

**Greek Political Thought: An over- view of Platonic concepts of
Philosopher Kings and Education**

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Abstract

This research paper analyses two very crucial aspects of Platonic philosophy of philosopher kings and education. Both these concepts are central to the political philosophy of Plato. Infact Plato's philosopher kings are entirely based upon his concept of education because it is only through the scheme of education that philosopher kings are made .Thus this paper analyses about these two concepts of Plato in a very comprehensive way.

Key Words- Greek, Political, Philosophy, Philosopher Kings, Education,

Plato's theory of philosopher kings is the central doctrine of the Republic. It is a logical result of the theory of justice. Plato divided human mind into three elements viz., **reason, spirit and appetite**. He accorded a supreme position to the element of reason in mind as well as organization of the State. Plato believed that one of the major causes of the prevailing turmoil was that people were not ruling over the state after getting sufficient knowledge and training. He said, "Until philosophers are kings or kings and princes of this world have spirit and power of philosophy, cities will never have rest from the evils." Plato was very much critical about the Athenian practice of choosing their rulers as they were chosen by lot. Plato considered that in order to become a carpenter, one needs some proper training but in order to become ruler simply a lottery will do. Therefore, Plato gives his theory of philosopher kings. Infact Plato's theory of philosopher kings is a logical extension of the doctrine of Socrates that virtue is knowledge. Sabine says this doctrine implies two meanings: "That there is an objective good to be known and that it can infact be known by rational or logical investigation rather than by institution or

guess work of luck”.⁹ His theory of philosopher kings has some assumptions, which are as under:

It constitutes the aristocracy of wisdom and knowledge. It may be described as monarchy or as an Aristocracy. “If there is a single distinguished man among the rulers,” says Plato, “It is called a monarchy, if not, it is known as Aristocracy.” Plato’s philosopher kings would also include both the sexes and the basis of selection would be merit not sex. The philosopher kings are the absolute rulers. They combine absolute power with the highest kind of wisdom. They are above laws. To place them under laws is like placing a doctor possessing perfect knowledge of medicine under a restraint that he must prescribe medicines from the given books. The philosopher kings rule over the community or society in the sense of disinterestedness and social obligation. They would choose the path of truth and philosophy to become rulers. Every one of them will take office as a necessity and not after the fashion Plato says, “The truth remains that a State in which the rulers are most reluctant to governed is always the best and most quietly governed.

Moreover, it prevails for a long time, while the State, were the Rulers are more eager to rule is the worst.”

Plato provides scheme of education for the selection of the philosopher kings. It is a kind of meritocracy and philosopher kings are selected purely on merit and not on the basis of heredity, caste, class etc. The philosopher kings will live a common life and State will provide them the essential goods to live. form one family living under communism of wives and children. They would live a life of austerity and not of luxury.

Philosopher kings have supreme wisdom- A.E. Taylor remarked, “Plato’s philosopher kings are expected to combine two characters which are not often united. They are to be original scientific thinkers of the first order but equally they are to be saints.” They are expected of be combining two characteristics

which are not often united, viz., they are to be original scientific thinkers of first order, and on the other hand they should be saints. In book seven, Plato, on the one hand, gives the example of a cave to contrast the life of illusion and shadows and on the other that of philosophy and reality.

A philosopher king is like a man who has seen the reality and the sun, which is the source of the whole light, but he returns to the cave to take care of those who are still living in the world of shadows. In book sixth, Plato raises an interesting question-why do people regard philosophers as useless? His answer is that the fault lies not with the philosophers, but with those who fail to make use of them. He compares the present state of things in political communities to that of a ship, in which the captain is shortsighted, deaf and does not know much about navigation. of our present rulers of the states. The crews are all quarrelling with each other about how to navigate the ship. Plato says that this is the present attitude of society towards the philosophers. The politicians are like the sailors in the simile of the ship. Thus Plato's theory shows that ruling is an art and this should be acquired through proper training.

Absoluteness in Plato's philosopher kings- Plato's philosopher kings possess absolute Powers while they govern the State. They are above the laws. Plato held that it would be wrong to place them under the laws when they possess supreme knowledge.

There is no conflict between the people and the rulers, when the philosopher kings rule over them with absolute powers. Plato's philosopher kings rule with the instinct of disinterestedness, impartiality and goodness.

