

Introduction to Western Political Thought
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Lecture 05

The Communism of Wives and Property & Critical Assessment of his Thought

Hello and welcome, everyone. This is the third and concluding lecture on Plato. In this lecture, we will discuss in the first part, quite radical idea even for our own era and times, but it was certainly so during Plato's times - this idea was the communism of wives and property. In the first part of the lecture today, we will discuss, what this idea was, why it was required, and for whom it was meant. And then, we will critically assess his views on communism of wives and property. And in the second part, we will discuss the overall contribution of Plato's thought and philosophy in understanding politics. His response to the question of ethics and politics, which is at the center of any understanding of politics.

In the previous two lectures on Plato, we have already discussed his idea of justice and all also how he has a conception of ideal state is to be governed by philosophers or guardian class. And this image of the philosopher king continued to inspire many rulers and heads of the state's event today. When we think about our heads of state, whether it is the prime minister or the president, we want them to be enlightened, we want them to have knowledge of good beyond the appearances, or opinions, or the commonsensical understanding of what is good and desirable for society. We want to be ruled or governed by the enlightened ruler even today when we do question many of the assumptions, many of the suggestions that Plato had for his philosopher-king.

These ideas on justice, ideal state, and the philosopher-king we have discussed in the previous lectures, the topic that we are going to discuss today is his ideas on the communism of wives and property. This idea should be seen within the larger context of justice, order, and the ideal state that Plato was envisioning.

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➤ For Plato, justice is a prerequisite for ensuring order and harmony in the state or polis. To achieve that, he envisions three classes corresponding to three dominant traits in human subjectivity – appetites, spirit, and intellect. He also argued that to ensure order and justice in the state and maximum happiness for the individuals or three classes, the state must be ruled by a governing class or philosophers.

➤ This governing class of Plato, due to their knowledge of forms or good, will exercise unrestrained power without any limitation of laws or constitution. Now, to guard the guardians, he argued that there would be only one constraint on them that is they would not be allowed to have family or property and live communal lives.

➤ Drawing from the philosophy of Karl Marx, many scholars argue that Plato's idea of communism of wives and property is the first expression of communism. Still, others see Plato as a feminist, since he regarded both male and female of equal worth. However, these are not just anachronistic but incorrect too. Plato's conception of communism was limited to only elites or the ruling class, not everyone, as Marx suggests. Similarly, Plato creates a polity that is thoroughly masculine in which he wanted women to act and behave like 'men'. Thus, we need to understand his idea of communism of wives and property in the context of his philosophy, more specifically his utopia of Kallipolis rather than by imposing our meanings to his thought and ideas.

For Plato, and his conception of the ideal state, justice is a prerequisite for ensuring harmony or order. Plato witnessed political instability and moral decay in the Greek city-state. There were many demagogues who rose to power by stroking the desires, passion, or instinct of the masses. Plato feared that. He despised the rule by the many, yet he was striving to ensure stability and order and harmony in the state and also within the individual self. Now, to do that, he regarded justice as the first-order principle for society. And to achieve that, he envisions three classes, as we have discussed, the producers, auxiliaries, and the philosophers.

These three classes were corresponding to the three dominant traits in human personality – that is appetites, spirit, and intellect. In each of these classes, out of these three dominant traits, one would be dominant. For the producing class, it is the appetites that are dominant traits of their personality or subjectivity. They are driven by desire, passion, and instinct. For the auxiliary class, the sense of honor or the spirit is the dominant trait. And therefore, they will sacrifice, they will protect, they will fight for the honor, demonstrating their courage, and so on. And finally, for the highest class in the hierarchy of Platonic society is the philosophers or guardian class, who are guided by the intellect or reason. Therefore, they should be the ruler of the state.

He argued that to ensure order and justice in the state and also the maximum happiness of the individuals or the three classes, the state must be ruled by a governing class or philosopher. The justification for a philosopher or governing class in his ideal state is that they are driven by intellect and reason, and also has the knowledge of true good or welfare of society. Therefore, when they are given the responsibility of ruling, there would be overall harmony, there would be order in society. And when there is order in society, the individuals and classes

would act or perform their allotted tasks according to their own traits. There would be harmonious existence or justice. This governing class of Plato, due to their knowledge of forms and good, which we have discussed that this knowledge of forms or good is very different from the appearance, are capable of governing. According to Plato, this class of philosopher King or philosopher, due to their knowledge of this unchanging or permanent knowledge of forms or good, will exercise unrestrained power. Thus there is no restriction on the power that is given to the philosophers in Plato's ideal state. They will exercise unrestrained power without any limitation by laws or constitution.

