CHAPTER FOUR

THE RATIONAL IDEAL

It might seem logical to call our third ethical system "rationalism." But since that word was later associated with a certain type of epistemology, it will be convenient to use the term Socratic ethics, after its earliest expounder. In brief, its assertion is that the highest good springs from the intellect, and consists of a rational balancing of all actions, feelings, and external phenomena to produce a sense of total well-being. To the Socratic, man differs from animals in his possession of an intellect, and his highest good is the complete development of that distinction. Man is the reasoning animal, and either to grasp pleasure or grimly to endure nature's batterings is a failure to make use of his native powers.

It is not that the Socratic rejects hedonism and a stoical attitude; indeed, he prides himself somewhat on including them both, purged of their irrational elements and harnessed to the service of the mind. Some pleasures, and certainly some happiness, must always be present in well-being; but they are subject to the wise choice of the intellect, which discards all that might not fit into the balanced outline of the
good life. Some standard of duty must be followed, but a rationally creative duty which understands and moulds its environment, not merely a glad compliance with things as they are. The Socratic, welcoming diverse sensations, volitions, and experiences, has confidence that his mind can organize them into a logical pattern. According to our earlier description of a philosopher as a man who takes everything into consideration, this inclusiveness appears to give Socratic ethics an initial advantage.

The three Greek philosophers who exemplify this theory can hardly be separated, but should be taken together as emphasizing complementary parts of the same ethics. Different as they are otherwise, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle agree in their common trust in reason as the guide of life. The lives of the three men overlapped: Socrates 469-399 B. C.; Plato c 427-347; Aristotle 384-322. Plato was a friend and disciple of Socrates, Aristotle a student in Plato's Academy. Plato to some extent tried to modify and expand Socrates' views; Aristotle did the same for Plato's. Socrates had great personal influence, but wrote nothing; Plato was a combination of teacher, literary artist, and mathematician; Aristotle was a research scientist who wrote with encyclopedic knowledge and unusual clarity. Though he and his teacher differed so widely as to lead to the remark that every man is born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian, yet both of them combined with Socrates to create the ethics of reason.

The dialogues of Plato are the best of all examples of "philosophy in literature." As philosophy, they discuss most of the moral, social, and metaphysical problems which confronted Athens and still confront Western civilization. As literature, they comprise a series of plays about a great man and his friends, plays ranging from a brief conversation with an acquaintance on the street to an elaborate scene including many characters and much action. With the actor Ion, Socrates discusses the nature of poetic inspiration; with the
formally devout Euthyphro, he questions the true relation of men to gods; in prison two days before his death, he calmly explains to his worried friend Crito why an escape would be unreasonable. These are direct and simple dialogues. On the other extreme are scenes like the Republic and the Symposium, not only involving a complicated interchange of views, but even being narrated at second or third hand, as when Aristodemus tells Appollodorus about the festivities at Agathon's house, and Apollodorus then repeats the story to an unnamed companion.

But whatever the setting, most of the dialogues truly belong in the realm of imaginative literature. They are vividly dramatic, filled with poetic images, concrete illustrations, myths and stories of all kinds, tragedy and pathos, satire and sly humor. They arouse abundant emotion not only in such great scenes as that of Socrates' death, but in many skillfully created situations to which the narrated dialogue is especially adapted. For example, Phaedo recounts to his friend Echecrates the last conversation of Socrates, an exciting argument in which the advantage shifts frequently from one side to the other, so that the reader is kept in suspense. But Plato heightens the effect by having Echecrates wildly excited about the outcome, fairly biting his nails as a telling blow is delivered; and, when Phaedo admits to having been disconcerted by an opposing argument, bursting out eagerly, "There I feel with you—by Heaven I do, Phaedo! . . . Tell me, I implore you, how did Socrates proceed? . . . Did he calmly meet the attack? Did he answer forcibly or feebly? Narrate what passed as exactly as you can."

Especially do the dialogues excel in characterization, the essence of literature. Through their pages walk individuals and types of all kinds, young and old, politicians and soothsayers, rhetoricians and revolutionists. Few are described, but their words reveal what they are: the candid, naive young Charmides; the conceited show-off Euthydemus; down-
right, thick-headed old General Laches, who thinks instruct-
ing the youth in modern mechanized warfare a waste of
time; the "Dynamic men," roaring Thrasyvachus and the
intelligent fascist Callicles; shrewd old Cephalus, who recol-
lects a previous engagement when the argument grows too
hot. All these are grouped around the outstanding figure of
Socrates, a portrait at once biographical and literary. No one
knows precisely how accurate Plato's account is; recent
scholarship has affirmed its probable truth both to the per-
sonality and to the ideas. But whatever the proportion, it
must contain both truth and fiction. As we examine Socratic
ethics in these dialogues, we shall regard Socrates as a complex
literary character, just as we did Falstaff.

Socrates' aim in life was a practical one. Loving his city
Athens and aware that its civilization was declining, he set
out to help it if he could by arousing it to its ignorance and
its danger. He worked to convince his fellow citizens that
only careful, accurate thinking could bring them well-being,
and especially to show them that hitherto they had reflected
not accurately, but vaguely and at random. He grew up in a
civilization just passing its prime, beginning to take its suc-
cess for granted and to grow overambitious, justly proud of
its greatness and unaware how soon its democracy would be
threatened from both without and within. With its class
struggle, its partial democracy, its dependence on foreign
trade and colonies, its failure to avoid war, its trust in science
and reason, and its attempt to achieve freedom without falling
into anarchy, it prefigured on a small scale both England and
America of the twentieth century. By becoming an imperial-
istic power with vassal states all around the Aegean, it
aroused the fear and rivalry of totalitarian Sparta, who
gathered a league against it. Weakened by the death of its
leader Pericles, exhausted by the long war, and torn by
dissension among the landowners, the business men, and the
proletariat, Athens began to disintegrate and to alternate
between mob rule and dictators. Meanwhile, again like the modern world, it passed through a period of intellectual eminence, a brilliant and skeptical age, with enough democracy to promote free, educated discussion of everything and enough uncertainty to necessitate reappraisal of the whole basis of society.

This spirit of inquiry was to some extent stimulated by the Sophists, a group of professional lecturers, traveling teachers of public speaking and logic, whose services were considered as valuable for the well-to-do youth as a college course is today. Their avowed aim was ethical, their real one prudential. They taught boys to be skillful debaters and political winners, but hardly honest thinkers. They are recalled by the word sophistry, which means plausible but insincere or fallacious reasoning.

The surest way to insult Socrates was to associate him with the Sophists. He was their lifelong opponent. Living much of his life in poverty, like them gathering a group of young men around him, he questioned every conventional opinion, attacked the Sophists as rhetorical hairsplitters, beat them at their own game, but insisted that he sought truth rather than victory in debate. The politicians feared his independence and his undermining influence; the pillars of society suspected him because he taught their sons subversive doctrines. After some of his friends were implicated in an aristocratic pro-Spartan revolution (with which he did not sympathize), he was indicted for corrupting the youth and worshipping strange gods, and in 399 was executed.

