

Lifestyle and Culture Lecture Series

presents a transcript of the talk

From Heaven to Earth: Plato's Philosophy and the World We Live In

by David Horan

Sunday, January 4th, 2009

Fairfield Amphitheatre, Melbourne



Just to begin with a little reflection on this venue which we're in here, an amphitheatre. If you tour Greece you find amphitheatres of this type, some actually of this size, which would be small; a very large one at Epidavros (and many of you have been to Epidavros).

There's a very interesting thing happens, though, when you go to the ancient Greek world and you look at these locations where they built these amphitheatres. If you go to Epidavros and you see the amphitheatre there, what it's most famous for—and it's still used for modern productions of the ancient plays—but you will also find there a running track, and above all Epidavros is not a centre of theatre, it's a centre of healing dedicated to the god Asclepius, a son of Apollo. So this mixture of theatre, running track and the sacred is a feature of very many of the sites in Greece. If you go to Olympia, of course, it is the place of origin of the Olympic games in antiquity; they were celebrated there, they were enacted there, right into Roman times; sometimes with very, very comical stories going with them—including the story of the Emperor Nero, who had the date changed so that he could compete in the games when he wanted to compete and had everything arranged so that he won everything.

That was Olympia, but above all, Olympia is a site sacred to Zeus, the supreme god in antiquity and perhaps before that, sacred to Hera, so a sacred site first and then a centre for these great games, which are only held every four years. In between times, it was sacred to Zeus. The temple of Zeus at Olympia is an enormous temple. In the temple of Zeus at Olympia was housed a gold and ivory statue of the god, sculptured by the sculptor Phidias, one of the wonders of the ancient world. So this mixture which is foreign to us—the sacred with the theatrical, with the athletic—was completely natural to the Greeks at that time, in the period which I'm going to talk about, which is the period of the philosopher Plato, and before and after. We will not be very specific on dates here.

And I can list many other sites in which you find this same feature—mixing things which we do not traditionally mix any more.

So we certainly have a centre of theatre here [in Melbourne]. It is a recreational area, and I do know for example that we see this in Europe; the marathon certainly runs round this area, and there are races round this area which we have seen, but where is the sacred? Where is the temple? That's not part of our thinking any more, and an architect in assembling something like this—he might say, 'Well yes, I can see where you want to put the theatre and maybe we'll put some athletic facilities around'; he's very unlikely to say, 'And where do you want the temple, and which god do you want to dedicate it to?'

Our thinking has changed, and what I really am going to talk about today is—Our thinking, and the way it has changed, and what it is that shapes it.

Why do we think now differently from the way the ancient Greeks thought, to such an extent that it would be probably strange and controversial to talk about putting anything sacred into an area like this—to talk about the location of a temple or any type of centre of worship? What has happened since? That's what I want to look at.

The question we're really considering is—The shaping of our own ideas. The shaping of our ideas takes you into the area of philosophy, because that is the area of philosophy. Philosophy deals in ideas. On its very simplest level, that's what philosophers produce.

I'm going to talk particularly about the philosopher Plato, and then I'm going to talk about the time before Plato and a time after Plato, coming then into the middle ages and taking then a very sudden, very quick jump into modern times. We're going to survey two and a half thousand years of ideas and changing ideas and we're going to begin to look at our own ideas and where those ideas come from and how they have been shaped.

But that is essentially the theme of the lecture, that is essentially an outline of what I am going to present to you.

Now just to talk about Plato for a moment: one feature of the *Dialogues* of Plato is the very significant use of questions and answers. I have put some questions here on these boards; I've used these questions in this lecture. The questions are not questions we would naturally consider always together, they're questions which we nowadays tend to separate. I've just put them together, though they're in no particular order, and I would like—it would be wonderful if—our discussion later on could focus on some of the questions.

Another aspect of philosophy really has got to be the pursuit of truth, the asking of questions and hopefully the answering of questions. And so I have some questions there; and as I've said, they're not questions which we would normally put on the same page.

- Who do we choose to rule us and why?
- What is justice?
- Why not choose a philosopher to rule us?
- How do our rulers know what to do?

There may be another question in the background there—'Do our rulers know what to do?' More of that later.

