

Greek Political Thought: Analysing Plato

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Abstract

This paper analyses the Greek Political Philosophy which covers the city states and their administration. The Greek city states of Athens, Sparta and Syracuse have been analysed. Thereafter a brief description has been made regarding Plato's works and the various theories mentioned by Plato. In this paper a comprehensive analysis has been made regarding Plato's theory of Justice and Communism of wives and property. Thus this paper mentions about the great idealist of Political Science ,Plato who is considered as teacher of father of Political Science ,Aristotle

Key words – Communism of wives and children, Greek, Justice, Political , Philosophy, Western,

Political philosophy in the West begins with the Greek. The prominent among them are Plato and Aristotle. Plato is generally considered as the first political philosopher and Aristotle as the first political scientist. Socrates is considered to be the 'Guru' of Plato, was not committed to writing; even if he had written anything does not survive today. Plato and Aristotle are not only the first Greek political philosophers but are also rated as the greatest political philosophers ever. Both these philosophers have laid the foundations of political philosophy. No modern political philosopher has dominated the political philosophy for such a long time as Plato and Aristotle.

The ancient Greeks were the first makers of Western civilization. 'They invented Mathematics, Science and Philosophy; they first wrote History as opposed to mere annals. They speculated freely about the nature of the world and the ends of life without being bound in the letters of any inherited orthodoxy¹. It is considered that Aristotle studied the constitutions of 158 States.

After studying them, he gave his theory of 'Classifications of States' in which he mentions about the pure form of governments and perverted form of governments.

¹ Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy, London 1946, P.21.

The Greek City States did not only cover the land which is called Greece but also large parts of Italy, Sicily and of Asia Minor, while each city-state had its own culture, institutions, and autonomy. There were two institutions which were common for all the Greeks. These were the Olympic Games and the Delphic Oracle. The Olympic Games were held every four years at Olympia on the banks of the river Alpheus and athletes from all parts of Greece participated in these games. The Oracle at Delphic was dedicated to god Apollo, and was highly respected by all the Greeks who often came to it for guidance and religious sanction in private and public matters. The City States were relatively small, autonomous and self-sufficient communities. The self-sufficiency which was prevailing over there was more than economic self-sufficiency. It meant self-sufficiency in matters of cultural, social and religious affairs. Generally the cities were walled for the purpose of defence. However, there were certain cities which were without the walls. Most of the City States had links with the sea. Small towns and villages were existing in most of the states. The citizens were also classified into two categories, viz, tribes and phiralties. The City States were small in their territory and size of the population. Some City States has as small an area as 2¼ square miles (DELOS), while others were larger. Sparta, at the time when it was the first power in Greece, commanded an area of 3,360 square miles. In all the States, the population was relatively small. According to an estimate, the city of Athens contained on a rough estimate, a population of 30,000 to 40,000². Some of the Sates had smaller population. A deep study of the ancient Greek City States reveals that a large portion of the population was not a part of the City States. “Slaves, aliens, old men, Children and even in some Greek City States the women were kept outside the pale of citizenship. In Athens, there were about 80,000 slaves as compared to 40,000 citizens³.” In the Greek City States, men were preferred to women, citizens to aliens, owners to slaves, and proprietors to workers. However, all these sections of population suffered from serious disabilities.

Even the City States were having democratic form of government. If it is analyzed in the modern sense of the term, it can be equated with oligarchy. The main objective behind providing citizenship to a fraction of population was that the Greeks possessed sufficient leisure and intelligence, to be able to actively participate in the affairs of the City States. In fact the Greek

² Sir Ernest Barker, Greek Political Theory: Plato and his Predecessors, London 1918, .24.

³ *ibid.*P.33.

gave more preference to men rather than women. In fact there was the prevalence of the idea that men were superior to women.

But Plato was very much advanced from his contemporary ideas when he equally treated the men and women. In his master work, 'The Republic' Plato gave the equal opportunity to women along with men for becoming the guardians. Two city states were considered to be the most important these were Athens and Sparta. Athens was famous for her philosophy and literature while Sparta was famous for personal values of its citizens and courage of her soldiers.

Athens came into the limelight on the eve of the two Persian wars in the 5th century B.C. Its intellectual glory, however, began under the leadership of Pericles, who governed Athens by the free choice of its citizens. Socrates and Plato made great contributions when Athens was declining as a great political power. The original constitution, which was given by Solon to Athens, was overthrown by an Athenian noble, Pisistratus (560-510 B.C.). In the 5th century B.C. Athens established a democratic constitution under the wise leadership of Pericles. The peculiar feature of the democratic set up of the Athenian democracy was the great power held by the General Assembly. This assembly met in an open place named Phnyx. There was another council of five hundred elected by the Ecclesia to deal with the problems of administration and government. The City State of Sparta was larger than Athens in territory and other material resources. Plato had mentioned about Sparta in his book, 'The Republic.' The Spartans possessed virtues like discipline, courage valour etc.

