

A Critical Study of Plato's The Republic

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Abstract

Plato was the favourite follower of Socrates. As Plato studied music, grammar, poetry, Maths with the help of private teachers, he had full faith in these branches of learning. While giving the concept of philosopher-king he had the importance of these subjects in his mind. Like Socrates he observed the working of the Greek states and reached certain conclusion. He noticed that all the citizens didn't have the capacity and ability to govern a states. Even democrats fail at times due to particular problems. Plato established his academy near the precincts of Academies and taught his students here freely. Aristotle was also taught by him though the former didn't accept all the Platonic principles.

In *The Republic* he has mentioned his concept of an ideal state though it is regarded as a mere utopia. However, he asserted the purpose of human life in this book. Plato had his own views regarding good conduct, justice, democracy, administration, music and games. He had his own opinion about the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Quite often Greek literary artists asked – Does God exist at all? There are confirmed proofs of the fact that the Greeks enjoyed free life in the state. However, they identified freedom with the rule of law. They didn't live like barbarians as they realized the importance of justice. Generally they took part in open debates on important state affairs.

Keywords : Justice, communism, purgation, socialistic and contemporary issues.

Plato was twenty three years of age when democracy fell in Athens. However, he was keenly interested in the questions relating monarchy, democracy, plutocracy, sovereignty, human rights, freedom, citizenship, public administration and regarded Socrates a wise person. For him, good government is the title to be given as 'golden age'. Only the idiots didn't know anything about serious affairs of public life. Jacob Howland remarks :

According to pericles, the polis alone makes possible a life truly worth living, for it alone allows the individual to make a difference in regard to truly noble and worth-while issues. Indeed, our modern distinction between society, the broad realm within which individuals pursue private ends through public interactions, and politics, the much narrower sphere of government that protects and maintains society, implies a judgment about the relative value of private and public life that was quite foreign to the polis.¹

Regarding the influence of Plato's ideas upon Aristotle Jacob Howland remarks :

Aristotle held a similar view. Aristotle maintained that the polis comes into being for the sake of mere life but continues in existence for the sake of the good life. Political community is constituted by our shared perceptions, articulated through logos, of the advantageous and the disadvantageous, the good and the bad, and the just and unjust. The seriousness and dignity of

political life is derived from the seriousness and dignity of these political things, which have no equivalents in private life. Accordingly, the private man who shunned participation in public affairs was thought to be confused about the most important things : the Greeks called him an *idiots*, from which comes our word *idiot*.²

He established the relation of philosophy with politics and followed this theory till death. In *The Republic* he mentions the methods to save community from various problems and corruption and for this he gave the concept of philosopher-king. Not only this, he elaborated this concept as everybody can't become a philosopher-king. As a friend of Dion, he never lost his optimism for bright future. C.L. Wayper remarks :

He was a superb dramatist, with a sure grasp of form and movement, an unflinching command of vivid detail and gripping situation. And he found that form for his writings which have fullest play to his great literary gifts. He wrote in dialogue form, generally representing Socrates as his chief speaker. His Dialogues were the artistic presentation of political and philosophical problems, and were instinct with life.³

The Athenians failed to understand the difference between good and evil and hence he defined the terms good, power, beauty, wisdom, wealth, knowledge, justice, communism etc. He noticed that political power had been captured by the ignorant people and it was useless to expect any general welfare from these rulers. Hence he felt the need for knowledge among the masses. As an optimist he hoped for the change of situation i.e. from ignorance to knowledge. C.L. Wayper remarks :

The change that they noticed constantly taking place seemed to them a particular form of the problem of variety. The idea of change, they concluded, assumes the idea of permanence, side however much an object changes there must be some part of it that does not or we would be compelled to speak not of changed, but of an entirely new object. What does not change, they said, must be the permanent character of the object. Triangles, for instance, change, but the quality of triangularity is permanent.⁴

Plato was the first thinker to accept the importance of idea and imitation. A thing comes into existence later as the idea of its construction comes first. In spite of ever-changing appearances, idea is important as it is eternal and final. As idea is an independent reality, people must attach importance to it :

Hence Plato's ideas are not to be regarded as transcendent. They could not exist in an ethereal world of their own. They are, on the contrary, immanent in the transitory nature of things, as the Idea of a horse. An Idea, then is eternal it can only exist in time. It is permanent though it is not separate from the world of change. It is in fact the law according to which a thing behaves, for that is not separate from the thing but is nevertheless distinguishable from it.⁵

For him, idea is a source as well as a means in itself. People feel that the visible things are real. But the ideas are real and all material things are mere shadows. For him, idea is the best source of goodness :