Thus Plato treats ruling as a means of serving rather than bossing or ruling over the people. The feeling of wickedness, treachery, appetite and self gain are unknown to him.

He has the supreme wisdom of the ideas or forms including the idea of good and they can never make any mistake.

Provision of the selection of philosopher kings- Plato suggests a proper scheme for the selection of philosopher kings. This scheme is widely based on his scheme of education. His education consists of two stages, elementary and higher. The elementary education starts from childhood and goes up to the age of 20 years. It again has two stages, first is upto the age of 17 or 18 years, when a pupil is trained in writing, literature, music and elementary mathematics and from 18 to 20 years, the physical and military education is imparted to them. At the age of 20, there is a criteria for the selection for the higher education and only those candidates, who are found fit, are to be selected for it. Thus the stage of higher education starts from the age of 20 and goes upto the age of 50. This long period also consists of various stages. Thus after a long time, the philosopher kings are prepared and they rule over the State with the instinct of disinterestedness.

Free from the shortcomings of human nature- Plato is not unaware of the shortcomings of the human nature. He not only knows that there are men of appetite and worldly evils, but also that they can fall into the trap of these evils, if they are not properly warned and protected. These can be the sources of corruption, which can divert the minds of the philosopher kings and lead them towards the path of evil. Therefore, Plato regards family and private property the root cause of evil. He propounds the theory of communism of property and wives for the philosopher kings. If they would adopt this principle, they would be able to give their whole time to public duties, which are bestowed on them.

Plato considers that a man always gives priority to the interests of his family and children over the broader interests of the nation. There are various reasons for which Plato considers family as rivalry between loyalty to State and

selfish motives. Thus by adopting the communism of wives and property, the philosopher kings will rule in the interest of the State and not in their own interests. Plato's theory of philosopher kings has been criticized by various scholars and on various grounds. Some scholars have regarded 'The Republic' as the original philosophic charter of Fascism. Warner Fite observes "Plato had no understanding of personality of individuality and much less of any species of democracy". The most bitter criticism for Plato comes from Professor K.R. Popper, an eminent social scientist with liberal learnings. Prof. Popper regards him an enemy of the open society who sought to arrest all political change. He has identified Plato's philosophy with totalitarianism. All these criticisms were made during the years of Fascism and Nazism in Europe and some part of the contempt which the Liberals and the Marxists felt about Fascism and Nazism came to influence their interpretations of Plato as a thinker later when Crossman and Popper issued the second edition of their book, they themselves confessed that their criticism against Plato was somewhat beyond the extent. The critique of Plato's theory of philosopher kings can however, be discussed under following heads

Despite the above said criticism of this concept of rule of philosophers. It cannot be denied that his concept is the most profoundly original concept is the most profoundly original concept in the entire political thought. He rightly emphasized that only a few persons, who had cultivated their faculties of mind, were competent to rule. The only defect of his philosophy is that he failed to provide practical training to his philosopher kings.

In short, he raised an unsound and impracticable super-structure over a sound philosophy. Professor Sabine sums up Plato's theory to a modern state there is something which is trifle startling about the totally unestimated may in which Plato argues from the breeding of domestic animals to the sexual selections of men and women. Infact, he demands a degree of control, rather self-control,

that has never been realized among any large population. The unity of the state is to be secured. Property and Family stand in the way. Therefore, property and marriage must go. A Family is one thing and a state is something different, and it is better that one could not ape the other.” There is another dialogue from which the theory of education’s philosophical basis may be taken.

In his another work Plato argues that when man dies in his soul which is immortal retains what it had known in this birth. When the soul re-enters this world of mortal men in a new body, it carries with it is remembrance of the previous birth. The purpose of education is to re-awaken and activate the soul so that it can bring out and further develop what it already knows. Socrates is made in the ‘MENO’, to re-activate the mind of a slave by asking him the right kind of questions.

Higher Education: At the age of 20, there will be a selection only those who are found fit would be allowed to receive higher education.