- How many philosophers are there in Barack Obama's cabinet?

We've heard the details of his cabinet, the leaked 'would Hilary Clinton be in/would Hilary Clinton not be in?' He does not appear to have gone searching for a philosopher. He did bring in a very eminent scientist—it was announced some weeks ago—but I've been out of touch with news since.

But there it is, I'm not actually saying there are no philosophers in Barack Obama's cabinet. On one level you can say they are all philosophers. Again, more of that later.

More questions:

- Is it just to lend money at interest?
- Is it just to own land?
- What is philosophy?
- What is a philosopher?
- Who am I?
- Were we better off in the past and are we less so now, and who was better off then?

This question, the last one, seems to be particularly relevant in the northern hemisphere at the moment, where people are definitely saying ‘2008 was not as all a good a year as 2007. We were much better off in 2007.’

Who was better off? And, what measure are you using for saying you’re better off?

All of these are questions which I’m going to leave out there. They’re questions which take you very, very quickly into the philosophic area.

Let’s talk about Plato himself just for a moment—and to say a little bit about Plato to start, and I’ll come back to Plato having gone to the time before Plato.

Plato was essentially of aristocratic birth. He was born into Athenian aristocracy. Being born into aristocracy he would have been expected to enter into public life and he would have been very well set up for that, he would have been able to receive the training and he would have had the financial backing which that required. So he was very well set up for entering into public life, and he was very close to and related to many of the families who were very influential in Athens. However, it seems that at the age of about sixteen to eighteen, he met up with a man called Socrates, and he was with Socrates until Plato himself was twenty eight and Socrates was then aged seventy. So he had ten to twelve years in the company of this man Socrates, and Socrates was interested in one thing only, philosophy and the pursuit of truth.

Plato came under his influence and spent much of his time with Socrates. When Plato was twenty eight, Socrates was put to death in Athens by hemlock poisoning, having been charged with corrupting the young and not believing in the gods of the state. This devastated Plato. It was a turning point in the life of Plato; this man to whom he was so close and whom he so greatly admired was put to death in this way on those charges which do not sound like political charges, but were actually politically motivated. Behind those charges of ‘corrupting the youth’ and ‘not believing in the gods of the state’ were a number of influential politicians who wanted Socrates out of the way, actually, probably thinking that Socrates would go into exile and not stay around for this execution. You could do that; that could easily have happened. They didn’t know Socrates, they didn’t know what would happen. Anyone else would have left, but Socrates did not leave. He stayed, and he faced death. He died by hemlock poisoning in 399 BC—let’s call that 400, because I’m going to jump back and forward in dates, so it’s handy to work in hundreds. The death of Socrates and the critical turning point in Plato’s life.

Plato describes, in his so-called *Seventh Letter*, the effect which this execution of Socrates had on him. His idea of going into public life evaporated. It’s not accurate to say he lost interest in politics or he was disenchanted with it; he saw things then very differently, and he says in the *Seventh Letter* something which is also quoted in his famous dialogue the *Republic*: he comes to a certain conclusion, and the conclusion relates to the famous ‘philosopher kings’ (you may have heard Plato’s proposal and suggestion

in relation to philosopher kings). And it's against this background that this proposal on philosopher kings comes about, because his question is, 'If I go into politics and devote myself to politics, will that prevent the terrible things which happen in cities and in countries, and will that prevent terrible things like the execution of Socrates happening?' He decided No, and here's what he did decide would work:

Until philosophers are kings, and kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils—no, nor the human race, as I believe—and then only will this our State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day. Such was the thought, my dear Glaucon, which I would fain have uttered if it had not seemed too extravagant; for to be convinced that in no other State can there be happiness private or public is indeed a hard thing.

Republic, V, 473

So the happiness of the people, the happiness of the individual, is guaranteed in this way—the rule of the philosopher. That is his solution.

To paraphrase it slightly, the solutions to our evils and difficulties are not to be achieved by resort to politics, by resort to sociology, by resort to psychology, but by resort to philosophy, because they all originate in the philosophic. That is Plato's belief. It takes root with him when he sees what happens to Socrates. He takes a decision then, that going into public life with the dream of changing the world is not going to work. He doesn't give up, he still has a mission which runs for the whole of his life—because he lives to be eighty years of age—but it is philosophic. Only philosophically can we ensure the happiness of the city and the happiness of the individual. The problems are philosophic.