Now, the biggest challenge for Plato was to guard the guardians, to restrain them, and to set a limit on the ruling class. And he argued that there would be only one restraint or constraint on the ruling class or governing class. That constraint would be that they would not be allowed to have family or private property and live a communal lives with minimal possessions. Except this, there would be no restrictions on philosopher-king or the ruling class in Plato's conception of the ideal state. This makes sense if you think of family, which is also a realm where we learn a lot of values, ethics, or a sense of morality. Still, it is also a realm that has a corrupting influence on individual subjectivity. We want to pursue our own self-interest at the cost of others. We want to maximize the accumulation by outperforming others. It leads to a competition for accumulation or material possession. And this should be allowed and makes sense for the producing class, for farmers or traders, which derive pleasure in accumulating money or in accumulating other earthly possessions. But for the philosopher or the guardian class, according to Plato, who is driven by intellect, or search after true meaning or true forms, they should not be distracted by this accumulation of golds and coins. And they live their lives for the benefit of the rest in society or for ensuring the maximum welfare of everyone.

Now, if that is the purpose of life for the guardian class, and in performing those actions, they are given the unrestrained power, there should not be any corrupting influence of family on the ruling class. We are going to assess this idea of communism of wives and property critically. But to begin with, it has become a kind of fashionable to equate Plato's conception of communism of wives and property with Karl Marx.

So, as you know, Karl Marx has also argued that perfect harmony or justice is realizable in communism or the stage of life where there is no need for politics or a state, which works on behalf of or for the interests of the dominant section. So drawing from this philosophy of Karl

Marx, many scholars have argued that Plato's idea of communism of wives and property is the first expression of communism.

Others see Plato as the first feminist since he argued that both males and females are of equal moral worth and should be given the same opportunity and the same educational training. However, these are two separate ideas – of Marx's idea of communism and finding its first expression in Plato's thought or the feminist conception of today's world. And finding its expression in Plato's thought is not just anachronistic; that means we are imposing our meanings, our assumptions to someone else in another historical and socio-economical context. So it is not just anachronistic, but also incorrect. Plato's conception of communism was if you compare it with Marx's, limited only to the ruling class. The majority of population in the state are allowed to have property or family. This communism is only limited to the ruling class.

And if you know, Marx, he wanted everyone to have this life as communal life. Thus it is not similar to Marx. Similarly, the Platonic conception of politics is very masculine. It is not the expression of feminist thinking of care and justice and so on. He creates a polity where intellect, courage, or other virtues, which is fundamentally masculine and then want the women to act or behave like the men in the masculine polity. So he does not, of course, discriminate between men and women. But the very conception of politics that he has is masculine. And therefore, when we say that Plato is the first feminist thinker is also somewhat incorrect and anachronistic. Thus, we need to understand his idea of communism of wives and property in the context of his philosophy, more specifically his utopia of *Kallipolis*, that is the ideal state where everyone lives according to his or her on nature. There would be a harmony of existence and thereby perfect order and justice in society. Thus rather than imposing our own meanings or assumptions to his thought; we need to understand the idea of communism of wives and property in the context of Platonic thought and, more specifically, his idea of *Kallipolis* or the ideal state.

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Communism of wives and property

- Considering the prevalent patriarchal norms in Athenian society, the idea of communism of wives and property was quite radical and bold for his age. We have already discussed how Plato did not discriminate based on gender in identifying the ruling or governing class for the state. He wanted women to be given the same opportunities or educational training as available to the male without any discrimination.
- Plato's objective in prescribing the communism of wives and property for the ruling class or guardians in the *Kallipolis* (his ideal state) was to insulate them from the corrupting influence of property or family. He wanted the majority of the population – producing classes to have property and family. He acknowledged the value of family for the pleasure and happiness of the producing classes. However, he was also aware of its corrupting influences. As we know, the institution of private property and family lead to many corrupting behaviors such as nepotism, favoritism, factionalism among the rulers. Thus to avoid that, Plato suggested that the governing class would live a communal life. It was to ensure that rulers are focused on the welfare of all and be free from the responsibilities of family.
- The ruling or governing class must live for the pursuit of true knowledge different from appearance and seek happiness in the happiness of others. Thus, this kind of communal life was meant only for the governing classes in the city.

Athenian society during Plato's time was a patriarchal society. As I have discussed before, the public or political life was meant only for the male citizens; slaves, resident aliens, and also women were excluded from the public life. Considering such patriarchal norms, this idea of communism of wives and property may appear to us quite radical and very bold, even from our own standard. We have significantly less representation of women in politics, in Parliament, if we critically assess the legislative assemblies and Parliaments of today. Now to argue that, in the classical Greek period with the dominant patriarchal norms, which demarcated between the household work and the public life; and did not allow the participation of women in public life, was quite a radical thing to do. In such a context he argued about the communism of wives and property. He also included women in the governing class. It was not just radical, but quite bold too.

We have already discussed how Plato did not discriminate on the basis of gender; and wanted women to be given the same opportunities and educational training as available to males without any discrimination. We have discussed it while we discussing Plato's educational system in the previous lecture. Plato's objective in putting forward his idea of the communism of wives and property for the ruling class or guardians in the *Kallipolis*, that is his ideal state, was to insulate them from the corrupting influences of property and family. He wanted the majority of the population in the ideal state, such as the producing classes, to have property and family, thereby acknowledging the value of family for the pleasure and happiness of the producing class. However, Plato was also aware of the corrupting influences of family. And we know that the institution of private property and family lead to many corrupting behaviors such as nepotism, favoritism, or factionalism among the ruling class.

