

A PLATONIC VIEW OF THE POLITICAL ORDER

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ABSTRACT

Politics, a noble discipline, can generally be defined as the activities associated with the governance of a country. Sadly, this noble activity has been deprived of its noble character by those engaged in politics. Truth and politics have never been on good and friendly terms with one another and lies have always been a justified and glorified tool in political dealings. The world's hope for a humanely and socially better order depends on the political order. The progress or the regress of a country is determined by the degree of transparency in political institutions. Unfortunately today, for many involved in politics, truth is not their forte. Virtue is not their ambition. Development of the soul is not their aim. The people who elected them to power are not their concern. Plato was of the opinion that either philosophers become politicians or politicians accept the values of philosophy. Here, by philosophers, he intends those who love virtue; those who love humanity; those whose sole concern is the welfare and well-being of the people.

INTRODUCTION

The world's hope for a humanely and socially better order depends on the political order. As Plato (428–347 BCE) states in his autobiographical *Seventh Letter*, “the human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class of who have political control be led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers.”¹ Here, by philosophers, he intends those who love virtue; those who love humanity;

¹. Plato, *Letter VII*, 326^b.

those whose sole concern is the welfare and well-being of the people. These are men and women who will not allow their own interests to take precedence over the interests of the people. These are men and women who are at the service of humanity and who will not hesitate to sacrifice anything so that the human race will see better days.

SOCRATES AND PLATO REFUSE TO ENGAGE IN POLITICS

Plato, hailing from a distinguished family, with many involved in active politics, was naturally destined to take an active role in politics. He was full of eagerness for a public career and, in fact, cherished the hope of assuming a significant place in his political community. Plato, being a man of honour and virtue, refused to identify himself with any of the contending political parties and succession of corrupt regimes, each of which brought Athens into further decline. Plato's decision and resolve to leave politics was inspired and further strengthened by the unjust execution of Socrates (399 BCE) whom Plato considered the most just man of his day.²

Political leaders of his day (470-399 BCE) wanted to connect Socrates with their governments. His refusal to adhere to the demands of the political authority of his day infuriated the politicians. He was ready to face the wrath of the politicians rather than to become a partner in their wicked deeds. The Democratic court voted by a large majority for Socrates' execution on an unjust charge of impiety. This injustice, a gross violation of democratic principles spurred Plato to withdraw in disgust from the political abuses of those days. For Plato, making decisions about the right political order is the most important choice one can make in politics. Socrates had a reason for not wanting to engage himself in politics. This is well elucidated in Plato's *Apology* (399 BCE) where it is stated that "no man on earth who conscientiously opposes any organized Democracy, and

². Plato's *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo* recount the last days and death of Socrates.

flatly prevents a great many wrongs and illegalities from taking place in the State to which he belongs, can possibly escape with his life.”³ In his opinion, “the true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone.”⁴ Such was the corrupt nature of the politicians for whom power and prestige mattered more than their service to humanity.

WHAT IS PLATONIC JUSTICE?

In a true democracy, justice is held in high esteem. In fact, justice can be described as the most fundamentally ethical and political concept in democracy. What is justice? The famous Sophist Thrasymachus, as recorded by Plato in his *Republic*, answers this question when he states that justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger.⁵ This understanding of justice has serious negative implications when justice, which is in the exclusive interest of the dominant group, is used as a means of oppression and becomes harmful to those without the means of power. Hence, there is nothing more harmful than domination by the powerful and privileged over the powerless. The moral language of justice is used merely instrumentally to conceal the interests of the dominant group and to make these interests appear universal.

As Plato states in his *Republic*,⁶ true justice is concerned with the common good of the whole political community. It cannot and should not be the exclusive advantage of any faction of society. Rather it should be to the advantage of every single citizen. Justice, which is concerned with the common good of the whole political community, brings friendship and a sense of purpose to every citizen. Justice that is not concerned with the common good of the whole political community can in no way be

³. Plato, *Apology*, 32^a.