It is impossible to have certain knowledge of things that are constantly changing. We can merely form opinions about them. Only of the permanent, of the Idea, of the law, can we have genuine infallible knowledge. Hence, Plato concludes, the good exists, whatever men may think about it. And because it exists they have at least the hope of escaping from their predicament.⁶

Then Plato establishes the relation between human soul and knowledge. For him, the soul is immortal. He relates idea with the theory of incarnation :

Because the Soul is immortal it existed before it became incarnate, just as it will continue to exist after it leaves the body, which is its temporary dwelling place. It's real home is its abode when not incarnate, and that is the higher world of ideas. Before its incarnation it thus had knowledge of the Idea among which it lived. And after its incarnation it is reminded of those Ideas through the senses when it sees those earthly things which "partake" of the ideas.⁷

The soul has the power to recollect the power to recollect the experiences of previous life. Noble people attach importance to noble ideas as they impart them real knowledge :

In fact, it is only because the Soul recollects what it has known in a previous life among the original models or archetypes or Ideas that men can have knowledge of these Ideas. These recollections of the Soul are the only genuine form of knowledge, and because men possess Souls they have therefore the possibility of arriving at it.⁸

Then he refers to three elements of the soul-reason, courage (spirit) and desire. It is through reason that the noble people can find truth and wisdom. Courage obeys the dictates of reason. However, desire are often chaotic and strong. Reason helps men to identify themselves with all reality. So, reason is top important as it commands noble people and tells them how to get satisfaction.

Plato accepts that the qualities of the soul are inborn. However, the importance of restraint and training can't be neglected at all. Force has its own part to play and Plato refers to the role of force frankly. Then he refers to the constitution of the state. Yet the earthly evils go against the rational soul. Moral evils are very harmful as people become selfish and cruel due to them. Many states fail to grow due to these moral evils and hence asks people to rise above the feelings of mine and thine.

In the ideal state desirous soul will not be allowed to function freely. Philosophers are rare in society. Certain gifts are given to them by Nature.

Plato banded the contemporary defective education for this evil. In the Republic he elaborated the whole pattern of ideal education. He asserted that the good state can execute the idea of ideal state and hence it has got to be protected at every cost. The professional soldiers, called guards, will defend it at every cost :

...Courage is their main virtue. They must be keen to see, swift to catch, and strong to destroy the enemy. And like the watchdogs that they are they must combine two contradictory qualities – mildness to their friends and ferocity towards their enemies. Accustomed to warlike sights and sounds at a early age, taught to be indifferent to danger and contemporary of death, they will be able "to see bloody slaughter" and yet hold their ground. They will be men of fine quality, and they live with the best of men.⁹

According to Plato, the best state is that where citizens are trained for Goodness and Reality. Even the rulers must understand the value of external good. Secondly, every person must know the Good to become a decent citizen. Here Plato combines intellectual and moral discipline. Thirdly, a lot of education is essential for a ruler. Fourthly, he asserted the importance of leisure for the sake of wisdom. Generally people work hard for their living and hence fail to develop their wisdom. For him, wisdom consists in knowledge of the Good.

In *The Republic* Plato divides people into three sections : the common people, the soldiers and the guardians. For him, the guardians can be entrusted the political power. However, the guardians are chosen by the legislator, and then they usually succeed by heredity. If there is an exceptional person from the inferior classes, he may be promoted to

the category of guardians. If somebody from the guardian class has loose character, he should be dropped and degraded.

Through education, Plato wants to develop gravity, decorum and courage among the guardians. Homer and Hesiod are not to be taught to children. He said that these two Greek thinkers represent gods as behaving badly on occasion. The young citizens must be taught that evils never come from the gods. Secondly, Homer and Hesiod create sense of fear for death in the hearts of people. On the contrary the aim of education is to create fearlessness in the hearts of soldiers who may die in battle. Thirdly, the citizens must that slavery is worse than death. Why should be guardians weep and lament? Fourthly, decorum means no loud laughter. Since Plato noticed Homer praising rich feasts, and speaking of lust of gods, he condemned him. Lastly, there is no place for such stories in *The Republic*. They show the triumph of wickedness and unhappiness of virtuous people. This is reason that he exiled poets from the ideal states. Regarding dramatists he asserted :

When any of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our state such as he are not permitted to exist; the law will not allow them. We shall send him away to another city.¹⁰