If family exist, it will lead to enviousness. It will lead to more and more accumulation of wealth, favoritism, or nepotism. And that would be disastrous for the ideal state that he was envisioning. Suppose if the ruling class is supposed to live a life in search of true knowledge, and govern this society or state based on that knowledge. And if that class is distracted by the needs of the family or involved in the pursuit of property, this class will not be in a position to rule the city in a just manner. So, to restrict the corrupting influences of family and property, particularly for the ruling class or governing class, Plato devised this mechanism of communism of wives and property, where they will have a sexual or emotional relationships, but they do not have any personal family or property except the minimum requirement for their living.

So, to avoid the corrupting influences of family and property such as nepotism, factionalism, or favoritism Plato argued for the communism of wives and property for the ruling class. Such corrupt behavior is visible in contemporary politics too, when you find those who are called to rule or given the responsibility of ruling are involved in numerous corrupt practices, or accumulation of wealth, or favoritism. These lead to disastrous consequences in the affairs of state. Similarly, in Platonic conception, particularly his ideal state, where the governing class is free from any restriction by laws or constitution; only thing that restrains them is that they will not have the family or private property. They will live a life for the happiness of the state or ensuring the maximum welfare of the citizens. It was to ensure that rulers are focused on the welfare of all and are free from the responsibility of the family.

Plato wanted a class devoted only to the business of ruling according to the true knowledge of good. So, the ruling or governing class must live for the pursuit of true knowledge, which is different from the appearance; and seek happiness in the happiness of others. This kind of communal life was meant only for the governing class in the city.

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- Plato wanted the governing class to live in the barracks, like soldiers with minimum possessions and without any interest in the pursuit of gold or silver. He also proposed a strict and very rigorous mechanism for mating or sexual intercourse for the governing class. It should be regulated in a manner that leads to the birth of the best progeny for the state.
- He wanted the philosopher-king to ensure that the best among both sexes get maximum chances of mating in comparison to the inferiors among the governing class. He wanted it to be done through a kind of lottery, which would make such frequent mating among the best appear natural in the eyes of inferiors. He also proposes the organization of feast or festivals to promote such coupling among the best.
- Once children are born, they should be taken care of by the state-run nurseries. No one would know the exact parentage of these children. And thus, each male and female among the guardian class would look at each child as his/her son or daughter. Similarly, when the parentage would not be known to the children, they would be equally respectful to all elders. Plato also wanted the progeny of inferior men or children with deformities should be carefully and secretly disposed of.

How this communism of wives and property should be organized or managed in the polity?

Plato wanted the governing class should live in the barracks, like soldiers, with minimum possessions and without any interest in the pursuit of gold or silver. So, you know, in the life of an individual, most of the time, he or she pursue those activities which help him or her to accumulate wealth. And in the accumulation, people derive pleasure. However, for Plato, this should be so for the producing class only; those who are farmers, traders, or craftsmen. It should not be there for the ruling class, particularly the governing class or the philosophers, who are constantly in search after true knowledge and then grudgingly take the responsibility of ruling the state to ensure that everything works according to their own nature. So, Plato wanted this governing class to live in the barracks, like soldiers, with minimum possessions and should not have any interest in the pursuit of gold or silver.

He also proposed a strict and very rigorous mechanism for mating. He allowed the governing class to have sexual relationship, but it should be regulated in a manner which benefits the state. Plato appears to be the first philosopher who also wanted some mechanism to regulate the growth of the population, for maintaining the best progeny for the state to become its rulers or the governing class. So, he wanted the philosopher-king to ensure that the best among both sexes get the maximum chance of mating in comparison to those who are inferior among the governing class. He wanted the philosopher-king, in the state to ensure a mechanism where the best males and females among the governing class will have the maximum opportunity. He wanted it to be done through a kind of lottery, which would make such frequent mating among the best appear to be natural in the eyes of inferior. He also proposed the organization of feast and festivals to promote such coupling among the best.

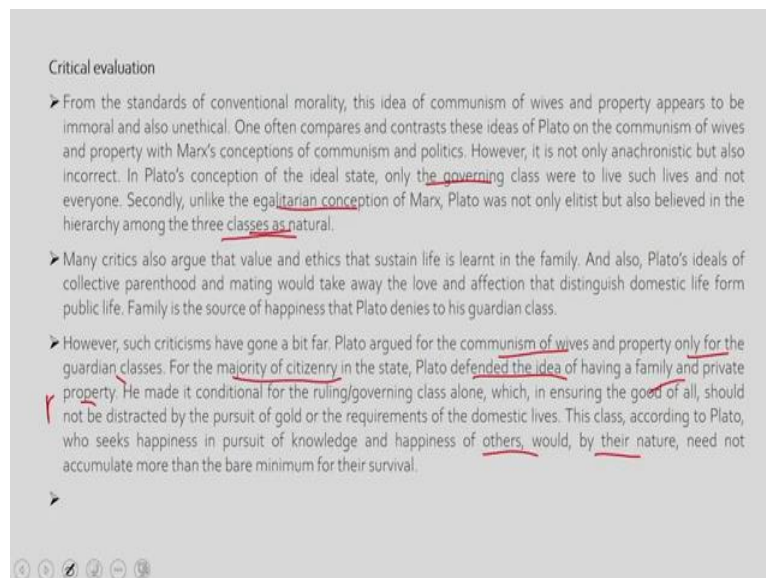
Now, what happens once the children are born? Plato argues that once children are born, they should be taken care of by the state-run nurseries. So, unlike the family or the private lives of the citizen, where they will nurture or nourish their children, for the ruling class, the state will maintain the nurseries separately. And once the children are born, they will not be kept with their mothers or fathers, since the identity of their mother or father will be anonymous. And it should be known only to the philosopher-king. Once children are born, they should be taken care of by the state-run nurseries, and then he suggested an elaborate system of education for the children of this class. This model of education we have discussed in the previous lecture. Among the governing class, no one would know the exact parentage of a child. And thus, each male and female among the guardian class would look at each child as his or her son or daughter. That is to ensure perfect communal living or harmonious life, where there will not be any enviousness, competition, or corrupting influence that is prevalent in the family lives.