How does Plato, in his plays, characterize this small, ugly, disturbing man? The best direct account of him is given by his younger friend Alcibiades, who bursts into Agathon's house during a party and tells the company what he thinks of Socrates. The description is probably accurate, both because Alcibiades is drunk enough to be outspoken
and because he is giving unwilling testimony. Despite his admiration of Socrates, he himself has chosen to live the life of wealth, "honor," and political ambition which Socrates always deprecated. We must believe him, therefore, when he says, "He makes me confess that I ought not to live as I do, neglecting the wants of my own soul . . . . He is the only person who ever made me ashamed." We may also believe his description of Socrates' appearance, which he compares to a statue of Silenus the satyr, who was a stout, bald, puckish old fellow, teacher to the wine-god Dionysus. No one could help noticing so ugly a man, with his squat figure, his wide mouth with its sly smile, and the disconcerting directness of the gaze from his protruding eyes. Few who fell under his spell could escape. Condemned to death, he found friends ready to risk their positions and fortunes to get him away; and Phaedo says, "Of all men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best."

Plato emphasizes the paradox that Socrates was both hedonist and Stoic, yet much more than either. He enjoyed pleasure himself, as at Agathon's banquet, and never tried to stifle it in others. He was no Puritan. In the Protagoras he denies that sensual pleasures as such are evil; the evil appears only if they cause pain later, but so far as they are pleasures they are good. Yet, like the Stoic, he had control over his own desires. Though he had no scruples against drinking, he could drink or not, as he chose, and no one ever saw him drunk. He toughened himself physically and morally. He excelled others in enduring hunger, cold, and the fatigue of army life. He would not yield to evil authority, but he calmly complied with what seemed to him the necessity of imprisonment and death. Both hedonists and Stoics consequently adduced his character as authority for their theories.

He went beyond both, however, in his complete reliance on reason. Emotion he regarded as carnal and temporal;
reason as divine and eternal. In every argument, pleasure, or
danger, he trusted his intellect to govern his actions. The only
emotion he showed was a sly, sometimes fantastic humor,
which in any case was born of the mind. His sincere enthu-
asms were intellectual. "Let me think this matter out," was
his instinctive reaction. So deeply did he concentrate that he
sometimes fell into fits of abstraction, which his friends
learned to ignore. A brief one occurred on the way to Aga-
thon's banquet, and once during a military campaign he was
oblivious to his surroundings for most of a day and night,
arousing the curiosity of the whole camp. When his friends
grew excited, he steadied them; when they acted at the dictate
of fear or desire or hatred, he tried to bring them back to the
rational level. He refused to introduce his wife and children
into court in order to make an emotional appeal. When he
awoke one morning in prison to find Crito beside him, agog
with excitement over a plan for escape, he said, "Crito; your
zeal is invaluable, if a right one; but if wrong, the greater the
zeal, the greater the danger . . . . For I am and always have
been one of those natures who must be guided by reason,
whatever the reason may be which upon reflection appears to
me the best."

The most emphatic example of this trust in reason occurs
in the Phaedo, at a moment when Socrates is hard pressed
and when the rival arguments seem to have canceled each
other out and reached a dead end. Here Socrates inserts a
warning to all young men. At such a time, when rationality
appears futile and self-contradictory, it is tempting to aban-
don the whole thing as a bad job and decide that one might
as well act on impulse. The person who yields to this tempta-
tion Socrates calls a "misologist," or hater of ideas, a word
formed on the analogy of "misanthropist," hater of men.
Both conditions are the natural result of disillusionment.
When a boy with little experience finds that one or two
trusted friends are not perfect, he decides that all mankind is untrustworthy. He blames the evil in human nature instead of his own ignorance of how to deal with its varied qualities. Likewise when an enthusiastic young debater finds that one or two trusted arguments are not perfect, but are easily refuted, he conceives a distrust of all argument. We recall, for instance, that Omar Khayyam became a misologist in this way. Socrates feels that such a condition is pathetic and a little conceited. Don't blame reason, he says, if your ideas are proved wrong; blame yourself for having failed to reason correctly. "Let us then be careful of admitting into our souls the notion that there is no health or soundness in any arguments at all. Rather say that we have not yet attained to soundness in ourselves, and that we must struggle manfully to gain health of mind."  

Typical of Socrates' emphasis on reason was his characteristic way of teaching, known as the Socratic method. This was neither lecturing nor recitation, but a special form of the question-and-answer technique. Rational truth exists in every man's mind, Socrates believed, if only it can be brought out. The teacher's function is to dig for this truth among the errors and irrelevancies of his pupil's thoughts, to bring it to light, and to show the youth that it was really there all the time. Like a modern psychiatrist, Socrates brought to the surface things that the subject did not even suspect were in his mind. In other words, he taught the pupil to "know himself." More specifically, this excavation in search of truth took the form of a series of shifting definitions. Most people think at random, without defining their terms or examining their premises. If only they would take a little trouble, they might arrange their ideas in some clear order; and Socrates' object was to stimulate them into taking the trouble. That was what made him annoying. He was always asking, "What do you mean by that?" always inserting a simple question that upset everything, always saying, "Before I answer, let me first
understand you." In the *Phaedrus* he puts into the mouth of an imaginary lover words typical of his own point of view:

All good counsel begins in the same way; a man should know what he is advising about, or his counsel will all come to naught. But people imagine that they know about the nature of things, when they don't know about them, and not having come to an understanding at first because they think they know, they end, as might be expected, in contradicting one another and themselves.

In this process of definition the main difficulty was that each interlocutor was convinced he knew what he was talking about. By making him admit one small inconsistency after another, Socrates led him to realize that all his ideas needed revision. For example, they might start with some moral idea such as courage, temperance, friendship, or piety. The opponent would postulate a definition: courage is never running away from anything. By examining the consequences of this definition, Socrates would always find it too narrow: even a courageous man might run away from an avalanche, or might feign flight in order to lure an enemy into a trap. Then a new, more inclusive definition would be found, and again tested and modified, until the result always turned out to be some form of knowledge or wisdom: real courage is knowledge of when to stand and when to run. The purpose of the whole process was to start the opponent thinking for himself.

In describing his teacher's technique, Plato makes much of the characteristic tone or attitude that Socrates adopted toward his disputants, a tone which is called Socratic irony. His object was to draw people out, to make them confidently express ideas that he could tear down. To do this he assumed a pose of ignorance, even helplessness. He knew nothing, he said; wouldn't they please help him out of his difficulty? His attitude was perplexed, eager to learn, almost openmouthed. His objections were raised so modestly that no one could
suspect them. He insisted slyly that his friends, being so wise, could enlighten him if only they would. Since Euthyphro, in order to put himself right with the gods, has formally charged his aged father with murder, he must know what piety really is. Yet all his attempts to explain it have been shown to be inadequate. Obviously, therefore, Euthyphro must be unwilling to share his wisdom with poor ignorant Socrates—come, sir, please don't leave me in this uncertainty. The effect of this on Euthyphro may be imagined.

