

A note on the political beliefs of Plato

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Abstract

A times gone by of political theories of the scope defined above must begin with the thought of that brilliant aggregation of Mediterranean people whose amazing development peoples whose astonishing in development in intellectual culture, twenty-three centuries in the past, is still the wonder and despair of civilized man. Probably in no field save that of art are Greek ideals more highly appreciated at the present day than in political theory. This is in some measure due to the wide prevalence of democratic thought and feeling, but more decisive is the fact that the great thinkers of Hellas explored the entries height and depth of human political capacity and outlined the principles which at all times and in all circumstances must determine the general the general features of political life. With all its university, however, however, Hellenic thought, like that of every other age and people, was determined primarily by the institutions amid which it developed. Plato and Aristotle analyzed and classified the principles and organs of a state life that had passed its prime and was rapidly waning. The characteristic features of this life were determined by influences and motives in which rational generalization and ideals had little part, and when systematic reflection began, the results was rather explication of the past than anticipation of the future.

Keywords: Ethical, Hellenic, republic, democracy, politics, legislative, administrative.

Introduction

It is quite clear that the various phases of early social political thought find some illustration in the literary remains of Hellas. The Homeric epos could illustration in the literary remains of Hellas. The Homeric epos could have taken shape always as Zeus-born and Zeus- nurtured, and rule as shepherds of the people. Some significance is attached to the lesser chiefs, who likewise claim divine ancestry, but for the common people homer shows only a general contempt. In Hesiod there may be detected a change of attitude, or at least a different point of view. More stress is laid on the duties on the rights of kings, and they are judged with reference to the justice rater then the success of their acts.

Apparently a similar strain appears in the sayings attributed to the seven sages and in the fragments of the gnomic poets. There is a tendency to measure kings by the same standard as other men, and thus to weaken the supports of royalty. From this it is clear that an ethical consciousness developed during the period of transition from the monarchic to the aristocratic and tyrannical types of government, acting as both cause and effect of the political movement.

That arduous century which began with the Persian and ended with the Peloponnesian war brought the Hellenic world face to face with every kind of practical in statecraft, on a scale beyond anything that had proceeded. The close contact with the Persian despotism, the rise and decline of the Athenian empire, the antithesis and death-grapple of Spartan oligarchy and Athenian democracy, brought into the range of everyday experience the gravest questions of political practice, and correspondingly stimulated political reflection. Not only in this particular field, however, but in every department of intellectual life there was the greatest activity. Literary and plastic art achieved the triumphs which have rendered the age of Pericles famous for all time, and general philosophy began under the guidance of the sophists and Socrates to take the

path which led straight to the immortal work of Plato and Aristotle.

It is quite clear the ethical consciousness which had been awakened during the preceding centuries found scope now for the fullest development, especially in the administration of democratic government. As in every other age of what may be called aggressive enlightenment, the general religious faith of the Greek world was tending to disappear at this time, and the peoples entered upon the realization of popular supremacy without a sure support in even that somewhat inadequate moral doctrine which the old myth-ridden theology had embodied questions of right and wrong in political practice imperatively demanded a rational solution; and it was in offering some sort of satisfaction to this demand that the sophists came into prominence.

The work of the group of man commonly designated by this term requires no special analysis in this place. After bearing for twenty- two centuries the obloquy of the civilized world, due chiefly to the odium philosophical which Plato manifested toward them, they at last received a measure of just recognition through the insight of Hegel I and Grote. The function of the sophists was primary educational. They supplied the demand for instruction in all that would fit a young man for a successful career, in the conditions then existing functions; for industry, commerce and agriculture were not recognized as worthy pursuits for the citizen.

The republic is in every respect Plato's greatest work. Both the substance of his thought and the form in which it is expressed has fascinated all succeeding generations and have stimulated endless imitation. The familiar name of the dialogue, however, gives a somewhat erroneous idea of its true character. The ideal state, whose outlines are so boldly and beautifully set forth as often to monopolize the attention of the reader, is awowedly a mere incident in the main theme of the dialogue. Plato proceeds to formulate the conception of a state in which

justice prevails, in order to discover by analogy the philosophic idea of justice in the individual man. This method expresses in itself the two dominant characteristics of the writer's political philosophy—its idealism and its subordination to ethical science.

The first cause of the state Plato finds in the diversity of men's desires and the necessity of mutual assistance in satisfying them. A community arising from this cause must embrace three classes of people: producers of sustenance, to supply the physical wants of the population; warriors, to protect the laborers and insure a sufficient territory for the purposes of the state; and finally, counselors and magistrates, to regulate the general welfare of the community. These three classes, working in proper correlation, will insure the maximum of well-being throughout the state. Every member of the community must be assigned to the class for which he proves himself best fitted. Thus a perfect harmony and unity characterize both the state and every person in it.