Theory of Education

Plato’s theory and scheme of education is discussed in Books 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th ^{Of} the republic and covers about one third of this great dialogue. The theory of education has very deep connection with the selection of the philosopher kings. The theory of education plays crucial role in bringing unity and peace in the society. Barker says that it cures a mental malady with a mental medicine. Rousseau, one of the contractualists regarded the theory of education propounded by Plato as the greatest theory. He regarded the Plato’s Republic was not a book on Politics at all, it was the greatest book on education ever written .Thus it is amply clear from the remarks of the above said scholars regarding the theory of education that this theory is indeed ,praiseworthy and has importance up to certain extent in the modern world. Plato believed that virtue was knowledge and it was the duty of the state to

impart that knowledge .He held that all the three classes in the state must be properly trained and educated so that may be able to perform their duties effectively and efficiently.

In other words state exists for the promotion of education .Professor Barker brings out intimate relationship between justice and Education thus, “A system of common education will give that training for special work and that instinct for keeping unselfishly to its performance .Which justice demands.”According to Plato education has individual as well as social aspect on the one hand it makes the individual realize knowledge which is synonymous with virtue. It enables the individual to join his eye towards of education .It would be necessary to go in depth before evaluating and discussing the theory of education .

The main features of Plato’s theory give us a clear idea about his theory of education .These basic features can be discussed under the following heads.

State Controlled Education Plato believed in state controlled education .In view of the importance of education Plato insisted that all concerned must be imparted proper education .He considered education as a positive means by which the ruler could mould the character of the people and promote spirit of unselfish devotion towards their duties .He therefore did not favour the idea of leaving education in private hands and insisted on state controlled education .

No Discrimination on the basis of sex : Plato did not favour the exclusion of the women from his scheme of education on the Athenian pattern and wanted that men and women should be given education .Plato did not find any differences between the native capacities of boys and girls and therefore favoured that both should be given similar education .

Strict censorship of all literary and Artistic Works: Plato was in favour of strict censorship of all literary and artistic works to ensure that the youth should not come under bad moral influence. He wanted only the right type of

literature to reach the hands of youth. The ultimate judge of the rightness of the literature was the ruler. Thus he sought to check every piece of literature which could have adverse affect on the children.

A Long Time Task : Plato does not favour for education only in the young age but his scheme of education remains going on up to the age of 50.

Thus it is very long term process and only the super brilliant persons can go through in this process. Plato suggested such type of rigorous procedure because the persons who were imparted this education was to become the rulers of the state one day whom he called the philosopher – Kings. After discussing the main feature of Plato’s scheme of education we can discuss the influence of prevailing theories of education at that time on Plato and also the philosophical basis of his theory of education.

The Influence of the Prevailing Systems of Education: At the time of Plato two diametrically methods of education were in vogue, the Athenian and Spartan. The Athenian system of education was mainly in private hands and it left entirely to he parents to educate their children in the manner they liked the best. On the other hand the Spartan system of education was fully controlled by the state.

Thus it seems that Plato’s scheme of education was influenced from Spartan system of education. Early in Spartan history there was developed and for centuries there was maintained a rigorous system of state-training. It was at the age of seven that the child was taken from his parents and the responsibility of his education was put on the official of the State. In the Spartan education system parents had no control over their children. The students were taught under strict control. They were given primitive school education, training of athletics and preparation for war. The great purpose of Spartan education was to develop courage in its citizens. Man and woman both have right to get similar type of education. Thus by discussing these two

educational systems which were prevailing at the time of Plato it becomes clear that the latter has deep impact on the Plato's theory of education.

Philosophical basis of Plato's theory of Education: Nettleship says that the whole function of education is not to put knowledge into soul, but to bring out the best things that are latent in the soul and to do this by directing it to the right object. Plato says that we must reject the conception of the education professed by those who say that they can put into the mind knowledge that was not there before rather as if they could put sight into blind eyes. The object is said to be turn the eye which the soul already possess, to the light. There is another dialogue from which the theory of education's philosophical basis may be taken.

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Plato's Scheme of Education: Plato's scheme of education has two stages, viz. elementary and higher education. Elementary education starts from the age of 6 and goes up to the age of 20. In other words, a pupil starts his

education at the age of 6 and ends first stage of education at the age of twenty. The second stage starts from the age of 20 and goes up to the age of 50. Plato's scheme of education serves dual purpose, firstly, it meant for the selection of philosopher – kinds and secondly for the training of the philosopher kings. These two stages are as follows.