⁴. Plato, *Apology*, 32^a.

⁵. See. Plato, *Republic*, 338^c.

⁶. See. Plato, *Republic*, 339^c - 339^e

described as justice. Justice that is not concerned with the common good of the whole political community only causes war, hatred and anger. In fact, it can never be described as justice. But justice that is concerned with the common good of the whole political community fosters respect for one another, fraternity, liberty and equality.

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is an ideal of human society. A political democracy is an organized form of governance in which all the legislative, judicial and executive powers are exercised by representatives and agents who are entrusted by the whole people with the exercise of these powers subject to its will. In any event, political democracy is not an end in itself. It is an instrument for the realization of social democracy. The final justification of any form of political democracy must be that it will promote social democracy - democracy as a social ideal or ethical principle. What is the meaning of social democracy? It means the complete recognition of the right and duty of every human being to develop and give expression to his personality by participating in the life of the community. The ultimate justification of democracy is that it enables every citizen to express his ideas and to become a better person in the promotion of the common good.

Democracy makes greater demands on the intelligence and virtue of the whole citizenry than does any other form of government. The working of democracy presupposes sufficient intelligence and character on the part of the people to choose their representatives and leaders wisely. This condition is frequently not fulfilled. The people do not always choose the best representatives; do not always follow the wisest leaders and the most competent experts. Thus democracy becomes, to a large extent, a failure. It frequently fails to establish the best conceivable conditions for the realization of the common good. It fails in the efficiency of its government. Hence, democracy may not even be any more satisfactory than other forms of governance. It can fail to establish and maintain equally good

educational opportunities for all its citizens and economic opportunities for all its members. However, we cannot expect the complete disappearance of these shortcomings but only their slow and partial mitigation. Democracy is still better than government by a bureaucratic caste system, in which the dictatorship of a hereditary aristocracy and military caste together with plutocracy have complete control or a government by the dictatorship of a class-conscious minority

IS DEMOCRACY A SUCCESS?

Today democracy, government of the people by the people and for the people, is believed to be the best political system. The distinct features of Democracy are freedom and equality. Nevertheless, Plato did not consider democracy to be the best form of government because, as he stated in the *Republic*, it can easily be corrupted and provide scope for a tyrannical government led by a dictator.⁷ In fact, the distinct features of democracy itself pave the way to this undesirable state. For, on one hand, democracy contains the possibility of excessive freedom, of doing as one likes.

On the other hand, it is based on a sense of equality according to which everyone has the right and equal capacity to rule. These qualities of democracy enable all kinds of power-seeking individuals motivated by personal gain rather than the public good to enter politics. For democracy to succeed and flourish, the leadership of society must be competent and honest. This is one of the reasons why, in the *Republic*, Plato decided to hand the steering wheel of the state to philosophers.

Another reason why he decided to hand over the steering wheel of the State to philosophers was his pessimistic view of human nature. For him, most people are corrupt and are driven by their desires and passions. Philosophers are those who can distinguish between true and false beliefs.

⁷. See. Plato, *Republic*, 562^{aff}.

They are people who love knowledge and are motivated by the common good, people who can heal the ills of society because they love virtue and truth. They value the progress of society as a whole and are motivated by an earnest desire to see people flourish.

CAN A RULER BE A LOVER OF THE OTHER?

In the *Republic*, Plato talks about different classes of people. The rulers in Plato's Republic receive only a modest remuneration from the State. They are neither anxious nor motivated by the desire to acquire private lands or luxurious homes and money. Persons who are motivated by the acquisition of private lands, luxuries, money, etc.⁸ soon come to dominate other citizens. Such people can never be leaders who are willing to risk everything in their lives to improve the conditions of human beings in society. A politician should be motivated by a desire to develop harmony among citizens by encouraging them to share the benefits that each class in society can confer on the community.