Now, that's Plato. His philosophic life begins in earnest with the dramatic event of 400 BC.

Now I'm going to go back in time, because Plato has a setting, a setting in time. A lot has gone on before Plato which we know about, and I'm just going to mention one or two other significant characters who appear on the scene before Plato.

I'm going to back now to nearly 600 BC, to a man called Solon. He arrived on the scene when Athens was in crisis, and the people of Athens were not happy. Why were they not happy? They had a problem, and the problem related to their laws and in particular to debt.

Their problem related to debt and the way in which someone who was owed money could exercise huge power and control over you. So if I owed any of you money and I could not pay, you could get your hands on all of my property and you could sell my wife and children into slavery. They were the laws they were faced with. This meant that what the money-lenders did was, they would lend you money, knowing that you could not repay and knowing that they would get everything that you had. And as this was exploited and exploited and exploited. Thousands and thousands of very good people were destitute. People had to leave, people went into exile to escape the horrors and the state of Athens was very close to civil war, it was a very dangerous situation.

The Athenians asked a public official at the time, a man called Solon, whom I've mentioned, who is typically counted not even as a philosopher but as a sage, he's listed as one of the seven sages, they asked him to deal with this. Solon came up with certain proposals and those proposals were very dramatic. On a very simple level, his most dramatic proposal of all was that he abolished and cancelled all the debts.

Only a philosopher could think of it. And then he reinstated the laws so that they were just laws which did not allow you to enslave somebody just because they owed you money. It did not allow you to make them destitute just because they owed you money. The amazing thing as well is, that the Athenians accepted this, they accepted Solon's laws, these measures on debt and some others in relation to the beginning of the democratisation of Athens. Not the final steps in democratisation which were later, but the beginning of this phrase—whereby we say that 'Athens is the home of democracy—began with Solon, because he would see that if you leave the wealthy men to control everything, all that will happen is that they'll change the laws back again and we'll be back where we started. So you have to change the way in which power was exercised or you would be back where you started.

This is what Solon did, this was well known in Athens at the time of Plato which is two hundred years later, round figures, and Plato himself would have traced his ancestry back to Solon; he's in one of those related families.

So here is a very significant event, an event which they knew about and this was done by what they would have called a 'sage'; Solon is called a 'sage'.

There are great stories about him and if you would like to read Herodotus' *Histories*, it's full of great stories about Solon and his adventures.

Then we move forward another one hundred years now. I'm going to come forward now to 500 BC, round figures, so we're now up to 500, another hundred years' time we'll be back up with Plato again.

Now, five hundred BC, two people I'm going to talk about now—Parmenides and Pythagoras.

Now, they're very different people. Parmenides was a philosopher and poet. He wrote his philosophy in a poem. People often summarise Parmenides' philosophy as 'All is one'; Parmenides was the man who said 'All is one'. However, I can assure you that his poem is preserved and has far more lines in it than that one line which says 'All is one'.

Nevertheless, that's what happens in the world today: you go and write a beautiful poem elaborating your philosophy, and people turn round to you and they say 'So you're really just saying All is one, are you?'

The poem opens with a description of Parmenides being drawn in a chariot led by two maidens to meet the goddess. The poem describes him meeting the goddess; the poem describes the goddess welcoming him and the rest of the poem records what the goddess said to him.

Welcome!, since it is by no means an evil lot that sent you forth to travel
 On this road (for it is far away from the wandering of men),
 But right and justice. It is necessary that you shall learn all things,
 As well as the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth
 As the opinions of mortals in which there is no true belief.
 Nevertheless you shall learn these [opinions] also, how the appearances,
 Which pervade all things, had to be acceptable.

This is a very mystical poem, but it contains a very precise and exact philosophy. Plato later wrote a dialogue called Parmenides, describing the meeting of Socrates and Parmenides in Athens at about 450 BC. We are reading that dialogue this week on our week which some of us are attending out in St

Kilda. But that's Parmenides, a mystic, a poet and a philosopher. But importantly, he came himself from Southern Italy, a town called Elea—it was a Greek colony—and he wrote laws for his city also. They turned to this poet, philosopher, mystic to write laws for their city. We don't do that, our thinking has changed. If you want a constitution, would you ask a poet? Even if he said, 'Well my poem is philosophic.' Someone would just say, 'What did he say?'—'He says All is one.'—'I don't think he's the guy we're looking for..'

