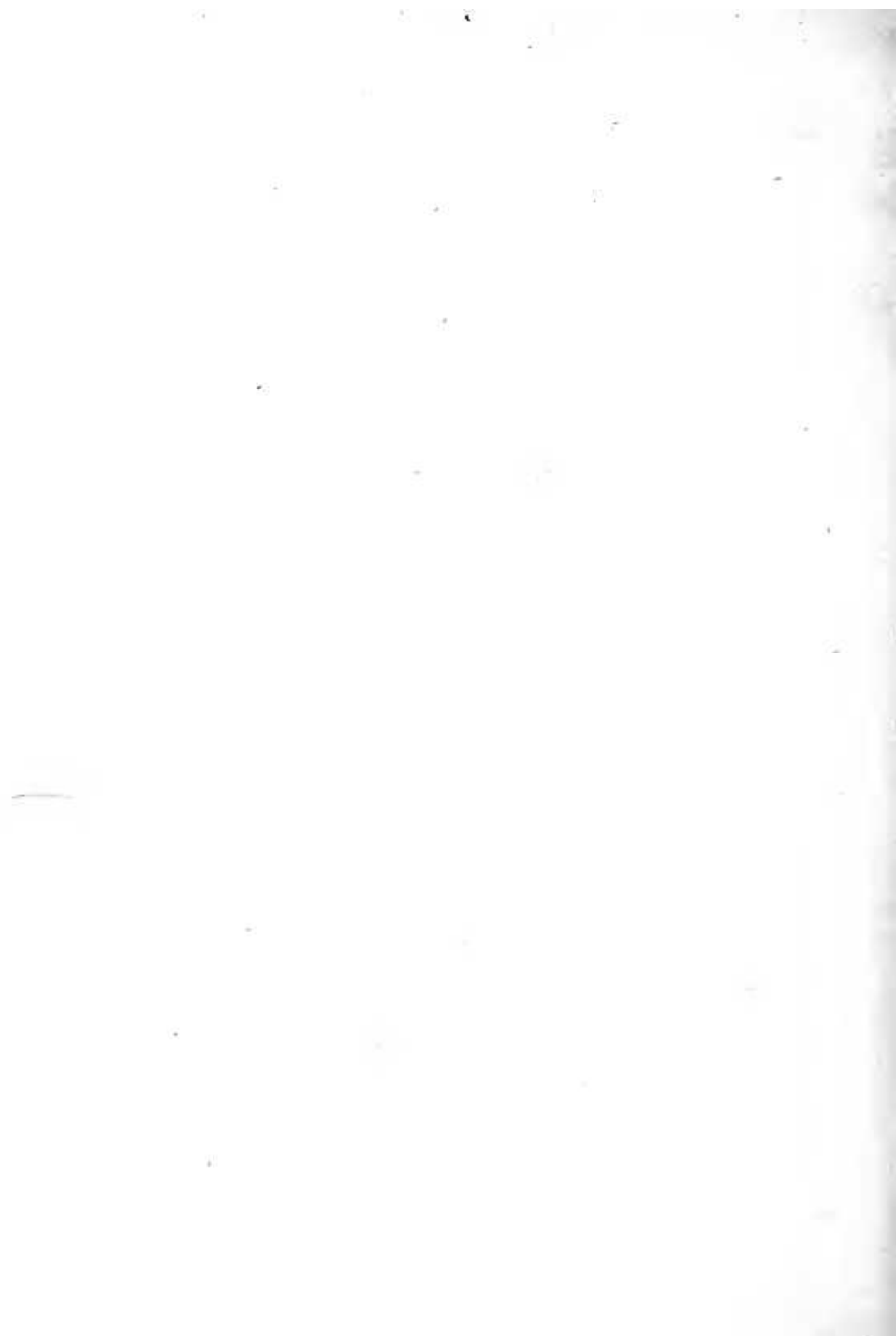
## PREFATORY NOTE.

THE essay following was given before the Philosophical Society of the Victoria College, Stellenbosch, as the annual open lecture for 1914. Its immediate purpose is sufficiently indicated in the opening paragraphs, and it was not originally intended for any wider audience. The opinion, however, has been expressed that its subject matter might prove of interest to some among the general public, who have not much time to cultivate a first hand acquaintance with the master thinker of ancient times, by whom so many problems and questions of our own day have been anticipated in a remarkable manner. More particularly, it is hoped that even so slight a sketch as this may be found of some use to University students as a popular introduction to the detailed study of Plato's Republic.

To scholars, the extent of my indebtedness to Jowett's edition of Plato will be so obvious as scarcely to require formal acknowledgment. The fulness of his analysis and commentary, has, in truth, left little that is fresh to be said by humbler students of Plato upon the topics of which the Republic treats.

W. OWEN JENKINS.

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## The Philosopher as Statesman.

