

# Assess plato's justification of inequality in the polis essay sample



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The term polis refers to a self-governing city state, and Plato uses the term for the best form of social organisation. At the heart of Plato's Republic is the belief that philosophers should rule. These philosophers are at the top of a hierarchal order (Roberts and Sutch. 2004: 32). Plato's claim is that people have different aptitudes for different jobs; and therefore people should be divided into different classes in terms of what they can best contribute to the society (Plato. 987: 370a-b).

Plato explains how there should be philosopher rulers at the top, then the auxiliaries, which are the soldiers and who along with the philosophers make up the guardian class. Below the auxiliaries are the artisans, who are the producers to the society, and are by far the biggest class but have no political power. This is the fundamental cause for inequality in the polis.

In this essay it will be argued that there are many good reasons in Plato's argument for inequality, but by looking at each cause for inequality in turn, it will be shown that there are many problems with Plato's ideal polis which make justification for the inequality impossible. The claim that we have different natural aptitudes, which fit us for different jobs' (Plato. 1987: 370a-b) is crucial because it allows Plato to justify why there should be segregated classes of people where everyone does a job that they do best. Plato believes appropriately that there is a single job that men are best suited (Plato 1987: 370a-c).

Plato argues that there will always be trouble until either real philosophers gain political power or politicians become true philosophers (Plato. 1987: 499b). This is far too perfect in reality as people are rarely obviously best at

one thing. What would happen if there was an excess of one aptitude, and some of those excess citizens had a second skill that was better at a certain job than another persons' best aptitude for a particular job, which would get the job? It is offensive to suggest that it is only an elite few that are capable of knowing how to rule, and have the attributes to do so.

However, jobs that need expertise should be left to experts. Therefore potential rulers should be given a specialist education, but experts should be consulted on matters where specialist knowledge would help to make the best possible decision. David Lloyd-George famously employed this style of government. A fundamental problem with Plato's justification of inequality in the Polis is the fact that it is based on a 'noble lie' (Plato. 1987: 414b-415d). Plato plans on convincing the citizens of the polis to accept the hierarchal system as it was God who has chosen which class each citizen falls into by adding different metals into their souls.

To the rulers God added gold which brings wisdom and reason, to the auxiliaries God added silver which brings courage and spirit, and he added bronze or iron to the artisans which brought appetite and self-discipline. As it was God who put the metal in the soul, the hierarchal system is fluid across generations which prevent the ruling class being constituted from a permanent aristocracy, and the membership to a class is purely based on ability and suitability to a role (Plato. 1987: 415b-c). This foundation is the worst form of propaganda there could possibly be.

How is it right that to do the just thing you have to con everyone into thinking that God has placed a metal in their soul for the citizens to accept

the hierarchal system? Similarly, it raises the question of whether the citizens would accept the system or whether the auxiliaries would have to force them to accept it (Heineman. 2004: 390). The likelihood is the latter would be true and so it is no wonder why Plato's ideal polis has been seen as a totalitarian state.

This leads to Plato's claim that justice is 'minding your own business' (Plato. 1987: 433b, 434c). If everyone sticks to what they do best and minds their own business, the sum of all the whole body working together will be more than the sum of the parts it's constituted from (Roberts and Sutch. 2004: 33). This helps justify Plato's reason that inequality should exist because when everyone works together in their job, society benefits and becomes more prosperous. However, this doesn't explain why there should be a hierarchal system, as there could be a system where everyone does what they are best at without such a structure.

An important part of the hierarchal system is that the rulers are excluded from owning property or any gold or silver (Plato. 1987: 416e-417a). Also, the rulers wouldn't be allowed wives and birthing programmes would be set up to aid good breeding, but no child will know who their parents are (Plato. 1987: 457d). This stops those in power from corruption in the traditional sense, and also from nepotism (Plato. 1987: 417a-b, 464e). Here, the justification for having an elite class is sensible and there are obvious benefits. The eradication of corruption from politics can only be a good thing.

The main justification for why the philosophers should rule is the fact that it is only philosophers that can understand the Forms, especially the Form of

the Good (Plato. 1987: 505a). The Forms are the true, real world which takes fifty years of proper education to understand (Plato. 1987: 540a). The idea that people should rule purely based on a conceptual understanding of Plato's Forms is completely without foundation (Heinaman. 2004: 384). Even Plato struggles to explain what the Form of Good is, which doesn't bode well for the ability of others to understand it.

In conclusion, Plato has a good basic idea that people should stick what they are best at, and that those who rule should be educated to rule, as ruling is a skill like being a mechanic or doctor. However, there are many problems in the way Plato justifies the hierarchal inequality in the polis. The division of natural talents and the class divisions needed by the polis are without foundation. The way in which Plato admits that a 'noble lie' is needed to found the polis is the worst form of propaganda.

Importantly, there are no legal checks on the rulers which mean they are free to act as they please with no consequence, which is dangerous. This has led so the argument that the Republic would be a totalitarian state, which is the most unjust form of rule there is. Finally, the notion that it is only philosophers that can rule as they are the only ones capable of understanding how to rule is offensive, and is a weak basis for justifying the necessary inequality in the polis. Therefore Plato's justification for the polis is fundamentally flawed, but the Republic has many good ideas in it which could be implemented in a real state.