

# From the Republic to Civil Government: Tracing the Roots of Political Thought through Plato and Locke

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## ABSTRACT

In the annals of Western philosophy, Plato and Locke stand out as influential thinkers, each with distinct political theories. Examining the differences between their ideas offers insight into the evolution of Western political thought. This essay aims to demonstrate the progression of political philosophy in the West by identifying and scrutinizing the core concepts in Plato's and Locke's political ideologies. Their divergent perspectives on governmental structure, personal liberties, and social contracts have profoundly influenced subsequent political discourse. Through an exploration of the fundamental principles underlying Plato's utopian state and Locke's notion of limited governance, we can observe the development of democratic principles and individual rights. This comparative analysis not only elucidates the historical trajectory of political philosophy but also offers valuable perspectives on contemporary debates surrounding governance and social organization.

**Keywords-** Plato, Locke, political philosophy, Civil Government, The Republic, personal property.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Plato is recognized as one of the most eminent philosophers in history, acknowledged as the progenitor of Western political philosophy. Similarly, Locke is regarded as a highly influential thinker of the 17th century. Voltaire observed: "perhaps no man ever had a more judicious or more methodical genius, or was a more acute Logician than Mr. Locke." The works of both philosophers significantly influenced the development of Western political thought, with each articulating distinct perspectives on the individual and the state. This paper is structured into three primary sections. The first section briefly delineates the key aspects of Plato's political ideas as presented in "The Republic." In this work, Plato examines harmony and justice, drawing parallels between the soul and the city. He associates desire (appetite), courage (spirit), and reason with workers (producers),

soldiers (auxiliaries), and guardians, respectively. The section then identifies and elucidates unconvincing or contradictory elements in Plato's political philosophy. The second section explores Locke's major political views from his book "Of Civil Government." This includes Locke's theories on the state of nature, property, freedom, and the role of diligent work in benefiting society as a whole. The third section examines certain aspects of Locke's philosophy that distinguish his political ideas from those of Plato, demonstrating the progression of Western political thought. The analysis focuses primarily on their contrasting attitudes toward private property.

## II. PLATO'S THEORY

### 2.1. Introduction of Plato's Theory

The foundation of Plato's political philosophy rests on his ethical theories. He posits that a just and

virtuous society can only be achieved when its three primary components - laborers, military personnel, and rulers - fulfill their respective roles effectively. According to Plato, each of these groups possesses a distinct characteristic. Moreover, he draws a parallel between these societal groups and the three faculties within the human psyche. Plato states, "Then it's in this way, my friend, that we will claim that the single man—with these same forms in his soul—thanks to the same affections as those in the city, rightly lays claim to the same names." He postulates that harmony in both society and the individual's psyche can only be attained when these three elements are in alignment. Plato emphasizes the significance of maintaining this equilibrium, asserting, "Meddling among the classes, of which there are three, and exchange with one another is the greatest harm for the city and would most correctly be called extreme evil-doing."

### **2.2. Worker Class**

According to Plato, every society necessitates laborers. These encompass individuals such as farmers and artisans who produce essential daily necessities. A society devoid of such workers would collapse at its foundation. This is attributed to the fact that societies, analogous to individuals, have fundamental requirements. Just as individuals require sustenance, clothing, and shelter, societies demand agricultural produce, implements, and structures. Plato posits that workers are primarily motivated by their desires, focusing on fulfilling their corporeal needs. Consequently, he identifies desire as the defining characteristic of workers. Plato contends that workers must exercise moderation, as unbridled desire can lead to reckless behavior. In the absence of self-restraint, an individual might overindulge in food or alcohol. Similarly, workers lacking moderation would prioritize physical gratification over their obligations. Such workers, consumed by excessive sleep, sustenance, leisure, and inebriation, would fail to perform their duties adequately. This inadequacy would result in insufficient production of daily necessities such as agricultural produce and tools. Evidently, a society cannot thrive without an ample supply of these essential goods. Therefore, Plato asserts that a well-functioning or just society necessitates workers to exercise moderation in their pursuits.

### **2.3. Soldier Class**

According to Plato, a society necessitates more than a moderate working class to fulfill its fundamental requirements. He posits that a prosperous society may become susceptible to external aggression, thus requiring a class of protectors or soldiers. These soldiers, entrusted with defending against external threats, must frequently confront perilous situations. Consequently, Plato contends that soldiers should possess elevated spirits and be emotionally predisposed individuals. Emotion is considered the defining attribute of the soldier class. Plato asserts that soldiers must channel their elevated spirits into courage. However, he cautions that soldiers might be

inclined to usurp power and assume leadership roles, potentially leading to societal disorder. To prevent this and ensure they fulfill their protective duties effectively, Plato argues that soldiers, like workers, need to exercise moderation. Thus, in Plato's perspective, an ideal or just society requires soldiers who embody both moderation and courage.

### **2.4. Leader Class**

To establish a virtuous and equitable society, it is insufficient to rely solely on laborers and military personnel. A third category, comprising leaders, is essential. The primary function of this leadership class is to employ logical reasoning and intellectual faculties in decision-making processes. As the architects of state policies and administrators of civic affairs, leaders must excel in critical thinking and rational analysis. Consequently, Plato asserts that philosophers should assume leadership roles. He contends that philosophers are uniquely qualified to engage in logical reasoning and arrive at sound judgments, making them the ideal candidates for governance.

