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Greek political thought

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Abstract---The fourth century BCE is widely regarded as the formative period of Greek political thought. While earlier centuries had certainly grappled with significant theoretical questions — most notably the relationship between nature and law — it was not until this era that coherent and systematic political doctrines crystallized. The period was distinguished by an exceptional degree of intellectual freedom and by a pronounced tendency toward abstraction that shaped political discourse in profound ways. The vitality of Greek thought, which was already evident at the close of the fifth century BCE, was marked precisely by this speculative quality, and its influence has persisted without interruption to the present day. This intellectual moment constituted a pivotal turning point in the history of the Greek city-states and gave rise to a distinctly new political vision that first emerged in the fourth century. Against this backdrop, the article addresses two guiding questions: What are the origins of Greek political thought? And who were the thinkers who gave it its enduring shape?
Keywords---Political thought, ancient Greece, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle.

Introduction

Greek political thought developed within the distinctive institutional framework of the city-state (polis), and its growth was shaped by a confluence of general and particular characteristics that allowed collective political ideas to crystallize and, in time, to give way to a more individualized form of political reflection. In comparative terms, the Greek intellectual tradition stands out for the exceptional degree to which it was sustained by forces of political fragmentation and the divergence of foundational perspectives — forces that proved especially dynamic within Greek society and its political milieu. These tensions contributed to the remarkable plurality of political systems across the city-states and spurred a persistent alertness to the dangers of corrupt political practice. The creative output of Greek thinkers — whether expressed in poetry, drama, political dialogues, or intellectual debates — eased the task of those who sought to articulate and test their ideas against the demands of practice.

None of this, however, should be taken to deny the possibility that political thought emerged, in some form, within earlier civilizations that preceded the Greeks. Yet the sheer abundance and sophistication of Greek political writing remains unmatched by any other ancient civilization — a fact that does not negate the reality of intellectual exchange and cultural interaction among the ancient peoples who were in regular contact with one another.[1] While some contemporary scholars maintain that political thought as a rigorous discipline began with the writings of Plato — particularly his accounts of the ideal state in the *Republic* and the *Laws* — this position does not do

[1] Cyril Northcote Parkinson, *The Evolution of Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 7.

full justice to the foundational role of Socrates, whose influence on Plato was decisive. Socrates connected politics to virtue and to knowledge; it was he who brought Greek thought down from the heavens — from speculation about the divine — to the earth, to the lived realities of human existence.[2] He contested the Athenian democracy's practice of allowing artisans and tradespeople to participate by lot in the management of public affairs, championed respect for the law and the necessity of honoring it even when it condemned him to death, and elevated dialogue as the proper medium for shaping collective thought and effecting genuine change. Aristotle, for his part, transformed political thought into a systematic science, studying states according to their capacity to promote human happiness through constitutions that blended democracy and aristocracy and relied upon the middle class to mediate between the wealthy and the poor.

1. Socrates (469–399 BCE)

Political Life and Thought

Strictly speaking, Socrates left behind no systematic body of political doctrine. Yet his life itself constitutes a sustained series of political stances, most of which placed him in opposition to Athenian democracy. Through these stances it is possible to recover the broad contours of his political thought, which would subsequently exert a profound influence on both Plato and Aristotle. His attachment to the city bound him unconditionally to its laws and institutions, and he was equally opposed to any attempt to break free from those laws or to alter them in ways that would assert the primacy of the individual over the state — a position actively promoted by many of the Sophists.[3]

The Theory of Law

Socrates maintained that laws — whether the written laws crafted by human beings for the sake of peace and civic order, or the unwritten laws derived from divine will — are enduring truths transmitted across generations and deserving of preservation from any alteration or abolition. In his view, law in its stability and perfection resembles a mathematical truth: it does not vary with changes in time or place. There exists, he held, a stratum of unwritten law that originates with the gods, is not specific to any particular city or era, and is universally known and recognized. Among these universal precepts are filial piety, the veneration of the divine, and the prohibition of incest. As to the ultimate source of law, Socrates stated plainly to his interlocutor: "I believe that it is the gods who have given laws to mankind, for the first law among all peoples is the one that commands worship of the gods." In this way law occupied the supreme place in Socrates's worldview. He regarded it as the

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[2]Claude Mossé, *Les Grecs inventent la politique* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2005), 39.

[3]Mostafa al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy from Solon to Ibn Khaldun* (Egypt: Rawabet Publishing, 1st ed., 2017), 43.

foundation of moral education, the source of virtue, and the guarantor of order amid the perpetual flux of human arrangements. He also held that law does not conflict with divine justice — rather, it gives that justice its visible expression. This position was entirely consistent with his larger commitment to strengthening public authority in the face of the individual freedom championed by the Sophists, especially those of a naturalistic persuasion.[4]

Socrates's theory of law, and in particular his insistence on obedience to the laws, marked an important watershed in Greek political thought and left an especially deep imprint on the political philosophy of Plato. Socrates defended the rule of the philosopher-king on the grounds that such a ruler is best placed to determine and realize justice in a form acceptable to all citizens. But is justice truly attainable for all citizens regardless of their level of civic consciousness? With the benefit of hindsight, one might conclude that his theoretical principles were difficult to reconcile with the actual political practices of his time. His aim was to render the laws genuinely acceptable to ordinary people, but this ambition brought him into direct conflict with the democrats, who ultimately sentenced him to death. Socratic politics was animated by a desire to restore the glory of the Athenian state on the basis of a sacred and divinely sanctioned order — an expression of a deeply conservative attachment to the traditions and inner nature of the city. This reverence for law, carried to its logical conclusion, found its most emblematic expression in his dramatic death, which embodied the Greek conviction that law is the foundation of civic organization and justice.[5]

