

SP04

"Political Science
in the Republic of Plato"

Philosophy III

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Political Science in the Republic of Plato.

In a discussion of Plato's Political Science, it would be interesting to note the influence of his environment and temperament upon his theory. This influence naturally extends through all his philosophy. The educated Greek world was sophistic. The sophistic movement itself was a product of its environment. All the previous philosophical analysis had resulted in scepticism. Opinion was everything. There was no moral absolute. Night was night. That which pleased the mob, was good. There was nothing permanent or eternal. All this resulted in a loosening of the public morals. Governments were corrupt and unstable. Nothing was believed in, nothing was held to be ultimately true. Plato's philosophy was, in some sense, a reaction to this. He was an aristocrat and had little faith in common man. But more than this he was under the influence of Socrates. He saw the necessity of having something permanent, of having morals as good in themselves, and of having a sense of oneness and purpose to the whole system. Partly as a result of this reaction, Plato's Republic is full of discrediting remarks about the multitude, and about freedom. His State is essentially static. His social set up is rigid and least susceptible to change. It can be said that in this aspect of his political science Plato was affected to some degree, partly, by his aristocratic background, partly by his reaction to sophism and partly by the influence of Socrates. These do not wholly account for his philosophy or political science but they no doubt had a remarkable influence.

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Hobbes, who held the
contract theory of the
state, derives it
from a view of
human psychology.

a very interesting aspect of Plato's political science is its source. Usually political scientists go back in history to prove their theory. Some go back in the history of mankind to show that the first state or first social group was the family. Therefore when the state evolved it had the same social structure as the family with the father or chief at the head. This is very interesting except that some primitive societies have government but no families. Others, like John Locke, hold to the "Compact" theory of government and attempt to prove it by the historical method. Naturally man is free and he gave up sovereignty over himself to a governor for the public good, and this governor controls this sovereignty only while he is acting for the public good. The majority is the judge. But Plato's source is unique. He mistrusts the Heraclitean idea of change and evolution. He emphasizes character. As an outcome of this his political science has a psychological source. As the soul is, so is the state. The state is the individual " writ Large". As the soul in the individual is divided, so society in the state is divided. The soul has three levels, therefore society has three levels. Therefore in Plato's ideal state there is a static and rigid class structure. Although there is equality of opportunity, all other forms of equality are done away with. Because his source is not in history, there is no talk of "natural rights" or the "will of the governed". The state is what it is because the soul is that way.

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But it is decided
for him by his own
nature.

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"Democracy" in Pl's
view is of course the
democracy of his
own day in Athens.
It was a direct form
of gov. in which
every adult citizen
voted on the proposed
measure, and offices
were distributed by
lot - presumably on
the supposition that
one citizen was as good
as another.

Obviously our democracy
is very different from
this.

as has been said, Plato's ideal state is a class structure

It is one in which there is equality of opportunity, but one man must have one job. Once placed in a category, the individual remains there. He has one function, and that is decided for him. According to Ruskin, a man under a system such as this would be a tool, not a human. The tendency in this state would be for the individual to become a means, not an end. If the state is the individual "writ large," the individual would tend to become merely a function in the state. At this rate the, perhaps unconcerned, idea of the sanctity of the individual is given no place. The idea that every man has a right to say how he shall develop himself is given up for the good of the state. When this right is given up under compulsion, as it is in this state, I personally believe, something is wrong.

Of course this right (as in the beginning of the "Republic") he persuaded to do so. But, that one man has the right to tell another how to run his life, unless the latter willingly subjects himself to this discipline, is basically wrong. That he should be ordained by God I am not prepared to believe. Thus Plato, with his distrust in the common man, gives him no right to say how he shall develop himself. The idea of the worth of the individual, such as it is, has no place in his political science.

The scrapping of this right is not done in vain however. Plato faced with problems and chooses this way to combat them. In a democracy there are two big weaknesses. One is that a multitude is

never philosophical, and two, all people are not equal. Both of these are facts that have to be faced. The "rights of man" is a dictum somewhat mystical, these are facts. In facing them Plato rejects democracy, found in his scale of Governments. Unlike Aristotle he doesn't even give democracy credit for being able to be a good form of Government. The individual and his rights are forgotten in order that the whole might benefit.

Plato's class structure is, however, none the less idealistic.

His social distinctions are on the basis of ability, goodness and wisdom. "Philosophers are kings." and by Philosophers Plato means very high minded and worthy men; men whose purpose in life is to know and live what is true beautiful and good. These kings must have dislike for public office except in so far as it is an opportunity to serve. Plato's whole political science is based on an optimistic faith in well chosen governors. In a democracy the faith is in the common man and his ability to know what is good for him. In the Republic the faith is in the goodness of the rulers. In democracy the hope is that corruption will be done away with because every body has his say. In the Republic corruption is to be done away with by the right development of the character of the Governor. His whole philosophy of Government is based on a faith in character. This character is on the part of the ruler not the common man.

In the Republic, Plato's method of stamping out corruption might be contrasted with the method in a democracy

In a democracy the emphasis is upon legislation. Everyone has a say in the making of the laws, therefore laws will be passed to protect the public good, in order that the people might know what is good for them education is necessary, but the emphasis is upon legislation. On the other hand Plato mistrusts law making. Character is all important and for him, laws never changed character. Again and again he emphasizes education. Concerning criminals he says "Such men are produced in that city through want of education, and bad nurture and bad government." He tells us that the whole state depends upon the right education of the Governors. A large part of the book deals with this procedure. First there is the use of eugenics and the consequent doing away with the family. Then there is the right balance between music and Gymnastics from which all evil aspects are removed. Next experience in the field and lastly the dialectic. All prospect is taken from the prospective rulers so that they will have no desire for gain. The result is (we hope) a ruler without corruption. He can be trusted with the state. Education and upbringing are Plato's methods of making an ideal state.

It might be a good idea to sum up here, the accomplishments of Plato's political science. It has handled the problem of inequality of individuals and falseness of mob opinion. It has done away with corruption by education and character building of the governors. It has stamped out class war, a troublesome modern problem, by forming a class society based on a merit

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Probably your criticism
is true. Though I
wonder if the state
will really be static,
since the conditions
would be always
changing.

And - unfortunately -
Plato thinks it would
degenerate, descend
through Timocracy etc.
to Dictatorship.

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but with equality of opportunity. It has formed an ideal state by getting every one to work together in a harmony for the good of the whole.

There is this fact however, and doubtless it was intended, that Plato's state is essentially static. His social and economic order is very simple. There is no room for evolution or growth. The state must be small and its society and tastes must be simple. Our present economic systems would not fit into his set-up at all.

And there is also the previously mentioned fact that the sanctity of the individual is not respected. The worth of each individual man, and his right to develop himself is denied. If there is an ethical order and if an individual ought to develop himself then he must have freedom to do so. If it is all done for him, if education and heredity are everything and there is no free will, then an individual's purpose in life is silly and his life is silly. And, an individual's life is silly if he is a means, not an end in himself. And I believe that the state is useless if the good life of the individual is secondary to it. For me is basically wrong that the "producers" are put in a class corresponding to the lowest level of the soul. That an individual be placed in such a category is evil. In such a state the worker will not think and the thinker will not work and the result will be an inescapable materialism and not a harmony as was intended. For me at least this aspect of Plato's political science is, to say the least, unhappy.

P.S. It has been said that all criticisms of Plato are misinterpretations of him.