

# Shadows on the sun: the imperfections of platonic political theory



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## SHADOWS ON THE SUN: THE IMPERFECTIONS OF PLATONIC POLITICAL

THEORY by, Michael Jin December 5, 2004 Plato and Aristotle both reject the moral relativism of the sophists and address the question of how man can achieve absolute virtue. In *The Republic*, Plato constructs an existence proof, a kallipolis that produces philosopher-kings who grasp the eternal Good and rule benevolently. Aristotle discusses the kallipolis at length in *The Politics*, but much of his criticism concerns implementation. Still, Aristotle makes at least one worthy criticism of the theory, charging Plato with inappropriately misusing holism in assessing the happiness of the state. But Aristotle likewise fails to solve the underlying problem of ensuring complete happiness for all individuals; he ultimately constructs a political theory fundamentally similar to that of Plato. Plato postulates a tripartite soul with appetitive, spirited, and rational parts, corresponding to the producers, guardians, and rulers in the kallipolis (*The Republic* 435c-441c). Such a construction poses an apparent internal inconsistency. The guardian class, for instance, may represent only the spirited part, but individual guardians still possess all three soul parts. The inconsistency disappears if the kallipolis solely serves as a macrocosm of the soul, since a soul part only has that soul part. But a kallipolis qua polis needs to resolve the issue of how a spirited class can be composed of members that also possess desires and rationality. Plato defends his conception of the three classes by appealing to the idea of specialization of labor. He asks, “[D]oes one person do a better job if he practices many crafts or—since he’s one person himself—if he practices one?” (370b). He adopts this economic principle for his kallipolis, assigning each inhabitant that function he is most naturally suited for (423d). In other words, Plato asserts that the producers should accept toil and pursue <https://assignbuster.com/shadows-on-the-sun-the-imperfections-of-platonic-political-theory/>

physical desires without need of significant mental edification, while the most rational souls should live an ascetic life. Under this framework, it makes sense that Plato denies money, property, and even travel to the guardians (419). For guardians to achieve maximum bravery and glory as required by their spirited souls, they must specialize and avoid distractions. But implied in the idea of specialization of labor is that certain activities are practiced at the expense of others. If Plato selects and cultivates the soul part that will provide maximum benefit to the kallipolis, Adeimantus can argue that Plato practices relative suppression of the other two parts, if they exist. Guardians, for instance, must be weaned from the appetitive desires (419). Adeimantus worries that such inhibition causes unhappiness. After all, Plato discourages the guardians from deriving ordinary pleasures like ownership (416-17). Adeimantus essentially points out that human nature, as defined by Plato himself, contains innate needs for things. He questions Plato's implicit assumption that a proper environment, expressed by societal laws, can overcome such innate inclinations and change these desires towards better, higher objectives. If Plato were to label the kallipolis as theoretical and not subject to pragmatic concerns, the issue of how tripartite souls give rise to city segments behaving according to only one soul part would disappear. Guardians, under the influence of law, would let go of physical desires, a change that would allow them to achieve the greatest degree of happiness possible. But Plato expresses his own practical concerns when he states, "We'll say that it wouldn't be surprising if these people were happiest just as they are, but that in establishing our city, we aren't aiming to make any one group outstandingly happy but to make the whole city so, as far as possible" (420b). Plato concedes that guardians sacrifice at least a component of their

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happiness, since they are happiest in their original condition outside the kallipolis. He admits that the appetitive component of the soul cannot be excised without impacting happiness. But his reference to the happiness of the “ whole city” seems vague. Plato means either that some holistic happiness exists even if no city part is happy, or that the decreased happiness of the guardians increases the happiness of the other classes and thus elevates the happiness of the entire city. Here Aristotle makes his major theoretical assault by interpreting Plato to have wrongly postulated a holistic happiness. Aristotle responds, “ Again, though he denies to the Guardians even happiness, he maintains that it is the duty of a lawgiver to make the whole city happy. But it is impossible for the whole to be happy, unless the majority, if not actually all, or at any rate some, parts possess happiness. For happiness is a very different thing from evenness: two odd numbers added together make an even number, but two unhappy sections cannot add up to a happy state. And if the Guardians are not happy, who will be? Certainly not the skilled workers and the general run of the mechanics” (The Politics 1264b15). Aristotle here makes two points, which can be independently verified for fairness of treatment with regard to what Plato states. His first point contends that because happiness is an intrinsic quality, aggregating different souls of varying discontent cannot produce happiness. This point seems reasonable, but it only partly clashes with what Plato claims. Perhaps Aristotle was responding negatively to Plato for making the following analogy: Suppose, then, that someone came up to us while we were painting a statue and objected that, because we had painted the eyes (which are the most beautiful part) black rather than purple, we had not applied the most beautiful colors to the most beautiful parts of the statue. We’d think it

