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Plato's Ideal State: Governance And The Pursuit Of Truth In Politics

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Abstract

Philosophers throughout time have expressed their diverse concepts and visions of the state as a product of human society. One of these, Plato, considered the perfect state as an authority with absolute inviolability and inalienable immunity. In his philosophical research, he distinguished the essential role of laws in an organized society and particularly focused on the dual nature of these laws: both binding and punitive, as well as their curative role against moral evils in an organized society. Plato's aristocratic origins served as the foundation of his political engagement in the society of his time. This circumstance, along with the acquisition of ideas from one of antiquity's most prominent philosophers, Pericles, who attempted to democratize Athenian society, significantly influenced and shaped Plato's philosophical worldview. Subsequently, he became part of the lineage of prominent Athenian thinkers, such as Socrates, Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Aristotle, who established the foundations of philosophical studies. Until his death, Plato remained Socrates' student and colleague. This paper examines Plato's ideas on politics, the state, and just government, focusing specifically on state organization and its division into social classes, the role of philosophers as leaders, and his reasons for believing that only such a government could ensure justice and well-being for all citizens.

Keywords: *The state, justice, democracy, politics, governance, education*

Introduction

Plato was born in Athens in 427 B.C and died at the age of eighty-one at 347 B.C (John M. Cooper. 1997). He was the son of an aristocratic family, which enabled him to engage in early political activity in the society of his time. He was born when Pericles, one of the most influential philosophers of the democratization of Athenian society, died (Ben Holloway, 2025). Plato, along with other thinkers such as Socrates, Pythagoras, Parmenides and Aristotle, laid the foundations for philosophical research. In his youth, he formed a close friendship with Socrates that lasted until Socrates' death sentence. "He was executed for being a sophist, one who did not believe in traditional gods and whocorrupted the young" (Noboru Notomi, 2022, 2). The brilliance of Plato's ideas in philosophy coincided with the downward spiral of Athenian democracy..The unjust conviction of Socrates in 399, with accusations of treason against the Olympic spirit and his execution, was a blow that forced Plato to withdraw from political life. The accusations of the Athenian elite against Socrates' figure, ideas, and work for disbelief in the gods and corrupting youth, which prompted his death, exerted open pressure on Plato. The messages of Socrates' condemnation by the state aimed to direct youth education according to state interests and ruling circles. All this occurred when Athens was implementing various forms of government, from democracy to oligarchy, and reforms in education.

Plato's contribution to ideas includes philosophy, politics, ethics and epistemology, but his dialogues are the foundation that made him renowned in academic circles from his time until today. His concepts in political thought, reflected in his book entitled "The Republic" written approximately between 380 and 370 BC (Nicolae Sfetcu, 2022) retain their argumentative force even now. Plato's vision of democracy was based on a class of people with ethical and political skills and knowledge capable of leading society. He did not evaluate physical work as beneficial to farmers' or intellectuals' lives but thought it destroyed them physically; moreover, it hindered their intellectual development. This thinking prompted him to argue that people who should lead the state must possess outstanding abilities in thinking. Plato's philosophical worldview was shaped by the reality in which he lived, political views, contemporary society's culture, aesthetics, and his ideas about governance and citizen education. Plato

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begins "The Republic" with concepts of justice and injustice, where justice is both others' good and an honest person's virtue, while injustice is evil that forces people to obey and serve others. Valuing the human soul as immortal, Plato valued justice and injustice similarly. This study will focus on addressing issues of political concepts, the ideal state and justice in Plato's work, analyzing different forms of government, and his criticism of democracy and popular power, emphasizing philosophers' importance in achieving a just and stable state.

Methodology of the Study

The methodology of this study is based on research work, collection of scientific materials, use of literature, relevant bibliography, and consultation of selected literature. From the extensive preparatory work and research of sources by Albanian authors and those in foreign languages, the necessary subject matter was selected. The central focus of this study on state and forms of government draws from Plato's philosophical views and concepts regarding state, politics, and governance, as well as their application in our contemporary era.