Ethics, Politics, and Governance

For Socrates, ethics is politics and politics is ethics; the highest of all virtues is the art of statesmanship — the art that encompasses the governance of the state and forms citizens into capable political agents. He believed that political virtue, like virtue in general, is a form of knowledge. Justice and every other virtue, he argued, amount to nothing more than a kind of knowledge, since all acts of justice and all other virtuous acts are intrinsically good and honorable. Whoever truly understands the beauty of these acts will find nothing more beautiful. Socrates therefore drew no line in his moral philosophy between ethics and politics. Political ethics as he conceived it gathered up the results of the prior development of Greek political thought and served as the launching point for its ascent to higher levels in Plato's political philosophy and in Aristotle's political science.[6]

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[4] Ibid., 46.

[5] Adnan Mulhim and Zuhair Imran, "The Development of Political Thought among the Ancient Greeks up to Plato," *Tishreen University Journal for Research and Scientific Studies*, vol. 36, no. 5 (2014): 164.

[6] V. S. Nersesyants, trans. Hanna Abboud, *Political Thought in Ancient Greece* (Damascus: al-Ahali for Printing and Publishing, 1st ed., 1999), 95–96.

As for governance, Socrates regarded it not as a pleasure or privilege but as the practice of virtue. Its purpose is not to satisfy the selfish desires of the ruler but to realize the good of all. The political person is the only one genuinely fitted for these noble responsibilities, which must be placed at the service of the state. Organizing the affairs of the city according to the principles of reason was, in his view, the only reliable path to the common good. He placed great weight on culture and formation, believing their fruits to be more precious and enduring than the gifts of material wealth.[7]

In closing, it should be acknowledged that a fully elaborated account of Socrates's political opinions is not readily available, since his conclusions on political matters are discernible mainly through the circumstances of his life and the grounds of his trial. It is therefore highly probable that many of the political principles found in Plato's *Republic* are in fact Socratic in origin. It seems certain, at any rate, that the concept of a ruling class distinguished by rationality, and the aspiration to rescue the state through philosopher-rulers, derived from Socrates's central conviction that virtue is knowledge — including political virtue.

2. Plato (427–347 BCE)

Plato was the first political philosopher to achieve genuine unity of knowledge and method. In his work we find the primary theoretical foundations of political science, along with the general problems that would occupy political philosophers for centuries to come. Yet the student of his political philosophy soon encounters a classificatory difficulty arising from the evolution of Plato's views from one dialogue to the next.[8] Most of his dialogues touch directly on political questions. In the *Republic* — where Socrates serves as his mouthpiece — Plato poses his central political problem with unmistakable clarity, interrogating the nature and essence of justice in conversation with a range of interlocutors. In his political theory, there are clear indications of a desired reform of the political order, for he believed that the only meaningful reform was the reform of the individual human being in the first instance. A proper understanding of Plato's political theory is, however, inseparable from his epistemology.[9] His three major political dialogues — the *Republic*, the *Statesman*, and the *Laws* — contain the foundational political questions that have continued to occupy scholars to the present day.

2.1. The Philosopher-King

The ideal city that Plato envisions is governed by the philosopher-king. Political evils cannot be eradicated, he contends, unless governance is transferred to the hands of

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[7]Ibid., 104.

[8]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 49.

[9]Mulhim and Imran, "Development of Political Thought," 164.

philosophers or philosophy penetrates the minds of rulers. Plato favors the former scenario: society must first form and cultivate philosophers, then entrust them with power once their intellectual formation is complete. To realize this vision, Plato designed a long-term educational and pedagogical program intended to produce philosopher-rulers endowed with soundness of reason, rectitude of character, and a disposition to govern their subjects in accordance with virtue and the good.[10]

The government of philosophers is thus the very purpose of this educational system and the cornerstone of the ideal state. For once philosophers hold power, they will have no aim other than the realization of justice among citizens; they will dedicate their entire existence to the service of their fellow citizens. In Plato's own words, they regard governance "as an unavoidable duty rather than a privilege," disdaining the honors that ordinary people pursue as trivial and unworthy of a free person, and caring only to perform their duty, to uphold the honor that flows from it, and above all to serve justice — which they consider the most essential of all things. Plato therefore holds that these philosophers, properly educated and formed, must take turns governing the ideal state: either one after another, making governance a monarchy, or one cohort after another, making it an aristocracy.[11]

Plato's philosopher-rulers are individuals who have grasped the universal forms of justice, beauty, and the supreme good. They genuinely will these forms and strive to actualize them in the communities in which they live. Their souls have been purified, their intellects elevated, and the living image of the world of Forms — with its pure and immutable truths — has been impressed upon their hearts. Because the truth of things has been revealed to them in itself, they are incapable of acting otherwise than in accordance with pure goodness and pure justice. It was on account of these elevated qualities and essential characteristics that Plato wished the rulers of his ideal city to be philosophers. The philosopher, by virtue of his nature and the ideal virtues with which he has been endowed, will be a perfect ruler and a true king — one who draws on his wisdom in every circumstance and governs according to its guidance. Until such time as philosophers become kings, or the kings and rulers of the world become genuine philosophers, cities will have no respite from their evils and afflictions.[12]

The rule of philosophers is an idea rooted in Plato's idealist philosophy, which distinguishes between the world of becoming and change (*Devenir*) and the world of permanence and truth — a distinction that also serves to legitimize his fundamentally

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[10]Muhammad Waqiallah Ahmad, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: An Islamic Perspective* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1st ed., 2010), 63.