Plato wanted the guardian class and their children to be devoted to the life of reason, to the pursuit of true knowledge. And in doing that, they should be free from emotional attachment or enviousness that are prevalent in the families and among the producing classes. So, when the parentage of the children is unknown, each male and female in the governing class will look to every child as their own son or daughter. Similarly, when the parentage would not be known to the children, they will look at all the elders with respect without discriminations. This is to ensure perfect reciprocation between the child and the elders among the governing class. There is also an undesirable and a cruel system that Plato also put forward. That is, he wanted the progeny of inferiors or children with deformities to be carefully and secretly disposed of. Plato wanted to have the best for the state. And to have that, he also argued that we should not prolong life through the medicine if a person is living the idle life. The purpose of life, for Plato, is to live a productive life. And to live a productive life is to act according to one's own nature. So, he was not in favor of using medical assistance to prolong life if a person is unfit for living a productive life. Thus he argued that those who are inferior or born with physical deformities should be secretly disposed of because it would be a burden on the state. From the present point of view or the idea of justice, it seems very cruel. It lacks empathy. But for Plato, in his conception of the ideal state, everyone should lead a productive life, which is necessary to lead a happy life, to act according to one's own nature. If some physical disease or deformities added burden to the state, this should be secretly disposed off.

This whole idea of communism of wives and property, as I said, should be taken into the larger context of a Platonic vision for the ideal state. And that ideal state requires everyone to lead a

productive life, a virtuous life. And that virtuous and productive life requires everyone to act according to their own nature. So, there will not be rules; there will not be interference from the others. Everyone will live according to their own nature. And then overall, justice and order and harmony will be prevalent in the state. Plato was envisioning that kind of state, which he modified in *Laws* and *Statements* as we have discussed. But within the limits of this ideal state, he was arguing for the ruling class to have a life that will be free from the constraints or the corrupting influences of family and private property. Thus we need to understand his vision of communism of wives and property, in the context of the ideal state, without imposing our own assumptions. Now, let's discuss the critical remarks against this idea.

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Critical evaluation

- From the standards of conventional morality, this idea of communism of wives and property appears to be immoral and also unethical. One often compares and contrasts these ideas of Plato on the communism of wives and property with Marx's conceptions of communism and politics. However, it is not only anachronistic but also incorrect. In Plato's conception of the ideal state, only the governing class were to live such lives and not everyone. Secondly, unlike the egalitarian conception of Marx, Plato was not only elitist but also believed in the hierarchy among the three classes as natural.
- Many critics also argue that value and ethics that sustain life is learnt in the family. And also, Plato's ideals of collective parenthood and mating would take away the love and affection that distinguish domestic life from public life. Family is the source of happiness that Plato denies to his guardian class.
- However, such criticisms have gone a bit far. Plato argued for the communism of wives and property only for the guardian classes. For the majority of citizenry in the state, Plato defended the idea of having a family and private property. He made it conditional for the ruling/governing class alone, which, in ensuring the good of all, should not be distracted by the pursuit of gold or the requirements of the domestic lives. This class, according to Plato, who seeks happiness in pursuit of knowledge and happiness of others, would, by their nature, need not accumulate more than the bare minimum for their survival.

First, from the standards of conventional morality, this idea of communism of wives and property appears to be immoral and unethical. How can one think of a life without family, without one's children, and how one can have an emotional connection with everyone in a similar manner. For men to lead a happy life, they need to have a sense of belongingness, to have a sense of his or her own. The family and children are seen in the conventional morality an extension of the individual self. Now, in contrast to such standard, conventional ethics and morality, Plato imagined a group of individuals who will be devoted to the life of reason, unconcerned or free from the restraints or corrupting influences of family and private property.

One often compares and contrasts Plato's idea of the communism of wives and property with Marx's conception of communism and politics. And one of the similar streaks that are there in Marx and also in Plato is the absence of conflict. Karl Marx envisioned a life of individuals, where there will be no role for the politics or the state. They will all live an egalitarian life. It

is similar to the Platonic conception of the ideal state. However, the difference is that in Plato, this ideal of communism is limited only to the ruling class. And secondly, unlike the egalitarian conception of communism in Karl Marx, which is meant for everyone, Plato was not only elitist but also believed in the hierarchy among the three classes as natural. It is based on their own natural traits. So the Platonic conception is very different from the Marxist understanding of communism, and we should not stretch it too far.

