

Introduction to Western Political Thought
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Lecture No. 3
Plato- 1: Introduction and Justice

Hello everyone. Today we are going to start with the first thinker in this course, Plato. On Plato, we are going to have three lectures, and today is part one of that three lectures where we are going to discuss the bio-sketch or life sketch of Plato, his interest in philosophy briefly. By situating him in the context of Greek city-states, particularly during the classical period when knowledge about philosophy, medicine, science, and mathematics was flourishing and in that context, how Plato contributed to the development of moral political philosophy. And also, the influence of Socrates on Plato and in the second part of this lecture, today, we are going to discuss Plato's notion of justice.

In the second lecture on Plato, we are going to discuss his idea of a philosopher-king and the ideal state, and how he subsequently develops his consumption of the second-best state. And in the final and the concluding lecture on Plato, we will engage with his idea of communism of wives and property. And finally, we will assess the contribution of Plato in political philosophy or in understanding the political problems. We will critically assess the Plato's political philosophy and his contribution to western political thought.

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- Western political thought or philosophy begins with Plato. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) 'Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato' for out of Plato comes all things that are still written and debated among men of thought'. Similarly, Whitehead has said that entire tradition of European philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato and Aristotle. Truly no other thinker before and since has influenced the discipline of philosophy so much as Plato and Aristotle have done.
- Philosophy for Plato was not merely a contemplative or speculative exercise but something which had practical applications too such as in maintaining justice and order in the state. He developed his interest in philosophy and learnt its value for leading a virtuous and happy life from Socrates.
- Plato's contributions in all the branches of philosophy –logic, ethics, aesthetics, politics and metaphysics have been immense. He is the greatest philosopher ever. His *Republic* is regarded as the first work of political philosophy where he discusses the question of justice and order. He also describes his conceptions of ideal state and the role of philosopher kings; ideal system of education; communism of wives and property in this text.

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Plato remains on the most influential thinkers for many generations of political thinkers and philosophers in the western tradition. And in many traditions, particularly in Arab and also

other traditions of political thinking and theorization, Plato is regarded as the first philosopher. His name is also equated with those who are wanderers or contemplators or speculators. Thus, Plato's name is synonymous with philosophy. It is often argued that philosophy or political thought begins with Plato. And in this course, particularly on these three lectures on Plato, we will see how he has been a towering presence who has decisively shaped the discipline of political philosophy.

It is regarded that Western political thought or philosophy begins with Plato and according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato for out of Plato comes all things that are still written and debated among man of thought'. This statement by Ralph Waldo Emerson clearly states the huge presence or significance of Plato's philosophy in the history of western political thought and philosophy. All things that we discuss today and that have been discussed since Plato's time, you could find their expression in his dialogues, in many of the dialogues that Plato has written. So, for all kinds of moral, ethical, political problems that we face, one can find its expression in many of his dialogues. Therefore, Emerson correctly characterized philosophy as a synonym with Plato's name – 'Plato is philosophy, and philosophy is Plato'. And similarly, Whitehead has argued that the entire tradition of European philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato and Aristotle.

Aristotle is the next thinker we are going to discuss in this course. These two thinkers have significant influence on the evolution of political thought, political philosophy in the western tradition. And all the thinkers after them – Kant, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Rousseau; you will find that they did extend the paradigm of understanding the politics in their own way, but the streak of thought that guilds their philosophy and political thinking has its expression in the writings of Plato and Aristotle.

Indeed no thinker before and since has influenced the discipline of philosophy so much as Plato and Aristotle have done. These two thinkers had a decisive role in shaping the discipline of political philosophy, particularly in the western tradition. This is also a point which I have discussed in the introductory lecture that modern West's rediscovery of Aristotle and Plato was through their translations in Arabic. From Arabic, they translated them into English.

Plato has tremendous influence across the traditions. So did Aristotle. And these two thinkers are said to have a decisive impact in shaping the discipline of Western political thought or political philosophy. However, there is one more thinker who you have often come across, but

who has not written a text; he has not left anything in writing, that is Socrates. Plato was deeply influenced by Socrates, and about that, we will discuss in a minute.

Plato used philosophy, not just as a kind of contemplative or speculative exercise. Often, in the positivist paradigm of the 20th century, it was regarded that political thought and philosophy is merely the speculation and the contemplation done by few individuals which have very little application in the practical, pragmatic life of an individual or community; and we should not worry about reading or studying who said what, when, and how? The reason being that it has very little application in solving many of the contemporary political, pragmatic, practical challenges. And therefore, there was the system theory, or structural theory. However, the significance of political thought, as we have discussed in the introductory lecture, is there not just in providing the concepts and the ideas that we use to discuss politics, but also in providing the methodology or the epistemology to understand the political phenomena.

The task of political philosophy then is not just to speculate and contemplate about the political problems but also provide the solution for many of the challenges that we face in the politics. And as we know that in the politics, the challenges that we face are ethical or the moral challenges, ethical or the moral dilemmas such as what is justice? As we are going to discuss in this lecture, we will see how moral questions are involved in defining what justice is? What is just order? How to lead a good life? And answers to these questions require political philosophy. So for Plato, philosophy was not merely a contemplative or a speculative exercise but something which had practical application too, such as in maintaining justice and order in the state. For many political philosopher or political thinkers and political theorists, even today, one of the central concerns in philosophy is how to establish a just society? Or, an order, which will enable the individual to realize his or her true potentialities. Answer to this question requires answering many moral and ethical questions that are involved. So, for Plato, political philosophy is a tool to help in ensuring or maintaining justice and order in the state and society.

And you know, communities, when they manage their common affair, for a very long time, we use some other kinds of authority as well. For example, we use the divine authority or meta-physical or transcendental entity to understand our own practical and real world. For the first time through Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, we began to use our own reason and intellect to understand many moral, political, or ethical problems that we face. And arguing about these moral, ethical problems by using one's own intellect or reason has led to a different kinds of political philosophy and theorization about the political philosophy. So, we study these political

philosophers to know how to lead a good life. Their contributions are in justifying individuals right or the authority to decide for themselves what is good for them or what is desirable. For leading a good life, they do not have to rely on any external authority than themselves.