A city whose rulers do not govern with the intention to obtain personal gain will be free from civil strife because such rulers will have the interest of all the citizens and social classes in mind. Consequently, a politician should be well educated and should be someone who is able to move beyond changing circumstances by reflecting on such values as justice, beauty, trust and moderation. As Plato states in his *Laws*, peace is a value desired by all the people. The political order for Plato is one which promotes social harmony by mean of cooperation and friendship among different social groups that benefit from and contribute to the common good.

For the whole country to benefit we must be ruled by the most competent people. What motivates some people to take on the responsibility of a

⁸. See. Plato, *Republic*, 416^dff.

politician? Without genuine interest in the welfare of people, no one is willing to become involved in the problems of others. Today everyone expects some re-imburement for services rendered. For this reason, politicians who are motivated by the desire for money, honour and power will never do what is best for people. The unjust man or woman will make every effort to get the greatest benefit out of everything for themselves. But a just man or woman does not seek their own advantage. Rulers should not seek power for themselves. Once they have made their contribution to society, they should transfer their responsibility to others.

DUTY OF THE STATE

The State has three major functions: protection of lives and property, development of education and culture and progress of the economy. A democratic society cannot endure and progress unless it is composed of individuals having good character and some level of intelligence. The State has to envision and provide a good educational system which is capable of producing leaders who are unselfish in character. An educational system which is competitive and strictly job-oriented may produce capable people but cannot produce responsible people. Moreover, it is difficult for such a system to produce leaders who are unselfish in character.

The State is responsible for more than simply formal education. It should promote culture and science. In other words, it should stimulate scientific investigation and provide encourage literature and the arts. Besides caring for the elementary moral culture of its members by preventing vice and by providing moral education, the State should support the enrichment of aesthetic enjoyment and its cultivation as well.

No part of education is more important than the training of the individual in the right use of his leisure by means of spiritually uplifting activities. Since it is the function of an organized society, through its public agencies, to secure a fair measure of freedom and opportunity for all members of

society to enjoy the rights that belong to them as persons, it follows that it is a proper function of the State to regulate the production and distribution of economic goods. However, this function should not be seen as an opportunity to use undue state power to oppress the people.

POLITICAL CORRUPTION

Many organizations in the world today monitor corruption in politics, business and finance. No country in the world is immune from corruption in politics. The problem of political corruption includes a wide range of acts committed by political leaders before, during and after leaving office. It includes acts that are proscribed by national and international law as well as activities that are not illegal but do have a corrupting influence on the political process such as when private sector companies lobby for policy favours. Corruption is not only something that happens in large institutions and on a large scale. It happens in much smaller ways and is really only a highly visible aspect of human sin. For instance, employing someone without public acknowledgment of their employment is a form of corruption that is much prevalent in modern society.

One nasty aspect of corruption is that it is like a disease which we catch from one another. Corruption by political leaders is abuse of the power entrusted to them in order to seek personal benefit in the hope of increasing personal power or wealth. Political corruption need not involve money changing hands; it may take the form of 'trading in influence' or granting favours that poison politics and threaten democracy. It is distinct from petty or bureaucratic corruption in so far as it is perpetrated by political leaders or elected officials who have been vested with public authority and who bear the responsibility of representing the public interest. Another aspect of political corruption must be addressed, namely, the bribes and commissions paid to politicians.

Political corruption is an obstacle to transparency in public life. In the established democracies, the loss of faith in politics and the lack of trust in politicians and political parties challenge democratic values, a trend that has deepened with the exposure of corruption in the past decade. In the developing States, political corruption threatens the very existence of democracy as it renders newer institutions of democracy vulnerable. Political corruption points to a lack of transparency but also to related issues of equity and justice: corruption feeds the wrongs that deny human rights and prevent human needs from being met.

The root cause of all corruption is that of political institutions. The progress or the decline of a country is determined by the degree of transparency in the political institution. This idea of transparency in political institutions can be compared to the idea of universal religion which ensures human emancipation and the improvement of the quality of life. Unfortunately, the existence of poverty and the poor quality of many developing countries is a clear sign that political transparency is still a dream.