But the way he envisioned the communal life for the governing class or the rulers appears to be somewhat similar to the Marxist conception. Still, it is substantially different from the egalitarian conception of communism in Marx. Many critics have also argued that the value and ethics that sustain life are learned in the family. The family has a critical role to play in shaping the character of the individuals or the children. And they also learn the best lesson of life, ethics, or morality in the family. So, family is seen as the first school where a child learns some of the basics about ethics and values. However, Plato argued about a different kind of training or educational system for the child, which sees family having corrupting influence on the child and his character. There would be many critiques to this Platonic understanding of family. And also, Plato's idea of collective parenthood and mating would take away the love and affection that distinguished domestic life from public life. And that is what led Aristotle to criticize Plato's vision of the ideal state. The family is a source of happiness that Plato denies to the guardian class. However, such criticism has gone too far in criticizing Platonic conception of family and private property. Plato argued for the communism of wives and property only for the guardian class. For the majority of the citizens in the state, Plato defended the idea of having a family and private property.

He made the communism of wives and property conditional only for the guardian class because he or she enjoys enormous power without any restraint by laws or constitution. Now to ensure that this class work in the best interest of the state, he wanted them not to have personal property or family. And also, in the pursuit of ensuring the good for all, this class should not be distracted by the pursuit of goods or golds. The traits of this class, according to Plato, is search after true knowledge and seeking happiness in the happiness of others. So, this class will look at the whole state as their property; the whole state as their family; and emotionally or psychologically will be connected to the entire state, or welfare of the all and not just their own family or their own children. Now to produce or nurture this class, he wanted them to have communism of wives and common ownership of property without any personal attachment. So

they need not accumulate more than the bare minimum for their survival. that is how he justified the communism of wives and property for the ruling and guardian class in the state.

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Plato's philosophy: A critical evaluation

- Emerson has rightly said that Plato is philosophy, and philosophy is Plato. His conceptions of justice and ideal state, division of labor, three classes, and their corresponding virtues became the starting point for debates and discussions on philosophy and the challenges of ethics and politics. The entire tradition of European philosophy is, in many ways, responses to the questions raised by Plato in his dialogues. His idea of three classes did reflect in the organization of life in the medieval European states and other monarchies.
- The notion of *arete* – excellence/specialization of any kind to lead a virtuous life, guided Plato's philosophy. His whole philosophy revolves around the idea of ensuring how to lead a good, virtuous, and harmonious life for the individuals within and also in the state.
- His theory of forms or good as the true source of knowledge that is beyond the world of everchanging opinions or appearance, and an elaborate system of education define the philosophy of education even today. The name he gave to his institution of learning – Academy, has become a symbol of or synonym with the institution of learning and knowledge. Although, one could question his censorship of the art and culture and his argument that the role of art and poetry is limited to develop the character and discipline among the citizen. His preference for the knowledge of mathematics, reason, and dialectics as the basis of sound knowledge still motivates the educators and rulers alike.

Now, if we look at the overall assessment of Plato's conception of justice, or ideal state, or the philosopher-king, and also the communism of wives and property, there are a few points which we need to take into consideration. First, and that is quite obvious, which we have begun with while we started our discussion on Plato, that the philosophy, as Emerson has rightly pointed out, begins with Plato. He is seen as synonymous with philosophy. Emerson has thus rightly said that Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato. No other thinker or philosopher since then and before him used philosophy to lead an ideal, perfect, just life in the state or to ensure the harmony of existence. The platonic use of philosophy to lead a harmonious life has been unparalleled since then. Also, no other philosopher before him has taken the philosophy to perform this task of ensuring a good life or a just life for the citizens.

His conception of justice and the ideal state or division of labor, three classes – producing classes, auxiliary classes, and the guardians, and their corresponding virtues become the starting point for debates and discussions on philosophy and also the challenges of ethics and politics. What is ethical for one class may not be ethical for the other classes. And what is true ethics also required a proper and rigorous training of mind and the use of reason? Plato has used philosophy as the basis to arrive at the knowledge of what is ethical, or what is desirable, or what is good for all the sections of society. And that you need to look at in the context of turbulent times, or the change in the power between the oligarchs and the democrats, and prevailing decay in the morality. Plato was responding to those contexts. His ideas had

tremendous influence on the rest of the thinkers in the European tradition of political thought. It continues to inspire the thinking and thought of many other thinkers. So, these ideas of Plato on justice, state, philosopher-king, three classes and their corresponding virtues have become a starting point for any discussion on ethics and politics or philosophy. And if you look at the entire tradition of European tradition of political thought, we find them responding to some of the questions that are raised in Plato's dialogues or Plato's works. Particularly I will suggest you read *Gorgias* to understand how he uses the philosophy not just to include the prevailing norms and articulations, but also to respond in a more rigorous, epistemologically correct manner, the idea of justice, or idea of state, or the idea of order, and how to lead a good life.