[11]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 58.

[12]Najah Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 55–56.

conservative political position. Plato ultimately concluded that the functions of knowledge and political governance must be unified. On this matter he states: "The helm of states must be seized by a philosopher or by philosophers who disdain what people today pursue as honor and regard it as trivial and unworthy of a free person, who care only to perform their duty and to uphold the honor that flows from it, and who see justice as the most necessary and important thing — dedicating themselves entirely to its service and raising it high in their organization of their city."[13]

2.2. Justice in Plato's Political Theory

In the *Republic*, Plato begins his construction of the ideal city by attempting to crystallize a stable standard of justice, doing so through a sustained critical engagement with the various prevailing conceptions of the concept in his era. He examines several definitions of justice, among the most important of which is that offered by Cephalus and developed by Polemarchus: that justice consists in speaking the truth and honoring one's debts. Polemarchus refined this definition by proposing that "justice means giving each person what is owed to them" — which he understood as treating each person in the way appropriate to them, that is, "benefiting friends and harming enemies." Plato rejected this definition because it reduces justice to a bilateral relation between two individuals in which each party thinks only of personal advantage. The second definition that Plato rejected was that of the Sophist Thrasymachus, who declared: "Justice is the advantage of the stronger." Since the ruler is the strongest, justice operates in his interest; in other words, the political laws of any given state are always made by the strongest in their own interest. The ruler, as the strongest, imposes laws that serve his interests rather than those of the governed. Good and just, on this view, mean nothing other than the interest of the dominant faction. Force and power can always lend any act an aura of nobility and grandeur. This position laid the cornerstone of the politics of power that would later reappear in Machiavelli and in Nietzsche's will to power.[14] Plato rejects this view on the basis of his own conception of governance as an art like any other, in which the ruler receives a remuneration for his service. The true ruler is one who attends to the welfare of those under his care, not his own interests, and justice cannot be founded on the inculcation of fear. The attentive reader of the *Republic* will notice the careful balance that Plato strikes between state and individual, from which he derives his definition of justice as "each person performing his function to the fullest extent." He affirms elsewhere in the same text that "each individual must perform one function in society — the one for which his nature has best equipped him — without interfering in the work of others."[15]

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[13]Ibid., 56.

[14]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 47–48.

[15]Ibid., 48–49.

The discussion of justice in the *Republic* points toward the view that justice is the art from which the good of both the individual and the state is realized simultaneously. In this way Plato moves toward the affirmation that justice is possible when it expresses itself openly — that is, it can prevail in the state under the rule of philosophers. This view, concerning the precise form of governance required for justice, makes Plato arguably the first philosopher to have linked the state and justice to the existence of wise rulers. Justice is also beneficial only when the laws serve the interests of all, and this is only possible in a virtuous city — which explains why Plato felt compelled to imagine an ideal state.[16]

2.3. The Division of Labor and the Class System

The ideal state rests on the principle of the division of labor among its members and classes. Plato divides the individuals of the state into three classes: the producers, the warriors, and the rulers. He frequently refers to the second and third classes together as "the guardians of the state." The purpose of this division is to ensure that each class performs its function while embodying a corresponding moral virtue. The producers are to provide the various material goods with full diligence and competence, each keeping strictly to his own craft and refraining from interfering in others'. All must cultivate the virtue of temperance, retaining only what is necessary from what they produce and surrendering the remainder to the state for distribution among the other classes.[17]

Plato holds that communities came into being as a result of human needs that can only be met through the cooperation of individuals, since no person is self-sufficient or capable of producing everything necessary for life on his own. Each person must exchange his product for the products of others in order to secure the full range of life's necessities. This analysis implies that the foundation of civilized societies is economic need and the mutual exchange of services among members of the community, with each member committed to a certain degree of give and take. The function of the state, on this analysis, is to discover the best ways of facilitating exchange among individuals and satisfying their various needs.[18]

This theory reveals two fundamental truths about human nature: first, that individuals differ in their natural talents; and second, that individuals acquire far greater skill when they devote themselves to the work that accords with their natural inclinations and aptitudes. Plato accordingly affirms that the production of all goods is achieved in greater abundance, with greater ease, and at higher quality when each person specializes in the work suited to his nature and performs it at the right

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[16]Mulhim and Imran, "Development of Political Thought," 165.

[17]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 53.

[18]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 51.

moment. It follows that Plato cannot conceive of a society without specialization, for in its absence every individual would be required to produce all his own necessities and would have no need for others — and hence no reason to live with them in a single community under a common political order. The perfectly self-sufficient individual cannot exist. It is precisely this natural insufficiency of the individual that gave rise to political communities as a remedy for natural deficiency. The individual compensates for his natural shortcomings by acquiring exceptional skill in the type of work for which nature has fitted him, and he acquires this skill through specialization. In Plato's view, these are the latent forces that propel human society toward its highest development.[19]

This class system has attracted considerable criticism from historians and political philosophers, some of whom have regarded it as a form of rigidity and social ossification. My own view is that Plato had no such rigidity in mind; what he sought was to guarantee the state a stable and balanced political and economic order in which all members exchange benefits without self-interest. Functional specialization, when coupled with this class arrangement, serves to create harmony among individuals and to diminish the spirit of unlimited competition that so often produces the total dominance of individual selfishness.[20]

