

Greek Political Thought: Plato and Aristotle

Introduction

Greek political thought has had a profound impact on the development of Western political theory, shaping ideas of justice, governance, citizenship, and the relationship between the individual and the state. Two of the most influential figures in this tradition are Plato and Aristotle, who, despite being teacher and student, developed distinct political philosophies. Plato's vision of a just society, characterized by his theory of three classes and three souls, contrasts with Aristotle's more empirical and practical approach, particularly his theory of the state and its various forms.

The Historical Context of Greek Political Thought

Greek political thought emerged in a context of intense intellectual and political activity. The ancient Greek city-states (or polis) were unique political entities that fostered a rich tradition of philosophical inquiry. In the 5th century BCE, Athens developed a form of direct democracy, where citizens (albeit limited to free males) participated in the political process. This political system was both a source of pride and criticism among thinkers like Plato and Aristotle.

Athens' democracy, while relatively egalitarian for its time, was frequently destabilized by internal factionalism and external threats, particularly during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). The eventual defeat of Athens by Sparta led to the downfall of Athenian democracy and inspired philosophical reflection on the best form of governance and the nature of justice. It is within this context that Plato and Aristotle's political theories developed.

Plato's Political Thought: The Republic and the Theory of Three Classes and Three Souls

- **Overview of Plato's Political Philosophy**

Plato's most comprehensive work on political philosophy, *The Republic*, is a dialogue that centers around the question of justice and the ideal state. In the dialogue, Socrates, Plato's philosophical mouthpiece, engages with other characters to determine what justice is and how it can be realized in both the individual and the state. Plato's political thought is deeply intertwined with his metaphysical and ethical views, particularly his theory of Forms and his belief in the soul's tripartite nature. Plato's ideal state, as outlined in *The Republic*, is structured around a strict social hierarchy based on the natural abilities of individuals. His theory of three classes and three souls serves as the foundation of this hierarchical structure, reflecting his belief that society, like the human soul, functions best when each part performs its proper role.

- **The Theory of the Three Classes and Three Souls**

Plato's ideal state consists of three classes: the rulers, the guardians, and the producers. These classes correspond to the three parts of the human soul, which Plato identifies as reason, spirit, and appetite.

1. **Rulers (Philosopher-Kings):** The ruling class is composed of philosopher-kings, individuals who possess the wisdom and rationality necessary to govern the state. These rulers correspond to the rational part of the soul (reason), which Plato believes should dominate the other parts to achieve justice. Philosophers are uniquely suited to rule because they can apprehend the Form of the Good, which represents the highest truth

and provides the basis for just governance. In Plato's view, only those who possess true knowledge and wisdom can make decisions that benefit the whole society.

2. **Guardians (Auxiliaries):** The second class is the guardians or auxiliaries, who are responsible for protecting the state and maintaining order. The guardians correspond to the spirited part of the soul (spirit), which is associated with courage, honor, and the will to fight for what is right. In the ideal state, the guardians support the rulers by enforcing their laws and defending the state from external and internal threats. They must possess the virtues of bravery and loyalty but remain subordinate to the wisdom of the philosopher-kings.
3. **Producers (Artisans, Farmers, Merchants):** The third and largest class in Plato's ideal state consists of the producers, including artisans, farmers, and merchants. These individuals correspond to the appetitive part of the soul (appetite), which is concerned with basic desires and material needs. The producers are responsible for providing the state with the goods and services necessary for survival, but they are not involved in governance. According to Plato, the appetitive part of the soul must be controlled by reason, just as the producers must be guided by the wisdom of the rulers to prevent chaos and disorder.

Plato's political theory is closely related to his psychological theory of the tripartite soul, which mirrors the structure of the ideal state. Just as the state is divided into three classes, the human soul is divided into three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite.

1. **Reason:** The rational part of the soul seeks knowledge and truth. It corresponds to the rulers in society and is responsible for making decisions that align with justice and the good. According to Plato, reason must govern the other parts of the soul to achieve harmony and justice, both within the individual and in the state.
2. **Spirit:** The spirited part of the soul is associated with emotions, particularly those related to honour and courage. It corresponds to the guardians in society, who protect the state and enforce the laws. While spirit can be a positive force when aligned with reason, it can also lead to aggression and conflict if left unchecked.
3. **Appetite:** The appetitive part of the soul is concerned with physical desires, such as hunger, thirst, and sexual gratification. It corresponds to the producers in society, who are primarily focused on material needs. In Plato's view, appetite must be controlled by reason to prevent it from dominating the soul and leading to selfish or hedonistic behaviour.

Justice as Harmony

For Plato, justice is achieved when each part of the soul and each class in society performs its proper function without interfering with the others. In the individual, justice means that reason rules, spirit supports reason, and appetite is kept in check. Similarly, in the state, justice occurs when the rulers govern wisely, the guardians enforce the laws, and the producers provide for the material needs of society. In this sense, justice is not merely a matter of individual behaviour but a structural condition that requires the proper organization of society. Plato's ideal state is, therefore, an aristocracy in which the wisest and most virtuous individuals govern, ensuring that the state functions harmoniously and justly.

Aristotle's Political Thought: The Politics and the Theory of the State

Overview of Aristotle's Political Philosophy

Aristotle, a student of Plato, developed a more practical and empirical approach to political theory in his work *Politics*. While Plato sought to construct an ideal state based on abstract principles of justice, Aristotle focused on analyzing existing political systems and determining the conditions that lead to stability and good governance. For Aristotle, politics is a natural activity rooted in human nature, and the state exists to promote the well-being and flourishing (eudaimonia) of its citizens. Aristotle's political philosophy is centered on the concept of the state (polis), which he defines as a community that exists for the sake of the good life. Unlike Plato, who envisions a hierarchical society with a strict division of labour, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of participation and balance in the governance of the state.