Everyone wants to lead a good life. Now, how to lead a good life? Many would argue that one could lead a good or happy life through the accumulation of wealth or material possessions. But will that allow a happy life? Plato, like Socrates, argued that to lead a good life, one needs to be virtuous. And what would be the virtuous life? Virtuous life would be the life of reason, a life of knowledge. So the individual, should be governed by reason. Similarly, in the state in those classes who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or those who have the possession of the true knowledge of forms or goods, they should be given the task of governing, and thereby everyone will be living harmonious life without interference from each other.

And if you look at particularly his conception of three classes and division of labor, you find it reflected in the European states in the medieval times and also in the other monarchies. The life in the state is seen as a pyramid where the people at the bottom would be mostly producing class, driven by the desire; and above them, there would be the auxiliary classes of warlords or the armies; and then above them, there will be the priestly classes or the kings or the monarchs. They are supposed to have the knowledge of what is best for everyone. You will find it in medieval Europe and also in many other monarchies. However, in medieval times, the basis of such hierarchy was a religious myth, that is the divine right of the king. But Plato wanted to give it a more rational foundation, through what he calls noble lies. That is, there are three kinds of soul – bronze, silver, and gold. They should act according to their nature. Thus the kind of hierarchy that Plato envisioned was quite natural, based on rational ideas rather than any religious myth. Nonetheless, the political life in the state, in medieval Europe and also in the monarchies in other countries, are based on this division of labor and hierarchy of existence.

The notion of *Arete* - that is virtue or excellence or specialization, was considered necessary to lead a virtuous life. The virtue is to act according to one's own nature. If one is from the

producing class, his/her dominant traits are desire, passion, or instinct. One should be happy in the life of producing or accumulation of wealth. And if one is courageous, searching after honor, one should be in the army or the class which protects the producing class. Similarly, if one is driven by intellect or reason and seek knowledge for the sake of it, rather than for any other consequences, then one would lead a life of priestly class or the guardian class.

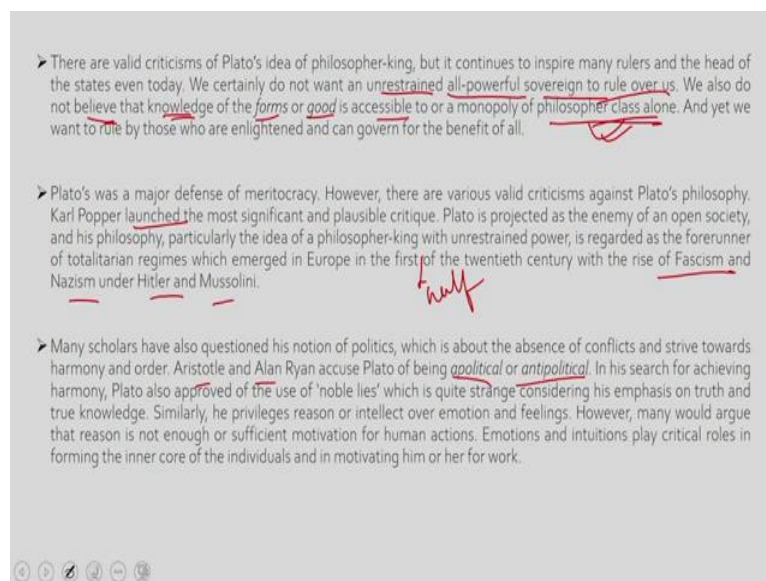
In Platonic philosophy, the *Arete* is specialization or excellence in any given traits or any given skill that the class need to master to lead a virtuous life. It guided Plato's philosophy. His whole philosophy revolves around the idea of ensuring how to lead a good, virtuous, and harmonious life, both for the individual within the self and also the classes in the state. The whole of the platonic philosophy was to ensure this harmony of existence within the self by maintaining the harmony between the appetites at the base and spirit above them, and the reason at the top. So the reason is the basis to maintain harmony within the self. Similarly, in the society or the state, those who are living the life of reason, or searching after the truth as an unchangeable or permanent form and are capable of distinguishing it from of its imperfect manifestation in the world, should be governing. This is accessible to only the philosopher class, through their training or in mathematics or reasoning. Only they are called upon to rule, and the rest of the classes perform their duties according to their own nature. Then the outcome would be a just and ordered society.

His theory of forms or good as the true source of knowledge – that is beyond the world of ever-changing opinions and appearance, or an elaborate system of education, defines the philosophy of education even today. That's the influence of Plato's thought. Philosophy enables us to see things beyond its appearance. Often our knowledge is shaped by the opinions or the propaganda or what is presented to us, rather than our ability, by using the reason and logic, to see beyond. This system of education, that Plato had for the philosopher or the ruling class, continue to define education even today. The purpose of education is not to be guided by the sense perception or what appears to us, but also to see beyond it; to understand the larger dynamics that make the thing as they are. And how to correct the existing practices and norms and how to improve them, that is the whole purpose of philosophy and education, even today. The name that he gave to his institution of learning – Academy, has now become a symbol of or synonymous with the institution of learning and knowledge.

