

Compare and
contrast aristotle and
platos political
theories philosophy
essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Plato, student of Socrates, and Aristotle, student of Plato, two of the most influential philosophers to have ever walked the earth, take two completely different approaches whilst talking about the formation of city states and epistemology itself. Plato primarily defined the nature of things in theoretical terms through metaphysics, in contrast to actual terms. Thus by looking to the 'higher forms' he aimed to explain the function of existing knowledge and understandings in the search for the 'absolute truth'. On the other hand Aristotle was more concerned with the actual physical features of nature, for the most part the Natural Sciences. The foremost divisions can be seen in the contrasting opinions between them primarily concerning eternal ideas, forms and causes and their relation to change, and the role of observing and explaining through the utilisation of the senses. Through their different approaches regarding the nature of man, both Plato and Aristotle sought to explain the relationship between the individual and society and furthermore the requirement of government to uphold order and stability. Plato's ideal city-state, which he refers to in his dialogue in the Republic as the 'kallipolis', and Aristotle's concept of the ideal relationship between the social order and government in an actual city state are contrasting not with regards to the end and purpose which they sought to fulfil, the telos, but instead over the proposed way in which they sought to meet that 'telos'. These differing objections can be explained by the abstract and theoretical ideologies of Plato contrasting and clashing with Aristotle's scientific and actual ideologies. To be able to further understand and contest the parameters of Plato's kallipolis, we must first seek to understand the bare foundations of Plato's theoretical ideology. At the origins of man's search for knowledge is the

'Theory of Forms' that states that every single material thing is in fact a representation of the real thing: the form. Most people are actually unable to see the forms, merely the representation of the form, the shadow. This is how Plato makes a distinction between the material world that us humans live in and the ideal world of eternal forms. His world of forms is not a different reality, but instead an outline by which material objects are created. This can be seen most prominently in Plato's Parable of the Cave from book VII of The Republic.

'Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light; here these people have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised walk; and you will see, if you look a low wall built along the walk, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.'(514A-B The Republic)

The prisoners watch the shadows projected on the wall and begin to attribute forms to these shadows, the shadows are as close to viewing reality that these ordinary men will get to viewing reality. He then goes on to say that a philosopher is much like a prisoner who freed from the cave comes to realise and understand that in fact the shadows on the cave wall are not constitutive of reality at all, for they are now able to recognize the true form of reality instead of the simple shadows that the prisoners see. From this

Plato explains that our senses cannot be trusted when observing and goes <https://assignbuster.com/compare-and-contrast-aristotle-and-platos-political-theories-philosophy-essay/>

on to conclude that the only way of realising absolute truth is through reason. This ability to recognise and understand the true forms of things is the central concept that establishes who holds the ruling powers in his kallipolis.

After having determined that it was in fact possible to form an ideal city state, Plato then looks to chose a government that would rule both justly and firmly. Firstly he discusses the reasons for which people would desire to form a state and keep within its rules. Plato states that it is not the desire of man to form a state, instead it is an inevitable need of man, for man is not self sufficient and therefore needs to live in an organised society, and that each person has a natural talent for a certain area of work and should seek to develop it further for the benefit of the state. Plato embodies the natural inequality of humanity, the origin of the state, in the division of labour.

" Well then, how will our state supply these needs? It will need a farmer, a builder, and a weaver, and also, I think, a shoemaker and one or two others to provide for our bodily needs. So that the minimum state would consist of four or five men." (369d The Republic)

He then goes on to say that the necessity to divide labour with accordance to specializations was prescribed by nature rather than decided by man.

Because Plato's state is based almost entirely on abstract ideas of both knowledge and nature, his approach to politics and government itself is more theoretical than actual. Therefore if a city seeks to uphold stability it must be ruled by those that are in possession of true knowledge, 'philosopher kings'.