And this we see in Plato. Similarly, in Immanuel Kant and many other thinkers as well. For them, then the philosophy is not just an speculative or contemplative exercise, but it has a profound influence in shaping the order, in solving the moral dilemmas that we face in the practical, pragmatic life. So, for Plato philosophy helps one to lead a good moral and virtuous life. We all seek happiness. But what is the true basis for leading a happy life? There could be many answers to that. And this is necessarily an ethical question which vary from person to person depending upon his or her subjective choices. But to lead a truly happy life requires, according to Plato, Socrates, and others philosophers leading an examined life – that is, we decide for ourselves, using our own intellect, what is good for us and determining what is good requires the use of logic, use of reason, and intellect.

They also agree that to lead a happy life, one needs to lead a moral life or virtuous life. And what is virtuous life? When you have the knowledge of what is a virtue? How are you going to acquire that knowledge? It is through the reflection, through contemplation, and that is the role of philosophy which shows you what is really, happiness. This question of happiness or a satisfying life requires moral contemplation, moral thinking, or the understanding of virtue. And these thinkers – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and many other that we are going to discuss in this course, will argue that philosophy helps us not just in understanding the world as it is but also as an individual how to lead a moral, virtuous, and dignified life and this Plato had learnt from Socrates.

Plato's contributions are in all branches of learning and philosophy - from logic to ethics, aesthetics to politics, and metaphysics. He also shaped the philosophy of language, philosophy of beauty, philosophy of education, and so on. And therefore, through Plato's writings and dialogues, we could not just understand the Greek city-states or the political arrangements in the *polis* and many ethical problems that are involved in governing the collective life of a community, but also it helps us to develop our own epistemology, our own logic to understand something. It is not just the appearance. For most of us in our lives or our inter-personal relationships, we are guided by the appearance or our instantaneous responses to our surroundings – be it individual, social, or political events. But the political philosophy tells us to see beyond the appearance to understand the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and dogmas;

and then judge accordingly. Political philosophy has a very significant role to play in understanding the political phenomena or life beyond the appearance; in understanding what is the underlying harmonious principles that govern life. Thus, the engagement with their writings, and I will encourage you to read these classics or dialogues, particularly *Gorgias* by Plato, will help us to reflect on our own biases, preferences, and suppositions more critically.

Plato is the greatest philosopher ever, and the *Republic*, his *magnum opus*, is considered as the most important work of political philosophy. In this text, he engages with the question of what is justice and how to establish a just order and polity. And as in the polity today, there exist multiple opinions or factions having different views or different solutions to the common problems that we face, so was the case when Plato was writing. The task of political philosophy is to help in the creation of an stable order which enable the individuals and communities to realize their true potentialities. And therefore, for Plato, the question of justice is very significant or the central concern. He also discusses in this text the idea of philosopher-king or the ideal state, the ideal system of education, the communism of wives and property. All these topics are dealt with by Plato in his text *Republic*.

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Greek city-states

- Greek city-states in the classical period (480-380 BC) provided the most conducive conditions for the philosophy to flourish. Men began to subject their knowledge about the world and themselves to reason. There were all-round development in philosophy, science, mathematics, geography, history and medicine. The relative autonomy, self-sufficiency and a degree of prosperity of the small-compact city-states was the breeding ground for philosophical speculation and contemplation. It produced thinkers and philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle among many others.
- There emerged two branches of philosophy in the Greek city-states. One was the pursuit of natural and measurable world; and second was moral philosophy that dealt with the question of human life, soul, good conduct, beauty, happiness, truth, and the ideal state.
- All types of governments – oligarchy to autocracy and aristocracy to democracy existed in the city-states. Athens, a flourishing town with plurality of beliefs and cultures, took pride in its democracy. In Athens every citizen took active interest in the politics. Its institutions like Ecclesia (Assembly), Boule (Council), and Dikasteria (Courts) beside the ten Strategoi (influential magistrates) managed the common affair of the polis. However, if we study the sociological basis of Athenian democracy we find that the majority of slaves, women, and resident-alien were excluded from the citizenship and did not participate in the affairs of the polis.

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To understand Plato's political thought, it is also necessary to understand the socio-political context of Plato. It was in the context of Greek city-states in the classic period that he developed his thought. And the classic period of Greece city-states is roughly between 480 AD to 380 BC. This period provided the most conducive condition for philosophy to flourish. Political thought and philosophy emerge in the context of intense crises and politically unstable times. There were self-governing, autonomous city-states, and that such small city-states were

gradually paving the way for bigger empires. During this transition from self-sufficient, independent city-states to the coming of big empires, Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates were developing their conceptions of the ideal state, good life, how to realize the true human potentiality, how to ensure justice in the cities which would enable the individual to realize his true potentiality. Thus, the classical period in Greek city-states provided that conducive environment for the thought and philosophy and lofty imagination of the thinkers or philosophers to flourish. And in this period, men also began to subject their knowledge about the world to critical rational scrutiny. They began to rationally discuss the questions like what is the source of that soul, how to realize the true potentialities of the soul, and so on. Thus, during this classical period in the Greek city-states, men, for the first time, began to subject their knowledge of the world and also themselves to the reason.

The reason or the intellect was used as the only source of knowledge about the world and the individual's self also. Many societies and communities do have the knowledge about themselves or the soul or the world. The basis of that knowledge are some religious treatise or some religious expressions. Although, those came back again during the medieval time as we will discuss later in this course. But in the classical Greek city-states for the first time, men took this audacious task of subjecting their knowledge of the world and individuals on the basis of their own reason and intellect. We will see how reason and the rational inquiry became the basis of all forms of knowledge. It influenced many other disciplines as well and not just the political philosophy. There where all-round development in philosophy, science, mathematics, geography, history, and medicine. Thus, in the western tradition, the classical period in the Greek city-states is also seen as a period when there was all-round development in many disciplines, including philosophy, science, mathematics, geography, medicine, history, and so on.