The State as a Natural Community

Aristotle begins his analysis of the state by arguing that human beings are by nature political animals (zoon politikon). He contends that individuals cannot achieve their full potential or lead fulfilling lives outside the context of a political community. The state, for Aristotle, is the highest form of human association because it enables people to live virtuously and achieve the good life. Aristotle traces the development of the state from more basic forms of human association, such as the family and the village. The family, he argues, is the most basic unit of society, formed for the purpose of satisfying daily needs. Villages arise when multiple families come together to meet more complex needs, but the state is the ultimate association, created for the sake of a good life, not just survival.

In Aristotle's view, the state is a natural institution because it arises out of human nature and is necessary for human flourishing. Unlike Plato, who constructs an ideal state based on theoretical principles, Aristotle bases his political philosophy on the observation of existing states and communities.

The Citizen and the Constitution

For Aristotle, the citizen is defined by participation in the political life of the state. Citizenship is not merely a legal status but an active role that involves contributing to the governance of the community. Aristotle's ideal citizen is one who is capable of both ruling and being ruled in turn, reflecting his belief in the importance of balance and reciprocity in political life.

Aristotle distinguishes between different types of constitutions, which he categorizes based on who holds power and whether they govern in the interest of the common good or their own self-interest. There are three legitimate forms of government:

- **Monarchy (rule by one):** A monarchy is a government in which a single ruler governs for the common good. Aristotle acknowledges that monarchy can be the best form of government if the ruler is virtuous, but he also recognizes the dangers of tyranny, where the ruler governs for personal gain.
- **Aristocracy (rule by the few):** Aristocracy is rule by a small group of virtuous individuals who govern in the interest of the state. Like monarchy, aristocracy can degenerate into oligarchy, where the few govern for their own benefit rather than the common good.

- **Polity (rule by the many):** Polity is a mixed form of government that combines elements of democracy and oligarchy. In a polity, the majority rules, but the laws are designed to ensure that the interests of the whole community are protected. Aristotle considers polity to be the most stable form of government because it balances the interests of the rich and the poor and avoids the extremes of pure democracy or oligarchy.

In contrast to these legitimate forms of government, Aristotle identifies three corrupt forms, where rulers govern in their own self-interest: tyranny (corruption of monarchy), oligarchy (corruption of aristocracy), and democracy (corruption of polity). Aristotle is particularly critical of pure democracy, which he associates with mob rule and the pursuit of short-term pleasures at the expense of the common good.

Aristotle's Theory of Justice

Aristotle's conception of justice is closely tied to his understanding of the state and the role of the citizen. In his ethical and political writings, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of justice: distributive justice and corrective justice. Distributive justice refers to the fair distribution of goods and resources within a community. Aristotle argues that individuals should receive goods based on their merit or contribution to the state. In a just society, honours, wealth, and responsibilities are distributed in proportion to an individual's virtue and abilities.

Corrective justice, on the other hand, deals with rectifying wrongs and ensuring fairness in private transactions. It focuses on restoring balance when individuals have been wronged, such as in cases of theft or breach of contract. For Aristotle, justice is the highest virtue, and the just state is one in which citizens can live virtuous lives and achieve their full potential. Unlike Plato, who views justice as harmony between the parts of the soul and the classes of society, Aristotle sees justice as a matter of fairness in the distribution of goods and responsibilities and the equitable treatment of individuals.

The Best Constitution and the Role of the Middle Class

Aristotle's analysis of constitutions leads him to the conclusion that the best form of government is one that balances the interests of different social groups, particularly the rich and the poor. In his view, a stable and just state is one in which the middle class holds significant power because they are less likely to be swayed by the extremes of wealth or poverty. Aristotle argues that the middle class is more moderate in its desires and less likely to seek to dominate others or to rebel against the existing order. As a result, a polity in which the middle class plays a central role is more likely to achieve stability and avoid the factionalism that can lead to the downfall of governments. This emphasis on the middle class as the foundation of a stable political system reflects Aristotle's broader belief in balance and moderation in political life.

Aristotle's Critique of Plato

Although Aristotle was deeply influenced by Plato's thought, he was also critical of his teacher's political philosophy, particularly the rigid hierarchy and communal aspects of Plato's ideal state. Aristotle rejects Plato's notion that the ruling class should be composed of philosopher-kings, arguing that such a system is unrealistic and undemocratic. He also criticizes Plato's proposal for the communal ownership of property and the abolition of the family, contending that these measures would undermine the natural bonds of affection and

responsibility that hold society together. For Aristotle, the state should not be based on abstract ideals but on the practical realities of human nature and social life. He emphasizes the importance of private property, the family, and the participation of ordinary citizens in the governance of the state. While Plato seeks to create an ideal society based on philosophical principles, Aristotle's political theory is more pragmatic and grounded in the observation of actual political systems.

Conclusion

Plato and Aristotle represent two of the most important figures in the history of political thought, and their works continue to shape our understanding of politics, justice, and the state. Plato's vision of the ideal state, with its theory of three classes and three souls, reflects his belief in a hierarchical, rationally ordered society in which the wise govern for the common good. In contrast, Aristotle's political theory is more empirical and practical, emphasizing the importance of participation, balance, and moderation in achieving a just and stable state.

While both philosophers share a commitment to justice and the well-being of the community, their approaches differ significantly. Plato's idealism, with its focus on abstract principles and rigid social structures, contrasts with Aristotle's more flexible and realistic vision of political life, which is rooted in human nature and the practical concerns of governance. Together, their ideas provide a rich and enduring legacy for political theory, offering valuable insights into the nature of power, citizenship, and the role of the state in promoting human flourishing.