### **2.5. Summary of Plato's Theory**

In Plato's societal structure, there is no mobility between classes. Workers cannot become soldiers, and soldiers cannot assume leadership roles. Harmony in society is achieved only when each of the three segments performs its designated function exclusively and effectively. However, Plato's political system is excessively idealistic and impractical. For instance, he proposes eliminating private ownership in favor of communal property. Such a shift would have significant negative consequences, as evidenced by the historical failure of movements aimed at abolishing private property. These initiatives typically falter because they severely undermine individuals' motivation to work. The absence of private property means individuals cannot directly benefit from their labor, as those who exert more effort receive the same compensation as those who do less. This lack of incentive eventually leads to economic downturns and food scarcity. Consequently, Plato's stance on eradicating private property is unrealistic. Furthermore, his ideas about dismantling marriage and family structures, and even promoting "noble lies" to children, are even less feasible. Additionally, Plato fails to address why individuals would choose to be governed when they could live independently. For these reasons, Plato's political theory is not persuasive.

## **III. LOCKE'S THEORY**

### **3.1. State of Nature**

According to Locke's political theory, humans initially existed in a "state of nature." In this condition, individuals possessed complete freedom and equality, as people are inherently born free. However, despite their freedom, humans in the state of nature were not unrestrained. They were governed by natural law, which prohibited harm to others' lives, health, liberty, and

possessions. Locke described the state of nature as: a condition of complete freedom to manage their actions and belongings as they see fit, within the constraints of natural law, without seeking permission or relying on anyone else's will. He asserted that humans were free within the boundaries of natural law, and this freedom was innate and inalienable. Locke's concept closely resembles the natural rights theory that emerged during the Enlightenment period.

### **3.2. The Emergence of Government**

Despite the freedom and equality of individuals in the state of nature, Locke contends that this condition is inherently unstable. He identifies three primary issues: First, there is no established law universally agreed upon to serve as a standard for right and wrong and to resolve disputes. Second, there is no impartial judge with the authority to adjudicate disagreements based on such a law. Third, there is often a lack of power to enforce just decisions, rendering punishment potentially hazardous and destructive for those who attempt it. In the state of nature, individuals can readily enter a "state of war" with one another. An individual might resort to violence against another's life, health, liberty, or property for personal gain, thereby creating significant peril for all parties involved. To avert this state of war, individuals unite and transfer a portion of their power to form an authority. This authority, which evolves into the government, assists in resolving conflicts and preventing or terminating the state of war. Locke observes that people seldom remain in the state of nature for extended periods due to the risks associated with each person possessing the power to punish others' transgressions. Instead, they seek protection under established governmental laws to safeguard their property.

### **3.3. The Function of Government and Personal Property**

Locke views political action as a means to an end. He posits that government should establish conditions of freedom that enable individuals to pursue their own objectives. Consequently, Locke emphasizes the government's role in safeguarding individuals' lives, liberties, health, and possessions. The protection of private property is a crucial aspect of Locke's philosophy. He contends that diligent labor benefits society as a whole. Locke asserts that God bestows natural resources upon all of humanity, along with the capacity for reason. This enables humans to employ their intellect to transform natural resources into utilitarian items. An illustration of this concept is how humans cultivate land to produce crops, converting the natural resource of soil into something beneficial. Furthermore, when an individual utilizes their labor to transform natural resources into usable items, these creations become that person's property. For instance, hunters' catches are transformed from wild animals, a shared natural resource, into their personal property. Nevertheless, the most perishable tangible items are those essential for sustaining life. If an individual accumulates more than they can utilize before

spoilage occurs, the excess does not constitute their personal property. This is because the individual does not require such an abundance for sustenance or consumption, and by hoarding, they deprive others of their share. Locke maintains that individuals have the right to own what they create through their efforts. Moreover, people are unlikely to exert themselves for things they cannot use. As a result, disputes over personal property are not likely to arise frequently, and individuals are less inclined to infringe upon others' rights.

## **IV. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLATO AND LOCKE**

Locke and Plato exhibit notable contrasts, with several factors contributing to Locke's more persuasive arguments. Primarily, Locke elucidated the rationale behind individuals' preference for governance over autonomous existence. Additionally, Locke's political philosophy emphasizes the necessity of safeguarding each individual's life, health, liberty, and possessions. This approach facilitates the implementation of crucial modern societal elements, such as the protection of individual liberties and minority rights. Furthermore, Locke's stance on private property is more pragmatic than Plato's. The underlying rationale is that, beyond incentivizing labor, the protection of private property serves as a safeguard for justice and personal freedom. "Where there is no property there is no justice". The eminent economist Hayek asserts that our era has failed to recognize private property as the most vital guarantee of liberty. It is solely because the control of production means is distributed among numerous independent actors that we can determine our own actions as individuals. When a single entity, whether it be nominally 'society' as a whole or a dictator, controls all means of production, the entity wielding this control possesses absolute power over us. Thus, government protection of private property is essential.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Plato articulates his perspectives on the relationship between the city-state and its citizens. He delineates the responsibilities individuals should fulfill within the city-state and the means by which they can effectively execute these duties. Furthermore, Plato identifies three qualities in the human "soul" to determine the three attributes individuals should possess when performing specific societal roles. Locke, akin to Plato, examines the relationship between government and individuals. However, in contrast to Plato, Locke does not advocate for specific qualities in individuals to maintain social order. Instead, Locke posits that the rule of "philosopher-kings" is unreliable, individual rights take precedence over sovereignty, liberty is more pragmatic than patriotism, laws are more dependable than leaders, and it is patriotic for citizens to challenge the government. From a contemporary perspective, while Locke's ideas

may have certain limitations, his contributions to political philosophy are indisputably significant.

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