The relative autonomy, self-sufficiency, and a degree of prosperity of the small compact city-states was the ideal condition for all these disciplines of philosophy to flourish; to have new modes of knowing; or new forms knowledge about the world in which humans live and realize their potentialities. So, this relative autonomy, self-sufficiency, and a degree of prosperity in the very compact nature of this Greek city-states provided these thinkers or philosophers the ideal condition for their speculations and contemplations; and subjecting the knowledge about themselves or the society or polity to intellect or reason.

This is also a point to note that in the Greek city-states, all the productive, manual works were done by the slaves. And freedom from productive, manual works enables these thinkers, philosophers to contemplate and think about the larger goods of the society or the higher-order principles; to think about the basis of morality and ethics not on any external authority than human reason or intellect.

The zenith of the classical period was reached in the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. We will discuss Socrates before we enter into the life world of Plato. But Aristotle's philosophy, we are going to discuss in the next in this course. In the Greek city-states broadly, emerged the two branches of philosophy or knowledge tradition. One was about the pursuit of the natural and the measurable world. The best treatise were written on mathematics, on physics, on medicine and so on. Aristotle wrote about biology and other scientific stuff as well. So, one branch of knowledge or philosophy was about the natural world, which could be measured, or calculated. That led to the growth of natural philosophy.

However, Socrates and then Plato and Aristotle, and many others thought and argued that it was not enough to think about and reflect upon the natural world or the measurable things. It is equally necessary to understand the moral philosophy that deals with the question of life, soul, good conduct, beauty, happiness, truth, and the ideal state. It led to the growth and development of moral philosophy in the classical period in the Greek city-states. And also, in the Greek city-states, you have all forms of government, from oligarchy to autocracy; from aristocracy to democracy and so on. And Athens, to which Plato belong, was a flourishing town with the plurality of beliefs and cultures. It took pride in its democracy. It was seen as quite an achievement that no longer Athenians relied on a few individuals or a group of individuals to govern their common affairs. Athenian democracy was a system of rule where everyone, every citizen, took part in the management of the common affairs. The Athenian democracy and democratic method of governing was something in which every Athenian took excessive pride. It was seen as ruling and being ruled in turn, as Aristotle said. They all took an active interest in matters of politics. It was not like today when we talk about politics; we leave it to the political parties and politicians to decide.

Politics is something which governs every sphere of our life. We should all be aware of its developments and take interest in or participate in the political process in the country and society to govern it better, to make it more representative, to make it more just, or transparent, or accountable. And the Athenian system of government, where everybody was part of the

process of governance was something which was regarded as an ideal, although in Sparta which was ruled by the aristocracy was the opposite. And similarly, there were other kinds of government as well – oligarchy, autocracy, and so on. The political-institutions in Athens were like – *Ecclesia*, that was the Assembly where all the debates related to the political matters were being conducted. There were well-enumerated rules for taking part in discussions and debates, and this Assembly took all the decisions. So, it could be synonymous to our modern-day Parliament, or the Legislative Assembly, which deliberates upon the laws and law is the basis of government or the rule in today's democracies as well. Then there was the *Boule*, which was the Council, and it was a body which was in the permanent session. When the need arose, they used to implement the decisions and set the agenda for the Assembly as it is done by the executive organs of the modern state and in liberal democracy. Then, there was *Dikasteria*, that was the court to adjudicate the matters that were related to the state, laws, and government. Besides, there were ten influential magistrates, which was called a *Strategio*. So, these were the political-institutional framework of Athenian democracy, which roughly represent the kind of organs or the system that we have in modern nation-states. We often divide them into three broad organs, that is, the executive, legislative, and the judiciary.

And similarly, in that classical period among the Greek city-states there were states governed by oligarchy, aristocracy, and autocracy. Athenian governed themselves through democracy, through a clear separation of power by ensuring the accountability of those who are in the business of governing. Everybody was taking interest or participating in managing the collective affairs of the community. So, that was a kind of shining example of democracy.

However, if we study the sociological basis of Athenian democracy, we will find that the majority of population – slaves, or women, and residence-aliens were excluded from citizenship and had no right to participate in the affairs of the *polis*. So, it was a democracy in a very limited sense, but it did provide the opportunity for the individuals to think about how to ensure order, justice. How to govern oneself better? And in governing the collective affairs of society, how it ensures the full realization of individual's potential? These were some of the questions which provoked the philosopher like Socrates and Plato.

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Socrates (470 BC – 399 BC) ↓
One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing. – Socrates

- Knowledge, for Socrates is relentless pursuits through rational or logical cross-examinations and doubting. This method of Socrates is also known as Elenchus. He argued that our knowledge should be product of cross-examining our cherished beliefs, dogmas or axioms. For Socrates, knowing thyself (Gnothi seauton) was the basis of all knowledge. Unfortunately, we know very little about him except the account of his life and teachings in Plato's writings. Socrates is the main protagonists in all of Plato's dialogues, most notably in Republic and Georgias.
- Socrates lived like a free thinker searching after the true meaning of happiness, beauty and truth. And in this search he subjected all existing notions of truth, beauty, good life to ruthless critical scrutiny. Greeks believed in four cardinal virtues – courage, wisdom, justice, and temperance to lead a happy life. However, Socrates believed in the unity of all virtues and argued that virtue (arete) is the basis of a happiness (eudaimonia) and knowledge is virtue.
- Socrates was poisoned by the democratic rulers of Athens in 399 BC on the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. Plato provided a fascinating account of Socrates' life and trials in Apology and Crito. Plato holds the 'democratic' rulers responsible for the death of his mentor Socrates - the wisest man in Athens.

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Now, before discussing Plato, it is perhaps necessary to understand how Socrates influenced the youths in Athens; and also had a profound influence on the political thought of Plato. For the first time in Socrates, we see the use of philosophy as not something which we should confine to writing. He was someone who wanted to engage with other individuals, and in that engagement through dialogue, through cross-examination, he tried to develop the knowledge of an object. And that knowledge, then leads to refinement of individuals and also the communities. We will see how this new approach created a lot of challenges for particularly the oligarchs in Athens or those who were in the business of governing.