2.4. The Theory of the Three Parts of the Soul and Its Social Applications

Plato likens the state to a large human being and the human being to a small state. In seeking to analyze the meaning of justice, he preferred to study it in the state rather than in the individual. The three social classes correspond to three faculties — or souls — in the individual. The first and most fundamental is the appetitive soul (*epithumia*), located in the belly, whose domain is food, drink, and bodily desires. The second is the spirited soul (*thumos*), located in the chest or heart, oriented toward combat, mastery, and pride. The third and highest is the rational soul (*logos*), centered in the head, which engages in thought and seeks wisdom, truth, goodness, and beauty in all situations and actions. Human beings are formed with these three faculties in varying degrees. The great majority of people are dominated by the acquisitive and greedy appetitive faculty; they form the common class, whose aim is production, gain, and the accumulation of wealth. A smaller number are dominated by the spirited faculty — spirited in the pursuit of glory and honor, with the bodily appetites held in check — and these are the soldiers of the state, well suited to their role by their impetuosity and valor. Only a rare few are dominated by the faculty of reason and reflection, which governs both the impulses of ambition and vainglory and the drives of material greed; these are the exceptional few who should stand at the head of the community, distinguished by their abstinence from worldly pleasures,

[19]Ibid., 52.

[20]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 54.

their freedom from rashness and cruelty, and their unique capacity to devise the wisest and noblest solutions.[21]

For the state to be virtuous, the appropriate virtue must prevail in each of its parts. The general virtue common to all is temperance or moderation — resistance to greed and appetite. The virtue specific to the military class is courage: steadfastness in the right without fear, however great the obstacles. By courage, Plato means firmness in the truth without fear, whatever the obstacles. The virtue of the ruling class is knowledge — an understanding of the truth, goodness, and beauty by means of a free and precise intellect that cannot be deceived by charlatanism or superstition, and that is not subdued by mere custom and tradition. Plato holds that his temperate, courageous, and wise state must also be just. Justice, in his conception, consists in each class and each individual within each class confining themselves to their proper domain and refraining from meddling in what does not belong to them. The same applies to justice in the individual: the person who is temperate, courageous, and wise is just only if he prevents his desires and passions from interfering in his thought and judgment. In this way alone does he give each person his due, bring happiness to himself, and bring happiness to others. A society composed of just individuals cannot fail to be just; each class attends to its work, and the true philosophers take the reins of governance for the benefit of the governed.[22]

2.5. The Theory of Education in the Ideal State

In the *Republic*, Plato advanced a comprehensive theory of education and instruction with the specific purpose of producing the distinguished class of philosopher-rulers. In so doing, he also furnished a complete philosophy of education that Jean-Jacques Rousseau would later describe as the greatest work ever written on educational philosophy. The question, however, is how Plato proposes to ensure the realization of philosopher-rule and the attainment of political and moral perfection among those who are the very pillars of his ideal state.[23]

The educational system begins by having its administrators identify healthy children capable of physical training without regard to their social origin. These children are then subjected to a unified educational program that makes no distinction between boys and girls. The first stage of this system lasts until the age of eighteen, during which the children follow a complete dietary regimen under medical supervision while engaging in physical training to ensure physical fitness. For the nourishment of the soul, they receive instruction in the refined arts and are exposed to tranquil music. Plato does not neglect the physical education of these future rulers; he prescribes

[21]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 54.

[22]Ibid., 55.

[23]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 55.

gymnastic exercises and attends to their dietary regimen so that their bodies remain sound. By the time they reach the age of twenty, their tastes have been cultivated through music and the fine arts and their bodies strengthened through athletic training, rendering them fit to receive instruction in the mathematical and philosophical sciences.[24]

The second stage runs from the age of eighteen to thirty, following the successful completion of the examinations that mark the end of the first stage. It begins with two to three years of compulsory military training. Those who pass this period of military exercises successfully then proceed, from the age of twenty to thirty, to study the sciences — particularly the mathematical sciences: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music theory. The aim of this study is to train these young people in abstract thought and in the apprehension of abstract relations among things, so that they may be prepared for the subsequent study of dialectics and philosophy. The third stage, from thirty to thirty-five, is devoted entirely to dialectics — the study of philosophy — in which the students learn the method of ascending to the discovery of abstract truth through rational dialogue, rising from the sensible to the intelligible without the mediation of any instrument of sense. The fourth and final stage is reserved for those who have successfully passed the examinations of all previous stages and lasts for a further fifteen years. It is devoted to practical training in the exercise of senior functions and in the active performance of military duties. Its purpose is to test the capacity of the candidates to resist the temptations that assail them from every direction, and at the same time these practical exercises distinguish them from all others in their mastery of practical affairs and in their depth of knowledge.[2526]

At this point the ultimate aim of Plato's educational system becomes clear: to produce that elite class capable of governing the ideal and virtuous city — the philosophers who can exercise the function of governance while striving to realize the ideal of justice without any personal interest or selfish motive. Plato grants these philosopher-rulers absolute power, unconstrained by any human authority or written law, defending this absolute rule with the statement: "The ruler is the servant of the state who preserves the balance among classes and maintains the boundaries of the city."[27]

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[24]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 59.

[25]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 56.

[26]Ibid., 56.

[27]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 60.