This knowledge is not simply right opinion but true knowledge of the good. Secondly, Plato in the Republic expounds the Socratic view that statesmanship is an art, like the art of healing or music that requires expert knowledge. Everybody can't become a ruler. Like any other art, the art of ruling can be learnt. Thus Socrates preached the cult of professionalism in politics. The main argument of Socrates is that political instinct is no substitute for the knowledge of the art of governing men.

Whereas the knowledge can be taught and transmitted to successors, instinct cannot be transmitted as such.

Thus there is a need for expert knowledge based on the first principles for the conduct of public affairs. Plato developed it into the idea of the philosopher kings and the doctrine of specific function based on specialization.

Plato was born in 428 or 427 B.C. He belonged to a distinguished aristocratic family of Athens. His formative years were spent in Athens. He is universally acclaimed as one of the greatest philosopher of all times. Even his critics do not deny his philosophic profundity, literary genius and the immense influence of his philosophy which he has exercised on the western civilization. K.R. Popper describes him as “the greatest of all philosopher and expresses the view that Plato’s moral and political philosophy as an intellectual achievement, without parallel though morally repulsive and indeed horrifying⁴.” The first twenty three years of Plato’s life were spent under the shadow of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, which began in 432 B.C. and ended with a brief interlude of precarious peace from 421 to 415 B.C.

The democratic constitution was overthrown by an oligarchic faction, but it did not improve the matters. A year later, democracy was restored, but the democratic terror was even worse than the oligarchic misrule.

Athens gradually drifted into its defeat and the loss of empire which took place in (404 B.C.). At the age of forty, Plato crossed over to Sicily and met Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse. He came into contact with Dion who was the brother-in-law of the tyrant and made him his disciple. It appears that Dionysius became angry with Plato due to the latter’s outspoken condemnation of Dionysius’ tyranny. Plato was sold into slavery but was later brought back by Athenian friend. In 386 B.C., Plato founded his academy, which was the first school of higher learning in the West. Taylor remarks that “it was the turning point in his life and in some way the most memorable event in the history of Western European Science⁵.”

Plato founded the Academy for two purposes viz disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and the training of the legislators and the administrators. It offered the study of philosophy in all its branches. In 367 B.C., Plato received an invitation from his friend and disciple, Dion of Syracuse, to visit the City State and convert the new tyrant Dionysius II, then a youth of thirty, to the truths and wisdom of philosophy.

Plato had dedicated his life to the cause of improving the conditions of City States through philosophy and education. So he did not let the opportunity to slip by. He decided to visit Syracuse and make a serious attempt to teach Dionysius and Dionysius responded to his teaching

⁴ .K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, (London, 1962) 4th Edition vol.1, P 335.

⁵ A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his works*, (London, 1949) 6th Edition P5.

but the feeble character of the ruler and jealousies of the courtiers leading to Dion's exile, led to the failure of Plato's mission and he returned to Athens without achieving any success. In 361-360 B.C., Plato made another attempt to convert Dionysius into philosopher-king, but again he failed. Now onwards, Plato took no interest in Syracuse and devoted himself to the affairs of the academy.

He died in 348 B.C. at the age of forty, while he was still working on the unfinished manuscript of his last and longest dialogue, *The Laws*. According to Maxey, "There was much in Plato of the ephemeral and the provisional but the mid rib of the philosophy was timeless and universal." A.E. Taylor says, "Plato is the voluminous author of classical antiquity whose works seem to have come down to us whole and entire nowhere in later antiquity do we come on any reference to a Platonic work which we do not still possess." This refers to his dialogue surely. The ancient records have preserved 35 dialogues and 13 letters of Plato. The dialogues follow the method of argument discussion and question and answer. In the exposition of Plato's ideas and theories, Raphael Demos describes them as 'Drama of Ideas'. They possess superb literary qualities. Near about in all the dialogues, there is a group discussion between Socrates and his companions, which may sometimes include such standing as Parmenides and Protagoras.

Plato himself does not appear in any of the dialogues; though his name occurs in *Apology* and *Phaedo*. Socrates appears in all the dialogues except *The Laws*. In most of his dialogues, Socrates is cast in the role of a hero. It is he who gets the best of his arguments and dominates discussion. The exceptions are the *Parmenides*, the dialogue dominated by Parmenides; *the Sophist and the statesman*, where Socrates is presented as a subdued character and many of the ideas attributed to Plato are put into the mouth of a stranger from Elea.

The Method of Plato- Plato adopted the dialectic method in resolving the various ethical, political and metaphysical problems. According to Eduard Zeller, "The dialogues imitate the Socratic conversations." In almost all his dialogues, Socrates raises some fundamental ethical or metaphysical problem, and asks his companions to throw light upon this. He himself appears to be an ignorant, knowing nothing. His role is to question others. It is also characteristic of Plato that he uses analogies to push home his point.