Socrates period was 470 BC to 399 BC. He was the first philosopher who was poisoned; forced to take poison because of his thought or teachings. He is therefore the first martyr of this discipline. We will see why it happened, and in what context, and what influence it had on the minds of Plato and Aristotle and other philosophers. The basis of true knowledge for Socrates is this *maxim* that all forms of knowledge and philosophy should be based on this idea that we know nothing. And from this knowing nothing emerged the true knowledge through interactions with others; through cross-examinations. However, most of the time, we come across people, or groups claiming that they have all the answers. But those answers are not examined answer. These could be one's beliefs, or maybe biases, the preferences and one might regard these preferences, biases, prejudices as your thought. So, for Socrates, for the first time, all kinds of ideas, all kinds of knowledge about truth, life, polity, state, citizenship, the right, should be subjected to critical scrutiny. And the starting point should be that we do not know; we know nothing. So, this quote that 'One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing'.

The claims of a philosopher or those who seek true answer to the questions - what is justice, what is a good life, what is truth, what is beauty, and what is ultimate reality, should start with questioning one's own presumptions and one's own beliefs. Socrates believed that the philosophers should not confine their role to writings alone, but engage with other individuals, other groups. He himself used to travel freely, across the Athens, in the market, in someone's home, and start reflecting upon or questioning the prevalent ideas of truth, beauty, knowledge, virtue, and so on.

The maxim that I know nothing gives us a new approach to the knowledge. That is acquired through constant reasoning, through the use of human reason. Not because, some scriptures, some beliefs, or the social customs or conventions tell us so. The authority of any knowledge is not based on some external authority than human reason or human intellect. And that shaped the thinking of a great many youths in Athens, including Plato. Knowledge for Socrates is then a relentless pursuit through rational or logical cross-examination and doubting. The way knowledge progress or understanding develops is through cross-examination; through use of logic; and doubting all kind of definitions, conventions, beliefs, prejudices. It is only through these that we may have the correct knowledge about a phenomena, about something. And we can also understand our own biases, precedents, and so on which colours our thought.

Often we equate our biases with the thought, but thought requires constant cross-examination of our own beliefs and preferences. So, this method of Socrates is called *Elenchus*, which has influenced the thought and philosophy of many thinkers, including Plato. And he argued that our knowledge should be a product of cross-examinations of our cherished belief, dogmas, or axioms. So, as a human being, we are part of a culture, or a society, or a linguistic tradition. And therefore we carry certain biases which are the result of socialization. And it often colors our understanding; our thought. Socrates tells us that we need to examine those beliefs, those biases critically to have true knowledge. For Socrates, knowing thyself, that is in Greek *Gnothi seauton*, was the basis of all knowledge. Unfortunately, we know very little about Socrates' philosophy as he was someone who believed that the true philosopher should engage with others through dialogue. And in that process of dialogue, our beliefs, our cherished ideals are cross-examined, and the true knowledge develops; not in through writing a text and so on. We have very little knowledge about Socrates except for the account of his life and teachings that exist in Plato's writing. Socrates is the main protagonist in all of Plato's dialogues, and that shows the significance of Socrates' thought and his modes of inquiry on Plato.

Dialogues are texts that Plato has written. The most notable dialogues are *Republic* and *Gorgias*, but in other dialogues too you have Socrates as the main protagonist. Thus Plato speaks to us through Socrates. And Socrates was the one who started this new approach to producing knowledge, to understanding something through rational, logical cross-examination in a dialogical form.

Socrates lived like a free thinker, searching after the true meaning of happiness, beauty, and truth. And in Greek city-states, Socrates was the one who realized that the true value of moral philosophy and not just the natural philosophy, or knowledge about measurable world. And how are you going to measure the value of human life or human soul? What is truth? What is beauty? These are the moral problems which require the moral philosophy and dialogical engagement with the prevailing notions of truth, beauty, justice and so on. To answer these questions, Socrates subjected all prevailing notions of truth, beauty, good life, and soul to the ruthless critical scrutiny through rational argumentation.

Greeks believed in the four cardinal virtues to have order in society. They believed that individuals should have these four cardinal virtues – courage, wisdom, justice, and temperance. Temperance is a kind of moderation, not the extreme of any elements in human personality, emotion, and other things. These four cardinal virtues were the basis for human life, which could be a life worth living for; or to have a just social order. Now, Socrates believed that all these virtues are interconnected. Greek words for virtue are *arete*. He believed in the axiom that all human beings seek happiness. So, all our actions are guided by a desire for happiness. But what kind of life is a happy life? He argued that a virtuous life is a happy life. And what is virtuous? It is the knowledge or wisdom.

So, to live a virtuous life, one needs to have the knowledge or wisdom. Knowledge is regarded as virtue by Socrates. If one is courageous, then he will be wise enough to know his role and act according to that knowledge. Once individual, who is courageous, acts according to his knowledge, his life is worth living for. It would be a virtuous life. A virtuous life requires the knowledge or wisdom; and one acquires this knowledge through dialogue with others. It is not about just being happy with whatever you think or cherish as truth, or true meaning of anything, or even virtue. The dialogic life helps us understand or have the knowledge of virtue and then to shape our lives accordingly. And that life which is virtuous is the only source of happy life according to Socrates. The main role of knowledge and philosophy is to enable us to lead a happy life, which is called *eudaimonia*.

Because of this new approach to knowledge and philosophy and questioning all forms of authority, Socrates was poisoned by the democratic rulers of Athens in 399 on the charges of impiety. That is on the charges of showing suspicion to all kinds of authority and also corrupting the youth. Socrates used to sit in very informal gatherings – at the market place, or in the friends' place, and start his relentless questioning about the prevailing notions of what is the true nature of the human soul, right conduct, or beauty or truth and so on.