State and Politics in Plato's Philosophy

The philosophical trials of the Sophists concerning the human being, society, politics, morality, the state, and happiness opened new avenues in addressing theoretical and philosophical issues. Their open call invited contemporary philosophers to focus their attention more on humanity and human society, rather than on nature. "The word sophist is derived from the Ancient Greek sophos meaning wise, skilful, clever. The associated noun, sophia, indicates wisdom, skill and knowledge" (Patricia O'Grady. 2008). The Sophists were scholars who traveled from city to city to make a living and to transmit their encyclopedic knowledge. "Plato's portrait of the sophists is quite different. To him they are clearly not philosophers, but are engaged in teaching for pay. For this reasons Plato called the Sophists merchants of illusions, while Aristotle referred to them as people who derive benefits through shallow and unreal knowledge; in short, speculators of words and knowledge" (David Dwyer Corey. 2002, 7/11). Unlike the Sophists, who are based on polishing words and demagogic phrases regarding governance, Plato diagnosed the existence of a political problem within the state. He formulated the idea that "all evils for citizens and the city stem from short-sighted policies and bad regimes" (Grube, G.M.A, 1974, p. 259/260).

Plato's political philosophy determined the right directions for making humanity better. For this, he built his political philosophy by emphasizing the search for human values. "Good and evil, Plato thought, are not simply individual values, but rather measuring, eternal standards on which we must rely to regulate our lives". (Ibid 260). Thus, since good is liked more than evil, justice more than injustice, and truth more than lies even in politics, we can distinguish good governance from bad governance. The assessment of good and evil must be made in light of truth. Knowing and applying the law aids us in achieving good governance. However, a democratic government can be devalued by the mentality of the majority, which is guided more by the principle of personal benefits than by reason and right, by the law. For the people, it is not so important who leads them, but rather the benefits and increases in their well-being. For this reason, Plato points out: "For the people, the good is the benefit and the increase of well-being, while for the chosen ones, it is the opinion" (Gérard Mairet. 2007, 20).

Based on Plato's concepts presented in the Republic, scholars consider him the founder of political philosophy and state governance. The presentation of political issues regarding the state requires the education of both state leaders and citizens with high knowledge and virtues. According to him, "Politics must be subordinate to morality. He is mistaken who believes that success achieved through unworthy means can bring good results." (Hersch Jeanne. 1993: 31-32) For Plato, the mission of politics is orientation toward the public good. Plato chooses the soul and goodness of humanity, which he considers the only sources of legitimacy. According to him, since the best cannot be clearly distinguished in life, the most appropriate determination of the best regime becomes possible only through discussion, that is, through speech closely related to the content it carries. In this sense, he expresses the view that there cannot be a just state without the input of the wise man, which implies the idea that political life is nourished and guided by philosophical life. Plato supported Socrates' ideas when he said: "Here is where our state was founded; now we will see where justice and injustice lie, what differences there are between them, and which of them should be embraced in order to be happy" (Gérard Mairet 2007. 19).

In his work, the Republic, Plato presented: "an ideal city-state, or the just state that is to illuminate the nature of the just soul, which he argues that they are analogous" (Chris Wright, 2012). However, the reasoning he used was speculative because his system of government was utopian, dreamy, and

far from the reality of the time. He gives the idea of how the state he imagined should be built, who the heads of the state should be, and how justice should be achieved in this state. Building the state according to Plato means knowing humanity or, otherwise, the soul, since the state is nothing more than an enlargement of our soul.

Accordint to plato: "The best city is the one most closely resembling an individual, which suffers when one of its members does, just as the whole person suffers pain when his or her finger hurts". (Julia Annas,. 1981. 1981, 179). Thus, Plato considers the state as a man of great dimensions and thought that while justice is a general virtue of an honest person, so is justice that characterizes a good and happy society. Plato argues: Similarly the city's happiness is just the happiness of all the citizens." (Julia Annas,. 1981, 179). Happiness in the state would not be possible except through the right path and in harmony with human nature. For this reason, justice is better than injustice, so knowing the good remains the most important issue. Politics itself is a social issue related to philosophy and therefore must be studied carefully. Plato discovers a difference between right and wrong in politics, and consequently, he considers it the most crucial issue in evaluating the good. The good is like a sun in whose light all other things are clearly seen. The difference between right and wrong is that between truth and falsehood. To prefer right means to love truth. To discuss political issues means to moralize political life by establishing bridges of communication and cooperation between truth and virtue.