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reasonable to offer the following defense: “ You mustn’t expect us to paint the eyes so beautifully that they no longer appear to be eyes at all, and the same with the other parts. Rather you must look to see whether by dealing with each part appropriately, we are making the whole statue beautiful.” (420c-d) Aristotle has a valid criticism of Plato insofar as the latter means that happiness of a city can be closely compared to the beauty of a statue. To be beautiful, the statue must be appreciated by the eye of a beholder. Purple eyes would ruin the effect; holistically viewing the statue makes sense. But happiness of cities must be judged by different criteria than that applied at art galleries. Whereas beauty may be an external state to be seen, happiness is an internal state to be experienced. As Aristotle suggests, happiness cannot be compared to evenness, which can result from odd numbers. Rather, happiness of the city is equal to the sum of the happiness of its parts. Plato, however, proceeds to defend the idea that having one section of the populace too happy would ruin the happiness of other sections. Aristotle, perhaps addressing this further Platonic idea, makes the second point: if the guardians are not happy, then the producers cannot be happy either. His assertion appears tangential and unsupported. In any case, he misses the real Platonic argument: “ You mustn’t force us to give our guardians the kind of happiness that would make them something other than guardians...you surely see that they’ll destroy the city utterly, just as they alone have the opportunity to govern it well and make it happy” (420d-1a). Implicitly, Plato argues that guardians who regularly indulge in appetitive aims would not be guardians anymore, but among the common producers. He has a strict sense of what a guardian can permissibly do while remaining effective. Furthermore, Plato states that it is not so much a question of <https://assignbuster.com/shadows-on-the-sun-the-imperfections-of-platonic-political-theory/>

whether other classes will be happy if guardians are less than perfectly happy, as Aristotle charges, but of whether the city can exist at all if normal pleasures corrupt the guardians. Plato seems to envision an extremely slippery slope, with guardians as shepherds and normal people as sheep. If the shepherds were to lower their vigilance and enjoy materialistic pleasures, the sheep would certainly be taken by the wolves of anarchy. Aristotle does not directly refute Plato on whether such a complete deterioration would occur. But in supporting the kallipolis against objections on happiness, Plato takes the rather rigid position that even small deviances would destroy the city, and thus less than complete happiness should be tolerated, since a stable city is happier than total chaos. Thus, the result emerges that the happiest city cannot contain maximally happy individual. Though Aristotle does not treat Plato fairly, his critique points out individual souls cannot benefit from a mysterious holistic happiness. Without that condition, Plato must resort to his argument that he sacrifices some individual happiness for utilitarian reasons of preserving the state. Aristotle recognizes that unhappiness results from suppression of soul parts. He criticizes practices like sharing of women among guardians because he does object to pleasure to the same degree (1262a32). He does not see the Platonic slippery slope. But Aristotle, in the same breath, argues that a community of wives and children may be suitable for the agricultural class (1262a40). He argues that if producers have less affections, they will more likely to obey their rulers. Aristotle here uses the same logic as Plato: he sacrifices the lower forms of fulfillment for the interests of stability. In other words, he values lack of revolt more than individual happiness= 2E Aristotle ultimately rejects communal sharing of wives and children for inclusion in his <https://assignbuster.com/shadows-on-the-sun-the-imperfections-of-platonic-political-theory/>

political theory; he observes that ownership and pleasure strengthen interpersonal bonds that bind the state (1262b3). Unlike Plato, he believes the maximally stable and good state can be achieved with less extreme measures. In addition to accepting a role for appetitive desires for citizens, Aristotle provides more room for them to realize their highest faculty, reason= 2E He recognizes that the virtues of a good citizen and a good man are not the same, for the former possesses only correct opinions and obedience, while the latter has practical wisdom (1277b16). Aristotle emphasizes the role of rule, or employing practical wisdom, for human virtue and he extends the ability widely for certain constitutions, especially in the polity. Plato, on the other hand, sees rule as more of a necessity, not something fine (540b). As such, Aristotle pays more attention to human nature and sees cases when it may be beneficial to promote expression of higher faculties for more people. But it can be argued that Aristotle differs only quantitatively with his vision of man and the state, but not qualitatively. Aristotle does not recognize the full capacity to reason and rule in everyone, especially slaves (1255b4). Like Plato, Aristotle has an essentially elitist worldview, in that he believes most men should not rule (1277b33). First, most men need to toil for the prosperity and stability of the state and, as such, have no time to nurture higher virtues (1278a13). Second, if a “god among men” exists (1284a3), simply gifted men should not rule even if they could, because such rule would be less likely to produce a state that promotes living well (1280b29). For these two reasons, Aristotle would support a kingship over constitutions that distribute rule more widely among the more mediocre. But he still recognizes the essential compromise: “Is then the fifth alternative better, that one man, the most worthy, should rule?”

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But this is yet more oligarchical, because it leaves still larger numbers without honour” (1281a28). In other words, Aristotle has not discovered a state that allows everyone to express all natural capacities while still promoting maximum stability and optimum rule. Despite this failure, Aristotle does a more practical version of governance, including the polity as more realistic alternative to the kingship or aristocracy. Applying a standard of implementability, Aristotle’s polity falls short. However, political theory arises from the constraints of reality and the difficulties of human nature. By such a standard, Aristotle often succeeds, even triumphs.