The democratic rulers of Athens thought that his methods of teaching and philosophy corrupted the youth and made them suspicious of all forms of authority. They also thought that it was dangerous to the stability and the order that existed in Athens. Therefore, they arrived at a decision that Socrates should die. Plato provides a fascinating account of Socrates' life and trials in *Apology* and *Crito*. Socrates was regarded as the wisest man in Athens; first to begin subjecting all forms of knowledge to human reason and intellect. However, the governors or the rulers of the day thought that he encouraged among the youth suspicion towards authority and, therefore, dangerous to the rule or the political stability. He was also charged with corrupting the youth, and therefore, he should die. However, he was also regarded as the wisest man in Athens who shaped the political thinking of the whole generation, including Plato's. Since Socrates was forced to drink poison by the democratic rule, therefore, Plato remained apprehensive and suspicious of the inherent instabilities/uncertainties of the democratic rule. He equated democracy to mobocracy or crowd rule driven by instinct rather than reason. And Socrates' method of knowledge or dialogue had a profound influence on Plato.

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Plato (427 BC – 347 BC)

- Plato was born in an aristocratic family in Athens when a generation long Peloponnesian war (430-404 BC) between Athens and Sparta was going on. Politically it was a turbulent times in Athens. Athenians took pride in their democracy but there was growing strife and hostilities between oligarchic and democratic factions. Plato has political connection with both the democratic as well as oligarchic factions. Sparta, ruled by aristocracy, finally defeated the Athens in this war. And Oligarchic factions blamed it to the ineptness of the democratic rule in Athens.
- Plato was anguished by the turbulent politics in Athens. He thought that philosophy could provide a sound foundation for ethical conducts for individuals as well as rulers. Power in Athens used to alternate between oligarchy and democrats. When the rule of thirty was instated with the tacit support from Sparta, Plato was invited to join the Oligarchy. However, he refused. Soon this rule of thirty was replaced by democracy again.
- The political instability and moral decay in the Athens deeply disturbed Plato. He confessed it in his autobiographical writing *Seventh Letter*. He thought that 'the only hope of finding justice for society or for the individual lay in true philosophy, and that mankind will have no respite from trouble until either real philosophers gain political power or politicians become by some miracle true philosophers'.

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Plato's period is from 427 BC to 347 BC. He was born into an aristocratic family in Athens when a generation-long Peloponnesian war (430 BC to 404 BC) was taking place between Athens and Sparta. And this was also a struggle between two modes of governing – Athens was ruled by democracy and Sparta was ruled by the aristocracy. Politically it was a turbulent time in Athens. Athenians took pride in their democracy; but there were growing strife and hostilities between two factions – oligarchs and democrats. Plato had connections with both these factions – democratic and oligarchic. Sparta, ruled by Aristocracy, finally defeated Athens in this war, and oligarchic factions blamed it on the ineptness of democratic rule in Athens. These turbulent politics anguished Plato; and he thought that philosophy, and that is a practical use of philosophy, will provide a sound foundation for ethical conduct for individuals and also for the rulers. Thus in Plato's time, there was a growing tension or strife between these two factions. There was a kind of confusions and misconceptions regarding what is just order and what is the correct notion of justice. And through philosophy, Plato was trying to provide answer using human reason and intellect. His purpose was to provide an ethical solution to the political, ethical challenges that Athens was grappling with.

Power in Athens used to alternate between the oligarchs and the democrats, and when the rule by thirty was instated with a tacit support from Sparta, Plato was invited to join them. However, he refused to join them because he thought that philosophy is a better way to understand the moral challenges of his time and not the active politics. Soon this rule by thirty tyrants was replaced by democracy. And thus, the power used to alternate between oligarchs and the democrats in Athens. This political instability and the moral decay deeply anguished Plato. He confessed it in his autobiographical work – the *Seventh Letter*. He thought that the only hope of justice for society or individuals lay in true philosophy. So, the role of true philosophy is not just speculation and contemplation but in ensuring justice in society, or establishing just order which would be just for individuals as well.

And he argued that mankind will have no respite from troubles until either philosophers gain political power or politicians becomes by some miracle true philosophers. That is the basis of his notion of the philosopher-king, which we will discuss in the next lecture. But here at this point, we have to understand that the political context of instability and moral decay enabled Plato to reflect upon the moral and the ethical challenges that Athens was facing. And he thought that philosophy had a significant role to play in answering those moral and ethical questions. And he also thought that until the philosophers become the kings or kings become the philosophers, there would be no end to the tyranny and the moral decay that was there.

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- After the death of Socrates, Plato undertook extensive travels to other city-states in Greece, Italy, Egypt and returned to Athens in 387 BC. He founded the academy in the same year where both theoretical subjects like philosophy and mathematics as well as practical subjects were taught. Knowledge of mathematics was prerequisite for the admission into his academy. Aristotle was taught in this academy.
- Plato also made an unsuccessful attempt to convert the tyrant of Syracuse into a philosopher-ruler. Plato taught and wrote most of his dialogues in the academy till the end of his life in 347 BC. Following his mentor Socrates, Plato too followed a dialogic method of philosophical investigation and argumentation.
- His works are divided into four categories such as *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches* as early works; *Gorgias*, *Meno*, and *Protagoras* as transitional; *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theoetetus* as middle; and *Timeaeus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Laws*, and *Seventh Letter* as late works. However, *Republic* is regarded as his *magnum opus* of Plato where he discusses his ideal state and *Laws* and *Statesman* are his other political works where he discusses the nature and characteristics of his 'second best state'.

