

Relevance of Plato's Political Philosophy in Present Context



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Abstract

Plato believed in the purity of soul and actions. His purpose was to establish justice in society. Justice for him was a moral concept which refers to the performance of one particular action assigned to one particular class or person. He deeply dealt with the question: Who should rule? He firmly advocated the rule of Philosopher King, the rule of reason. For him only such rational governance may remove all the evils from politics. Regardless of gender, Plato always emphasized the rule of most knowledgeable person whether man or woman. He strictly divides the society into three classes: guardians' class, warriors' class and producers' class. However, Plato has been criticized for such strict hierarchical classification of society, but one has to realize that Plato's ultimate aim was to discover an ideal state, a state away from all discrepancies. Plato was an idealist and he provides ethical remedies to political problems. Today, political machinery almost in all societies is suffering from a disease called corruption and if Plato's moral concepts are applied (not fully, even though partially) definitely an ailing polity may attain good health easily as well as quickly.

Keywords: Republic, Ideal State Philosopher King, Soul, Justice, Good Governance, Guardian, Warriors, Producers, Reason, Appetite, Spirit, Athenian Society.

Introduction

A great Greek political philosopher Plato was an obedient pupil of illustrious Socrates and an educator of first political scientist, Aristotle. His writings depict not the real but the ideal. But it doesn't mean that his concepts have no potential to solve the current political problems. In fact, his writings focused to solve the problems of justice, equality, ideal state and ideal king etc., which are persistent in modern political societies. Plato is one of those rarest political philosophers who continue to influence the minds of political leaders and political thinkers even today. His visualization of the ideal community and his study of ideal state formed the foundations of political science.

Aim of the Study

This paper tries to examine the continuing relevance of the book republic, with particular focus on Plato's concepts of justice, happiness and the ideal society. This paper also highlights how ill health of political societies today be improved if Plato's concepts are adopted by our politicians.

Plato's Republic was written at a time when ancient Greece was facing a phase of major political decay. Today if we analyze the ill political health of modern nation states, we realize that even today Plato's Political Philosophy is tremendously relevant. What we learn in the Republic is that the nature of justice depends on the nature of the city and that there are strong parallels between the city and the soul.¹

Plato believed in the immortality of the soul, both in life and after death. Our soul is something that cannot be corrupted. Plato emphasized leading a just life which signifies a life based on justice, moderation and wisdom. Plato thinks we should not be lovers of honor, gain, injustice, appearance, reputation etc as at first sight, they may seem tempting. But, in order to earn such temptations, we just might follow morally degraded path. However, at the end of the day, we will be judged on our actions.²

If we analyze current political scenario, we realize that most of the politicians enter politics not to earn honor which they may achieve by serving the masses, but to earn money and reputation which they wish to save for their coming generations. Such intentions of today's politicians simply crush the objective of politics, a politics of ethics, which was

prescribed by Plato. Therefore, if today politicians follow Plato, they not only purify their souls but the dirty politics may also get purified.

In modern society, almost every nation-state is having the problem of good governance. The term 'governance' was used extensively in the earlier modern day to mean the act of governing – hence the word 'government' was defined as the "form of government of state" or a "body or successive bodies of persons governing a state"³ Present national and international scenario clearly indicate that one state is having problems with other or we can say that no state is free from the "bondage of conflicts." America is having problems with North Korea, Pakistan is having conflict with India and so on, so forth. Why should the President or the Prime Minister having a lot of critics when ruling the country? Are they not competent to rule the masses? Then question arises who should rule over the country? Answer lies in Plato's idea of Philosopher King.