In *The Republic* Plato argues in favour of justice. It is the duty of the state to impart justice to its citizens at every cost. Justice is ranked with wisdom, courage and temperance. The questions are – what makes the state complete? What is the constitution of Justice in a state? What is the list of virtues? What makes the state wise? It is true that the farmers and carpenters also possess wisdom and do their work properly. But Plato feels the need of wisdom and justice for the betterment of state :

The knowledge that makes a state wise, is knowledge about the state as a whole; and this wisdom resides in the guardians, who alone have a clear idea of what is needed for the common weal, and are able to regulate the internal and external relation of the community. Wisdom, in the sense in which the word is applied to a state, is thus the special virtue of the rulers. The state is wise in so far as the men at the head act wisely on its behalf.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the soldiers too have courage to defend the nation. They are the representatives of the state and fight courageously to defend the nation from enemies. Courage has got to be shown in the battlefield. Plato relates wisdom and courage with self-control so that discipline may be maintained in the state. Every citizen has to control himself for bright future of the state. Plato does not accept the role of negative virtues. Let the inferior people obey creating harmony among all sections of society :

... Plato refers to the approx involved in speaking of man as master of himself? 'For', he points out, 'the man who is master of himself will also be the slave of himself'. The explanation, he thinks, is that in the self there are two parts a higher and a lower, one to rule, the other to obey. So there are to be found in society the same two parts, and temperance consists in the general recognition that it is the right of the superior to rule, and the duty of the inferior to obey.¹²

Even the soldiers must obey the command of their officers. Every artisan of the state must obey the orders of the state.

Wisdom, self-control and courage are incomplete without justice. It also creates harmony and intimacy among all sections of society. People must have the spirit of devotion for the state and only then they will be happy and gay.

Every citizen must perform his duty willingly and only then harmony will become strong :

.... the common spirit of justice manifests itself in the special forms of wisdom, bravery, and temperance, according to the particular duties of a class. In other words, if a state be just, its rulers cannot but be wise, its soldiers cannot but be brave, there cannot be agreement among the different classes. Plato in this way gives to the special virtues both the individual and a social aspect.¹³

Plato points out the difference between justice and injustice. Plato accepts the relation between body and soul as he observed the psychology of citizens.

Similarly he pointed out the relation between impulses and desires and also between reason and the lower elements. Plato accepts that passions and desires take their origin within the soul of man. Then he analyses all these factors accepting the opposition as well as unity in difference. As scholar and follower of Socrates Plato gave a theory of education for society as a whole.

He attached due importance to Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Philosophy and Physical training for the proper growth of body and soul. Certain subjects are to be taught during childhood.

Plato attached due importance to myths and legends about gods and national heroes. The term 'music' was used by him in broad perspective.

Let good man not shirk from his duties. Why to paint death in a terrible manner? Why to boast of slavery in the kingdom? Then he answers the question – what kind of poetry is good for the citizens as they are imitative? Should they imitate even in youth? William Boyd explains :

In raising the question, he is thinking as much of the hearer as of the reciter or actor. His conclusion is that imitation weakens character, and that the only imitation which can be permitted is the imitation of good men. From this point of view, he classifies poetry accordingly to the degree in which it makes men imitators, and passes judgment on the educational value of the different forms : the lyric is sanctioned, the epic tolerated, and the drama forbidden.¹³

Plato accepted the theory of purgation and role of poetry for purgation of readers. If music fails to perform the role of purgation, it is useless. The question is that of means as well as ends of music. Then he asks – what is the role painting, embroidery, weaving etc.? Like all Greek philosophers, he attached importance to beauty :

Accordingly, the state must exercise the same superintendence over the handicraftsmen as it over the poets, and compel them to make the articles they produce, things of beauty. Thus will be created the City Beautiful in which men, healthy in body and soul, will grow into harmony with the true beauty of reason.¹⁴

Plato establishes relation of music with culture and refinement. Gymnastic exercise will make people strong and cultured. These days the Athenians enjoyed exercises in the Gyms as the exercises kept them fit physically and mentally. William Boyd explains :

Gymnastic will, of course, make the young men strong and hardy, and that is important enough in its way. But its chief value is not in its physical effects, but in its influence on the character. Music imparts grace to the soul, and makes it temperate. Gymnastic adds to temperance, spirit and courage, and the result is a harmonious character. The fact that the aim of gymnastic is the improvement of the soul leads Plato to remark that the young men must not be

trained like mere athletes, but be moderate in eating and drinking and even in exercise.¹⁵

Now Plato answers other question such as – what is the correct view of the soul? Is early training only a preparation for higher form? What is the relation of education with environment? How to improve educational pattern with right education? Can the members of guardian class follow their own devices? Plato's answer has been elaborated by William Boyd :