After the death of Socrates, Plato undertook extensive travels to other city-states in Greece, Italy, and Egypt and returned to Athens in 387 BC. He founded after the return an academy in the same year where both theoretical subjects, as well as the practical subjects, were taught. One of the distinct features of this academy was that the knowledge of mathematics was regarded as a prerequisite for admission into the academy. Thus philosophy and philosophical inquiry require the sound knowledge of mathematics. It is not speculation or contemplation for the sake of it, but it has a very sound methodological and epistemological basis for reflection and resolving many of the ethical and political challenges. Aristotle was taught in this academy by Plato. Plato also made during his lifetime unsuccessful attempts to convert the tyrant of Syracuse into a philosopher. Syracuse was a small princely state in Italy, and Plato in his lifetime tried to convert the tyrant of Syracuse into a philosopher ruler, but this attempt was unsuccessful. And then, he confined himself to the academy in teaching, writing his dialogues till the end of his life in 347 BC. Following his mentor Socrates, Plato, too, followed a dialogical method of writing. All his arguments and political inquiry progress through dialogue/s by engaging with the others and prevailing notions before giving his own account of justice, or state, and so on.

Plato's works are divided into four categories. *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches* are his early works, *Gorgias*, *Meno*, *Protagoras* is regarded as the transitional work of Plato; and *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides* and *Theoetetus* as the middle works; and *Timeaeus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Laws* and *Seventh Letter* as his late works. However, *Republic* is regarded as the *magnum opus* of Plato, where he discussed his ideal state; and *Laws*

and *Statesman* are his other political works where he discusses the nature and characteristic of his second-best state.

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Plato's *Republic*: A Theory of Justice

- Plato regarded justice as the first order principle of a state. He argued that without justice there could not be order or stability or happiness either for the individual or for the state. Justice according to Plato was the sine-qua-non for the order and stability in the state. *The Republic* in a way is his answer to the question what is justice. However, like his tutor Socrates, before providing his own account of justice, Plato engages with many prevailing notions of justice through the notable scholars and sophists in Athens.
- First to join the debate is Cephalus who argued that justice is 'being honest, speaking the truth and paying one's debts'. Plato, through Socrates refutes this argument by stating that speaking truth or paying debts may lead to harmful and unjust consequences. So, it could not be just. Then, Polemarchus defines justice as 'doing good to one's friends and harm to enemies'. However, Plato refutes this definition too as it is not easy to identify one's real friend and enemy. And also doing harm to any could not be just. Next a sophist (favouring practical morality; not conservative and abstract ideals) Thrasymachus argued that justice is 'the advantage of stronger i.e. the ruler' and thus it is better to be unjust. But, Plato refutes this argument too by asserting that injustice could not be better than justice if a ruler act as a 'ruler'.
- Next set of definitions come from Glaucon and Adeimantus who argued that men are not intrinsically just. They are selfish and calculative. Thus, there is not intrinsic value in justice but it depends on its effects. Plato refutes this argument too as for him justice could not be governed by cold calculation of rational self interest and then proceeds to provide his own conception of justice which is good in itself.

The main purpose of Plato's *Republic* is to answer the question, what is justice. Plato regarded justice as the first-order principle of a state. So, any order, any state cannot be stable, cannot be helpful for its governed unless that order, that state is just. And he argued that without justice, there could not be order, or stability, or happiness, either for the individual or for the state. So, to have order, stability, and happiness, Plato thought that justice should be the foundation of the polity. And justice, according to Plato, therefore, was the *sine-qua-non* that is absolutely necessary for the order and stability in the state. *Republic* in a way is an answer to this question what justice is? However, like his tutor Socrates, before providing his own account of justice, Plato engages with many prevailing notions of justice in Athens. So, first, he refutes all the prevailing notions of justice, which was held in his time through the notable scholars and the sophist philosophers.

First he presents those prevailing notions and then goes on to provide his notion of justice. The first to join this debate on what is justice, is Cephalus, who argued that 'being honest, speaking the truth and paying one's debts' is justice. So, according to Cephalus, if an individual is honest, and speaks the truth and pays his debts that he owed to others, then he is just. Plato, who speaks through Socrates, refuted this and argued that often speaking truth or being honest or paying debts to the other leads to unjust consequences or undesirable consequences. So, if speaking the truth or being honest or paying debts leads to undesirable or unjust consequences or harmful consequences for the self and the others, how could that be just? How that principle could be

regarded as the just principle? So, let us take this example, suppose you owe someone a knife and that person has gone mad; if this principle of justice is applied, then you should give the knife to that person. But that person has now become mad; he may harm himself or others. So could we say that paying one's debt is justice? Plato refutes this definition of justice that being honest, speaking the truth, and paying one's debt is justice.

Then Polemarchus defines justice as doing good to one's friends and harms to enemies. So, if one does good to his friends and harms to his enemies, then that is justice. Any act of individual which helps his friend and harms the enemy is just. Thus it's a very practical, pragmatic understanding of justice. So, you help your friends and harm your enemies. However, Plato refutes this definition of justice too by asserting that in life, it is tough to distinguish who is your real friend and who is your enemy. You may have friends in the guise of the enemy or *vice versa*. An enemy or a friend in the guise of an enemy, or an enemy in the disguise of a friend. Besides that, harming others cannot be the basis of a just order. Because it harms further those who whom harm is already done. Let us understand it this way; if we regard justice as harming others, then we deny that other their true potential. Or what is their true nature? Now, justice as a principle, and you know Plato was trying to have the absolute notion of justice, which would be the harmonious existence that we will discuss later. Thus, as a principle, first, he refutes this definition of justice as doing good to your friends and harm to your enemies by stating it is very hard to distinguish between real friends and enemies. Secondly, you cannot do harm, to do justice. Justice requires the harmonious coexistence of everyone, not distinguishing between the individuals by supporting a few and punishing the others. Justice requires an order where everyone flourishes; everyone realizes his or her true potentiality.

The next to join the debate on the notion of justice is a sophist. Sophists were regarded as the supporter of the practical morality who refuted all kinds of abstract, conventional, or conservative ideals and authorities. Thrasymachus was a sophist who argued that justice is the advantage of the stronger and justice as following the law, abiding by the law is framed in a way which helps the stronger or the rulers. So, Thrasymachus argued that justice is always the advantage of the stronger. Thus according to him it is better to be unjust if you get away with that. And these modes of thinking you may also find when we will discuss Marks' idea or false ideology where workers or the majority follows the ideology of those who rule over them; those who exploit them. Thrasymachus, similarly, argued that justice or laws are benefit the stronger or the rulers; so it is better to be unjust. Injustice is more desirable than justice.

