

# IDEALISM

## A LAWYER'S REFLECTIONS ON PLATO

by *FREDE CASTBERG*

*Professor in Constitutional and International Law  
at the University of Oslo\**

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When we contemplate the history of research and thought, we cannot fail to notice the profound difference between the conditions of the work of pure research on the one hand, and of speculative philosophy on the other. Research, advancing rapidly, is constantly achieving new results. The flood of fresh attainments swells incessantly. Views and theories wither fast. Research based on the scientific theory of a generation before is often valueless. Conclusions reached by science are like a vast edifice, to which annexes can and must always be added.

The position of philosophy is entirely different. Here we are confronted with the fundamental questions of life, with the problems of the essence of existence and the conditions and limits of our cognition, the question of whether our will is free or not, the question of the aim and purpose of life, and of guilt and responsibility.

Man has pondered these problems throughout the ages. They are taken up again and again. We all meet them, whenever we pause for a while in our daily round, and whenever life and intercourse with our fellows pose serious questions of choosing between alternative courses. The greatest intellects have struggled with the basic problems of philosophy. Are we nearer the truth today than we were 2000 years ago? Are we not still perplexed, groping — our questions unanswered? Is it not distressing that, for all the mighty brooding of the philosophers, we still have no definite answers to our riddles?

I cannot see it that way. Admittedly the problems do recur from generation to generation. But changing circumstances place them in a setting peculiar to each generation — indeed to each individual. Life's changing circumstances constantly shed new colour and new light on eternal problems. But the thoughts of the great philosophers of old

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\* A speech delivered by the author, when Rector of the University, to the students in Oslo.

can give inspiration in understanding and choice to each and every one of us who will lend an ear. Today I want to speak to you about one of these original profound thinkers, whose teaching has deeply influenced intellectual history for more than 2000 years — the Greek philosopher Plato.

The thoughts I am going to discuss have, I dare say, their earliest origin even further back in time. But Plato was their great architect. It is his doctrine that has emerged again and again throughout the centuries, throwing eager adherents and challengers into debate.

The point of departure of Plato's Theory of Ideas is a lack of confidence in our sense-perception of the outer world. Our everchanging sensory impressions of sight, hearing and so on give us only an incomplete, even treacherous conception of reality. According to Plato, true and certain knowledge is only afforded by a science such as mathematics, whose propositions are independent of the phenomena of the world of the senses, and consist of pure thought. Plato finds the only certain reality in the world of thought, and all the objects and qualities we meet with in our earthly world of perception, he says, can only be incomplete, transient impressions of the world of ideas.

Plato's «Idea» is not identical with any concrete physical act of thinking. Nor can it be likened to the abstract notion which we form through the observation of single phenomena. His «Idea» is something that just exists spiritually, at the same time something that the phenomena of the world of senses only reflect in an incomplete state. It is a prototype, a model, from which all things in our world of perception are copied.

Plato conceives an ageless realm of «Ideas». These stand in order of precedence, the highest of them all, he maintains, being goodness and beauty, which, in his view, are the same thing. It is the purpose of man to bring the idea of goodness and beauty to the highest degree of reality. This we can never attain. Just as man has never been able to find in material life the true mathematical straight line, nor the perfect circle, so has he failed to mirror the concepts of goodness and beauty in full perfection. But he can always strive towards this goal. Our world of perception never allows us more than glimpses of perfection — purity of form and completeness of life. Plato's theory of ideas contains a remarkable combination of doctrines of epistemology, morality, and religion. He considers the «Ideas» to be at the same time true reality and the pattern for our actions. Platonic thinking is at once theoretical cognition, moral appeal, and religious vision. This blending of cognitive theory and morality in an atmosphere of religious ecstasy is, of course, a logical weakness of the doctrine. At the same

time it explains why the theory of ideas has had the power to influence the widely varying currents of opinion in later intellectual history. In truth, Plato's influence — in scientific theory, and above all in our ethical attitude — has become so strong, as an English philosopher has put it: «His influence, like the pressure of the atmosphere, goes undetected, because we never really get free from it». (A. E. Taylor).

In the later centuries of antiquity, the religious element in Platonism coloured the belief of the Neo-Platonists in a transcendent reality. The conflict in the Middle Ages between the «nominalists» and the «realists» revolves round the question whether our general conceptions are simply a name for a group of particular phenomena, or whether, as the «realists» claim, they have a separate ideal existence. These «realists» of the Middle Ages build directly on Plato's theory of ideas. In more recent times the doctrine is clearly traceable in the speculative philosophy of the Germans. Schiller, who represents so much of the noblest in German thought, pens beautiful lines on the value of ideals. Our own Wergeland writes:

*Great Plato! Of all souls departed hence  
None has more clearly seen Truth's evidence.*

The poets write of an idea primarily in the sense of an ideal. In true Platonic style the Norwegian poet Vinje says that «an ideal is like a star in the heavens that we set our course by, but never reach». True enough, in «The Wild Duck» Ibsen, at a later date, gives Relling the cynical lines: «Why use that outlandish word «ideals»! We've got a good Norwegian word for the same thing — lies». But no Norwegian poet has upheld the ideal of personality more stoutly and consistently than Henrik Ibsen.