Aristotle has objections to the very foundation of Plato's kallipolis. Due to his more grounded approach more actual than theoretical in nature, Aristotle argues that man does not seek to make a state simply because it is essential due to man not being self sufficient, instead it is because of an innate instinct. He goes on to argue that the state in fact existed in nature before it was discovered by man, and that a 'human being is by nature a political animal, and anyone who is without a city-state'(1253a Politics)is not a man. Even in mans most primitive form, man's nature forces him to realise his role within a given city, or polis. It is in fact man's self preservation instincts that directs to the organization of the masses, attempting to avoid conflict. Thus politics through a formal government was a means by which to resist chaos: it is not as Plato believes a thing of forms, rather it is an innate instinct of man.

Plato's kallipolis had within it ideas of a strong unified community and conformity. Aristotle states that Plato's assumption that the people can be as unified as he believes they must be in his kallipolis is entirely unrealistic. He rejects complete uniformity and conformity, describing the potential dangers in terms of the relationships between the state and the household, and the household and the individual, arguing that the more uniform a city state is, the more it will resemble a household and eventually even an individual. He goes on to conclude 'that a city-state is not a natural unity in the way some people say it is, and that what has been alleged to be the greatest good for the city-states destroys them.' (Politics 1261b). When man is responsible for his own crops and home within a community, the effort and pride placed into the upkeep of them is massive. However in a community where there are a

lot of shared goods very little effort is put in, because 'the thought that someone else is attending to it makes them neglect it the more' (Politics 1261b 30) and ultimately the city state is reliant upon a broad variety of people and services.

The differences between Plato and Aristotle's ways which they select their government's rulers can be attributed in part to Aristotle's outright rebuff of the kallipolis. Plato states that for a city to be ideal it has to be just and 'good', and that 'good' can only be realised if the city is led by people able to see the true forms of things and understand true knowledge. Ultimately philosophers must become kings, or kings must become philosophers, known as the guardian class. The rules selected by these guardian kings would be enforced by the Auxiliaries class, men of courage and intelligence, whilst the majority of people would make up the lower end of society, the producer class. His kallipolis is best described as an aristocracy, something Aristotle greatly disagrees with as he rejects the idea that those elite few with absolute truth will be the rulers of governments.

Aristotle instead seeks to create a perfect relationship between the government and social order, looking most prolifically at balance when determining where the power of government would lie, whether it be in the hands of few or the masses. First he looked at whether or not the proposed leaders would govern for their own self interests or for good of the polis, separating the candidates into the 'three parts of the city state: the very rich, the very poor; and, third, those in between these.' (Politics 295b)

Aristotle determined that the poor 'do not know how to rule, but only how to be ruled in the way slaves are ruled' (Politics 295b) and that the rich 'do not
<https://assignbuster.com/compare-and-contrast-aristotle-and-platos-political-theories-philosophy-essay/>

know how to be ruled in any way, but only know how to rule as masters rule.' (Politics 295b) Aristotle then goes on to determine that the middle class should form the ruling body because it reduces the chances of divisions because the middle do not 'desire other people's property as the poor do, nor do other people desire theirs... And because they are neither plotted against nor engage in plotting.' (Politics 295b).

Comparing the two proposed city states and governments it is clear that there is more to Aristotle's objections to the parable of the cave: it is not just regarding the matter of the 'elite few' being masters of the slaves that are the masses, but how the actual power is obtained. Plato believed that man could achieve absolute truth only by consideration of the eternal forms, not through observations and experiences. Aristotle instead shifted away from this view and instead used observations and experiences to pursue his goal of achieving knowledge. Famously Aristotle is thought of as the father of biology, his great encyclopaedia of knowledge and observations still influence the academics of today. Because the world is constantly changing, Aristotle determined that absolute knowledge is not possible, a stark contrast to Plato's views, believing that through observing the material things, one could understand its underlying form. I personally believe that Aristotle's way of viewing things is more effective simply because it is more realistic and down to earth, he is not always thinking of hypothetical 'forms' like Plato, instead he is observing their real embodiments and coming to conclusions.