Although Plato's philosophy extends beyond political problems, most of his studies in political philosophy focus on state functioning. In the work "Republic," the concept of the state receives deep reflection and remains one of the most important works, stimulating ongoing debate. According to Plato, "the state's purpose is ensuring people's happiness and creating just relations among them" (Vernon Yian, 2021). He believed that state creation stems from the necessity to unite people and satisfy their personal needs. Aristotle pointed out: "The state is a creation of nature and man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle 2003, 11). Man is closely connected with the state, just as ethics is with politics. Beyond these purposes, the function of the state is to ensure the good of man to the highest degree, encompassing his moral and intellectual life.

The state can be conceived only according to the principles of good, because while politics pursues well-being, happiness in the state would be impossible except through the right path, in harmony with natural human rights. The historical eras that human society has experienced are faithfully embodied in the history of the state's birth and development as its essential component. Plato emphasized in his work the Republic: "The State as arising from the need of men for one another's assistance. Drawn by this need they come to live together and form specialised classes, each being devoted to the satisfaction of a certain need". (Ferrari, L. 1956). Following this reasoning, the state serves as a means to achieve our goals. Regardless of when this thought on the state emerged, it maintains a universal and eternal truth.

"Plato explains that the state should function as a tool for expanding our duties toward fellow citizens, as an instrument that can effectively serve what we know is good in mutual relations. He categorizes three classes of citizens that should constitute the state, guardians, Auxiliaries, and the Productive Class" (Julia Annas,. 1981. p.109). Guardians or the rulers govern through epistemological expertise and moral excellence while steering the state towards equitable and collective prosperity. Plato advocated that state leaders acquire comprehensive cultural erudition and exemplify the virtues of wisdom and judicious decision-making. He maintained that rulers' selection should stem from their intellectual prowess and ethical character rather than hereditary privilege or material wealth. The auxiliaries, (Soldiers): Plato postulated that warriors, comprising the martial class, must embody exceptional attributes including physical prowess, valor, and fortitude through which they safeguarded their realm. These guardians bore responsibility for state defense and security maintenance. Their societal function proved fundamental, and Plato underscored the necessity of rigorous training to instill these virtues, enabling effective duty execution. Productive Class (Craftsmen and Farmers). In Plato's conception, artisans and agriculturalists constituted the productive class responsible for the state's material sustenance. These practitioners needed to perfect their craft and agricultural expertise to ensure societal prosperity. Their labor proved indispensable to state functionality through the provision of essential commodities and services.

According to Plato, justice in the state would only be achieved when each of these classes performed their respective functions properly. Justice, for him, is the harmony created when each class fulfills its role without overstepping into the responsibilities of others. In this harmonious state, the virtues of temperance, moderation, courage and wisdom are all in balance, and the state functions as a unified whole, promoting the well-being of all its citizens. Philosophy and politics are inseparable in Plato's

thought because they must be used to achieve a just polity. Plato revised many philosophical concepts regarding the form, content, and functioning of the state, corrections that he reflected in the work "Republic." Plato's philosophical metamorphosis is revealed in the opinion he expressed to Glaucon (Socrates' hypothetical interlocutor) regarding how the state can approach perfection: "Until philosophers are kings, or the 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,–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..." (Plato, 2002. 333) Plato's state comes to life from the basic premise that society is built on the needs of humanity. The Platonic perspective in the work "Republic" remains a correct orientation of philosophy on the education of man, which also builds the state of law. This is a just state, which serves its citizens and strives to ensure their well-being and stability in all social, political, economic and cultural areas.

The state performs the function of a moral curator by establishing norms and punishments for acts that harm society, as well as by demonstrating and upholding the state itself, its representative structures, high moral goals, and values. Thus, gradually, the demands for the protection and development of moral values in a society that aims to progress on the path of perfection took their rightful place and required protection from the state's legal system. Plato's analytical view delved deeper; he observed the danger that accompanies the development and expansion of human relations through unvirtuous individuals. The legal system serves as a deterrent and preventive tool against violations of an administrative or criminal nature. Moral norms, together with the Laws, exercise their punitive force against violators in proportion to the damage caused to state and societal interests.