However, Plato refutes this argument too by asserting that injustice could not be better than justice if a ruler act as *a ruler*. He argues with Thrasymachus that if a ruler frames the law to suit his own interest, then he is not behaving as *a ruler*. The condition for Plato is that a ruler must act as *a ruler*, and if he acts as *a ruler*, he must act for the benefit of the subjects or the city. So, when a ruler frames a law for his own selfish interest, he is not actually working or functioning as *a ruler*. An actual ruler will always act for the benefit of his citizen or subjects. And if he does so, then how can we argue that injustice is preferable to justice and justice could not be in the true sense of the term for the benefit of the stronger.

The next set of definitions of justice come from Glaucon and Adeimantus, who argued that men are not intrinsically just; they are basically selfish and calculative. So, they will be just if it is for their benefit; and unjust if that injustice is for their benefit. Plato refutes this argument too. For him, justice could not be governed by the cold calculation of rational self-interest. And often, we do not know what true self-interests are that lead to happiness in life.

Plato then proceed to provide his conception of justice, which is good in itself. And this line of thought we will find in the Kantian ethics as well. So, for Plato, justice is not a means to some ends. Justice is good in itself. If you behave justly, if a society behaves justly, he or she or society will realize his/her or their true potentials. And that is the route to happiness, to a happy life. Thus, justice as a good or a desirable thing is good in itself. It does not require any further justifications as many scholars like Glaucon, Adeimantus, and others have argued.

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➤ Plato presents his conception of justice first in the city-states or polis and then at the level of individuals. He had an organic idea of state which he divided into three classes guided by three distinct skills/talents – farmers, traders, craftsmen driven by appetite; auxiliary classes of military commanders spirited and guided by honor; and finally philosophers guided by reason. For Plato in order to have order and justice in the state, these classes must realize their interdependence and act or work according to their own specific nature.

➤ Like in the city-states, Plato identifies three elements of the individual soul – appetite, spirit, and intellect. There are often conflicts between these elements within our personality. Therefore, according to Plato to live a harmonious and just life, individuals must subordinate appetite and spirit to reason or intellect.

➤ Platonic conception of justice is thus based on the harmony of existence for the individuals and also among the three classes in the state. When they act and do things for which they are best suitable without interfering in other works then alone justice could be achieved and order achieved. It is based on the twin principles of interdependence and specialization.

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Plato presents his conception of justice first in the city-states and then at the level of the individuals. He argues, and there is no dichotomy between the justice for the individual and

justice in the state at the broader level. First, he provides his conception of justice at the level of city-states or the *polis*, and his idea of the *polis* was a kind of organic idea. He does not distinguish and differentiate between and among different organs of the state, which he divided into three classes. These three classes had three distinct qualities, or skills, or talents. There were farmers, traders, craft men driven by appetite or emotions or instinct. They are in the majority in any society or state. Then there were the auxiliary classes of military commanders or a spirited class who were guided by the honour. They were in the minority. And even in fewer numbers were those who were the philosophers guided by the reason. For them, trained in dialectics, the knowledge is virtue and source of a happy life. Thus they are guided by reason and intellect alone. Wisdom is the true basis of happiness. For these three classes having different talents farmers, traders, craftsmen driven by their appetites, emotions, and instinct were the producing classes. The auxiliary classes of military commanders driven by the spirit or the courage or the sake of honour, and philosophers were driven by knowledge or the wisdom, or the true wisdom together constitute the guardian classes.

For Plato, an ideal state would be that state when all the classes act or work according to their own talents. They realize their own potentialities by doing that for which they are best suited to. And in doing one's own allotted works, acting according to one's own nature, one realizes justice. And also justice prevails; and order prevails in the state. Thus, there is no conflict in the state or the society because producers need protectors, protectors need producers, and the philosophers guide the state through wisdom or intellect that helps all the classes to realize their talent to the fullest. So, for Plato, to have just order and justice in the state, the three classes must realize their interdependence – that means producers need protectors to protect them from external aggressions. Protectors need the producers to have their material needs satisfied, and both of them need a philosopher-king to lead them to the good action, to govern the state through reason or intellect. How a philosopher-king helps in realizing the ideal state or just order in the state and realizing the true potential of the individual, we will have a separate lecture on that.

But for justice to prevail in the state, for Plato, all the classes should act according to their own nature by realizing the interdependence, or acknowledging this interdependence and work according to their own specific nature. Similarly, like in the city-states, Plato identifies three elements of the individual soul that is an appetite at the base, then the spirit, and finally, intellect and injustice. Conflict occurs when our emotions are against our intellect. So, within the human soul or individual personality, Plato argues that to have harmonious or just life, an individual

must subordinate appetite and spirit to human reason or intellect. At the level of individual, justice, or order, or stability is obtained when our appetite and spirit are subjected to our intellect and reason. Similarly, at the city-states or the state level, the philosopher-king should govern the auxiliary classes and the producing classes; and they do what they are best suited to do; realizing their interdependence and not conflict.

Plato's conception of classes is not the Marxist, or another exploitative notion of classes. Plato's conception of classes is that men are by nature, by psyche, fit to do certain things, and doing that thing brings happiness, harmony to their existence. When city-states or polity provide the condition for realizing one's true self, then that order is just. Thus there is no conflict. Harmony and stability is the basis of the Platonic conception of justice. Platonic conception of justice is thus based on the harmony of existence, not the conflict that we find when we discuss justice in contemporary times. The harmony of existence is for both individuals; within individuals, you have these three elements of appetite, spirit, and reason. To lead a happy, harmonious life, one needs to have harmony between these three; by subordinating appetite and spirit to human reason and intellect; and similarly among the three classes in the state. So, when they act and do things which they are best suited to without interfering in other works, then alone, justice could prevail and order achieved in the state.

So, Plato's conception of justice is based on this twin principle of interdependence and specialization. It is a kind of coherence existence among the classes and also within the individual self – realizing the value of interdependence or the specialization of one's talent.