The famous little questions are also examples of this attitude. Protagoras, for instance, has just finished an effective speech on the function of a Sophist in teaching virtue and improving the State. Socrates stands dazzled by the great rhetorician's brilliance. At last he says in awed tones, "O son of Appollodorus, how deeply grateful I am to you for having brought me hither; I would not have missed the speech of Protagoras for a great deal. For I used to imagine that no human care could make men good; but I know better now. Yet I have still one very small difficulty which I am sure that Protagoras will easily explain, as he has already explained so much." Needless to say, the small difficulty disrupted most of what Protagoras had said.

This ironic tone reaches a climax in Socrates' speech in his own defence before the jury, when he turns its full force on the pillars of Athenian society. The Delphic Oracle, he reminds them, once said that no man in Athens was wiser than Socrates. This, of course, was ridiculous, "for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great." The oracle, as usual, must have had a double meaning; and Socrates determined to test it by seeking out a wiser man. Accordingly he approached a statesman with a simple question, only to find the man's ideas in confusion; the same thing happened with a poet, a teacher, and a general. Ultimately it dawned on Socrates that the oracle was right: whereas others thought themselves wise but were deceived, only Socrates realized his
own ignorance. Thus, understanding himself better than the others did, he was really wiser. The nice balance of true modesty and underlying conceit in this attitude is evident.

If a reader feels that the Socratic method is often trivial and the pose of ignorance disingenuous, he must remember three considerations. One is that Socrates' purpose was negative as well as positive. He wanted to disseminate truth if he could; but before he could do so he had to break down prejudices of traditional morality, disturb men's minds, agitate and even anger them, convince them that what they had taken for thinking would not endure analysis—as he said, be a gadfly. Many of his questions, therefore, are intended to be simply provocative, sometimes made tricky to stimulate some young friend to detect the fallacy. For example, he confronts the youthful Lysis with the following elementary dilemma:

One who is a slave and can't do what he likes is not happy;
Your parents love you and want you to be happy;
Nevertheless they will not let you do whatever you like;
Therefore their attitude is contradictory.

Clearly this is no real dilemma. Not only is the major premise untrue, but its application to the conclusion is shaky. But Socrates did not mean it to be sound. What he wanted was to startle Lysis into thinking about the problem of freedom and restraint, to make him reason for himself that a boy may be given freedom to do only what he understands—in short, that freedom depends on the maturing of wisdom.³

In the second place, we must observe Socrates' reasoning as contrasted with another type of dialectic fashionable at the time and popular with some Sophists. The aim of this eristic reasoning was victory, not truth; it set out to impress the audience with its brilliance, to silence and baffle rather
than convince an opponent; it tried to establish antinomies or contradictory conclusions based on the same premise. Against such a background, Socrates' arguments seem straightforward indeed. A well-known example of the quibbling dialectic is Zeno's proof that a flying arrow cannot really be moving, but only appears to be. The motion, said Zeno, must take place either where the arrow is or where it is not. The latter alternative is impossible, because an object cannot exhibit any characteristics or perform any functions in a place where it does not exist. But the former alternative is likewise impossible, because the space where the arrow is is completely filled by the arrow itself, allowing no room for motion. Therefore the arrow cannot move at all. Again, in the dialogue _Euthydemus_, Plato has Socrates make fun of the eristics who pride themselves on being able to silence anyone by catching up the ambiguities in his words. If we are irritated by Socrates' questioning of Lysis, what must we feel when Euthydemus and his brother argue about a young man as follows? If you are fond of this boy, you cannot really desire to make him wise. For if he is not now wise, then you must wish him to be no longer what he is now. But to be no longer must mean to die, and you cannot sincerely want that! A little contact with such argument must convince the reader how reasonable Socrates' method is.

But the most important evidence of the soundness of Socrates' trust in reason is the fact that, not content with merely arguing, he actually governed his own conduct on rational grounds. His choices were made after careful consideration of all sides. We cannot escape this conclusion even if we disagree with his decisions. This is the impression most emphasized in Plato's picture of his trial, imprisonment, and death in the _Apology_, _Crito_, and _Phaedo_. Many times he could have saved himself by being more tactful, by playing on the feelings of the people, by agreeing to abandon his public teachings in Athens. As a man of seventy, he could
have considered his work finished and retirement his due. Even his accusers did not want to inflict the death penalty. But he forced them to face the issue they had raised. To withdraw or recant seemed to him logically inconsistent with his previous life. So he warned the Athenians that he would continue to do what his reason told him was best for the city:

While I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet and saying to him after my manner: You, my friend,—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens,—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? And if the person with whom I am arguing says: Yes, but I do care; then I do not leave him or let him go at once; but I proceed to interrogate and examine and cross-examine him, and if I think that he has no virtue in him, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less.

Instead of escaping, he reasoned with Crito that escape, like recantation, would belie the doctrines he had already taught, and still more the ideals his whole life had implied. By living in Athens, he said, he had entered into a tacit compact with the Athenian laws, which had provided him with legitimate birth, education, and security of life. Even though the laws now effect his death, he has no reasonable right to undermine them by breaking the compact. If he fled to some other city, how could he logically continue his teachings there? And on the day of his death, almost in the act of drinking the hemlock, he reasoned quietly that for a philosopher to fear death is illogical, because the aim of his whole life has been to escape the trammels of body into the realm
of mind and soul. Death is merely the final consummation of
that escape.

So far we have been examining Socrates' particular type
of rational ethics by observing his own character as Plato
pictures it. Before proceeding, we should consider two possible
objections to this way of life. The first is that reliance on
reason may easily be transformed into a habit of rationalizing
one's actions. It is not too hard to find plausible reasons for
what we want to do, and to convince ourselves that this
process is the noble one of basing our conduct on the intellect.
Whether Socrates was guilty of this habit must be decided by
each reader for himself. Perhaps Socrates temperamentally
loved an argument, enjoyed the feeling of superiority aroused
by pointing out the confused thinking of his friends, and so
justified his desires by glorifying the life of the intellect.
Perhaps his real impulse at the end was to become a martyr
in order to feel self-satisfied and to increase his fame and
influence; if so, his appeal to reason was merely specious. We
have not enough evidence to be sure; probably his motives,
like most people's, were mixed.

But even if one can free himself of all rationalization,
there is a further objection to setting up reason as the highest
good. To do so picks out one element of human nature and
exalts it at the expense of others. Granted that it is nobler for
the Socratic to exalt the intellect than for the Cyrenaic to
exalt the senses, yet each omits some essential qualities in the
total organism. It is not possible for men to live by ratio-
cination alone; if it were possible, it might be unpleasantly
arid. Socrates was both admired and loved, but there are few
like him. Too often' the totally rational man is as forbidding
as anything else totalitarian. Usually we cannot argue away
the senses and emotions. Either we fail, or we produce a
distorted personality. Here as in other cases the success of
the great man does not prove the universal value of his ethics.
The fact that Socrates arouses our admiration does not mean
that everyone should be like Socrates.
While keeping in mind that no one has distinguished the ideas of Socrates from those of Plato, we may now observe two extensions of rational ethics more typically Platonic than Socratic. The highest good became not only reason, but absolute reason; and this ideal good was expanded to include the state as well as the individual. Both these ideas have had interesting reflections in later literature.