Plato and the Just Governance

Although during different historical eras, the forms of government have evolved from direct democracy to representative democracy, the role of citizen participation remains decisive. From this perspective, their participation in drafting and implementing laws for society's governance constitutes the essence of modern democracy. Various socio-political deformations can undermine democracy's essence and genesis: the process of direct participation and citizen governance. The form of government is a crucial element of the state's form, as it relates to the organization and functioning of the highest state organs and people's participation in state governance. According to Plato, there are five types of governments arranged in order from best to worst: Aristocracy, Timocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny. Aristocracy: This form of government is ruled by individuals who hold power based on inherited wealth and titles. Democracy: A government by many people which generally represents a system closer to the people's interests. "The forms of government thus degenerate in a linear order, from better to worse as follows: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, tyranny". (Kaila, Eero Aleksis 2018). Thus, all social systems can be endangered by the phenomenon of slipping and turning into the opposite of these interests.

Aristocracy can degenerate into oligarchy. However, even democracy itself, as the system with the most immunity due to the balances and mutual control of powers, can suffer distortions if the laws of the state are not implemented. Plato continues with the following statement: "They must be stingy with regard to money, since they worship and keep it hidden, but at the same time they have squandered the public wealth to satisfy their whims, as children do as soon as they come into possession of their parents' wealth, having been raised in a regime that did not try to educate them, but forced them, and having never thought about the right principles of government, and having paid greater homage to gymnastics than to music." (Plato (1999) - Republic, 317)

Plato supports the idea of Socrates, according to whom the best government is Aristocracy, which represents the best system of government because it is more effective than the others. While his vision of the worst system of government places tyranny at the top, then comes oligarchy, and then democracy. The system of democracy is evaluated by him as the worst system of good legislation and the best of the legislative system of evil. That is to say, democracy is identified with a state of anarchy, where neither reason, nor courage, nor greed are guiding principles. Thus, democracy is regarded as the weakest form of state government, where its weak form is evaluated as the best towards those who do not govern by laws. The distinguishing characteristic of monarchy is authority, while for democracy, it is freedom. Plato emphasizes that freedom must be combined with authority. Citizens must always respect the law and legal authority.

Plato's aristocratic background influenced the formulation of his aristocratic doctrine, as well as the entirety of his formulations on political philosophy, justice, the state, and law. In all his works, he openly declared that the state should be led by philosophers, who should be the most chosen and most deserving, and should take care of the laws. As a basic problem of the theory of the state, he posed the question: Who should rule? Giving the only reasonable answer: Not the ignorant, but the learned and the wise; not the crowd, but the best. For Plato, good governance is embodied only in the philosopher king or in the people of knowledge. According to him, populist regimes turn into tyranny or tyrannical systems, that is, they forget the promises made and seek to fulfill their hidden goals. Plato believed that the state should be led by educated individuals—philosophers—who could guide the state with their knowledge and wisdom. Plato considered this to be a crucial necessity because he believed that ordinary citizens lacked the wisdom and knowledge necessary to make the right choices and lead the state. Regardless of the will of the people, he believed that wise leaders should lead the state to avoid "mob rule" and the state's slide into tyranny.

The government, in every democratic society, is at the service of all citizens and protects individual freedom and other human rights. To serve citizens and meet their essential needs, a truly democratic government must see and treat the individual as its greatest priority. The state exists for the individual and not the individual for the state. This is a necessary condition that characterizes a democratic government. The same importance of research and treatment from a conceptual and philosophical perspective is also required by the forms of government in practice, which aim to preserve connections with the very source of power. In order to avoid distortions and usurpations of power, a number of checks and balances have been established, the implementation of which guarantees the intact preservation of the content and methods of governance of the democratic system. A number of permanent dangers aim at the destruction of the power of the people in favor of a group of rulers. The system of democracy needs to be protected both from violations and misinterpretations that aim to transfer all power into the hands of a ruling elite, as well as from totalitarian regimes and military dictatorships that, through abuse and the use of false democratic labels, theories, and seductive words, attempt to gain the support of the people.

Plato's criticism of Democracy as a form of government

In the late 5th century BC and early 4th century BC, signs of the weakening of Athenian democracy appeared. Its citizens were experiencing fatigue caused by a tyrannical regime. In these aggravating circumstances, Athens, already tired and shaken by the war with its neighbor, Sparta, had to endure widespread disappointment, as the Athenian leaders demonstrated a lack of orientation towards a more stable system of government. The conviction of Socrates by the court added to the disappointment of ordinary Athenians. Just as the earth is subject to earthquake tremors, the system of government also experiences pressures and waves that seek to change or overthrow it.

