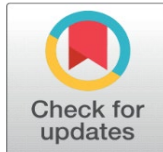
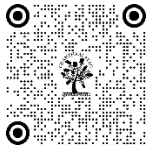


REVISITING CLASSICAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.4416](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.4416)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

The Republic is one the greatest works of political philosophy. This was precisely Plato's intent: if the Republic could not alter people's politics, it could at least alter the lives of those who read it. It is written in the imperative mood- not by way of an analysis, but rather for warning and counsel. The Republic is in many respects a polemic- directed against current teachers and the practice of contemporary politics. The current teachers against whom it is directed are the younger generation of Sophists. Its purpose is the substitution of a true conception of justice for the false views which common error and sophistic thinking had contrived to spread. Whether he is combating the theory of the sophists, or seeking to reform the actual practice of society, justice is the hinge of Plato's thought, and the text is his discourse.

Keywords: Ideal Republic, Philosopher King, Morality

Before describing the third wave, Socrates says that it was hard for him to escape the first two waves and now he has to deal with the 3rd wave, the most problematic of all. Socrates described that it is his search for morality and his efforts to distinguish it from immorality that has led him to describe what an ideal state would be like to which Glaucon agrees. Socrates then talks about the difference between theory and practice. If certain things are said in a theory and there is no such example in reality then that does not amount to the incompetence of the theoretical construct. Socrates is then agonized about the failure of political communities. When asked by Glaucon, he then, states his version of the ideal state and describes the third and the most challenging wave in the words,

"Unless communities have philosophers as kings, or the people who are currently called kings and rulers practice philosophy with enough integrity- in other words, unless political power and philosophy coincide, and all the people with their diversity of talents who currently head in different directions towards either government or philosophy have those doors shut firmly in their faces-there can be no end to political troubles, my dear Glaucon, or even to human troubles in general, I'd say, and our theoretical constitution will be stillborn and will never see the light of day. Now you can appreciate what made me hesitate to speak before: I saw how paradoxical it would sound, since, it is difficult to realize that there is no other way for an individual or a community to achieve happiness."

The theory of the philosopher ruler was the linchpin of Plato's Ideal state. The real ruler as Plato tells us must be a philosopher and the philosophic nature is reserved for a few souls, "a whole people cannot be a philosopher" (494 A). The ultimate test of a philosopher ruler is his philosophic power. He must know the "idea" or essence of Justice and of Beauty, and of Temperance, in order that he may fashion into their likeness the characters of whom he rules. In doing so, "they will first look at natural justice, and beauty, and temperance and again at the human copy.... And one feature they will erase, and another they will put in, until they have made the manners of men, as far as possible, comfortable to the divine."

Ultimately he must know the Idea of which all these Ideas are but phrases, and from which alone comes every perfect work- the Idea of Good. According to Socrates, in the ruler, the final element of mind must express itself, which grapples with the mystery of existence, and arrives at a solution of its meaning. The premise of the Republic is based on the fact that state is a product of man's mind and that each aspect of the state is the product of an element of mind. The synthesis of the state from each of its spiritual factors cannot therefore but culminate in the conception that it is not only an economic nor only a military but also a rational organization, and that, as such an organization, it must ultimately be guided by the highest reason which is possible for man. The "philosopher-king" is not a mere addition on insertion: he is the logical result of the whole method on which the construction of state has preceded. Speaking about the selection of philosophers, they will be receiving proper education through which they will be taught that desire for power and pleasure is not the basis of political or individual happiness and fulfillment.

After reading Plato's theory of philosopher ruler, we can understand that Plato's philosopher by his grasp of the Idea of Good was best qualified to rule and that he would be devoid of economic and emotional considerations, he would be public-spirited and wise. Following the arguments of Platonists, we can also say that just as a sick person seeks the help of a doctor for cure, similarly a diseased polity must take the assistance of wise and noble rulers. A diseased polity was one where naked ambition, acquisitiveness and appetite subordinated wisdom, reason and temperance. In the words of Nisbet, Plato's political philosophy is a blend of rigorous social nihilism and political affirmation. The nihilism springs from his desire to cleanse the political state of all influences he saw as erosive and destructive of political unity. The mission of the political community is the means whereby all the native powers and excellences of the individual are brought to fruition.