Elementary Education: Up to the age of 17 or 18, children will be trained in reading, writing, literature, music and elementary mathematics. It might be done with as little compulsion as possible. From 17-18 to 20, the pupils will be imparted exclusive physical and military training. According to Plato the elementary education would consist of “music” and “Gymnastic”. Both these words have more comprehensive meaning, when used in the original Greek sense. The term music as F.M. Corn ford points out, included all the arts over which the music presided: music, art, letters, culture, philosophy”. Similarly, “Gymnastic” included physical training, proper use of diet and knowledge of the rules. While inclusion of Gymnastic in early education shows the influence of Spartan practices. But Plato considered that too much emphasis on athletes will be useless. Therefore, he disapproved heavy athletics training. What he wanted was kind of physical training which would produce persons fit for military duties. They would live life of simplicity not of luxury.

While dealing with training in reading, writing and literature, Plato calls for a severe state censorship of poetry and other forms of literary productions which may be prescribed for the training of the pupils. In that age ‘Homer’ and ‘Heriod’ were the great poets whose writings were taken as the basis of morality. In order to activate goodness and sound character in the young pupils only that kind of literature should be prescribed for them which should make them the right kind of citizens and future philosopher kings. Similarly he insisted that the use of musical instrument and tunes should be such as would arise the right kind of emotions among the pupils.

As Lee points out, the Greeks were more inclined, then we are to associate certain type of music with certain types of feelings and sentiments.

Higher Education:

- At the age of 20, there will be a selection only those who are found fit would be allowed to receive higher education.
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- From 20 to 30, those who have been selected will receive instruction in mathematical sciences with a view “to grasping the connections between several branches of mathematics and their relation to reality”. Alongside, a training in the public service mainly military will be going on.
- At the age of 3, there will be further selection only those who are found fit will be able to get further education.
- From 30 to 35, the selected few would study dialectics, that is philosophy.
- From 35 to 50, they will serve in subordinate, administrative position and take military commands appropriate to their age. And at this stage there would be another selection procedure.

When they are 50, the best will become philosopher – Kings and reach the vision of the good and therefore divide their time between study and governing the state as Supreme Council.

Thus Plato’s scheme of education is a very long term process. The scheme of higher education can be discussed in some detail. For those who are selected to receive higher education, Plato describes the study of mathematical sciences for the next ten year from the age of 20 to 30 years. The mathematical studies move from Arithmetic to plane and solid geometry and then to Astronomy and Harmonics. In recommending mathematical studies, the object of Plato was to make the pupils think in abstract terms. This was also meant for them to deal with military problems. Those who are selected at

the age of 30 to receive further training study dialectics; “dialect” may be taken to mean “purely philosophic activity”. Plato believed that dialectics lead to the knowledge of reality. After serving a period of apprenticeship for fifteen years in administration and military duties. The selected persons become philosopher – Kings proper. Thus Plato’s scheme of education lasts up to the age of 50. As stated earlier, Plato’s contribution to the Science of teaching was of great importance.

If Plato had written nothing else but his chapters on education, his place in western civilization would have been quite secure.

He recognized tremendous role of education as an agency of socialization and particularly that aspect of socialization which deals with the cultivation of political attitudes, beliefs, and values and is described political socialization. He used the education system to select the rules for serving the state.

Plato was the first philosopher who recognized that main purpose of education was to draw out the best which was latent in the soul of the pupil by representing the right kind of environment. He was, as had been stated earlier, the first thinker to recommend that the curriculum of the educational system should be adjusted to the intellectual development of the pupil. He provided a system of education which develops all the aspects of human personality, viz., intellectual, physical, creative etc. Though on the one hand Plato’s theory is praiseworthy, yet on the other hand it is bitterly criticized. The criticism of this theory may be made under the following heads.

Only for the Guardians: It is alleged that Plato’s scheme of education was meant for the guardian class alone and bulk of the population consisting of peasants and artisans were not covered by it. No system of education which ignores majority of the people can be regarded as the just system of education. In the words of George H.Sabine, “It is extraordinary that Plato never

discusses the training of the artisans and does not even make clear how if at all, they are to be included in the plan of elementary instructions.

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