Philosophical principles have sanctioned the absolute truth: Power originates from the people, but it is exercised by representative elites. All these phenomena have not passed without leaving a trace in the research of one of the most prominent philosophers of antiquity, Plato, who formulated the innovations and weaknesses of the contemporary government system. His first theoretical formulations summarized a number of criticisms of government, because regardless of its purpose, not all people are educated and, consequently, cannot choose the best leaders of their state. Consequently, this type of democracy can easily slide into tyranny. By conceiving democracy as the rule of the popular mass, that is, as crowd rule, he thought that it acted to the detriment of wisdom and property. The observation of this phenomenon convinced him to reason that the country and the people should be governed by philosophers, by the most knowledgeable individuals of the country. The entirety of these philosophical reasonings took place in his work "Republic," which marks a qualitative growth in the field of philosophical ideas of all times. In this work, he presented not only his vision of the ideal state but also how that state should be built, who its leaders should be, and what the justice of this state should be. Plato's goal and ethical message through his works aimed to convey to the citizen reader and statesmen the democratic concepts according to which a democratic state should be built. Regarding the influence of culture on social life, Plato thought that through it, the citizen is educated and forms his substantive worldview to orient himself in every circumstance of life. The problems of state governance, the forms of its governance, and the characteristics that should fulfill them constitute the essence of Platonic doctrine.

At their core, Plato's critical views contain both supportive and constructive criticism of the achievements of Athenian democracy. In these views, his concern that democracy could slide into tyranny is evident. Democracy could fail and end in dictatorship because the people, who are not

educated to the appropriate levels, could make the mistake of electing incompetent leaders to the head of government. Moreover, Plato saw populist politicians as individuals who took advantage of the crowds and ultimately led the state to tyranny. Unfortunately, this phenomenon of the emergence of populist slogans and the establishment of dictatorships exists today in many countries around the world.

In his work "The Republic," Plato emphasizes that governments should be conditioned by laws in order to prevent and stop populist regimes and strengthen the governing order or reinforce the rule of law. According to him, the law should not be subject to any other authority; otherwise, the collapse of the governing order will happen very quickly. For Plato, the government should be a slave to the law; it should be constitutional and far-sighted, with clear visions for the people. According to Plato, laws that do not serve the interests of the people are false laws. What is right is both legal and honest, while what is unjust is illegal and unjust. For Plato, law is the reflection of a divine order in harmony with the good. Plato argues that the right form of government has just and good laws, while the bad form of government has wrong and unjust laws. For Plato, laws that can be drafted to serve the interests of a certain elite are unjust laws, and the governing regime will soon fail. The leaders of such governing systems will soon be overthrown. Aristotle also emphasizes in his work "Politics": A good form of government has good laws, and a corrupt form of government has wrong laws. According to Aristotle, good laws should be above all. Both Plato and Aristotle thought that democracy is the rule of the uneducated crowd. This meant that people did not have the necessary wisdom, but at the same time, they lacked the necessary knowledge to decide on the common governing life.

Conclusions

Due to their profound content, Plato's ideas remain alive today in modern political theory and governmental practices. Since ancient times, scholars' and philosophers' views have centered on democracy's most important elements in theoretical fields, as philosophical, political, and legal concepts and as materialized systems in societal governance. Their implementation or distortion directly relates to democracy, governance, and people's fate. Plato's political philosophy studies embody state-functioning problems. His state concept remains relevant, encouraging philosophers, scholars, and state leaders to pursue deeper understanding. Plato's views emphasize that achieving justice and social order requires wise and educated leadership while avoiding dangers from governments relying on demagogy and populist deception. Plato believed society could function best under intelligent, virtuous individuals, particularly philosophers. This statement reflects an uncompromising need to place the most capable and knowledgeable specialists at the helm of crucial social sectors, science, culture, and governing bodies. Aristotle's assertion that the "majority" should determine governmental form remains significant today. Plato's state emerges from the premise that society builds upon societal needs.

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