2.6. The Communism of Women and Property

Plato broached this theory in the course of his discussion of education, when he remarked that "a sound education, if it enlightened the souls of our citizens, would allow them to resolve all problems easily — including the question of the acquisition of women, marriage, and the procreation of children — following the principle that all things are shared among friends." The theory rests on Plato's conviction in the equality of the sexes: both can accomplish all things together. Women should learn the same subjects as men and should consequently be treated in the same way and assigned the same functions. On this basis, Plato advocated communism as a social arrangement. Since women would share in all things with men — whether in education or in public office — they would not be free to devote themselves to child-rearing or household management. Plato accordingly called for the communal sharing of women within the guardian class: no man would be bound to a particular woman, nor any woman to a particular man; instead all things would be shared among friends. The state would organize specific seasons for the celebration of marriages on the basis of merit: the best women for the best men, and so on. The children born from these unions would also be held in common, such that no father would know his son nor any son his father. Plato set the age of union under this system at twenty to forty for women and thirty to fifty-five for men.[28]

This arrangement carries, in Plato's view, an additional benefit: the improvement of the race. Nothing is left to chance; the most gifted men mate with the most gifted women so that the offspring may be finer and more complete. This superior progeny must be nurtured from the day of its birth: newborns are transferred to public nurseries where they are cared for by nurses and officials appointed for this purpose. The ruler must monitor births both in quantity and quality, ensuring they do not exceed the resources available to the state. Infants born weak or deformed are to be removed and concealed in a remote location.[29]

In truth, Plato's system of communal women was conceived above all as a guarantee of state unity. He believed that the principal cause of conflict within the guardian class was competition over the possession of women, as well as over the ownership of land and property. Eliminating the sources of this conflict would therefore preserve the unity of the state and secure the stability of the political order. This means that his concern was not with the liberation of woman or man from the bonds of marriage per se, but solely with the preservation of state unity. Although these justifications give the system a certain internal coherence within the framework of Plato's ideal state, they are not sufficiently precise. In seeking to eliminate the causes of competition and conflict, Plato in fact created new causes for it: a new conflict might well arise

[28]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 57–58.

[29]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 62.

among parents over which of the children was theirs. Furthermore, the damage to the state from the abolition of the family — which constitutes the foundation of individual life — may well exceed the harm caused by competition among its guardians over women or property.[30]

2.7. Corrupt Forms of Government

Plato identified five types of government. The first is the government of philosophers — the optimal form. The remaining four are corrupt governments, since they fail to achieve the supreme ideal or the model standard of justice in the state. He described them as follows:

a. Timocracy: This is a government dominated by ambition and the love of glory. Plato explains how, after several generations, the class of virtuous philosophers in the ideal state gives rise to a generation that is less cultivated and refined than its predecessors. These individuals take power and shift their energies away from the service and protection of citizens toward the pursuit of personal interests and ambitions. They devote themselves to warfare and to tightening their grip over others. The pursuit of military glory becomes their dominant preoccupation — a consequence of the subjugation of their rational faculty to the spirited and irascible part of their souls.[31]

b. Oligarchy: This is the government of the wealthy and avaricious. It emerges from its predecessor when the ruler's highest aspiration shifts from military glory to the accumulation of material wealth. The oligarchs, in Plato's characterization, are consumed by greed for money and hold gold and silver sacred. In their insatiable drive for more wealth, their esteem for virtue diminishes in proportion to their growing regard for money. Under such a regime, greed for wealth becomes pervasive among citizens; the ranks of sycophants who flatter the rich and despise the poor multiply; and the state gradually loses its unity as it splits internally into a state of the wealthy and a state of the poor, each conspiring perpetually against the other.[32]

c. Democracy: In the light of the foregoing analysis of life under oligarchic rule, it is inevitable that the majority will ultimately prevail in their struggle against the wealthy minority. A democratic government is then formed by lot; some oligarchs are imprisoned, others banished, and the people divide the wealth among themselves. Under democracy, individuals enjoy freedom in everything, so that its constitution appears, on its surface, to be the best of all constitutions. Yet Plato holds that this very freedom will become the driver of anarchy that proves impossible to contain after a time. Democracy equalizes the equal and the unequal alike, and it admits to governance those who have no understanding of its meaning.

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[30] Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 58.

[31] Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 65.

[32] Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 60.

Gradually the people will grow weary of the chaotic consequences of democratic life, which will lead to calls for a change of regime and a demand for tyranny.[33]

d. Tyranny: This government arises when the extreme exercise of freedom reaches the point of absolute anarchy. Having grown weary of democratic leaders and their corruption, the people choose a person whom they favor and invest with increasing power and formidable authority. But this leader swiftly transforms into a despotic tyrant.[34]

2.8. Social and Political Institutions in the Laws

In the *Laws*, Plato abandons the communism he had advocated in the *Republic*. Some commentators regard this as one of the most significant revisions in his later work. Yet in reality he remained committed to communism as an ideal; it simply represents the highest level that human beings are capable of attaining given their nature. He therefore relinquishes it on account of human weakness, permitting the existence of private property and the private family. Even so, he maintains his position on the equality of women with men in education and their participation in military and other civic duties. He accepts permanent monogamous marriage — under strict public oversight — and requires that marriage, as specified in Book VI of the *Laws*, bring together complementary and contrasting qualities. Each man should seek not merely what pleases him but what is best for the state; thus the wealthy should marry the poor, and the quick-tempered the calm, so that balance within the state may be achieved. As for private property, Plato prescribes the distribution of land among citizens in a manner that prohibits them from selling or buying it. The owner bequeaths his portion to a single son — the eldest — so as to guarantee the stability of property and prevent its fragmentation or diminution below an appropriate threshold.[35]

These are the most important political theories that Plato advanced through his three major political works. There is no doubt that they generated a broad and enduring intellectual movement. Critics of Plato's political philosophy have sometimes gone to considerable lengths in attributing errors to him that do not correspond to the actual content of his thought. Yet whatever the gravity of his mistakes, they should not lead us to harsh or unfair judgments about his political theories. Had his most severe critics read the *Statesman* and the *Laws* alongside the *Republic* rather than confining themselves to the latter, they would have formed a more accurate picture of his politics and would have moderated many of their objections considerably.[36]

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[33]Ibid., 60.

