

Plato and the just community:an argument against political idealism term paper sa...

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There are but few philosophers in the history of modern thought that is as important and as far-reaching as Plato. His Republic is justly regarded as the most comprehensive masterwork of his middle years, discussing some of the most basic questions of contemporary Western philosophy. Interestingly, it has set the agenda for many questions in ethical thought, from political philosophy, art, education, metaphysics, and other arenas for philosophical and ethical inquiry. While much of the work appears to be an argument for a perfectly just community, it may also be observed as the greatest argument ever presented against political idealism. The former assertion is an explicit one, contained within Plato's almost-wistful description of the ideal city. The latter argument, however, is one that is implicitly formed in the fact that the striving of men for such an ideal city – perfectly just and almost utopian – demands unreasonable standards and requirements for men.

The commonly-cited argument attributed to Plato in his Republic is essentially one that deals with the philosopher's conceptualization of utopia. Although it was not for another 2, 000 years that the word ' utopia' was invented by Sir Thomas More in the early sixteenth century, Plato's Republic is universally considered as the first great work of political utopianism. To be sure, Plato was not the first one to do this, but he was among the most prominent of the earliest philosophers to develop a utopian state model. In his application of his notion of a perfectly just society, Plato constructed an " ideal city" through a fictional dialogue between his mentor Socrates and the other citizens of Athens. In so doing, he gives the reader an outline of ' the ideal state". He proceeds into this discussion by analogizing between the city and the soul of an individual, consequently equating happiness with justice,

and declaring that both the city and the soul has three desires: for wisdom and truth, for honor, and for gains (368c-435c). Socrates begins with the needs for food, shelter, and clothing, describing the growth of a minimal community. This 'first city', as Socrates describes it, is essentially a plain and primitive paradise, one that has farmers, builders, and a variety of craftworkers. It is also derived from two important principles:

- Individual humans are not self-sufficient (369b)
- Individual humans are naturally predisposed to perform tasks (370a-b)

The formation of the city is owed to the former, while its structure and organization is due to the latter. The city, thus, must exist, and it must exist to satisfy human needs. The unity of such a society is clearly organic. It depends upon the different capacities of its individual members to satisfy the needs of life, and it would be dissolved if these differences were annulled. Six or seven men of the same trade or industry would not constitute even the seeds of this city, but would remain a multiplicity of individuals. The key, Plato points out, is in the division of labor. Given this discussion, where is justice to be found within this organic and natural city? Here, the discussion goes into the heart of the 'ideally just' city. Plato compares the first city with this 'ideally just' second city, and comes to the conclusion that, in the 'first city', the form which constitutes its unity – division of labor and harmony of trades – is organic, in the sense that it is primitive and is not consciously created for a particular purpose. On the other hand, the ideal city also acquires this identical form, but the process of creating it is an act informed by conscious purpose. A city is perfectly just, Plato argues, when it is so organized that each citizen is required to perform his or her own task – that

is, the social function for which he or she is best suited, by nature and education, to perform. Thusly, the three main social functions within the perfectly just city are provisioning the city, defending the city, and ruling the city (369bff., 374ff., 428dff.). Moreover, there are three natural kinds of persons in the city, persons of inborn high intelligence, persons of inborn high spirit, and those of inborn abilities for arts and trades (415, 435). The optimal social function of persons with high intelligence is to rule; those of high spirit to defend the city; and those of abilities in arts to provision it. From these premises, Plato crafts his argument stating that a city is just when it is so organized that those of high intelligence are tasked to rule it, those of high spirit are tasked to defend it, and those of artisan abilities are assigned to provision the city. His lengthy formulation and argumentation of the perfectly just city, thus, comes full circle.

The foregoing discussion is a staple in any study of Republic, as well as of Plato's overarching political philosophy. A less-popular approach to Republic's interpretation, however, goes against the mold that has been set by previous scholarship. This view, espoused by scholars such as Allan Bloom, asserts that Plato's Republic, rather than being an argument for the perfectly just society, appears more to be an argument for against political idealism. These two assertions are not contradictory and do not conflict with each other.

“ The striving for the perfectly just city puts unreasonable and despotic demands on ordinary men, and it abuses and misuses the best men. There is gentleness in Socrates' treatment of men for he knows what to expect of men. Political idealism is the most destructive of human passions. Similarly,

according to Strauss: ‘ Certain it is that the Republic supplies the most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition’”.

Plato built and rebuilt his conceptualization of the ideal – and utopian – society in the Republic, and then abandoned it. To his credit, he accepted its impossibility, but made it clear that it is a desirable end for contemporary societies. Nevertheless, he appears resigned to man’s incapacity to follow his prescribed systems. He insists that the ideal city cannot be built upon experience, but on a clean slate. In so doing, he turns the argument of the Republic into a twofold equation of desire and reality – a balancing act of sorts between the ideal and the real.

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