The vein can easily be traced further in Norwegian letters. Life's attitude to idealism is, in my opinion, given classical expression by Arnulf Oeverland when he says «There are bigger things than yourself. Look at the snow-capped mountains. There is something more precious than your life. For that you must fight».

What meaning can Plato's theory of ideas have for us today? Let us first consider that part of the doctrine which may seem the most strange to us: the theory of the realm of ideas as something existing in the mind, something that has validity, regardless of how far it is comprehended in any person's actual thoughts as they occur. Do we find such a theory anywhere in modern scientific argument? I think we do.

The mathematician considers it quite reasonable for his scientific propositions to be looked upon as true conceptions even before anyone has construed them. In the field of humanistic science too there is room for views that are related to Platonic doctrine. There is one school

of literary research that aims at a concentration of study on the work itself as an independently existing intellectual achievement. The spotlight is not on the writer's life, his social and cultural background and his historical antecedents, but on his finished work. And this work is thus not treated as an historical psychical process, but as a detached phenomenon, with an ideal existence.

One of the contentions in legal and moral philosophy has concerned the extent to which the dicta of law and morals can be identified with existing factual, determinable legal and moral valuations. Or must legal and moral dicta, seen as valid binding norms, be considered as different from each single factual individual concept of law and morality? If the latter is the case, we ascribe a kind of ideal existence to law and morality. We are undoubtedly in the territory of Platonic thinking.

It is not my intention to give here and now my views on these theoretical problems of science, or to try to develop them for you. My aim has simply been to show how the Platonic theory of ideas can apply to the scientific disputes of today.

But if the theory of ideas is disputable and disputed as a theory of cognition, on the other hand its meaning as what we every day refer to as «idealism» is clear.

Today the words «idealist» and «idealism» strike many people as distasteful, or faintly comic. I cannot share these feelings. Our intellectual culture has so many foundations. It stems not only from Greek philosophy and Roman law, but from Christianity too, and many more modern intellectual influences. But one of the most important elements is the Platonic theory of ideas as a goal and a guide for all we do and all we are, for social life and social reform.

«Idealism» in the sense of an idealistic attitude in life is, of course, not a discovery attributable to Plato nor to any other philosopher. But the theory of ideas has furnished a philosophical grounding for such an attitude. It has been a priceless source of inspiration to generation after generation.

In politics we find groups in conflict over interests that clash, or are supposed to clash. We find demands for the revision of existing political and economic power, and strenuous defence of rights acquired and positions of authority won. But we find, too, social ideals, live convictions as to how society — the ideal society — should be run. Many fine writers have, in the course of time, set down their inmost thoughts on what Björnson calls the «Land of the Future». It is a gross simplification to class these ideals as nothing more than an ideological superstructure built on interests. As often as not the notions of the ideal state were thought out in the quiet rooms of the social scientists —

by thinkers whose lives were little affected by the interests which their ideals did promote.

But we must also recognise the fact that the stronger our faith in a political ideal, the greater is the temptation to twist the picture of reality so that it may fit into the frame of the ideal. We see this every day, in political conflict, in foreign as well as in home affairs. We are constantly meeting the tendency to be blind to facts that do not harmonise with that picture of reality which the ideologist and idealist find convenient for their reasoning.

Be on your guard against this – all of you who wish to adopt and fight for political ideals. Be prepared always to test a new assertion as to what is the true position. Do not flinch from recognition of error. Be genuine «realists» in that sense of the word.

But «realism» by itself can never be enough. Political life can never forego a faith in the ideal, a belief in the high purpose of political contentions.

The tragedy of Idealism is the mutual clash of ideals and the conflicts between different idealistic trends. We know that the differences in men's natures and in the historical moulding of nations bring about dissimilarity of ideals. But here and now there is but one course I want to urge on you. Be true to your own ideals – and at the same time respect the ideals of others.

The University has no duty to act as a spokesman for any special social ideal. But when it is a question of the ideal a man should aim at in his own personal development, that is another thing. Then, I think, the University should have something to say. Study at school or at a University is supposed to imbue you with the love of truth and of work, and to teach you to demand much of yourselves. Nowadays we keep hearing intense warnings against creating a «feeling of guilt» and «guilt conscience» in young people. I agree this far: it is not by rebuke and chastisement that valuable results are achieved, but by setting a high standard of personal ideals. However, one of the old-fashioned social notions should be retained, and that is the value of a fruitful dissatisfaction with oneself.

The truth and validity of our ideals must always remain a matter of faith. Science offers no cut and dried criterion of the validity of the norms which govern our lives – the ideals we wish to pursue in the society we live in, and in our private lives. But the very fact that ideals are so varied in hue and clash so strongly gives life fullness and colour.

This we know: life without ardent striving towards a high purpose is insipid. Without ideals in our work and effort human life cannot be worthy the name.