[34]Ibid., 61.

[35]Ibid., 66.

[36]Ibid., 69.

In any case, the errors Plato committed appear to have arisen from two sources: first, the rationalist method by which he pursued the discovery of truth; and second, his excess of idealism and noble principle, combined with an overriding appeal to the common good. His idealism, in other words, should not be held against him as a fault in itself. His idealism inspired a large number of the most luminous thinkers who conceived ideal cities and followed his approach, as well as those who championed education as a fundamental pillar of the state — among them John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Dewey. What may legitimately be held against him is his failure to reconcile his idealism with social reality, so that his ideals — when their application proves impossible — become detached from any concrete object. He is also to be criticized for pushing the logic of reason so far that he failed to understand that human life contains instincts that human beings are entirely incapable of renouncing.

3. The Political Philosophy of Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Aristotle is considered one of the greatest of the Greek philosophers. He received his earliest formation under Plato and went on to master philosophy, logic, ethics, politics, literary theory, and the natural sciences. Although he was deeply influenced by Platonic philosophical principles, he differed radically from Plato in many of his views, particularly those expounded in the *Republic*. Aristotle developed a number of his own theories specifically on the basis of a critique of Platonic ideas.[37]

3.1. The Theory of Social Necessity and the Elements of the State

Aristotle opens his *Politics* by asserting that the state (or city, *polis*) is a natural community that is logically prior to all other communities — the family and the tribe — because it encompasses all of them and satisfies the broadest range of human needs and demands. In so doing, he replies to those Sophists who had argued that the state is not a natural but a conventional community.[38]

Aristotle delivered his judgment on the original natural condition of the human being in his celebrated dictum: "Man is by nature a political animal" — meaning that human beings are naturally inclined to live in community with their fellow humans. It is from this natural inclination that the institution of the state and the instruments of governance ultimately emerged. In Aristotle's view, the human tendency to live in community resembles the tendency of other animals to live in groups of their own kind. Yet the human being differs from animals in possessing moral principles and ideals, as well as the tools of rational analysis that guide him toward the ends of the

[37]Waqiallah Ahmad, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 73.

[38]Ibid., 74.

good life — a difference that sets him decisively apart from animal societies, which are essentially societies of the jungle.[39]

These distinctively human attributes — the faculties of reason and ethics — are nevertheless insufficient, taken by themselves, to order human life. They require the institution of the state in order to grow, develop, and reach their full maturity, and to bring the human being to the realization of existential happiness. As Aristotle states: "These virtues were implanted in us by nature. Nature has prepared us to receive them. But it is habit and practice that bring these virtues to maturity and completion." If a human being fails to cultivate and mature these virtues within himself, he descends not merely to the level of the animal but to something below that — to an intolerable state of savagery. The human being who lives outside the institution of the state is the predatory beast itself.[40]

To this remarkable degree does Aristotle dramatize the place and importance of the state in human life. He states: "The existence of the state is by nature prior to that of the family and of individuals." Sensing the strangeness of this proposition, he goes on to reaffirm it: "The existence of individuals is by nature prior to that of the state, but the good and happiness of individuals depends on and is conditioned by the existence of the state, which is the instrument without which they cannot attain the happy life befitting the dignity of human beings."[41]

3.2. The Formation of the State

Aristotle holds that the state passes through three stages in its formation. He begins by maintaining that the state emerged as a result of a historical evolution from the family, which is the primary nucleus of society. The family itself arose in response to the basic needs that every person experiences — chief among them, in his view, the need for reproduction to ensure the continuation of the species, along with the needs for food, shelter, clothing, and so on, which no single individual can meet alone. Families then find it necessary to join together in a higher and larger community — the village — and this constitutes the second stage of social formation and a further step on the path toward the state. The third stage, following the family and the village, is the coming together of several villages to form the city or state, which is the highest form of human community because it is capable of sustaining itself and of guaranteeing its members a happy life. Politics for Aristotle is thus "the science of social happiness," just as ethics is "the science of individual happiness"; and the function of the state is to secure happiness for all its citizens. The state, then, is in Aristotle's view a natural development from the family and the village — but a

[39]Ibid., 74.

[40]Waqiallah Ahmad, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 74–75.

[41]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 75.

development that is not merely quantitative: it adds a higher purpose and satisfies higher dimensions of human life, making possible the virtuous life in a more civilized community that is closer to the true nature of the human being.[42]

3.3. The Theory of Government

Aristotle drew a meaningful and precise distinction between the state and the government. The state, in his view, is the totality of its citizens; the government is the body that commands, regulates the affairs of the state, and oversees its public functions. He held that the form of a government varies according to the end it pursues and according to the number of rulers. Government is either legitimate or corrupt. A legitimate government is one that works for the good of individuals and aims at the happiness of the community as a whole. A corrupt government is one that manages its own interests at the expense of the community's welfare. Government may be monarchical, aristocratic, or constitutional. This yields six forms of political regime: three legitimate — monarchy, aristocracy, and constitutional democracy — and three corrupt forms corresponding to them respectively: tyranny, oligarchy, and demagogy.[43]

In a monarchy, the ruler is a single individual who governs according to the law and aims at the common good. In an aristocracy, power resides in the hands of an excellent minority distinguished in every respect, and they too govern according to the law and aim at the common good. Constitutional democracy is the government of the majority, which works for the welfare of citizens and is characterized by freedom, equality, and governance in accordance with the constitution. These legitimate forms of government are liable to degenerate into corrupt forms. If a king or single ruler inclines toward injustice and pursues his own interests, his government transforms from a virtuous monarchy into despotism or tyranny. If the aristocratic class deviates from the right path, it becomes the oligarchy of the greedy wealthy. Correspondingly, when democracy becomes corrupt and overindulges in freedom, it degenerates into the government of the mob and the rabble, bereft of discernment and incapable of grasping the truth of affairs.[44]

Aristotle ultimately concludes that the most suitable government possible for the state is a middle form between the legitimate governments, which he calls "constitutional government" — a form that mediates between aristocracy and democracy. Its most distinctive characteristic is that it entrusts governance to the middle class, thereby avoiding the dominance of both the wealthy and the poor.