All the while, without their knowledge of it, their souls are growing into goodness and intelligence under the stimulus of beautiful things. They hear the old-time stories about gods and heroes, they join in singing their country's songs, they listen to the inspired verses of the poets. Everything around them is beautiful – pictures, and statues, and fine buildings, even the utensils in everyday use.¹⁶

He allowed only lofty fables to be narrated to children by mother and the nurse. There is no denying the fact that relation between soul and the environment exists. William Boyd explains Plato's theory :

This might seem to suggest that the soul is a plastic material, on which the world makes an impress. It is to be noted, however, that the metaphor has only reference to the youngest minds, which are those in which the living response of the soul to external influence is slightest. The metaphor which describes education at this stage most adequately is that of education being a nurture, and music and gymnastic being the nutriment of the soul. By this comparison, justice is done to the organic character of the soul.¹⁷

However, soul has got to be kept free from all evil influences. External factors often prove to be dangerous for soul. So education is important for shaping the soul. Suitable environment, however, is very necessary for this. Conditions of life should be suitable for imparting right education. Environment can improve life as the educator does.

To get rid of various social and economic evils, Plato gave the concept of communism of wives and property. In the ideal republic, people will be above the feelings of mine and thine and selfish feelings will not guide their actions. He observed that people work for material gains so much that they even adopt foul means to achieve their ends. For selfish purposes they ignore all wisdom, courage, self-control and the fundamental justice. To bring revolutionary change in Athens he suggested the theory of communism of wives and property and didn't bother for any hostile criticism.

The guardians will have no possessions and hence dedicated to the state fully. As they are above the feeling of possessiveness, they will not be victims of many evils. Unity will be established in society with this scheme. Plato's scheme is illustrated by many critics as they want to know its validity.

The relation between wife and particular husband is bound to undergo a drastic change. Plato had his own concept of race and hence introduced this pattern for a healthy social reconstruction. Even women of superb intelligence will have the status of guardians of society.

By this time minor and major difference between socialism and communism had not become popular among the intellectuals. However, a few political thinkers talked about the socialistic methods of government. Plato had many questions in his mind these days such as – will the state be supreme body? Will the people get political rights as they are granted fundamental rights in a democratic setup? Will they get liberty in personal life? Will human rights be sacrificed for the defence of state? Will Greece be an enlightened state if the policy of communism is adopted? Will the laws give new political powers to the government? Will

the citizens become mere puppets in the hands of the state? Well, he had no mind to make state a dictator. How could he forget the human rights of the citizens?

In the ideal republic, there will be no indiscipline and chaos. The political authorities will be educated since their beginning and yet be deprived of property and family. However, they will be compelled to do the work which is entrusted to them.

Plato's concept of ideal has been criticized by Dunning, Sabine, William Boyd, Jacob Howland, Lee Cameron McDonald etc. as it is not the least acceptable in 21st century. The term communism has been criticised by numberless thinkers and politicians. However, democratic socialism has replaced scientific communism also. People work hard when they think of personal prosperity and the status of the families. Even the politicians gather money for future as they will not be in power in old age. State control has increased in society at large and yet elections are contested for political units. A lot of laws have been framed in countries like India, Pakistan, U.K., U.S.A., Australia etc. to defend personal property. Secondly, family ties are broken when a woman is everybody's wife. What about the children when the concept of communism of wives is accepted and implemented? Such a system is bound to create immorality in society. The communism of wives is bound to increase problems rather than establish in ideal republic. Now the citizens don't want to depend upon the state for everything. The individualists and the Anarchists don't want to give many rights to the states. It is true that Plato asserts the importance of work, wisdom, courage, self-control and yet his conception of communism is misleading and unacceptable today.

So, Plato was an original thinker. Secondly, he gave importance to the powers of the state. Thirdly, he asserted the importance of courage, self-control, wisdom and justice. Fourthly, he prescribed duties for the philosopher-king. Fifthly, he suggested the concept of communism of wives and property. Sixthly he attached due importance to music, physical training and defence. However, he failed to assert that private property has inspired numberless people for regular and sincere work. Many capitalists work hard regularly as they are guided by personal interests.

However, his utopian plan as given in *The Republic* influenced his successors. It is also an accepted fact that Plato gave the concept of hero-philosopher and introduced the technique of dialogues in this book. Aristotle, Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, etc. feel indebted to him for his lofty thoughts. *The Republic* can be regarded as the criticism of life of Athens and Sparta. At several places Plato answers the question – How to live?

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