

Aristotle's critiques of plato's arguments



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Many of Aristotle's views have stemmed from those of Plato. However, in *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Aristotle criticizes four main arguments in Plato's *Republic*. They are: the way in which women and children should be held in common, the system of property, the organization of the government, and the concept of unity- the idea under which the previous three have stemmed. The problem in Plato's description of the ideal city is that it is too unified, and according to Aristotle, an excess of unity leads to a lack of self-sufficiency. In this idea lies the chief problem in Plato's attempt at creating an ideal republic. In analyzing Plato's text, *Republic*, it is evident that the ideal state consists of three distinct classes of people who collectively make the system work. At the bottom of the social classifications is the productive class, which includes people such as doctors, farmers, teachers, and craftsmen. They are considered the least likely to rule because of their tendency to act upon the appetitive part of the soul; they focus more on the physical (money, food, and sex). One level higher stands the auxiliaries (officers), who are guided by the spirited part of the soul. Lastly, at the top of the social ladder, the guardians, or philosopher kings rule because of their ability to reason. The question that arises from the structure of this "ideal" city- state is how can this republic be unified if the social classes are segregated (especially based on a "noble lie")? The manner in which Plato tries to balance out this inequality of citizens is setting regulations based on the sharing of property, women, and children. It is Plato's belief that "all these women are to belong in common to all men, that none are to live privately with any man, and that the children, too, are to be possessed in common, so that no parent will know his own offspring or any child his parent" (*Republic*, 457 c-d). By sharing women and children in

common, an inevitable unity is created which in turn would unify the city-state. Aristotle's view, on the other hand, states that if there is no limit to child rearing, there will be overpopulation, which leads to poverty. It is not clear whether or not they would be shared within each social class or within the entire republic, so that there is no clear-cut distinction between the classes. This blurry boundary is a subject that will later be discussed in Aristotle's arguments. In addition, (as stated earlier) Plato believes that only the same select few should rule over the rest of the republic; however, he simultaneously states that the best form of government is a monarchy. If a selective group is constantly ruling, is that called a monarchy, or is it closer to an oligarchy, (a form of government despised by Plato)? In any case, the "guardians" who are chosen to rule the city are expected to keep it happy, but they themselves (guardians) are deprived of happiness. Lastly, Plato strives to form an ideal city. In doing so, he aims at the best possible city. Noting that humans are not perfect, he openly states that his republic is unattainable. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that the best way to strive for perfection is to live according to the "golden mean". Instead of leaning toward a distant ideal, it is better to live between the two extremes of that characteristic. Aristotle has several other reasons why Plato's republic is not only unreachable but also unrealistic. Let us now examine more specific details in Aristotle's critique of Plato's arguments. First and foremost, a major argument in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is that happiness is achievable by anyone; it does not require any inherent characteristics. Therefore, Aristotle focuses on the common man in his texts, without segregating them based on certain traits, which creates unity in itself. However, too much unity is not desired, as in the case of Plato's ideal city-

state. Aristotle believes that it's impossible for citizens to share nothing, but if they share everything. He states, " For a household and a city- state must indeed be a unity up to one point, but not totally so" (Politics, 1264, 30-31). If everything is shared among the citizens, including women and children, there will be a point when the city- state becomes more like a household, and from there, the household becomes a human being. The unity as each transforms into the next increases, but the self-sufficiency decreases. Also, if everything is held in common, how can the social classes be visibly divided? There will be a general group of people that will claim to be what they are not. In addition, it is Aristotle's view that" what is held in common by the largest number of people receives the least care. For people give most attention to their own property, less to what is communal" (Politics, 1261, 30-35). The children and wives of Plato's so-called ideal republic will be treated with no care, since they do not have a single father (or husband in the latter case). Three other negative effects that Plato failed to realize would arise from the communal use of women and children are incest, poverty, and crime. It is indeed strange that Plato believes sexual intercourse inhibits happiness, but creates a community in which brothers and sisters, sons and mothers, fathers and daughters have intercourse (due to the lack of knowledge of their relatives). Secondly, such interaction is likely to produce a high birth rate, which in turn would produce more poverty. Aristotle also states that crimes " are bound to occur more frequently among those who do not know their relatives than among those who do" (Politics, 1261, 30-33). As a consequence of these unfortunate occurrences, the rate of crimes would also increase, especially if these citizens do not know who exactly are their family members. Another question

that arises from Plato's unrealistic proposal of communal wives and children is who will manage the households if all the wives are shared? In terms of the chosen few who participate in the government, Aristotle believes that it is "risky" to constantly select the same few people to govern the city-state. In a realistic situation, the people with what is said to be no merit, will not sit back and watch this occur; there will be continual conflict between the citizens over this matter. However, Plato cannot make any changes to this law because of his false theory of metals. Aristotle also refutes Plato's proposal that the legislators (philosopher kings) should be deprived of happiness while simultaneously making the entire city-state happy. "But if the guardians are not happy, who is? Surely not the [...] multitude of vulgar craftsmen" (Politics, 1264, 20-25). If the guardian does not have happiness within the self, he/she cannot provide happiness to others. In conclusion, Aristotle notes that it is not feasible to do every thing perfectly; it is good to strive for an ideal republic but not an impossible one. In addition to never creating or mentioning an actual constitution (that the unhappy guardians are expected to create), Plato describes not only an unrealistic, but also a senseless city-state. Aristotle's arguments against Plato's "ideal" city are sensible because they treat each person as an individuals and not as a group consisting of people without reason or common sense. In Aristotle's view, the philosophers are not the only people capable of thought since there are different types of knowledge. He develops more on the specific types of justice, knowledge, pleasure, virtue, and friendships that exist. Plato merely generalizes in every case.