The Analogies are sometimes drawn from arts after the fashion of Socrates and sometimes from nature.

He cites the example of a doctor or a pilot to show the knowledge and skill in the management of the affairs of the States. Similarly, he gives equal opportunity to women to become guardians.

In the Republic, Socrates raises the issue-what is justice or righteousness? Those of his companions, who had knowledge of this subject, gave answers or provided the [preliminary exposition of the concept.

But Socrates cross-examined them and realized them their fallacies. For instance, in **The Republic**, much of the exposition of Platonic philosophy is in the form of long and never ending talks to Socrates. Plato himself defines his dialectic method in **The Republic** as, “The power of conversion”. Its object is the discovery and pursuit of truth as well as moral and intellectual excellence. Robinson says, “Dialectic was not a substitute for thinking but a way of thinking⁶.” It is training of soul. It is a method through which a clear distinction may be made between mere opinion and knowledge. In his dialogues, we can observe and travel with Plato on his voyage of discovery through all the processes of theory making, its difficulties, its inadequacies and unfinished ending of his difficulties. G.C. Field remarks, “Most of the philosophers aim at presenting their conclusion to us in systematic form and it is difficult to discover the process through which they arrive at them. In the case of Plato, he provides in his dialogues with, as it were sections, greater or smaller of the processes that his mind was going through and our difficulty is much more often discover the conclusion that they eventually led him to⁷.” Another perspective of Plato’s method is the use of analogies. A number of analogies are used to support argument or to draw or to strengthen a conclusion in the Republic. An analogy is made between man and City States to discover the nature. Justice or Righteousness, first in the City State, is to be able to understand its nature in man.

According to Sir Ernest Barker, “The use of analogy is difficult and false analogies are easy. Another perspective of Plato’s method is the use of analogies. A number of analogies are used to support argument or to draw or to strengthen a conclusion in the Republic. An analogy is made between man and City States to discover the nature. Justice or Righteousness, first in the City State, is to be able to understand its nature in man. According to Sir Ernest Barker, “The use of analogy is difficult and false analogies are easy. He was interested in the search of an ideal state. Infact, Plato wanted to establish a perfect State under the rule of philosopher kings. **The**

⁶ Richard Robinson, Plato’s Earlier Dialectic, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1953, 2nd Edition, P 7.

⁷ G.C. Field, The Philosophy of Plato, Oxford university press, London, 1949, PP189-190.

Republic, the Laws and the Statesman are conversation of persons in search of a perfect State. In nutshell, it can be concluded that most of his ideas were Utopian in nature. He himself admitted that the idea of ideal State was Utopian.

Fundamental Issues of Plato's Political Philosophy

Plato's three dialogues are of utmost importance for the vivid exposition of his political philosophy, viz. **The Republic, The Statesman, and The Laws**. The Republic was composed in the early part of his life while the other two works were prepared in the later part of his life. Several fundamental issues are raised by Plato in his dialogues. The most important issue is the good governance of the City States through philosopher kings. **Idea of Good Governance-** In all the three dialogues, the fundamental issue remains the same, viz., How shall we choose our rulers so that States are properly constituted and governed?

In **The Republic**, Plato asserts that the only way of bringing peace, stability and good governance to the State is to place all authority under the philosopher kings. In **The Republic** he rejects many forms of governments that prevailed during his own times. Tyranny, in which a tyrant rules for his own purposes, is considered to be the worst form of government. Democracy is a kind of anarchy where everyone is law up to one's self. He also rejected the government by rich (Oligarchy) and government by the soldiers (Timocracy).

Plato assumes that for all other professions a formal training is needed but for running the affairs of states simply a lot will do. He rejects this notion and puts forward his theory of philosopher-kings, who will rule over the State disinterestedly. He proposes a scheme of Communism of wives and children for his philosopher kings, so that the rulers maintain unity among themselves and are kept away from the worldly temptations of self-gain.

Proper Relationship between the Rulers and the Codes of Laws- Plato raises another issue in his dialogues whether the rulers are above the codes of law or whether their authority is limited by the laws. The traditional point of view of the Greek was that the authority of the rulers should be controlled by the laws. The citizens should be moulded into the spirit of the laws through education.

Plato provides methods to achieve the goal of just State and just man. Sir Ernest Barker defines Platonic justice as "it consists in all the classes in the society performing the function for which they are best suited for."

Nettleship says, "The principle of justice in the society is that each man should devote himself to

that one function in the State of which he was by nature best fitted.” Plato’s theory of philosopher kings is thus a logical deduction from his theory of justice. Plato’s theory of justice can be further discussed under the following heads viz. Just State and Just Man.