That's him.

The other person—a near neighbour of his actually, a near contemporary—was Pythagoras, whom you have heard of (if only for his famous theorem that 'the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides'). A scientific man, he discovered the relationship between music and number, discovered how the laws of the universe are reflected through number, and really had insights which have really only come to bear and really be influential and important to us in the past two hundred years—because the realisation that the laws of the universe can be expressed in numerical relationships is the basis of the scientific revolution. But the first person that we know of who had this insight in the Western world is Pythagoras, also around 500 BC.

He also was interested in politics. Firstly he formed what was called a 'cult', and around him was a circle of people; and if you wanted to get into that circle of people it was difficult, and if you did get into it, you had to give him all your wealth. And they said if you left you'd get all your wealth back. It sounds ok.

It was not easy to get into his inner circle, but he got involved in the politics of his city which was called Croton. Because of that, as you can imagine, anyone who's involved in politics gets involved in conflict. There are those who are for you, there are those who are against you. There were two known rebellions against the Pythagoreans in southern Italy. And it really does sound as if the Pythagoreans were burned out of southern Italy. It was quite dramatic. So, there's another aspect of politics again before Plato, also known at Plato's time and that could make you wary; you could say 'Philosophers in politics, we don't want another Pythagoras around here.' He did an interesting thing—interesting for some—he was not a materialistic man, he was not a hedonistic man, he did not worship pleasure. There was a city to the north of his city, a town called Sybaris, and they were hedonistic and they were materialistic. It really does seem as if Pythagoras arranged for that other city Sybaris to be attacked, to be destroyed and to have the local river diverted through the river of Sybaris so that no one could ever, ever think of living in Sybaris again.

So, again, before Plato, Solon—excellent; Parmenides—excellent; Pythagoras—might just make you a little cautious... Certainly a philosopher, and said to be the first person who coined the term 'philosophy'.

Let's come back up to Plato. He knows about all this history. He does not see—and the world at that time does not see—philosophy as separate from politics; he does not see philosophy as something which is studied for a year maybe when you're doing a degree just to get a feel for what all the fuss is about. He does not see it as something you read on your holidays.

It's very real for him. What happened to Socrates is so strongly in his mind, he's not going to do nothing, and he places his trust in philosophy as the prime mover, the most important thing. So, he begins to write philosophic works.

Now, how was he going to do this? What will he do? Will he set out works which say—‘OK, well, philosophers are meant to tell you the truth, so I’m going to get one of my philosophic works and I’m going to set down the truth in my philosophic work and put them out there and people will read them and they’ll learn the truth.’

It’s not what he did. All of his works are called ‘dialogues.’ You’ve heard of the *Dialogues* of Plato. There’s no work of Plato which is not a dialogue except for the letters. Now, I’m not getting into authenticity arguments and debates here, so, we’ll just leave the statement at that.

There are his letters and there are his *Dialogues*. The dialogues are what they say; they are essentially plays, plays in which people discuss philosophy—that’s what they are. His main character—you could probably guess who his main character’s going to be—his main character is Socrates. He shows Socrates discussing philosophy, he shows Socrates philosophising, in the market place with the people whom he meets there. He shows Socrates living in a particular way; he gives you a picture of his character and his lifestyle. But he does another interesting thing as well: he shows Socrates talking to some people, whom, if you were being advised by a PR agency, they would advise you perhaps not to be seen talking to, and certainly not to be photographed talking to, and certainly not to be depicted in a play or a movie talking to. These are characters who had a bad reputation. Plato’s *Dialogues* start coming out 350-360 BC. By then Socrates is well known and what happened to Socrates is well known.