When knowledge or reliance on reason is mentioned, a modern reader automatically thinks of the methods and results of science; experiment, observation of phenomena, generalization, verifying and testing of results. This is not quite what Plato meant. Though he was versed in mathematics, he knew little of experimental science, and what he did know he disliked. He has Socrates describe how, as a young man, he had temporarily flirted with science, but had abandoned it as too materialistic and as diverting his mind from real knowledge. For real knowledge does not come from the senses at all, but from mind alone, from pure cerebration. This divergent view of knowledge has caused much enmity between Platonic philosophy and modern science.

To some extent, though not completely, the difference is the same as that between inductive and deductive reasoning. Induction starts with a number of concrete facts found to be true by actual observation, and from them infers the truth of a general statement. Deduction starts with a general statement believed by the reasoner to be true, applies this idea to a specific case, and infers the truth of a concrete statement. It is almost impossible to use either of these methods alone. Science always uses both, though we think of it as inductive. For instance, by observation and experiment scientists induced the generalization that yellow fever is always carried by the stegomyia mosquito. Then, using this general statement as the starting point, they deduced that (a) if X contracts yellow fever, he must have been bitten by a stegomyia, and (b) if every stegomyia in this village is destroyed, there will be no yellow fever in the village. A scientific hypothesis is the end
of an induction and the beginning of a deduction. Likewise Plato uses both methods. When he observes that fathers send their sons to a flute-player to learn music and to a rhetorician to learn oratory, he concludes inductively that everyone is best qualified to teach his own specialty. When he assumes that the soul is the principle of life in the individual, he concludes deductively that his own soul is immortal, because a life principle cannot be thought of as dying.

Nevertheless, in the main, induction is the method of science and deduction the method of Plato. The scientist trusts the observation of his senses and suspects abstract generalizations. Plato was dubious about sense impressions, but confident in the results of abstract thinking based on what he believed to be a few self-evident universal truths. To him, truth existed in the mind, never in the body or in matter. After asserting that the soul is imprisoned in the body, Socrates continues:

Philosophy, seeing how terrible was her confinement, . . . received and gently comforted her and sought to release her, pointing out that the eye and the ear and the other senses are full of deception, and persuading her to retire from them, and abstain from all the necessary use of them, and be gathered up and collected into herself, bidding her trust in herself and her own pure apprehension of pure existence, and to mistrust whatever comes to her through other channels and is subject to variation; for such things are visible and tangible, but what she sees in her own nature is intelligible and invisible.  

What does this have to do with ethics? It simply shows that a modern scientist would probably have no unchanging standard of good; if he placed knowledge as the highest good, that knowledge would be relative to the time, place, and environment. But Plato's good was not relative to anything;
it was self-evident, eternal, true always and without exception. It passed over into the abstract realm and became an absolute. And so to understand this basis of rational ethics we must travel one step into Plato's metaphysics.

According to Plato, the whole universe is made up, not of objects like trees, planets, and people, not of elements like air and water, but of ideas. What seems to consist of matter really consists of something mental or non-material, of which matter is only an external symbol. This is hard to apprehend, because our habits of thinking lead us to assume that matter is real, that seeing is believing. But everyone who has studied psychology knows the convenient word concept, meaning a general idea which includes in one unit a number of specific sense-perceptions. Having perceived successively an orange, a plum, a banana, and a strawberry, we tie the whole group into one bundle by referring to them as fruit. Then small concepts are united to form more inclusive ones: fruit plus meat plus vegetables plus beverages make up the larger concept food. In the field of conduct, numerous specific brave actions fuse in the mind to form courage. It is our habit, however, to regard concepts as conveniences for thinking, not as real entities. For centuries during the Middle Ages a conflict raged as to whether they existed or were merely convenient names. But Plato, far from doubting their reality, held that they were the only real things that did exist. In a region of the mind, independent of time or space, ideas dwell eternally without change, unaffected by anything that happens. They are the models, the archetypes; and what we call things or events are merely faint and imperfect copies of them. A man is courageous only inasmuch as he partakes of or has a share in the idea of absolute courage. He becomes a good speaker as he partakes more in the idea of absolute eloquence.

Both as a proof and as an illustration of this theory Plato uses his doctrine of recollection, which he may or may not
have taken literally. The soul, being non-material, has a permanent existence before birth and after death. Between incarnations it exists in the realm of ideas, and of course is there acquainted with the absolutes. At birth it forgets them, but every sensory experience of life reminds it of them, just as the sight of a portrait may remind us of a person whom we formerly knew but have not thought of for years. The portrait is not the person, but only an imperfect symbol of him; had we never known the man, the portrait would have little meaning for us. Similarly a round object may remind the soul of the idea, perfect circle, with which it had been familiar in the absolute realm; had it never known the idea, it would have no standard with which to compare the sensory object. Thus what we call learning is only being reminded of what has been temporarily forgotten. The more we learn, the more we can associate and unify our recollections into higher and more inclusive concepts, until at last everything is joined in the idea of absolute good, which comprehends the entire universe. The highest ethical good, therefore, is not merely the choice of one act or another by the use of reason, but the living of a life dissociated from unreal things of sense and based on the firm reality of ideas.

Most people, Plato knew, would never accept or even understand this view. In *The Republic* he pictures the whole situation in one of the most splendid of literary images, the analogy of the cave. Imagine that all mankind live in a cave, fastened so that they must always look toward the back wall (which is smooth and white) and can never turn toward the mouth of the cave. None of them has ever seen the world above ground. Behind them near the entrance burns a fire, and between it and the people is a raised walk along which pass men and women carrying all sorts of objects. The fire casts on the back wall shadows of these passers-by, and mankind can see nothing but these shadows. The sensations of life become a sort of cinema thrown on the screen, and since
people have no other experience of anything, they naturally take the moving shadows for reality. Suppose, then, that one of them should be released and taken out into the sunshine. At first his eyes would be so dazzled that he could see nothing; gradually he would perceive objects close to him, then hills and clouds, finally the sun itself. If then he returned to the cave he could see nothing at all, as one is blinded when he enters a movie theater from a bright street. When the shadows appeared again, he would realize their hollowness and would pity those who mistook them for reality. But his friends would not understand, and would deride him for having lost his common sense while he was away. The meaning of this image is clear and consistent. The shadows are ordinary sense impressions, which we take to be real. The outer world is the realm of absolutes, culminating in the sun, or absolute good, in which all else merges. The released man is the philosopher, who, having attained a glimpse of the world of ideas, tries in vain to convince others of its existence and importance. So vivid is this whole picture that it seems at first to prove Plato's theory instead of merely illustrating it; we must not forget that it is merely an interesting way of making the point clear, an analogy and nothing more.