One should question his censorship of art and culture. His argument that the role of art and poetry should be limited to the development of character and discipline in the child, one should

be critical to that. In his educational system, he wanted only those kinds of arts and culture, or poetry, which would help the children to see things as they are, rather than giving them any delusions or having corrupt influences on them. Thus Plato was in favor of strict censorship of those art forms, which leads to delusion, which has a corrupting influence on the child. So one could be, in today's time, critical of this kind of censorship that Plato has argued. But his system of education continued to define the philosophy of education. His preference for the knowledge of mathematics, reason, and dialectics as the basis of sound knowledge motivates the educators and rulers alike even in modern times.

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Similarly, there are valid criticisms of Plato's idea of philosopher-king, but it continues to inspire many rulers and the head of the states. We certainly do not want an unrestrained, all-powerful sovereign to rule over us. In this era of modern democracy, we do not want our rulers to have unrestrained power or unaccountable power. The whole apparatus of ruling in modern democracies is governed by the principle of separation of power, and check and balances. The Platonic philosopher-king, however has unrestrained power because he has the true knowledge of forms or good, and he uses that for the benefit of all. So we do not want ruler today with unrestrained or unaccountable power. And we also do not believe now that knowledge of the forms or good as Plato argues, is accessible to or a monopoly of philosopher class alone. We do not want such beliefs to be valid, which argues that only the philosopher or only a particular class is capable of comprehending true knowledge, or knowledge of forms, or the knowledge of good. We want everyone should have the opportunity for or are capable of accessing that knowledge or comprehending that knowledge. It should not be limited to only a class, as Plato

has suggested. However, even today, we want our rulers to be enlightened and govern for the benefit of all, that is the basic argument of Plato's philosopher-king or Plato's guardian class. We have certain criticism against the philosopher-king or limiting the knowledge of forms to a particular class. The state, if it is to function for the benefit of everyone, then we want a ruler who is in a position where s/he can understand what is good for everyone, rather than driven by the factional interest of any one group or any one community.

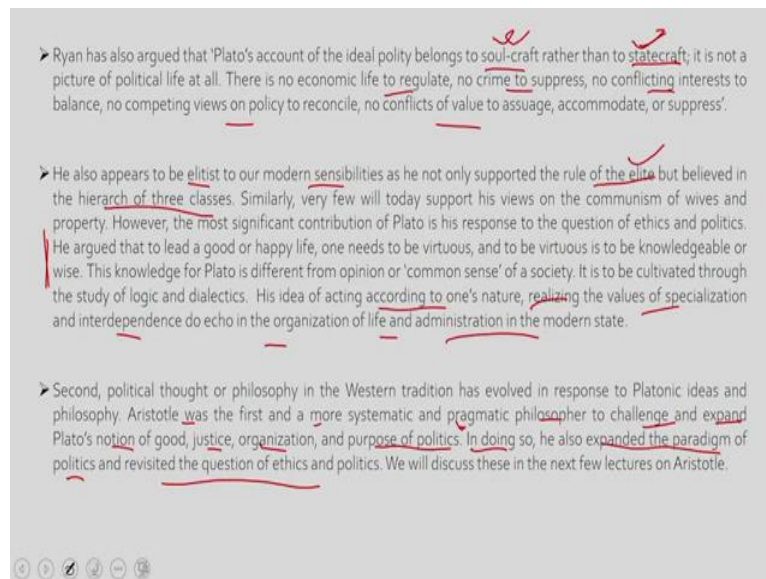
Plato's was a major defence of meritocracy; as he says that those who are skillful in a particular thing, they should be given that role. If someone is interested in the pursuit of wealth, he should become the producing or trading class. In class, if someone is interested in the pursuit of knowledge, he should join the guardian class. Thus Plato comes as a major defence of meritocracy. However, there are various valid criticisms against Plato's philosophy. Karl Popper has the most significant and plausible critique. Here Plato is projected as an enemy of the open society. And his philosophy, particularly the idea of philosopher-king, with its unrestrained power, is regarded as the forerunner of the totalitarian regimes, which emerged in Europe in the first half of the 20th century, with the rise of fascism and Nazism under Hitler and Mussolini.

Many scholars have also questioned his notion of politics, which is about the absence of conflicts and strive towards harmony and order. The whole vision of Platonic philosophy is to ensure the harmony of existence. And his conception of politics, therefore, is about the absence of conflicts. Therefore, there should not be any role for laws and constitution in Plato's ideal state ruled by the philosopher-king. Alan Ryan accuses Plato of being apolitical or anti-political. In his search for achieving harmony and order, Plato also approved of the use of noble lies, which is quite strange, considering his focus on the search after truth, or the role of wisdom in society. How could he justify noble lies, which would work in perpetuating the class hierarchy in society – that is producing class is of bronze soul, auxiliary class is of the silver soul, and only the philosopher or the guardian class is of the golden soul.