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WHEN I received the invitation of the Philosophical Society which has procured for me the honour of being present to-night to lecture to this company, there was more than one reason why I felt considerable hesitation in accepting it.

To begin with, a bare month's notice of the event was a circumstance more flattering to the lecturer's implied powers of impromptu production, than re-assuring to a person of busy life and all too scanty leisure for philosophical research.

The date too upon which the invitation reached me—exactly a month before the first of May—seemed to contain a warning reminder of the proverbial opinion regarding the prudence of those who rush in “where angels fear to tread!” Then, prominently printed on the letter conveying the invitation, there stood out the motto of the Victoria College philosophical society.—“No one has the right to an opinion who has not studied the subject.” A truly admirable motto, and there could not be a more sound principle as the basis of a philosophical society. But in the circumstances it recalled to my mind Dante's ominous warning inscribed over the portals of a certain region in the lower world, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.” For it seemed to indicate clearly the scant hope of mercy that any lecturer might look for, if he ventured to offer such an audience as this a merely dilettante or casual treatment of any subject of sufficient importance to engage the attention of a



philosophical society at its annual open meeting. Altogether a somewhat formidable combination of deterrent circumstances! and prudence suggested a negative reply. But as I read on, my courage revived, for I found that the secretary's letter contained one or two suggestions, which seemed to offer a loop hole of escape from the reproach of presumption which appeared to encompass the path which I was invited to tread.

The first was that the Society wished to hear a discourse on some aspect of Plato's Republic. Now, while I have no pretension whatever to be regarded as an authority on Plato, it so happens that, of the subjects which my Alma Mater, the University of Oxford, in her wisdom, presses upon the too-often reluctant attention of her sons, the one which I, personally, found the most congenial as a student, and which has for me never lost its fascination and its interest in later life, is this same Plato's Republic. Consequently, the opportunity of addressing a society of students who were disposed to be interested in this famous book was to me a great attraction. The range of discussion in the Republic is so wide that it contains almost an embarrassment of choice to a lecturer in search of a subject, so that one of the perplexities which besets a general invitation to lecture upon an unspecified topic was removed by the considerate explicitness of the committee.

There still remained, however, the problem of the mode of treatment which would be considered appropriate to the occasion: and here too I was not left without guidance, for I was thoughtfully informed by the Secretary that the lecture was desired to be "esoteric enough for the purposes of a philosophical society, while at the same time

admitting of being appreciated by the general public." I doubted very much, and still doubt, if it is possible in one lecture for a fallible human being to succeed in coming up to this two fold and (as it might seem) paradoxical requirement. But then there came the thought: What student of Plato would allow himself to be daunted by a mere paradox? Is not Plato's Republic itself a happy hunting ground of paradoxes—indeed the veritable apotheosis of paradox in the literature of the world?

And, after all, how could a lecturer on Plato better attempt to fulfil a request which might seem to contain something of a paradox, than by choosing for his subject one of the famous paradoxes of the Republic for such an attempt at exposition as time and circumstances might permit? Why not boldly plunge into that one which to Plato himself seemed the most startling of all the paradoxes which he ever formulated viz: the imagined state of society in which philosophers were the guardians of the state and no one was considered competent to bear rule unless he had received the training and education of a philosopher?

Here, it seemed, was a theme which might possibly open up a field of interesting reflection to a society like this, composed of students of philosophy; of whom it would not be extravagant to suppose, from the honourable distinction already attained by the Victoria College as a nursery of Cabinet Ministers, that possibly more than one among the audience might in years to come be called upon to put Plato's theory of the philosopher as statesman to practical proof, and show to the world the value of a course of philosophical study as a preliminary to the exercise of public responsibility in the direction of some weighty office in the government of the country.

By such reflections I was led to the choice of the subject upon which I am embarked this evening. And I should like at the outset to make the confession, quite between ourselves, that I was not a little encouraged to attempt the task by the reflection that when the lecturer became particularly dull, and dry, and abstruse, and generally unintelligible, one part of the audience would be saying to itself, "this is no doubt the *esoteric* treatment of the subject for the benefit of the members of the Philosophical Society." And on the other hand, if the lecturer should occasionally lapse into comparative lucidity, and his remarks might strike some among his audience as being too trivial and commonplace for the serious attention of a critical philosopher, I hoped that they also might be lenient and say to themselves, "this is without a doubt the part of the lecture which is designed to meet the comprehension of the general public."

So, relying upon these two planks to save me from the fate, which Socrates himself dreaded, of being drowned in the great wave of the paradox which he propounded, with your kind indulgence I will endeavour to put before you in brief outline some of the aspects of Plato's Republic, bearing upon and leading up to the climax of his conclusion that the perfect state of society will only be realized when philosophers are kings and all the rulers of the state are philosophers.

#### THE REPUBLIC AND ITS WRITER.

First, a few preliminary words are necessary on the book itself and its writer.

Plato, as you are aware, was a Greek thinker who lived in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and lectured in