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Concluding Remarks

- Plato's conception of justice is rooted in the harmony of existence within the self or the soul of the individual and also among the three classes in the state. It is vital for the order within the soul as well as within the state. It is essential to achieve the full potentialities of the individual as well as the state. Justice is a primary moral value and intrinsically connected to other moral values such as courage, wisdom and temperance.
- His conception of justice therefore is an organic conception of justice which envisions a coherent individual and political order. He argued that as in individual where reason or intellect must guide the spirited or appetitive parts of the soul; similarly, the philosophers should guide the auxiliary and trading classes in the state. Justice is achieved when each individuals or classes act and work according to their nature without interfering into other works.
- However, for many his theory of justice could appear as inegalitarian. It differentiate among the men on the basis of their talents and also divide them into classes. Second, it regards that one individual could be talented in only one skill. But truth is that one person may have talent in more than one fields. S/he could be a good soldier and also a good trader or a philosopher. However, despite these obvious limits and criticisms, Plato's theory of justice continue to inspire many generations of thinkers and it remains central concern for the philosophy.

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To conclude this lecture on Plato's conception of justice, which is rooted in the harmony of existence within the self or the soul of the individual; and also among the three classes in the state. Justice is vital, this harmony of existence is vital for order within the human soul or within the state. And it is essential to achieve the full potentialities of the individual as well as the state. Justice is a primary moral value and intrinsically connected to other moral values such as courage, wisdom, and temperance which were the guiding principle of Greek society.

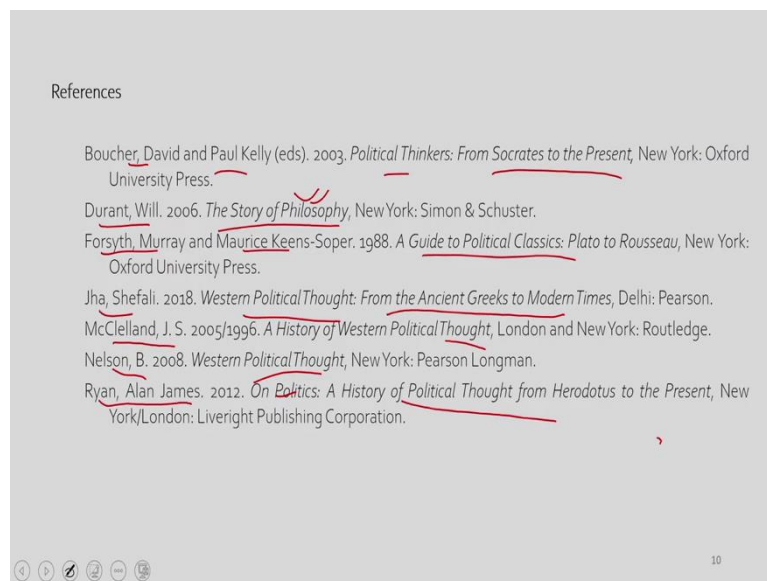
Platonic conception of justice can be argued as the organic consumption of justice. There is coherence within the individual's three core elements – appetite, spirit, and intellect; and also, among the three classes in the state. He argued that as an individual, where reason or intellect must guide the spirit and the appetitive part of the soul; similarly, the philosopher should guide the auxiliary and producing classes in the state. Justice is achieved when each individual or class act and work according to their nature without interfering with others.

For the harmonious existence in the state, Plato argues that all the individuals and all the classes should act according to their own nature. To realize their own talents without interfering with others. Injustice in the state occurs when say, the trading class takes the role of philosophers; or when the producing class takes the role of military commanders or the auxiliary classes. So, all these classes have a mutual role to play, and through the interdependence of their performance of their roles, the order and justice are established and sustained in the state. And the justice and order help them realize their own true potentiality. So, there is a harmonious or a coherence that exists within the individual self, among the three core elements and also in the state among the three classes, and that is how we can look at Platonian conception of justice.

However, for many, Plato's theory of justice could appear as unequalitarian, as it differentiates among the men based on their talents and also divide them into the classes. This division of classes is vertical. There are the majority of people who are traders, craftsmen, farmers; they are at the base. Then there are the guardian classes of military commanders and the philosophers. So, for many in contemporary times, his conception of justice could appear as an unequalitarian conception of justice. Second, it regards that the individual could be talented in only one skill. However in our practical, pragmatic life, you may find one individual having talent in more than one skill. So, a farmer could also be a good soldier or *vice versa*. Or a philosopher could also be a good soldier. However, in Platonian conception of justice, there is only one skill to which an individual should subscribe to or govern his life accordingly. And it is equally true to three classes in the state as well.

Many scholars have also criticized Platonic conception of justice which argues that individuals are driven by reason. They argue that the reason helps us to understand the real nature of the phenomena, but to act upon those understanding requires the role of emotions or other stimulations. Reason itself is not the sufficient ground for acting upon our understanding. So, there are obvious limitations and valid criticisms against Platonic conception of justice. However, his conception of justice continue to inspire many generations of political thinkers and philosopher, and the question of justice remains the central concern in political philosophy.

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For this lecture, you can refer to these texts like - David Boucher and Paul Kelly, *Political Thinkers from Socrates to the Present*. Will Durant has a very good chapter on the contribution of Plato to political thought and political philosophy. You can also look at Murray Forsyth and Maurice Keens-Soper – *A guide to Political Classics: Plato to Rousseau*.

Similarly, Shefali Jha's *Western Political Thought from the Ancient Greeks to Modern Times* provides a good introduction to the Greek city-states and also the role of Socrates and his contributions to philosophy, and in shaping the minds like Plato and other youths in Athens. You can also refer to McClelland's, *A History of Western Political Thought*, Nelson's *Western Political Thought*, and James Alan Ryan's *On Politics: A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present*.

These are some of the texts you should refer to understand more about Plato and his context, and also his conception of justice. Do share your comments and feedback. Thanks for your patience and listening. Thank you all.