In laying down this social and economic basis for his republic the philosopher manifests a high appreciation of the principle of specialization and division of labor which has received such marked attention in recent days. His assignment of political functions has hardly so modern a tone. To the third of the classes mentioned above the guardians, as he calls them, consisting of the oldest and wisest of the community, he ascribes untrammelled discretion in the ordering of the state's affairs. This class, on whose character and attributes Plato dwells with the most particular interest, is the ultimate product of the long course of training in which the life of a citizen must be passed. Only those who have proved themselves perfect in true knowledge may enter the class, and the judgment of the guardians themselves is conclusive as to the qualification.

To the member of this close corporation is assigned a manner of life which is conceived to be appropriate to their exalted character. They have no individual family or property interest; they live in public, eat at common tables and sleep in tents. With the support of their physical existence reduced to the absolute minimum of concern to them, they are enabled to cultivate philosophy and rise to those heights of omniscience which afford an unerring insight into all human affairs. Hence their fitness to guide the state without other rule than the true wisdom in which they share.

Upon the relation of this picture of an ideal community to Plato's ethical discussion it is unnecessary here to dwell. In brief, the allegory is simply this: the three classes of the people symbolize the three faculties of the soul,—appetitive, spirited and rational,—and the just man, like the ideal state, is found where the first two are in proper subordination to third.

On the political side proper the ideas which he brings out in highest relief are, first, the necessity of an organic or organic unity in social life; second, the importance of systematic education, as contrasted with haphazard legislation, in regulating the common interest; and third, the rational basis of aristocracy in government. The ideal unity of a state Plato explains in his celebrated discussion of communism. As private property and family relationships appear to be the chief sources of dissension in every community, neither is to have recognition in the perfect state. Unity and harmony require that no individual should differ from any object whatever. All must "rejoice and grieve alike at the same gains and the same

losses", "the words 'mine' and thine' must be pronounced by all simultaneously."

Private property, therefore, can have no existence in the ideal state, and further, Plato works out an ingenious scheme through which children shall not know their own parents, or parents their own children. The discord-making devotion of fathers, and especially of mothers, to their own offspring thus precluded at the outset. Indeed, the relations of the sexes in general are to be wholly severed from the influence of individual emotion, and are to be subject to the absolute control of the magistrates. Men and woman are to be mated with sole reference to a harmonious balance of qualities in the young; and the elements of perfect character thus insured at birth are to be developed to maturity by a system of uniform public education.

In the statesman Plato's chief purpose is to develop the "idea" of a ruler, and to set political science in its proper place in the broad scheme of knowledge. The result is embodied in an identification of the true statesman with the all-wise philosopher, and an identification of the politics with education and character-building. These conceptions have already been formulated in the republic, but they receive in the statesman a more precise definition, and are cast in a more rigidly scientific mould. The ideal ruler and the abstract political science are set off with the utmost distinctness from the practical politician and the principles of practical administration.

Plato here, as elsewhere in his works, relegates to a wholly inferior category those arts and those men that are concerned with the management of military and fiscal details in the city's and even those who administer justice according to the laws. The function of the true statesman is to make the citizens conform to the ideal standards of virtue; and true political science is that knowledge by which men are taken care of either without law, either with or without their own consent.

From the point of view of ultimate truth there is no significance whatever in the various characteristics which are commonly employed in discriminating governments as good or bad. That the rulers are few or many, or rich or poor, or that the subjects obey willingly. Has nothing to do with the matter. The true physician is he who cures us, "whether he cures us against our will or with our will... whether he practices out of a book or not of a book, and whether he be rich poor"; and the principles he applies are true medical science. Not otherwise are to be judged the statesman and his science.

This conception politics precludes the consideration of law and legislation as factors in ideal government. But in the statesman, as in the republic, Plato discusses the relation between the ideal and the actual, and this gives the opportunity for a striking analysis of the function of law. Ideally the discretion of the all-wise philosopher is a perfect guarantee of excellence in administration, and stands in marked contrast to the narrow and inflexible prescriptions of past time.

The last and most extensive treatise of Plato on politics, and the laws, signifies by its title the last step in the transition of his philosophy from the ideal to that of the actual. In the republic he considers field of the ideal state almost exclusively. In the statesman he retains this point of view, but descends, as we have of actual government. In the laws, finally, he formally abandons his idealism and seeks to set forth a system that would be workable among imperfect men. Having demonstrated in the statesman that a regime of legal

and constitutional limitations, though logically irreconcilable with the perfect ideal of government, was indispensable to excellence in actual states, he purposes in the laws to formulate a code that shall in actual states, he determine the life of the community, and shall thus insure the best results possible in a practicable system.

The spirit of this code manifests very clearly, how-ever, the persistence of the earlier ideas. Plato clings as far as possible to the broad principles of the republic, introducing modifications with frank reluctance only when the requirements of a practical community seem imperatively to demand it. Thus he concedes the necessity of marriage and of family life; but the government is authorized to persuade the union of couples in whose contrasting qualities is found the hope of well-balanced offspring, to inspect and regulate the most intimate details of domestic routine, and to compel the presence of the women as well as the men at the public mess. Again, education ceases to be the almost exclusive occupation of the magistrates, but a system is prescribed which is to be most rigidly enforced all the youth, and the intellectual and artistic development of the citizens is made subject to a thoroughgoing censorship, in comparison with which the most rigid system of actual history would be lax and lifeless.