Plato's belief that the highest good may be written with capital letters as an eternal entity outside transitory human life, that the mind has been acquainted with this perfection before birth, and that the soul is capable of apprehending and moving toward it during life has fascinated philosophers and poets ever since. They have praised, imitated, modified, distorted, and expanded it with new imaginative applications. By examining two echoes of it in Romantic poetry we may understand something of its value and its weakness in the hands of later writers. It may seem strange that so much Platonic influence should appear in the Romantic movement, which was partly a reaction against classical ideas and a glorifying of emotion over intellect. But Plato's philosophy,
despite its basis in wisdom, actually stretches into a limitless unknown in its reaching after ideas; the Republic is really a city in the clouds; and absolutes are the very things to attract Romantic poets like Shelley and Keats.

Percy Shelley was an appallingly enthusiastic Platonist, filled with admiration for the Greek spirit and unconsciously interpreting it to correspond to his own effervescent temperament. Though highly emotional, he worshipped reason, and, finding all contemporary human institutions unreasonable, became a lifelong rebel. Hating tyranny more than anything else, he pointed out that Plato had classified it as the lowest and most unhappy state of society. But his alternative for tyranny was a form of anarchy, which he forgot that Plato had opposed almost as vigorously as he had tyranny. He was a “perfectibilian,” longing for the ideal state, ideal love and beauty, despairing of their existence in the real world and envisioning them always as “something afar from the sphere of our sorrow.” Forgetting that Plato had given explicit practical directions for achieving justice in the state, and remembering only his acknowledgment that the perfect state existed nowhere on earth but only as a pattern in heaven, Shelley located his utopias on some flowery western island or “Pinnacled deep in the intense inane.” His naive reaction to Plato’s theory of recollection is shown by an incident of his younger days. On the road one day he met a woman carrying a small baby. Taking the child in his arms, he eagerly inquired the answers to some questions of philosophy, and pleaded with the baby not to conceal these truths which it must know from recollections of its pre-existence. What a pity, he concluded sadly, that only inability to talk prevents an infant from solving all human problems! What Plato said, we remember, was that the soul at birth forgets all its previous knowledge of reality; Shelley in his excitement missed the point.

Especially interesting is Shelley’s reaction to Plato’s theory of absolutes, which he adapted to fit his own tempera-
mental love of extremes. There was no middle ground for Shelley. His acquaintances were either angels or demons, his world either hopeless tyranny or imminent utopia. He urged no practical program of reform that might gain one advantage by giving up another, but a sweeping revolution trying for all or nothing. Half a loaf was repugnant to him; compromise was cowardice. He must have absolute perfection—which, he said, was also Plato's ideal. Of course he was mistaken. By absolutes Plato did not mean extremes, but simply eternally existing non-material forms or models for the sensory world. He himself pointed out that if any good is carried too far it becomes less good, and the whole implication of Socratic ethics was opposed to the Shelleian temper. But the result appears in Shelley's treatment of the Prometheus myth. According to the original story, part of which was dramatized by Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound*, the Titan Prometheus was the only one who knew a secret of the Fates that Zeus would be overthrown by his own offspring just as he had conquered his father Kronos. When Prometheus stole fire from heaven, Zeus seized the opportunity to chain him to a mountain and offer his release as a price for revealing the secret. Prometheus accepted the bargain, established Zeus permanently in power, and used his freedom to help mankind by teaching them the arts. Thus he sacrificed his opposition to tyranny for the sake of a moderate advantage. Shelley, however, would have none of this compromise. He represents both Prometheus and mankind as enduring misery and bondage for thousands of years, until the sudden overthrow of Zeus brings perfect romantic freedom into the world. Then nothing is left to do, and Prometheus, instead of making any use of his new freedom, retires forever to a vine-covered bower in the Orient while all nature sings exultantly of the utopia. In this way Platonic absolutes were mistranslated into Romantic extremes.

Another Romantic poet, however, made better use of them. Though he had even keener senses and deeper emotions, John Keats possessed also a clear mind and more essential
Platonic wisdom than Shelley. In his short writing life of five years he matured from a mere recorder of disorganized sensations to a poet of depth and insight. He too sought the absolute, at first symbolically by recounting Endymion's confused quest for the moon-goddess Cynthia, later in his odes with a direct appreciation of what Plato really meant. The point, as Keats saw it, was this: surrounded by the shifting and bewildering flux of their experience, most people feel the need of something firm and lasting that can be trusted not to flow away from under them—something that remains in all circumstances true. Many never find it. Some attain it in religion, some in science or philosophy, others in art. This fundamental human need was what Plato was trying to satisfy. To see how Keats reached the same goal, let us examine his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Fusing in his imagination several Greek vases which he had seen in the British Museum, he describes an urn perfect in the grace of its form and the beauty of its paintings. As he turns it about, he sees painted on its sides a Bacchic revel, with satyrs pursuing nymphs into the forest, a flute-player sitting under a tree, a pair of lovers about to kiss, and a group of villagers sacrificing at an altar. What impresses him is that each picture has taken a moment of active life and immortalized it. Here is the musician, playing just as he did two thousand years ago. To be sure, in the process life has lost its sensory quality; no one can hear the flutist's music, and the lovers cannot enjoy a real embrace. In fact, life seems to have sacrificed all its reality. But in recompense it has gained eternity: the girl's beauty can never fade, the boy's ardor never cool. And this is a higher and more satisfying reality than the life of the senses, which lasts only a day. This love, frozen in marble, is better than real love:

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead and a parching tongue.
Thus Keats finds an absolute when he discovers that what the vase says to later generations is "Beauty is Truth"; it is truth because it is changeless and reliable, not dependent on the senses, transcending the world of phenomena just as Plato's non-material ideas transcended the world of shadows. The transformation of philosophy into poetry is complete when Keats calls the vase an eternally "unravished bride," a being in a magical way consummate and yet virginal. Though Plato disapproved of poets in his ideal commonwealth, he might have allowed Keats to live there.

The second element we shall consider in Plato's literary influence concerns this ideal commonwealth. It is not necessary to re-analyze the Republic; that has been done enough. Only one point concerning the series of utopias which that book has fathered needs to be examined. Most of them have attempted to outline ideally rational societies. But in course of time a curious change has come over their attitude toward reason and the intellect, until recently they have begun to question whether a social system based primarily on reason would, after all, be desirable. In connection with this have come changes in their interpretation of what reason is. This process may be briefly traced.

In The Republic, Plato describes a state which, though difficult of attainment, is not meant to be impossibly visionary. With careful planning and a good deal of luck, he thought, it might come about, at least for a time. Once, with misgivings, he tried it out on the young tyrant Dionysius II of Syracuse; but nothing came of that attempt, and Plato resumed his duties as a college president.

The ultimate aim of the discussion in The Republic is to answer a question of personal ethics: what is justice? To throw light on this, Socrates first explains what justice is in society, as one might learn a sentence in large letters before deciphering it in small ones. In both cases justice is the same:
namely, a harmonious co-operation of parts. In the individual, such co-operation occurs when the desires and the aggressive will are under the control of the intellect; in the state, when the uneducated masses and the ambitious career men are organized and controlled by an intellectual aristocracy. To show this, he analyzes at length his whole society. That it involves a typically Platonic reliance on reason is shown by three of its major elements.

