Plato

The Master-Mind Lecture was delivered at the British Academy on 13 April 2000, by **M.F. Burnyeat FBA**, *Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. In the extract below, he illustrates Plato's power to speak across the millennia.*

In 1916 Miss Henriette Herz provided for a lecture to be devoted to 'some Master-Mind considered individually with reference to his life and work especially in order to appraise the essential elements of his Genius: the subject to be chosen from the great Philosophers, Artists, Poets, Musicians.' The lecture is biennial.

It is sometimes said that there are no eternal questions in philosophy. The truth is that there are some, and there will continue to be, so long as the philosophical tradition keeps them alive. It depends on whether we continue to find them relevant. To illustrate, I turn to James Mill and to the question why, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he found Plato so relevant. John Stuart Mill reports 'There is no author to whom my father thought himself more indebted for his mental culture, than Plato, or whom he more frequently recommended to young students.'

Why? Let the father tell us in his own words: 'In most of the Dialogues of Plato, the object is to refute the tenets and expose the ignorance of some of those sophists who travelled about Greece, under pretence of teaching eloquence and philosophy, and who, in general, filled the minds of the youth with a spirit of mere logomachy, and with the worst impressions of right and wrong, with regard both to public and to private life. The ingenuity, the acuteness, the address, the eloquence with which this delicate and important task is performed, render the perusal of these dialogues among the most improving exercises which can engage a juvenile mind. Hardly any thing, in the way of example at least, can be conceived more calculated to sharpen the faculties; to render acute in discerning, and ingenious in exposing fallacies; to engender a love of mental exercise; and to elevate with the ambition of mental excellence. In some of the dialogues, as in those with Alcibiades, the object is to expose some of the false impressions which are most apt to prevail in the minds of men, and to lead to the most dangerous consequences. In these, the skill with which the misapprehension is analyzed; the variety of ridiculous lights into which it is thrown; and the power of argument as well as of satire which is employed to expose it, operate as the strongest sanative. In those of a different description, where inquiry, in the rigid sense of the word, is more the object, as in the books concerning Polity and Laws, the business is to give specimens of investigation, to let in rays of light, to analyze particular points, and, by throwing out queries or hypotheses, to encourage speculation, rather than lay down and establish any system of opinions. Accordingly, Cicero expressly tells us, "In Platonis libris nihil affirmatur; et in utramque partem multa disseruntur; de omnibus quaeritur, nihil certe dicitur."'

The critical spirit of Socratic questioning is what James Mills responds to. It is significant that he chooses Cicero as his vade mecum for reading Plato. His quotation is from Cicero's Academica, which is the distillation of some 200 years of Academic scepticism about the epistemological theories of the Stoics and other dogmatic philosophers. Given Mill's Ciceronian perspective, the later Platonists can be swept aside – they are 'the charlatans of antient philosophy' – and Plato rejoins the sceptical tradition. To translate the Latin, 'In the writings of Plato, nothing is affirmed and many arguments are given on either side of a question; everything is open to inquiry, nothing is declared for certain.'

Again, I want to suggest that Plato would approve. Mill, like Plotinus, and Cicero too, found Plato good to think with, a stimulus to independent thought about the issues that concerned him in his own day and age. Earlier I claimed it as a virtue in Plato that he can inspire such diverse interpretations. But perhaps they are not quite as diverse as I have made them appear. Perhaps there is a common factor to the systematising approach of Numenius and Plotinus, on the one hand, and the sceptical stance of Cicero and Mill on the other. The two parties share a common enemy: opinion, *δόξα*.

There are two reasons a philosopher might have for arguing, *παρὰ δόξαν* against the prevailing assumptions of their age. They might seek to replace opinion by something better than opinion, be it knowledge, enlightenment, or mystical union with the One; such are the Platonists of later antiquity. Or they might seek to replace the prevailing opinions by better opinions. Cicero fits that description, I suppose, and it is certainly apt for the nineteenth-century Plato-loving reformers, James Mill and John Stuart Mill, together with their mutual friend, George Grote, the greatest Plato scholar of modern times. All

University College London c.*1890*. Photograph by courtesy of UCL, College collection

three were leading members of a group called the Philosophical Radicals, who campaigned tirelessly (and with some success) to make Britain a more rational, more democratic, and more secular society than it was when they were growing up.

It is clear from Grote's magnificent three-volume work, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (1865), that he identifies strongly with Socrates in his role as the critic and questioner of prevailing norms and assumptions. His phrase for what Socrates was up against (a phrase borrowed from Pindar) is 'King Nomos', and one of its most vivid depictions he finds in the Great Speech of Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of that name. Protagoras claims that, despite Socrates' doubts about whether virtue is teachable, it is taught – and he describes a process by which morality is transmitted by everyone to everyone through a constant, often scarcely noticed, process of correcting and bringing into line, with no room left for independent, critical reflection. John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* spoke similarly of the 'despotism of custom'. Grove saw a parallel with James Mill's account of the transmission of established morality in his *Fragment on Mackintosh* (1835). James Mill, at least 30 years before Grote's *Plato*, saw the parallel with Protagoras and applied the point to his own day. 'The misfortune of the English universities is their being a part of the ecclesiastical establishment. With a fixed creed and fixed forms, the object of an ecclesiastical establishment is – to keep the human mind where it is. The object of a system of education should be to advance the human mind.'

These were not empty words. In 1826 Grote and the Mills helped to found the University of London, now University College London, the first English university to dispense with religious instruction and open its doors to those who were not members of the Church of England.

Myles Burnyeat is a contributor to *Mathematics and Necessity*, to be published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Volume 103, at the end of 2000. His contribution is entitled 'Plato on Why Mathematics is Good for the Soul'. The volume arises from a symposium held at the Academy in March 1998.