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[42] Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 79.

[43] Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 77.

[44] Ibid., 79–80.

The Rule of Law

As noted above, Aristotle prefers "constitutional government." He agreed with Plato in the *Laws* that there is no real basis for choosing between the rule of the philosopher and the rule of law, since Plato's later work itself affirms the sovereignty of law. The rule of law is not merely a response to the weakness of human souls; it is the hallmark of a sound state. Even the wisest of rulers needs law, which is reason freed from the passions. Aristotle's endorsement of the rule of law or constitutional governance rests on three essential pillars: first, the rule of law places the common good — the good of the public — before all else, as opposed to factional or despotic rule, both of which pursue the interest of a single class or a single individual; second, this legal governance is applied by the government according to general and objective rules, under which the government cannot disregard recognized customs or constitutional convention; third, constitutional government means the governance of citizens who accept rule freely rather than submit to it under compulsion, as is the case under a tyrant. Law, as Aristotle conceives it, is the only safeguard against the appetites of persons and the surest means of guaranteeing and preserving freedoms.[45]

The Theory of Wealth and Economic Production

Aristotle was the first to appreciate the significance of political economy when he asked how wealth is produced and how it is distributed in society, and when he began to investigate the sources of wealth. His inductive and empirical method led him to examine the means of creating wealth, and he distinguished between natural means — hunting, herding, and agriculture — and unnatural means, which include trade. He believed that trade should remain limited to barter, which helps supply the necessary needs of the family. He observed that barter is in its origin natural; but once money was invented and iron and silver were put to use as currency, the meaning of unlimited wealth accumulation became known. Aristotle therefore distinguishes between two types of wealth creation: the first he calls *oikonomia* — the wealth produced by the head of the household together with his children and slaves to satisfy their needs, which grows through the improvement and increase of labor itself; the second he calls *krematike* — the wealth derived from usury and commerce.[46]

The Separation of Powers

Aristotle advanced an important theory concerning the constitutional structure of different states: the theory of the separation of the general powers of the state. He argued that states differ fundamentally according to the relationships between their three powers — legislative, executive, and judicial. The most important of these, in his view, is the legislative power, because it exercises supreme functions relating to

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[45]Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 81.

[46]Waqiallah Ahmad, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 85–86.

the appointment and accountability of rulers, the enactment of laws, the determination of declarations of war and the conclusion of peace treaties, the issuance of sentences of death and exile, and so on. The legislative power may be constituted either by the whole people assembled in a general assembly or by elected representatives serving in a legislative council; in the latter case all citizens must have access, in rotation, to membership of this legislative body. The second power in importance is the executive power, charged with the day-to-day administration of state affairs, a power whose functions are as varied and ramified as the needs and tasks of the state. Aristotle focused particular attention on functions directly connected to politics, such as policing, general market supervision, and public education, and suggested that those occupying these functions should rotate annually, every six months, or at shorter intervals.[47]

The judicial power — which Aristotle called the power of the courts — is focused on overseeing the performance of the legislative and executive powers through what he termed the political courts, and on settling disputed claims between citizens. The most important type of court in Aristotle's scheme is the political court, which handles cases of a general constitutional character and is charged with regulating the political conduct of both citizens and rulers alike, so as to prevent the disruption of public order and the destabilization of the state.[48]

In this exposition of the functions of the three powers — legislative, executive, and judicial — Aristotle was the first in the history of political and constitutional science to point toward the system of the separation of powers. Although his treatment of the subject was broad and general, and was colored by his characteristic preoccupation with logical classification of types of government and constitutions, he nonetheless affirmed with clarity the purpose sought by the separation of powers: the necessity of preventing the concentration of political force in the hands of a single ruler, and the importance of the mutual balance, oversight, and correction of the powers in relation to one another.

3.4. The Theory of the Family and the Institution of Slavery

Aristotle addressed the question of slavery within his discussion of the family. He spoke of the family and the elements that constitute it — husband, wife, children, and slaves — and it was natural for him to place the man at the head of the family, since nature had endowed him with physical strength and full rational capacity; he is the pillar of the family to whom all its activities refer. The woman, in his view, possesses less reason and less natural aptitude. Plato's claim that nature had prepared her to share with men in soldiering, administration, and governance is, in Aristotle's

[47] Ibid., 87.