CONCLUSION

Many politicians today talk in flowery language decked out with fine words and phrases. They work tirelessly to fill the minds of the people with false impressions about their opponents. Truth is not their forte. Virtue is not their ambition. Development of the soul is not their aim. The people who elected them to power are not their concern. Wealth and money are elevated to the level of the divine. To such a brood of politicians Plato would say, "For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls, or even so much; and I tell you that virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both to the individual and to the state."⁹

⁹. Plato, *Apology*, 30^a - 30^b

It is very unfortunate that politicians focus much of their energy and time not on their policies and what they can do to enhance the quality of life of their people but on their political rivals with the unwarranted purpose of getting political mileage. Their intention is to reap benefits for themselves.

Unfortunately, most politicians think that they are wise, when in fact they are not. They resent the ideas and advice of others because they think they know things that in fact they do not know. Many politicians claim to know almost everything under the sky. Their arrogance is bewildering. They address us from a position of authority. They level false accusations against others and a scenario is created to make these false accusations appear genuine and true. Unlike Socrates who said that he was not going to change his behaviour, not even if he had to die a hundred deaths, our politicians change their conduct and their opinions to suit their own advantage.¹⁰ They have no convictions but speak words that are empty of content.

Due to the lack of political transparency and political corruption, democracy in my native county (Sri Lanka) and in many countries throughout the world today are like a large thoroughbred horse which, because of its great size, is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stinging fly.¹¹ We need someone to perform the task of such a fly. Truth must be spoken and should never be betrayed. Sadly, on the one hand, truth and politics have never been on good terms with one another and, on the other hand, lies have always been a justified and glorified tool in political dealings. False news is nothing new in politics.

In many modern democracies, as well as in my own country Sri Lanka, campaigns are run on the basis of lies. Therefore, it is not surprising that lies have become so natural and abundant that we almost expect them to occur. Lies have become part of the fabric of daily political life and have become instrumental in gaining political advantage and favour.

¹⁰. See. Plato, *Apology*, 30^b – 30^c

¹¹. See. Plato, *Apology*, 30^c

Often, but not always, those who stand for truth exist outside the realm of politics. They are outside and, like Socrates, are subject to exile and death. For example, we know of so many journalists and social activists who had to pay the ultimate price with their lives because they stood for what is right and true. Socrates was sentenced to death. Martin Luther King was assassinated (1929 - 1968). Aung San Suu Kvi (1945 -) was put in jail. In his *Apology*, Socrates wrote that "if you should offer to acquit me on condition that I must give up convictions, I do not want that freedom."¹²

He preferred to die rather than to betray his convictions. Today, unfortunately, many in the political arena make no secret of acquiring as much money as possible and do the same to acquire fame and honour without any concern for truth and honesty. They disregard the fact that the primary task of a politician is to focus on what is of supreme importance.

We do not usually like to submit our conduct to criticism. So we silence those who criticize us. We seek the elimination of those who oppose us in the belief that this will spare us from any further criticism. But Socrates was of the view that: "If you expect to stop denunciation of your wrong way of life by putting people to death, there is something amiss with your reasoning. This way of escape is neither possible nor creditable. The best and easiest way is not to stop the mouths of others but to make yourself as good as you can be."¹³

This was his last message for those who voted for his condemnation. Nothing can harm a good man or woman either in life or after death. In the *Apology* of Plato, Socrates addressed the jury and stated that "now it is time that we were going, I to die and you to live but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but to god."¹⁴

¹². See. Plato, *Apology*, 29^c - 29^d

¹³. Plato, *Apology*, 39^d

¹⁴. Plato, *Apology*, 42^a.

Let me end by echoing the words of Socrates who said that politicians should go about trying to persuade young and old to make their first concern neither their bodies nor their possessions but their primary concern should be the greater welfare of humanity, proclaiming as they go that wealth does not bring goodness but that goodness brings wealth and every other blessing both to the individual and to the state.¹⁵ ■

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¹⁵. See. Plato, *Apology*, 30^b.