The whole history of that period is well known and in the *Dialogues*, Socrates is shown talking to people like Critias. Now, when I say the name Critias here in Melbourne, in 2009, nobody goes, ‘Oh my god!’ When that dialogue came out and Socrates is shown talking to Critias it is ‘Oh my god!!!’ Critias was a very, very ruthless man, a very tough customer. He was, interestingly, a playwright, he wrote music, and he was a ruthless politician who contrived to kill people, to exile people and aligned himself with the enemy of Athens, Sparta; and, when Sparta finally conquered Athens, Critias took a job ruling on behalf of Sparta, for about a fifteen months. And when he had that job he used his power as ruthlessly as he could to even up old scores.

Plato shows Socrates talking to Critias, and not being negative about Critias. He doesn’t say to Critias, ‘You’re a murdering so and so, Critias, and you need to mend your ways.’ So what’s he doing? What’s Plato up to? Surely he’d like to show his old friend Socrates in a positive light. I mean, I can assure you if you were running for election in Melbourne and you were photographed side by side with Critias on an old photograph of you drinking in a bar with Critias surfaced, it’s over! You don’t want to be seen with Critias. But Plato shows Socrates talking to Critias. What’s he up to? And does it stop there? No. A closer friend (was) Alcibiades, another absolutely ruthless Athenian—high-born, very aristocratic, very pretty, very attractive to both men and women—and he used his attractions with both men and women (he was indiscriminating in that respect). He also was ruthless; his real skill was military, he was a brilliant General.

When it came to the affairs of his own city, he was utterly ruthless, he would kill people, he would just kill people. He was known to just kill people, and he was very wild, very very wild, and he was involved—or said to have been involved—in a great sacrilege which took place over-night in Athenians, whereby many sacred statues were defaced over-night and the Athenians woke in shock to this the next morning. He Alcibiades was said to be involved in that. Alcibiades went to Sicily on a military campaign, the Athenians sent him there. A brilliant general—it should work. However when he was over there, this religious scandal broke so the Athenians sent to Sicily and asked Alcibiades to return to answer changes in relation to the religious scandal. Alcibiades did not like the look of what was going to happen in Athens when he went back, so he defected to the enemy. A close associate of Socrates, shown

in intimate conversation with Socrates in many of the *Dialogues*, has defected to the Spartans. That's what he did, defected to the Spartans. Do you think that's the end of the story? Not at all.

Time passes. Eventually, Athens' military fortunes go to the worse and the worse and the worse, and some people starting saying, 'Look, if we had Alcibiades back he could turn this around.' Critias, the other man, goes into the assembly and proposes that they should let Alcibiades back. Whatever power Critias has, he carries the day and Alcibiades is allowed back. So he returns from Sparta, he reappears in Athens; but shortly afterwards he loses the battle and he's out of favour again.

These are the kind of people whom Plato is depicting Socrates involved with in his *Dialogues*. Socrates talking to people like this, and again there's the question Why?

I'll just make a suggestion and move on. If philosophy is to be of use, who needs to hear it? A few sedate people in a quiet garden on a Sunday afternoon? They're harmless already. They were never going to do any harm. But if you can get Critias to hear it, then you can do something. If you can get Alcibiades to hear it, then you can do something. And the relationship of Socrates and Alcibiades is particularly well depicted in the *Dialogues*. And it really does look as if Socrates saw something great in Alcibiades, but a greatness which was being turned in the wrong direction. And he moved towards Alcibiades to see if he could turn that greatness in the right direction. Philosophy was not for discussion in quiet gardens among civilised, sober, non-murdering people. The people who need to hear it—the people it needs to get through—to are the Critiases and the Alcibiades of this world. Later on Plato himself went to Syracuse to try and turn the king there in a philosophic direction; there seemed to be an opening, and Plato's attitude was, 'It may be a slim hope, but if there's any hope at all, I must go and I must try and turn this pretty tough king in Syracuse in Sicily in this direction—a man called Dionysus of Syracuse. It was not a great success, but this was his attitude towards philosophy; it is not a sedate subject, it is a subject which must be heard; the philosophy must go out, it must enter into the cruel and the coarse and the materialistic and turn them and lift them.

So maybe that is what he's trying to show us in these *Dialogues*. But at the time, I can assure you when those *Dialogues* came out showing Socrates side by side with Alcibiades and Critias—as I said, I mention the names here, nobody raises an eyebrow—at the time it has to have been, 'Oh my god, look who he's with!' It's a small town, people would still have relatives who were murdered by Critias, people would still have had people who suffered at the hands of Alcibiades—it's a small town. But that's the way he shows his philosophy, that's the way in which he shows it.