[48] Al-Nashhar, *The Development of Political Philosophy*, 85.

judgment, unfounded. He holds that the woman's function must be confined to child-rearing and household management under the authority and direction of the man. As for slaves, their function is to provide the sustenance necessary for the family and to perform the most demanding labor. Slavery, in his view, is a natural institution. Among human beings there are those who were born free, endowed with both body and mind; and there are those born to be slaves, endowed only with bodily strength. Some, that is, were made for mastery and others for obedience alone. The slave is, in his conception, an instrument of life, performing the mechanical work that a free citizen ought not to perform, and also a domestic instrument, assisting in the management of life within the household.[49]

3.5. The Theory of the Virtuous City

This aspect of Aristotle's philosophy is neglected by many scholars, and scarcely any of those who have studied him has done justice to it — despite the fact that it occupies two of the longest sections of his *Politics* (Books IV and V of the received arrangement). Aristotle laid down the foundations of a virtuous city in the tradition of his teacher Plato's vision in the *Republic*. The picture he produced, however, is incomplete and does not equal the vision his teacher had imagined.[50]

Aristotle holds, as his teacher held, that the city is the highest form of political life. But what is the path to this virtuous city, and what are the necessary and fundamental conditions for its establishment? Aristotle laid down a series of conditions for this city, as follows:

The first condition concerns the territory of the city. Aristotle believes it should be of a size that satisfies the needs of its citizens and provides them with an easy and pleasant life without inclining toward luxury or excess. The extent of the state, in his view, should not exceed what a person can survey with his eyes when standing on a hill. The lands of the city must be distributed among its citizens so that each receives a portion within the city and another on its borders, so that all share in its defense.

The second condition relates to the location of the city. It should ideally be situated on fertile soil that can be easily exploited. Its entrances should be difficult for attacking enemies, while movement among its parts should be easy and unimpeded. For the security and stability of the state, it is advantageous that it have access to a seaport, which facilitates the receipt of supplies and the satisfaction of its import needs.

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[49]Ibid., 89.

[50]Mohsen, *Lectures in Ancient and Medieval Political Philosophy*, 90.

The third condition concerns the size of the population, which must not fall below the minimum required for the city's self-sufficiency, but must not exceed a maximum threshold lest order break down and sound governance become impossible. Aristotle estimated this maximum at one hundred thousand persons.
The fourth condition relates to the elements of the state, which in his view are:

- *first*, those who provide food — farmers, craftsmen, and merchants;
- *second*, craftsmen and artisans who produce the tools indispensable for social life;
- *third*, soldiers, indispensable for asserting internal authority;
- *fourth*, a wealthy class that finances the state's vital projects and the preparation of armies;
- *fifth*, the priestly class, whose function is the highest — the service of the gods;
- *sixth*, the class of rulers, judges, and officials responsible for public services. After setting out these elements, Aristotle goes on to argue that they can ultimately be reduced to two fundamental classes: the military class and the ruling class — thereby returning, with certain modifications suited to the logic of his own system, to his teacher's theory.

The fifth condition relates to the educational system, through which the free citizen is formed. Aristotle held that the state must assume responsibility for education, since it is the state that shapes the citizen. For the morals and habits of individuals in any city are what ensure the continuity and soundness of the state. Aristotle agrees with Plato on the necessity of beginning education from an early age, and holds that it should initially focus on the care of the body, then proceed from physical training to the cultivation of instincts and moral habits, before advancing to the development of the intellectual faculties. He accordingly recommends selecting the stories and arts that instill virtue in the young. In his view, care for the body should precede care for the soul, and the cultivation of instincts and desires should precede the reformation of the intellect — because care for the body is ultimately in the service of care for the soul.

These are the fundamental pillars upon which Aristotle wished to construct his virtuous city. In them he sought to reconcile the real and the ideal, and deliberately combined things that are in truth difficult to unite. His city, for all its striving toward realism, emerges as pale and colorless — lacking the taste and beauty that Plato had bestowed upon his own ideal city. Aristotle's philosophy concentrated above all on society and the state, on the necessity of stability and development, and it linked politics closely to the moral dimensions of behavior. Politics for Aristotle was never isolated from its broader social context; it was bound firmly to questions of law, education, economics, and culture. Aristotelian political theories were more

realistic than those of Plato, and it is no surprise that they exercised a formidable influence on political thought across the ages. They shaped the thinking of Saint Thomas Aquinas and left visible marks on Islamic philosophy, as is evident in the works of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), al-Farabi, and others.

Conclusion

Greek political life was inseparable from the city, which constituted the political model and the sphere of moral action. Greek political thought was essentially an effort to reconcile force and power with moral rationality within the city's community. Politics thus becomes the organization of power in society, and the state is the organizational and practical instrument through which this process is carried out. The connection between politics and ethics derives from the bond between the citizen and the city: the rectitude of individual conduct produces the rectitude of the collective behavior of those who inhabit the city, and it is this that makes politics successful. Conversely, the corruption of the individual citizen's conduct leads to the corruption of communal behavior, makes coexistence impossible, and ultimately leads to the failure of the political model and the collapse of politics.

For this reason, the thinkers and philosophers of ancient Greece will endure as the masters of political thought to this day. This article does not seek to engage with the debate over Greek political genius, nor with the question of whether the Greeks were influenced by the earlier civilizations of the East — a debate that, as far as we are concerned, has been definitively settled. It is impossible for any active and reflective human being not to be influenced by those who preceded him; but it would be equally wrong to neglect or overlook the role of each civilization in developing the intellectual heritage, whatever its source, and in transmitting it to others with skill and consummate mastery — a transmission vindicated by self-confidence and a sense of responsibility toward one's contemporaries and fellow citizens, not to mention the freedom of thought and the desire for expression that animated the Greeks.

In our considered view, it would be mistaken to conclude that Greek political thought was purely theoretical and incapable of practical application, so long as it has inspired and continues to inspire contemporary political thought and the statesmen of every era. The very political systems that the Greek city-states knew — beginning with monarchy, passing through aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy — were a catalyst for theoretical reflection and constituted the foundation of Greek political thought; and they are, in their essential spirit, identical to the systems of the world today, however much their modes of application may differ.

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