First, Plato divides his citizens into three classes: artisans, who produce commodities and carry on trade; administrators, who execute the laws and defend the city; rulers, who legislate and make all major decisions of public welfare. And the crux of the whole system lies in the fact that the rulers are chosen, not for wealth or military glory or power or vote-getting ability or popularity, but exclusively for brains and the willingness to use them.

Second, the keystone of the whole structure is education. Never has such trust been expressed in the ability of rulers to transmit knowledge and logical method to the next generation, and never has the period of education been so prolonged or so intense. A young man judged a worthy candidate for ruler must undergo a training period lasting forty years. Only then is he qualified to govern the state.

Finally, this training for rulers goes beyond that of the administrators in that it culminates in a knowledge of absolutes. Mere administrators do not need such knowledge. It is enough that they imbibe the traditional morality of the state, and be taught loyalty to its customs. But rulers must know the fundamental reasons for that morality. Through study of mathematics and dialectic they must enter the world of ideas, come out of the cave into the sunlight, and base their legislation on abstract reason.

It is at this point, vital to Plato's thinking, that the subsequent changes appeared. For, here as elsewhere, reason to Plato meant abstract reasoning from axioms, deduction
from accepted generalizations. It meant mathematics, not science. As soon as it trusted the evidence of its senses, it was false to itself. In modern times, however, reason has come to be associated more and more closely with science, reasoning about society is now called social science, and a good state is often assumed to be one which takes fullest advantage of scientific progress. This new interpretation has affected the modern utopias. Some of them exalt science as a higher and more hopeful use of reason than Plato dreamed of; others attack it as a perilous distortion of true reason.

The first of the Renaissance imitations of Plato, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516, came too early to concern itself with the new science. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the divergence in point of view toward science had already appeared. The highest confidence in its value was expressed by Francis Bacon, one of the earliest practitioners and popularizers of the inductive method. In 1622 he published a fragmentary utopia called *The New Atlantis*, which was the first to substitute a scientist-king for Plato's philosopher-king and to assert that a state could prosper best by giving free rein to the scientific method. The country described is a small island in the south Pacific, unknown to the world but familiar with the progress of other countries through groups of observers sent out every twelve years to inspect them. After a brief and rather disconnected account of the laws, organization, customs, and characteristics of the inhabitants, Bacon spends about a third of the book on their most important institution, the House of Salomon, or College of the Six Days' Work, really the governing force of the country. It amounts to a research foundation: a group of scholars trained to carry on every kind of physical and biological experiment, some of which Bacon knew and others imagined in the distant future. The purpose of the College is "the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting
of all things possible." To this end their equipment is elaborate, including caves for refrigeration, towers for meteorology, animals for breeding and dissection, kitchens for experiments in nutrition, pharmacies and "chambers of health," optical and sound laboratories, and engine-houses for experiment on machines. The personnel is divided into those who experiment, those who record results, and those who apply them to the enrichment of life. Though the book breaks off before we are shown examples of what the House of Salomon could accomplish, we are led to believe that its influence is thoroughly beneficent and effective, and that if science can have its way all will be well.

This confidence is not shared by Jonathan Swift, who wrote a century later, after Bacon's imaginary foundation had been partly actualized in the English Royal Society. Put the scientists in control, says Swift, and the world will go insane. Such a world he describes in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*, in which that sensible explorer, by now almost beyond surprise, visits the flying island of Laputa and mainland of Balnibarbi underneath. In Laputa dwell the intellectual aristocracy, absorbed in the study of mathematics and music—two of Plato's favorite subjects. The heads of these thinkers are bent by cerebral weight at right angles to their bodies. Each man is so immersed in thought that he is accompanied by a servant called a flapper, who, by tapping him on the mouth and ears with a bulb filled with pebbles, arouses him temporarily to awareness of mundane events. Since their mathematics is too abstract to be applied in practice, their houses are misshapen and their surveying clumsy. In this instance, then, abstract scientists make sadly incompetent rulers, and it is little wonder that after staying a few days on the island, Gulliver is "very desirous to leave it, being heartily weary of these people."

But worse awaits him in Balnibarbi, where science and invention are really put into practice. Here the satire is two-
fold: partly on innovation for its own sake, mostly on the absurdities of scientific invention. Forty years before, the country has had a "scientific revolution," since when everything has been done in a new and more complicated way. For example, one nobleman formerly had an efficient water-mill in a river valley near his home. The Progressive Scientists now urge him to destroy it and build another half way up a mountain, run by water that is pumped at great expense to an even higher level; the theory is that, as the water now runs down a steep slope, it will take only half the amount to turn the mill at the same rate. Idiotic as it is, this is so suggestive of certain modern projects as to leave the reader uncomfortable. Gulliver is most interested, however, in the Grand Academy of the country, a foundation with aims similar to those of the House of Salomon, but organized as an insane asylum, a fact promptly revealed by Gulliver's mention of the warden. Here the inventors work at their projects: extracting sunbeams from cucumbers; building houses from the roof down as the bee does; training spiders to produce silk, tinted by feeding them colored flies; or producing thought by means of a mechanism that shifts words about like a kaleidoscope until by chance a coherent sentence emerges. At this point Gulliver remarks quietly, "I saw nothing in this country that could invite me to a longer continuance."

Evidently neither Bacon nor Swift had any real grounds for his point of view, since both wrote before science had advanced far enough for them to understand it. Yet the same clash of opinion persists to this day among creators of imaginary societies. Once more let us look at two examples.

The case for science is convincingly set forth in H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, a long essay in slightly novelized form describing what science can do to bring perfection. The essence of the Platonic society still remains: political authority is vested in the intellectual leaders, now not philosophers but research men in all fields, organized into a ruling class called
Samurai or voluntary nobility. Membership in the Samurai is open to anyone who has a college degree, some original achievement in his field, good health, no desire for wealth, and no asocial habits. Under these administrators the population is divided into four classes, resembling Plato's in that they are not hereditary but flexible: (1) the Poietic or creative, who keep the race evolving by making new discoveries in art and science; (2) the Kinetic or active, the backbone of society who, though incapable of discovery, exhibit energy and intelligence in carrying on the world's work—professional men, merchants, artisans, housewives; (3) the Dull, who are stupid and incompetent, but amenable to discipline; (4) the Base, or antisocial persons who lack the moral sense—these are segregated from society on islands.

Unlike all earlier utopias from Plato's down, Wells's does not envisage a small, isolated country as its locale, but insists that science has now made impossible any social unit smaller than the world. All races are equalized, war is abolished, and there is swift, easy transportation to every part of the globe, with all citizens encouraged to travel. The machine age has emerged from its era of dirt and ugliness into beauty. Everything is attractively streamlined, machines are works of art, factories are segregated from cities, and all advertising is forbidden. The economics in vogue is a modified communism, with the state owning land, natural resources, and all industries, and the individual owning such close personal property as clothes and books, but leasing for life intermediate products like automobiles, radios, and furniture. Nothing can be inherited. World trade is carried on by means of energy units based on what each section has produced in the past year. Poverty is abolished by having the state guarantee to every citizen a minimum wage, beyond which he may either enjoy leisure or earn more, as he wishes. With automatic state insurance against illness and old age, there is no temptation to save. Population is regulated by strict eugenic laws and by
payment of the regular state wage to mothers, their job being the equal of any other. All this, it will be agreed, is thoroughly scientific, quite according to reason, and mostly incongruous with the facts of human nature.