So let us move on a bit and talk about the philosophy itself.

There's a famous statement by a more modern philosopher, an English man called Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead said, 'All western philosophy is one giant footnote to Plato.' And he elaborates that in a series of lectures called *Truth and Reality*, and they're published and you can look at it. 'All western philosophy is one giant footnote to Plato.'

So whatever Plato did in terms of positioning his philosophy in that way he got something right, and something carried on.

I'm just going to talk for a moment about Aristotle.

Let's go back to debt; remember Solon and the debt? That issue never quite went away, but the ravages that Solon encountered were certainly moderated by the time of Plato. When Plato comes to write the

Republic he can still see the power and influence and control which people can work because they are wealthy. If you are wealthy, you can manipulate things in your favour. And you can use your money to control events and to control the people. And he describes this as he talks about the various forms of government in his dialogue called the *Republic*. But again he talks about debt and the way in which as rich person you can use your money to control. He says this:

On the other hand, the men of business, stooping as they walk, and pretending not even to see those whom they have already ruined, insert their sting—that is, their money—into someone else who is not on his guard against them, and recover the parent sum many times over multiplied into a family of children: and so they make drone and pauper to abound in the state.

Yes, he said, there are plenty of them—that is certain.

The evil blazes up like a fire; and they will not extinguish it, either by restricting a man's use of his own property, or by any other remedy.

Republic, Book 8, 555-556

Now he has another remedy in mind; remember Solon's remedy 200 years before? Abolish the debts. Here's another remedy—it's in Plato's *Republic*. 'What remedy?' they say:

One which is the next best, and has the advantage of compelling the citizens to look to their characters:—Let there be a general rule that every one shall enter into voluntary contracts at his own risk, and there will be less of this scandalous money-making, and the evils of which we were speaking will be greatly lessened in the State.

Republic, Book 8, 556

So, you enter into private contracts at your own risk; so if I lend you \$10,000 and the agreement between us is—you will repay me \$11,000 in a year's time. In a year's time, I discover that you have spent the \$10,000 on a car in which you are driving around Melbourne. Per this, that was a private contract in which you and I entered into, that was my mistake, I should have known. I cannot enforce it in law... That's his proposal in the *Republic*.

But again, this whole question of lending money surfaces.

And really what he is saying is, 'Sure, lend money if you want to, but you have no right to go to law to penalise that person if they do not repay you.' And so a tradition begins which I'm going to take forward now, in quite a few significant jumps.

The next person I want to go to is a very important person in this whole history, a really, really important person, which is Aristotle.

Aristotle arrived down in Athens aged eighteen when Plato was sixty and he was enrolled by his father as a student in the Academy. Aristotle was eighteen, Plato was sixty. He stayed there for twenty years on and off, certainly having his difficulties, until Plato died. At that stage he appears to have severed his connections with the Academy.

Sometimes people in philosophic discourse talk about Aristotle versus Plato. You need to be very careful about that. Aristotle studied for twenty years under Plato. You can very easily just say 'Aristotle is a

Platonist'. He's much more a Platonist than any of us. All we get to do is read something that he wrote. Aristotle was twenty years studying under Plato. A man called Lloyd Gerson—a modern philosopher—has written a book called *Aristotle and Other Platonists*.

So, ok, there's Aristotle versus Plato, but there's that title *Aristotle and Other Platonists*. Aristotle is very much in the tradition and very close to the tradition and has his differences, sure. But on this topic of lending money at interest, Aristotle, in his own work the *Politics*, says this:

The trade of the petty usurer [the extreme example of that form of the art of acquisition which is connected with retail trade] is hated most and with most reason: it makes a profit from currency itself instead of making it from the process which currency was meant to serve. Currency came into existence merely as a means of exchange; usury tries to make it increase [as though it were an end in itself].

Politics, 1258B

Now, that translator has put on the table a word, probably hard to find, this word 'usury'; the lending of money at interest is usury.

The meaning has changed slightly nowadays. Now it means lending at excess interest. The original meaning was just lending money at interest.