The question that who should govern, is really very significant in present modern society. To govern is to "rule or control with authority; to be in government"⁴ Different forms of government whether monarchy, democracy, socialist etc, is not really a problem. Ideology also is not really a problem. But the major problem is what kind of society (human being) that we produce. According to Plato-the development of the soul is what people lack during his time-but even in modern time; and this what makes Plato's theory very interesting and still relevant.⁵

To the questions how to create a perfect political system, his answer was: by the rule of philosopher king. He imagines a society ruled by philosophers. Protected by guardians and inhabited by artisans, blacksmiths, carpenters, traders etc. Plato was in favor of aristocracy, though, not a typical one, but one that is in the hands of governors who have been trained to govern properly; philosophers. Plato wanted the society to be ruled by the best. This concept is relevant even today as Plato insists that governors should not be tempted by money, luxury, reputation etc. In present scenario we really need philosopher kings who should be away from all greed and should offer services selflessly to the people. Today Plato's theory serves as an alarming bell to politicians if they, don't give up their love for money and luxuries, they can never achieve the aim of an ideal state and society.

Plato was a feminist as he admits that citizens, who exhibits great attributes in governing could become guardian or governors regardless of gender. As we all know that present world is witnessing tremendous growth in women emancipation. Almost all the higher positions have been acquired by women not only in India but in rest of the world also. Therefore, how visionary Plato was to evaluate the abilities of women that too centuries back.

Plato believed that the human soul is divided into three elements First there are the bodily appetites, expressed through bodily needs such as hunger and thirst. Second are the spiritual elements, expressed through emotions like love, anger and

compassion. Above all, the third element that separates people from animals and makes them unique is the human ability to use language and reason.⁶ On the basis of these three elements Plato divided the society into three classes: first producers class dominated by appetitive element, second was warrior's class dominated by the element spirit and finally ruler's class (named as philosopher king) dominated by the element reason. Plato believed that justice in society emerges when all the three classes perform their given specific function. He emphasizes that happiness comes when these three elements of the soul are satisfied under the rule of reason. Plato was critical of Athenian society, which allowed people who are ruled by bodily appetites to govern. He urged that this leads to an imbalance in the social organism, manifesting in the societal conflict and corruption. Plato's belief in establishing harmony within conflicting human and social elements led him to conclude that an ideal society must be governed by knowledgeable and reason driven elite.⁷

Though Plato's concept of an ideal polis is rightly criticized for its strict hierarchical roles, he has made a noteworthy contribution to political thought by maintaining that the political community must promote the well being of its citizens. His greatest contribution lies in his idea of the greater good being more important than the rights of the sovereign ruler. He significantly argues that a good political leader must be educated. Also, Plato denied family and property ties to the ruling class. If we examine current political scenario both the concepts are indisputably must for the good health of polity. Today, in many countries, a leader when enters politics, intends to earn not for himself but for his/her coming generations. Most surprisingly, the sons and daughters of politicians opt politics as a profession as they know very well the kind of luxuries and authority they acquire in politics, won't be available in any other profession of the world.

Plato argued that democracy was a danger to the state and to the individual because a democratic individual will never be satisfied because they think they are entitled to do whatever comes into their head. Their life has neither law nor order. This explanation is quite appealing as it is a criticism to today's consumerism. People think that they have the right to do whatever they wish just because they live in a democracy. But one should always keep in mind that rights demand duties. If we are not able to stop this tyranny of desires, we risk losing ourselves.

Conclusion

To conclude we can state, despite their limitations, many of Plato's ideal principles continue to hold relevance today. Educated leader, meritorious leader, no gender-based discrimination while choosing a leader and importance of debate and dialogue continues to be upheld. In the Republic, Plato's most significant contribution was to imagine an ideal that addressed the prevailing political and social injustice of his time. Today, more than 2500 years later, societies around the world continue to strive for Plato's ideal.

Endnotes

1. <https://slate.com/human-interst/2016/07/how-is-platos-republic-relevant-today.html>.
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3. *Concise Oxford dictionary*
4. Maszlee Malik (2015) *Good Governance A Critical Introduction*. IJUM Press. Gombak, Malaysia.
5. <https://www.academia.edu/34933941/ASSIGNMENT-PLATO-S-IDEAL-STATE-WHY-EVERY-GOVERNMENT-SHOULD-KEEP-AN-EMPTY-SEAT-FOR-A-PHILOSOPHER-KING>
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7. N.6