The idea of philosopher rulers is very alluring even though it may not be convincing. Seen positively, this idea, if brought into existence would transform the very nature of politics. If a philosopher is made to rule the state, a person who is hungry for knowledge, a lover of wisdom and has no quest to attain political power then in that Ideal state there would be no corruption, no political discord and no poison could enter the body politic of that state. Philosophers would prove to be the ideal rulers as they are not just the lovers of truth and wisdom but they are also the protectors of the community and good life. They are totally devoid of materialistic pleasures and ambitious desires. Hence proving the point that statecraft is ultimately the soul craft and politics thus becomes an inseparable part of ethics. For Plato, an ideal state ruled by a philosopher ruler was a divine institution perfectly worthy of emulation and imitation. It can also be realized that political philosophy became a practical enterprise, in which various possibilities of establishing a good society in light of the philosopher's vision of good was the aim. It could be compared with the Sun, for it illuminated all intelligible and knowable things.

Plato's attitude to change was peculiar and contradictory. On the one hand he was suspicious of change and on the other hand he was desirous of pursuing scientific investigations and contemplation that would revolutionize men's perceptions, outlooks and even their political systems. The problem lies in the fact that there is too much unity and absolutism in Plato's theory. But Plato counters the claim and even justifies that absolute control by saying that the citizen of the Platonic community would be benefitted by the exercise of absolute power because in the last analysis, he would be compelled and controlled not by a personal power but by the impersonal agents of timeless truth.

The criticism of the theory of philosopher kings however does not end here. Plato also denied the participation of the average person in politics and decision making processes. By discounting the opinion of the average person, Plato tried to play safe and prevent any opposition, criticism, dissent or even disobedience. He justified it on the grounds that these led to factionalism and particularism, whereas a good society should promote the common good.

Plato even rejected majoritarianism and popular participation on the grounds that the ordinary person did not have the capacity to comprehend absolute truth and the Idea of good. To ignore the political view of the humblest of citizens and deny avenues for participation was not only patronizing and authoritarian but also unhealthy. The strength of a political system was derived from the participation of its citizen members, for it ensured the accommodation of diverse interests and opinions through consensus. A political society that strived to achieve a greater degree of unity by being

insensitive to diversities would be inherently weak. "A political judgment is "true" when it is public, not public when it accords to some standard external to politics." (Wolin)

This Platonic ideal was also criticized by Aristotle for confusing unity with harmony. Aristotle argued that politics was not merely about the rule of the capable. A stable polity would have to accommodate the aspirations of different claimants. If a political community was tightly organized and unified then it would cease to be a political association. The essence of the state was its diversity, making it different from other organizations. The state and the family represented two different kinds of organizations and both ought to remain the way without either imitating the other. In view of the nature of the state and governance, it would be better for a ruler to be worldly wise than to be wise in the world of ideas. Even a philosopher ruler would be better off by being receptive to views and perceptions of others, instead of merely acting upon his vision of truth.

Plato's unflinching opinion that absolute power was safe in the hands of the philosophers was misplaced. Concentration of power would have to be prevented for it would generate vice. Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and its Enemies* condemned Plato's ideal state as being the enemy of the open society. Since people were not given any rights, or even the right to dissent in an ideal state and all the power was concentrated in the hands of philosopher rulers made him to believe that it would only culminate into a totalitarian state. Another important criticism is that the main function of the philosophers is to philosophize and to spread their knowledge and ideas of virtue. Will such people even be competent enough to govern the society? This is because ruling and philosophizing are two different things, the philosophers being experts in the latter.

It is also important to note here that philosophers, despite being the guardians of truth, will rule on the basis of a noble lie, a myth, about the reason for their class position within the society. This myth is related to the bodies of people belonging to different classes made up of gold, silver and brass. The problem is that this lie is contrary to Plato's assertion that injustice or any virtue is identical to knowledge or truth. A myth is a shadow, an illusion, a part of the world of becoming. This remains true regardless of the good intent behind the myth. And the fact that Plato feels compelled to hold his ideal state together with a lie- that is, with an act of "injustice"- indicates that even he recognized the limited capacity of truth to reform politics.

And most importantly, Plato doubted his own theory. Fundamental irrationality is at the very heart of politics. Despite receiving a proper education, there are still chances of philosophers abandoning their virtue and ruling in the interests of maintaining their own power. Perhaps human condition is too ambiguous ever to conform to strict dictates of truth. This problem had even confronted Plato. Therefore, he doubts the very version of his ideal state (*kallipolis*) that he wishes to prove.

Despite the criticisms, one cannot ignore the fact that Plato was the first systematic political theorist and a study of the western philosophical tradition begins with his masterpiece, "Republic." Plato has become the legislator of western philosophy for he has presented a number of problems to solve for posterity. Plato's theory will always remain at the heart of Western political philosophy and political idealism. Even if one disagrees with Plato, he/she cannot remain untouched by the alluring ideas and theories presented in his text. This is the beauty of his writing.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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