So, Plato says 'No', Aristotle says 'No'. The time moves forward, this tradition—of the closeness of philosophy to politics, of the influence of philosophy—does not change. Very much the tradition in the ancient world—captured in the title of a book here by a man called Pierre Hadot. The book is called *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, and you can read it—he's a very serious and very eminent academic. He says, 'In the ancient world, philosophy was a way of life.' It was intricately involved with day to day affairs and with how you yourself lived your life. How you yourself lived your life was determined by your philosophy.

So time moves forward; we move now into the Middle Ages, and I'll just talk a little bit about what's going on there and the way in which these ideas begin to carry forward.

In the Middle Ages, Aristotle's influence is very strong. Particularly in western Europe, the Christian churches took on board and were quite sympathetic with Aristotle. They were more wary of Plato. However, one idea which carried forward with Aristotle, from the quotation you've just heard: lending money at interest—usury—is not philosophically sound. It is not a just thing to do. By which we mean, lending money at interest, being guaranteed a return. Private contracts, no scope to enforce it, fine. Private contracts, no problem. But the idea that you lend money at interest and the laws will support you if the person defaults, no. It's in Plato, it's in Aristotle, it carries into western Europe in that way and in western Europe, although there was money lending, it was effectively against the law: there were laws against mending money at interest and being guaranteed your money back. There were laws against that, mainly under Church jurisdiction; but the whole Middle Ages and the movement between Church law and state law is far too complicated; let's just satisfy ourselves with saying that the law and the spirit of the Middle Ages did not favour lending money at interest.

So, if you move into the period of the Middle Ages, you find usurers are reviled. There are terrible stories about usurers. There's one story about a usurer going into Church to be married and a sacred statue falls down suddenly from the Church, hits the man and kills him stone dead. Again this kind of story was

told around: ‘Of course, it’s just desserts, it’s just desserts. What does he deserve? A usurer!’ Of course, the forces of the Church conspired to smash him with a holy statue. You would be reviled in the street as a Christian practising usury, lending money at interest. This gave scope for the Jews to come in and do this because it was shunned by the Christians. Also, as you may be aware, the Jews were excluded from any other areas of activity, so the ideas of Jews and money-lending grew out of that. They were excluded from any other areas; they had an opening in this area because the Christians were wary of it, and so they moved in.

But there’s a book here, again, which I have some quotes from, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, by a man called R.H. Tawney. It’s quite an old book—it goes back to the 1920s—and this man talks about this period and the way in which lending money at interest was much despised in the Middle Ages.

I’ll just give you a little quote from what Tawney actually says in his book:

No man, again, may charge one for a loan. He may of course take the profits of partnership, provided that he takes the partner’s risks. He may by a rent-charge; for the fruits of the earth are produced by nature, not wrung from man. He may demand compensation—interest—*if he is not repaid* the principal at the time stipulated... What remained to the end unlawful was that which appears in modern economic textbooks as ‘pure interest’—interest as a fixed payment stipulated in advance for a loan of money or wares without risk to the lender.

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, R.H. Tawney, pub. Peregrine, p54

That’s Tawney talking about Medieval England. So if you go for example to Dante’s *Inferno*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* written about 1300, you’ll find the usurers in the Seventh Circle of Hell. Sitting on the burning sand, flapping their hands incessantly. They can’t stop. Some say because when they were on earth they did no useful good work with their hands, and now in Hell they must move their hands incessantly. And their money purses are around their necks and they gaze down at their money purses. That is the usurers, the people who lend money at interest in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The Seventh Circle of Hell. Presided over, interestingly enough, by a monster called Geryon, and Geryon—remember the sting in Plato’s *Republic*, the sting of the money that the rich men insert—Geryon, the monster who presides over the Seventh Circle, has got a terrible sting in his tail. So that’s what happened to you if you were a usurer in the Middle Ages; that’s why Dante put it in the Seventh Circle of Hell.

So, let’s just move forward a short period of time, into the later Middle Ages, and the Medicis.

The Medicis were bankers in Florence. When Dante goes into Hell actually and he arrives there, he finds it full of Florentines in this Seventh Circle, because they are the people who lend the money and, of course they end up down there. There’s one Paduan who said, ‘I’m sick of listening to all these Florentines.’ This is all Medieval local politics. Poor old Dante didn’t die in Florence; he ended up dying somewhere else—they kicked him out.