However, many would also argue that his preference for reason and intellect over other elements such as emotions or passion is somewhat unsustainable. Reason or intellect, many would argue, help us understand things or comprehend our surroundings. But that is not enough for us to act upon. To act or to perform our tasks, more than the reason, we also need the use of emotion or our passion, which motivates us to act.

So, reason alone is not sufficient for action. It may help us to understand our surroundings, it may help us to understand the situation, but to act upon those understandings, we also need to have passion or desire. Therefore, Plato's preference for reason and intellect within the individual self and also in the state in the form of guardian class, is somewhat misguided. The role of intuitions, as Gandhi and many other scholars have argued, is as essential as the role of reason and intellect in human affairs.

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Ryan has also argued that Plato's account of the ideal polity is more like a soul-craft, which is how to lead a harmonious, peaceful life, rather than the state-craft, which is about resolving conflicts. In Plato's conception of politics, there is no economic life to regulate, no crime to suppress, no conflicting interests to balance, no competing views on policy to reconcile, no conflicts of values to assuage, accommodate and suppress. Hence, Ryan has argued that Plato's philosophy is apolitical or anti-political philosophy as it argues about a life that would be free from conflicts. So what is the role of politics there? And as we understand politics, it helps us to resolve the disputes through dialogue in a peaceful manner without resorting to violence. But Plato want society and the state to be free from conflicts, where everybody works according to his or her own nature, without interference from the others. Alan Ryan, therefore, regards Plato as a thinker of soul-craft, rather than the state-craft. Plato also appears to be elitist to our modern sensibility, as he not only supported the rule by the elite but believed in the hierarchy of the three classes. Similarly, very few will today support his views on the communism of wives and property.

However, the most significant contribution of Plato is the response to the question of ethics and politics. He argued that to lead a good or happy life, one needs to be virtuous. And to be virtuous is to be knowledgeable or wise. So, the main question of politics for many thinkers since Plato and also many philosophers in contemporary times, is to resolve the conflicts. There is a desire to lead a happy life, and the possibility of a happy life is only when you have a society or a state which is just. So how are you going to ensure justice in society? If there are too many economic disparities, if there are too many hierarchies, how are you to ensure the stable order or justice in such a disparate or conflicting situation. And that remains a core puzzle for many philosophers even today.

Plato has a very definite response to resolving this question of ethics and politics by arguing that to lead a happy life, one needs to be virtuous. And to be virtuous, one needs to be knowledgeable. And when the knowledge is the basis for a ruling or the ruling class is knowledgeable for what is good for society, only then true justice or order will be prevalent in society. This knowledge for Plato is different from the opinion or the common sense of society. And all the rulers, or the governing class, or those who are in the business of ruling, should be mindful of having that knowledge which is beyond the appearance or beyond the commonsensical opinion driven knowledge that characterizes our political discourse even today. It needs to be cultivated through the study of logic and dialectics. His idea of acting according to one's nature, realizing the value of specialization and interdependence, does echo the organization of life and administration in the modern state.

Second, political thought or philosophy in the Western tradition has evolved in response to Platonic ideas and philosophy. Thus, he is the first serious or major thinker who began to use philosophy to lead a good life or to ensure justice in society. He uses philosophy or knowledge as the basis of leading a good, harmonious, just life for the individual and also for every class in the state. And the Western tradition of thought emerged or evolved as a response to Platonic thought and vision. Aristotle was the first and a more systematic and pragmatic philosopher to challenge and expand Plato's notion of good, justice, organization, and purpose of politics. In doing so, he expanded the Platonic vision of the role of politics, the ideal state, justice. Aristotle has expanded the paradigm of politics and revisited the question of ethics and politics.

And we are going to discuss these things in the next few lectures when we will discuss Aristotle's idea of philosophy or politics, or how to lead a good life. Aristotle becomes a more systematic and pragmatic thinker in comparison to Plato. Still, he was expanding in many ways

the Platonic vision of ethics and politics and how to use politics to lead a good life, to establish a society which would be the just society. That is the influence of Plato, and there is something very unique to the Platonic vision of philosophy and his ways of looking at the role of politics in human life. And this course, as I said, is the introductory course, and should not be taken as a substitute for reading the works of Plato.

I will, therefore, highly recommend you to read his *Republic* or *Gorgias* to understand the complexities of the argument and the way Plato put forward his arguments or conception of justice, the ideal state, the role of the philosopher-king and the ideas on knowledge or the ideas on the communism of wives and property. We need to understand its significance in his own time, but also how it helps us to understand many of the challenges and the complexities that we face in politics today.

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For this lecture today, you can refer to these books, which are similar to the other lectures which we have had on Plato. First, you should refer to Paul Kelly or David Boucher, *Political Thinkers from Socrates to the Present*. Then Will Durant again is a very good work on Plato's thought and philosophy. Murray Forsyth and Maurice Keens Soper, *A Guide To Political Classics: Plato to Rousseau* is again an excellent book.

This book by Shefali Jha is a critical text to understand many of the thinkers and particularly what we have discussed today. And also James Alan Ryan *On Politics: A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present*. These are the texts you should refer to understand the

political thought of Plato. That's all for today's lecture, do share your comments and feedback.
Thanks for listening.