In respect to property also Plato concedes that the communism of the Republic is impracticable. The principle of private property is therefore demitted, but the evils of an inequitable distribution are guarded against by precautions that to the modern mind seem fatal to the principle. The philosopher fully appreciates the economic basis of political discord. A tranquil state will be one which there is neither extreme poverty nor extreme wealth; hence the laws must promote equality of possessions specially must the ownership by citizens of equal shares of land be safeguarded; and through the discouragement of commercial pursuits by all possible means the accumulation of wealth in other forms must at least be impeded.

Despite all legislation to obstruct it, how-ever, inequality in property will arise, and so far as it is inevitable, it must be taken into account in the organization of government. According, Plato bases his classification of the people, for the assignment of offices and honors, on wealth, and not, as in the republic, on intellect. Four classes are provided for. The first consists of those who possess only the equal allotment of land which the state guarantees to every citizen as the "limit" of provided for. The other three classes are determined by the possession of wealth to the amount of two, three and four times the value of the share of land; and property accumulated by any citizen in excess of the fourfold measure is subject to summary confiscation by the government.

In describing the governmental organization of his polity Plato avowedly seeks a mean between monarchy and democracy. These two forms he takes as representative of the contradictory principles of authority and liberty. Either principle carried to excess results in disaster to the state, as may be seen in the history of Persia and of Athens. Moderation is essential to the maintenance of good feeling between rulers and ruled; and Plato attributes the friendship, as he calls it. Indeed, he lays it down as according to nature that government should be "the rule of law over willing subjects, and not a rule of compulsion"-a proposition which is much like the "natural law" of modern days, that government rests on the consent of the governed.

The monarchic government, then, must be so organized as to check the undue extension of the principle of authority; Sparta, in Plato to have attained this end. On the other hand, democratic liberty must be prevented from degenerating into license. Especially must the conception of equality, which is the foundation of democracy, be properly understood? For equality are two kinds, absolute and proportionate. The former requires that every citizen have precisely the same opportunity to perform every public service: the latter, that part in the government be proportioned to the merit of each. In appointment to office, therefore, choice by lot will be more expressive of absolute equality; some other mode, such as election, must be combined with this if proportionate equality is to find recognition.

The details of the administrative organization which Plato sketches out for state need not particularly detain us. The chief place in the administration he gives to a board of thirty-seven, called guardians of the laws, chosen by election in three stages by the citizens who bear arms. Only men of fifty years of age and upward are eligible, and each retires when he reaches seventy. These guardians constitute the general advisory and supervisory authority for the whole administration.

Military officials are elected, on nomination, primarily, by the guardians. Provision is also made for an administrative council of 360, chosen through a combination of election and lot, with functions similar to those of the Athenian reconsidering senate. A general assembly of the citizens is presumed, rather than described, as an election and lot, with functions similar to those of the Athenian reconsidering senate. A general assembly of the citizens is presumed, rather than described, as an element in the government system, but its functions consist chiefly in the election of the various magistrates.

The judicial organization is based formally on the principle that all citizens should have a voice in the administration of justice; but the methods of procedure and appeal are so arranged as to insure a predominant influence to a select court of magistrates. Finally, as the capstone of the whole governmental edifice, Plato ordains a council consisting of the ten oldest guardians of the laws, the priests that have been distinguished for virtue, and those magistrates who have had charge of education, together with a number of younger men equal to that of the older. To this body, which shall meet daily between dawn and sunrise, is assigned the supreme duty of determining when and to what extent changes shall be made in the laws of the state.

For legislation in the familiar modern sense no especial provision is made in the laws. The prescriptions of the code are assumed to cover all important points-all matters that are worthy the wisdom of a scientific lawgiver. Moreover, the form of the code is such as to present, not only the rule, but the purpose and justification of the law, so that persuasion as well as penalty shall play a part in securing obedience.

This Plato considers a very important feature of legislative art. On the basis of the laws thus formulated, the elaboration of details may be left to administrative officials guided by experience. Finally, no written laws, however detailed, will altogether displace the customs or unwritten laws of a people; hence it is that the greatest attention is to be paid to the education of the young.

It is impossible to discover in the laws the criterion by which Plato distinguished the general and important from the secondary and unimportant in legislation. The work is for the

most part an un-systematic assemblage of ideas on the most divers' features of social life. besides the matters already considered, it embodies regulations touching many varieties of crime and teat, various phases of con-tract law, testament, trade, witchcraft, the treatment of slaves, treasure-trove, funerals, agriculture, divorce and many other things. In this mass of matter there is much that is exceedingly valuable from the standpoint of social history and comparative jurisprudence. The philosophy of the state is chiefly to be found in the points that have already been particularly considered.