So, you’re in the Seventh Circle of Hell, you’re a Florentine, but what if you’re a Medici? The Medicis arrive on the scene; they are now called bankers, so we’ve stopped using the term ‘usurer’ and we’ll use the term ‘banker’, is that ok?

Effectively they are doing the same thing, and what’s going on with the Medicis is very interesting, and some of what I say may be a bit unkind to the Medicis; I’m not particularly trying to be kind to anybody, so I’ll just say what some people would say.

Some people would say: the Medicis arrive on the scene, their consciences are burning them because they are usurers: it against all the traditions; it is contrary to the Bible, to *Luke*, Chapter Six, Verse 35; they should not be doing this. So to save themselves, they will do good, and so they become patrons of the arts, and they become patrons of philosophy and they, interestingly enough, commission someone to produce a translation of the *Dialogues* of Plato from the Greek into Latin so people could read them again, because Plato had disappeared out of western Europe effectively. These are the Medicis; so now we see a change, a lot of change starts to happen around this time, and the thinking of the world begins to change very dramatically around this time. In many ways for good; but there's one significant change which we will now need to note, and it's this: in the Middle Ages, if you were a usurer and you walked down the street, people would point to you and say, 'Usurer'; they would shun you, they would point to you as an unjust man. Time moves on, and people who do that become more and more and more respected. Now, if you are a chairman of a bank, a major bank, people will nudge one another and say, 'Oh look, Chairman of Lehmann Brothers!' Good example, huh? For those of you who don't know—it's gone.

We now hugely respect bankers; the tradition has changed enormously. That question which I put up there—and I do leave it as a question; I'm not trying to say it's just to lend money at interest, I'm not trying to say it's unjust—I'm just saying the thinking has changed dramatically.

How? Who changed it? When everyone was going around in the Middle Ages thinking 'unjust, unjust, unjust', who suddenly decided 'just, just, just'?

This whole thing works in a very interesting way. There's another question, 'What is justice?', and that's where you end up with it.

There's a very simple process that goes on when you're educating children. If a child asks you 'What is a bird?' you do not say, 'Well now, I will explain. It is born from eggs, it is a feathered creature, flying—but some are flightless—two legged...' You don't do that.

When you teach a child what a bird is, you point, you say, '*That's* a bird, *that's* a bird, *that's* a bird ... That's *not* a bird! [pointing to an aeroplane overhead, audience laughter]'... and the child will accept it. There's no particular problem with teaching children what birds are...

[*editor*—A slight gap in the tape here.]

We point to certain groups of people in one era and say they're just, and point to the same group of people in another era and say they're unjust; then our concept of what justice is has changed.

My question is, who changed it? We are the inheritors of the consequences, but who changed it? How did they do it?

This is what philosophy does; it works anywhere. We think we're keeping philosophers out, we think we exclude them, we don't bring them in formally, but something is shaping our ideas. Something told Medieval Europe that it was unjust to lend money at interest, and something tells us—and I include myself in it; I have no sense of outrage whatsoever about the lending of money at interest; all I note is that in the Middle Ages they had a sense of outrage. And it's there just as a question, and the other questions are there also.

Maybe just to finish, there's a further and last question on the board. Tawney in his book says that

another significant change happened at the end of the Middle Ages. And the change relates to the question, 'Who am I?' A very philosophic question, but Tawney in his book *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* says the answer to this question changed significantly at the end of the Middle Ages. I'll read you, to conclude now, what he says about it:

From a spiritual being, who, in order to survive, must devote a reasonable attention to economic interests, man seems sometimes to have become an economic animal, who will be prudent, nevertheless, if he takes due precautions to assure his spiritual well-being.

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, R.H. Tawney, pub. Peregrine, p273

A question is, who changed that? Did they consult us when they changed it, and which of the two—I ask you if you tick boxes, which box do you tick?

Way back to a question we began with here at the very start—and it's not unique to Melbourne, it's a picture of the western world—'Where is the temple?'

So—I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

[Questions and answers followed the talk. They will be added to this transcript soon!]