Conscious of the dangers involved, Wells takes pains to deprecate excessive rigidity and the destruction of individual initiative. He provides for the Poietic class. He would retain all possible freedom, limiting it just enough to prevent aggression. He would leave room for dissenters and critics, who are free as long as they hurt no one, and whose suggestions are, if possible, used. Yet all this amounts to little more than an assertion that, in his state, science would avoid excessive regimentation. The reader must ask, why would it? Developments since the book was written have indicated that, once the ideal of efficiency controls a state, it is likely on the one hand to become an efficiency directed exclusively toward making war, and on the other to engulf the individual and deny that he has any separate importance. In fact, many elements in modern society exhibit a distorted parody of the Wellsian utopia.

In 1932, the year before the Nazi state was established, such a parody appeared in literary form in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which pictures the ultimate in scientific states with an irony so effective that some readers took it seriously. Few modern satires can equal the devastating impact of this one; no amount of argument could demonstrate so clearly what might happen to the Platonic-scientific society gone wrong. It is pertinent to our discussion of Socratic ethics because it shows what can result from an exclusive reliance on reason. The time is approximately A. D. 2500. Huxley explains that, when civilization nearly blew itself to pieces in the Nine Years' War, it became obvious that human emotions had caused the catastrophe: fear, greed, and lust for power must vanish if humanity was to endure. As a last hope, science stepped in to create a rational world-state of absolute stability
and uniformity, based on the worship of machine technology. By the time of the story this technology is symbolized in Henry Ford, founder of mass production with interchangeable parts. Instead of A. D. 2500, we have A. F. 632. A noble is called His Fordship, a judge the Ford Chancellor, and the proper exclamation is "Good Ford, no!" By simply cutting off the tops, all crosses have become T's (commemorating the Model T), so that one may now speak of Charing-T Station. And this worship, far from being lip-service, is the basis of the whole social structure.

The theory is simple. Human beings were unhappy because they had feelings and aspirations. Because science now possesses the technique of controlling those feelings, men need no longer be unhappy, any more than cars on the production lines. Science can regularize life by means of a conditioning process beginning before birth. Indeed, viviparous birth is unscientific; better develop the embryos in a blood-surrogate bath, of which the chemical constituents will partly determine the character. After the baby is taken out of (not off) the bottle, he is conditioned throughout childhood by hypnopaedia or sleep-teaching. From a radio outlet near the head of the bed proceeds, all night long, a series of low-toned sentences which penetrate the sleeping brain with suggestions about being contented in one's class of society. These classes are no longer flexible (that would be unscientific), but from the time the infant is decanted are fixed in five groups, Alpha to Epsilon. Alphas are administrators, Epsilons unskilled laborers; but both are so adjusted that neither would exchange places with the other. If by some mischance anyone does become discouraged, science provides for that too; he takes a dose of soma, a new drug having the combined effect of alcohol and opium with no hangover. If, even amidst such perfection, a few heretics do arise who demand the right to have feelings, even the right to be unhappy, they need cause no concern, since the trouble sprang from an unfortunate error in mixing their blood-surrogate.
This book must be read; no brief description can reflect its sardonic power. Plato would repudiate its inclusion in his chapter. "This merely proves my point," he would say. "Here is what happens when you abandon philosophy for science, deduction for induction, ideas for empirical information." True as this is, it does not refute Huxley. For Plato advocated an ethic based on reason, and Huxley's exaggeration merely shows that man cannot achieve well-being by reason exclusively; to be human he must be irrational at times, have unhappiness as well as pleasure. *Brave New World* is a thoroughgoing attack on ultra-rational ethics, Platonic and modern. Moreover, Plato cannot reject science; for as philosophy does its work, it inevitably passes over into science. As soon as a new realm is conquered, explained, rendered intelligible, science annexes it while philosophy proceeds to new unknown territory. Any assertion that reason or philosophy is supreme leads in the end to the admission that science is supreme; and that belief, carried to its ultimate conclusion, leads to a brave new world.

The phrase "carried to its ultimate conclusion" brings us to Aristotle and his modification of Socratic ethics; for it is a phrase to which he would object and through which he would attack what we have been saying. In Aristotelian ethics, to carry anything to its ultimate conclusion is to ruin it. Though he starts where Plato does and agrees with many of his conclusions, yet in certain important respects he diverges from his old teacher. By examining these differences we can better understand rational ethics and can see how it may be adapted to other points of view.

Born in 384, just after Plato founded the Academy, Aristotle was not an Athenian but a Thracian. His father was physician to the King of Macedonia, at which court Aristotle met young Prince Philip. After doing brilliant work at the Academy, he traveled for several years gathering scientific materials. He wrote books covering every known field of
knowledge. Like Plato, he founded and administered a school; he tried unsuccessfully to educate a philosopher-king, when he became tutor to Philip's thirteen-year-old son Alexander; and he exalted reason. But the two differed in temperament and habitual outlook. Despite his admiration for Plato, Aristotle considered him too much the impractical idealist, satisfied with nothing less than perfection. He himself was a believer in common sense, in more matter-of-fact reasoning, in practical compromise. These qualities are evident in his *Nichomachean Ethics*.

The initial assumption is identical with Plato's. The Highest Good springs from the intellect, and is well-being or happiness based on rational choice. Aristotle calls it "an activity of the soul in accordance with reason," emphasizing mental energy in contrast to a mere life of sensation. So thoroughly does he uphold reason that he doubts whether very young men can study ethics effectively, because they are too emotional. "Knowledge is as useless to such a person as it is to an intemperate person. But where the desires and actions of people are regulated by reason, the knowledge of these subjects will be extremely valuable." Plato was impressed by the eagerness of youth for ideals of perfection; Aristotle insists more on the value of maturity. Both make the highest good attainable through reason.

In two important ways, however, Aristotle objects to the Platonic theory. First, he regards the notion of absolutes as satisfactory for metaphysics but too vague and impractical for ethics, and likely to lead the reasoner to extremes. Secondly, he denies that knowledge alone is enough for virtue. Socrates had insisted that if a man had real knowledge as to which of two courses was the better, he would always choose the better rather than the worse—that no man voluntarily and knowingly does evil. This Aristotle considers psychologically questionable. To know is not enough; we must do. On these objections are based his two main additions to Socratic ethics, the first better known, but the second more important.
The famous one is the doctrine of the Golden Mean, stated explicitly by Aristotle but characteristic of Greek literature long before him. It appeals to almost everyone as a simple and obvious answer to ethical questions. Clearly a person's health will be impaired if he eats either too much or too little; likewise his moral health will suffer if he allows too much or too little of any quality to enter his habitual actions. Therefore virtue always turns out to be a mean or midpoint between extremes. For example, the quality of courage is not an ideal of absolute fearlessness, but a halfway point between one extreme of nervous agitation and another of foolish and reckless disregard of safety. The truly courageous man is a sane, poised, experienced person who avoids both rashness and timorousness. Though he does not profess to be free of fear, he has developed the habit of disregarding it in the proper circumstances. The exact midpoint, of course, is hard to find, and Aristotle reiterates that there is nothing absolute about it, that it varies with the individual and the situation, and that no one can attain it except through years of experience. This standard is attractive to students who pride themselves on being realistic and hard-headed; unlike most counsels of perfection, it seems to have no nonsense about it.