Just State- In Plato’s ideal State, which is also the just State, differentiation of works is made on the basis of specialization of functions. There are three classes in the State: Economic, Auxiliary and Guardian. Plato identifies three virtues with different classes. Plato follows, what according to Barker, may be called the method of residues or elimination.

The guardian class has reason, therefore, it rules. The economic class has appetite, therefore, they do trade, while the soldier (Auxiliary) class has the courage, therefore they fight.

As these three classes have different types of instincts therefore, they perform their different works. But here the problem arises, how men belonging to all these classes will be found. Plato gives solution to this problem and puts forward his theory of education by which all these persons are trained. Plato’s theory is very much elaborative which deals with detailed provisions about the education of the Guardian class.

Plato’s theory of education is based on the fundamental philosophic principle that its objective stimulates and draws out natural capacities and aptitude of pupil by providing them with the right surroundings. Plato’s system of education is controlled entirely by the State.

He opposes the private handed education and professes for the education under control of the State. The scheme of Plato’s education is that up to the age of 17 or 18 children will be trained in reading, writing, literature, music and elementary mathematics. This may be done with as little compulsion as possible. From 17-18 to 20, the pupils will be imparted exclusive military training and physical training. After the stage of elementary education, comes the stage of higher education. Only those who are found fit are allowed to receive the same. The higher education starts from the age of 20 and lasts up to 50 only those persons are selected for it who qualify the previous stage. Thus Plato’s theory of education illustrates about the selection of the Guardian class. It provides for the education of the ruling class and the soldier class, but does not mention about the above point of view.

JUST Man- In his second book of The Republic, Plato discusses the problem of just man, which also constitutes a major part of the theory of justice. He analyses human nature and identifies three types of motives or impulses in the mind or soul: *reason*, the prime that takes decisions and guides desire; *appetite*, which makes the physical pleasures; and *courage*, which stands for

ambition. According to Plato, different men share these parts in different proportion. Some are dominated by the element of reason, some by the spiritedness and some by the appetite.

Just Man is a rational man whose soul makes up the elements of spiritedness and appetite and subordinated to reason. Justice is then called the excellence of the soul. It produces harmony in soul and constitutes what may be called the health of the soul.

In 10th book of The Republic, this question is raised whether the just man is happy man and which is of the two are more profitable justice or injustice. It is argued that a just man acts rationally in all the situations of life. He can do nothing wrong. He is rewarded by the society in his life. He has good name, can hold position of authority and can marry whomsoever he likes etc. Plato goes further and says that just man is rewarded even after his death. He narrates the myth of ER to prove his point of view. ER is killed in a battle and is buried but he comes back to life the twelfth day and tells the story of what he saw in the world beyond this life. He saw that just souls are better treated than the unjust ones. Professor K.R. Popper criticizes the theory of justice propounded by Plato on various grounds-

Give rise to Guardian class- Plato's justice gives rise to the guardian class. According to this theory, ruling is the privilege of a particular class. Modern age is the age of democracy and the representatives of the people are elected by the people without any sort of discrimination such as caste, creed, race etc.

Gives rise to Totalitarianism- According to Professor Popper, Plato's concept of justice gives rise to totalitarianism and completely ignores the humanitarian principles like equality, individualism and freedom. On the other hand, he emphasized on the principles of natural privileges. Guardians are given the sole power to rule while the other two classes are subordinated to them.

Violation of Human Psychology- To prevent the ruling classes from misusing their powers, Plato provides communism of property and wives in complete violation of human psychology. In fact, he makes too much demand on human beings by insisting that they must give up their right of family and property. Such a wrong practice cannot be put into practice anywhere in the world. Thus Plato's theory of justice violates the basic principles of human psychology.

Not practicable in the Modern State- His theory of justice could be possible only in the City States, where the population was very little and every individual was expected to do the work that was assigned to him. In the present context, when the population of every state has increased

too much, the three fold division of labour cannot fix the function which are performed by the different groups of people or individuals.

Plato provides the individual only his one third capacity- Plato advocates that each individual possesses three qualities viz. reason, spirit and appetite. He wants that each individual should devote himself for one faculty only. Thus he wants the ruler class to develop the instinct of reason, the soldier class to develop the instinct of spirit and the economic class of appetite. However, this division cannot be justified as it limits an individual to one aspect only.

Based merely on moral principles- Plato's concept of justice is based on moral principles and lacks legal sanction as it is not enforced by any legal court. It is based on self-control and self-obligation in the interest of society.

The experience from history shows that at no stage of history mere moral sanction have been able to protect the social goodness. Much of the criticism leveled against Plato's concept of justice is unjustified and falls flat if we remember that Platonic justice is not a legal matter, nor is it concerned with any external scheme of legal rights and duties. Plato considered justice as root of well ordered society and regarded it as the harmony between man and man, the orderly organization of relationships.

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