The idea will be clearer if we examine a few of the many specific virtues with which Aristotle illustrates it, each one a mean between extremes. One extreme is prodigality or wasteful spending; its opposite is miserliness; the virtue somewhere between them is liberality, or moderate generosity. Between irascibility and dull passivity is equanimity, that controlled self-respect characteristic of the man who is neither a firecracker nor a doormat. Friendliness, the main social virtue, avoids both flattery and moroseness; the good friend is neither a yes-man nor a constant fault-finder. An interesting minor virtue is wit. Its excess is buffoonery or ribaldry, which grows tiresome; its defect is unbending seriousness. The mean is to be quietly humorous, tactfully, with good taste, at the right time. Most typical of Aristotle is magnanimity: a mag-
nanimous man is one who, "being really worthy, estimates his own worth highly." If he estimates it too high, he is guilty of vanity; if too low, of humility—both undesirable.\textsuperscript{12}

All this may look easy, but we should be under no such illusion. Finding the mean suitable to an individual is hard enough; acting on it is harder still. The law of inertia leads us to keep moving in the same direction, probably to an extreme. The good is a small, finite area in the middle, while evil is infinite in both directions. All about us lie spacious opportunities for being rash or timorous; the tiny realm of real courage between them is hard to delimit. Furthermore, since the practitioners of both extremes are hostile, not only to each other, but also to people who do not go as far as they do, the virtuous moderate man is opposed from both sides. He encounters not merely evil, but two evils. The daredevil calls the courageous man a coward; the coward calls him rash. The familiar plight of the liberal in modern society is an example; while the communist regards him as a reactionary, the conservative calls him a Red.

The Golden Mean, however, is only one of Aristotle's ethical contributions. The second one is an even more notable correction of Plato. Virtue is knowledge, said Socrates. Yes, answers Aristotle, but knowledge alone is not enough to produce it. The excessive drinker may know that a little milder indulgence would prolong his life; but his drinking has become so habitual that he either does it without thinking or decides that the present pleasure is worth the price. The unscrupulous business man may have knowledge that he is lowering the general welfare when he deceives the public by using shoddy material or intimidates employes by a blacklist; yet his knowledge fails to change his actions, because he has always done things that way, everyone else does the same, and he wants his profits. Reason will not make anyone good, unless he spends years practicing what his reason advises him. Just as in physical processes, teaching must be put into
practice until a habit is formed. Virtue, then, is not knowledge, but is a habit created by long practice of actions based on knowledge.

Aristotle even adds the opinion that no one can really be virtuous until his right actions are habitual. As long as he needs to reason out difficult choices, his virtue is not quite trustworthy. After sufficient experiment, he should move automatically to his own proper midpoint between every pair of extremes, and never wish to be anywhere else. A test of one’s moral reactions, therefore, is as follows: First, pick out an action generally admitted to be virtuous, and perform it. If pleasure follows the performance, your habit of virtue is strong; if pain or discontent follows, the habit is weak. This point of view contrasts with both hedonism and Stoicism. The hedonist says: do that which causes pleasure. The Stoic says: endure that which causes pain. Aristotle says: practice until you are able to gain pleasure from actions that are otherwise right. Thus it appears that, to Aristotle, the main purpose of both education and laws is to give people practice in good habits.

It seems ungrateful even to raise questions about so attractively reasonable a system. It is a friendly ethic, demanding not perfection but only reasonable control. More adapted to the common man and the workaday world than either Platonic or Stoic ideals, it is still on a much higher plane than hedonism. By insistence on training and habit it creates defences against human weakness and prepares one to meet emergencies. And yet the very students who at first welcome Aristotle’s Golden Mean often come to view it with misgiving. They realize first that there is danger in falling into unchanging habits, even of virtue. To do so results in a stiffening of the moral joints, a kind of automatism, a surrender of man’s cherished power to keep his decisions free and flexible. Often, they observe, a spontaneously generous act is prevented or denounced because people are inured in habits of virtue.
Next they raise the logical objection that it is possible to go to an extreme even in following the Golden Mean! Some emergencies, if they are to be met rightly, demand excess. For example, if a baby walks into the street toward an approaching car, I ought to run toward the baby with extreme, not moderate, speed; if I have schooled myself too long in habits of deliberation, the car will arrive before I do. Again, the question arises whether the system is really as inclusive as it looks. May not the moderate man simply lose the value existing in both extremes? As Dr. Johnson remarked, "There are goods so opposed that we cannot seize both, but by too much prudence may pass between them at too great a distance to reach either." Sensible though it may be, the whole idea is too cautious and pedestrian, too much like reducing life to a mathematical formula. Like the printer Aslaksen in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, the Aristotelian seems to have only two choices open to him: he may act with (a) discreet moderation or (b) moderate discretion.

Eventually we realize that what we think of the Golden Mean depends on who follows it, and how he does so. As we noted once before, the value of an ethical standard often depends on the character who adopts it, not the character on the standard. An apt, though doubtless unintentional, illustration is furnished by a pair of characters in *Hamlet*. The old politician Polonius and the young student Horatio both admire the Golden Mean. Polonius' rule of life is "don't go too far." He warns his daughter to be circumspect in dealing with princes, and instructs his confidential servant to spy on Laertes by dropping slanderous hints as bait for his friends—but, mind you, "none so rank as would dishonor him; take heed of that." He admonishes Laertes himself to make a moderate number of friends, to dress well but not gaudily, to avoid both silence and garrulity. Similarly Horatio is of a steady, middle-of-the-road temperament which is contrasted to Hamlet's rapid alternations of excitement and depression.
Hamlet admires his friend's balance and wishes that he himself could be one "whose blood and judgment are so well commingled"—that is, whose emotion and reason are so equally mixed. Nevertheless, despite this apparent agreement in the Golden Mean, Horatio and Polonius are as unlike as could be imagined. Hamlet respects the one and despises the other. Polonius is an over-cautious busybody, a shifty and time-serving political opportunist whose habits of compromise are fossilized. In him the Golden Mean has become brass. But in Horatio it keeps all its attractiveness because it integrates his personality. Quietly and carefully, never losing his head or getting excited, he tries to steer the explosive Hamlet through his tumultuous problems, calming his excitement and tactfully stimulating his inertia. He even exemplifies Aristotle's virtue of moderate wit, in his combination of grave reliability with a warm, never-failing sense of humor. The man of extremes pays tribute to the Mean when Hamlet says impulsively:

Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation cop'd withal.