

Property in the ideal state



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Since the birth of society thousands of years ago, thinkers have pondered one of the most basic, important questions with which mankind must grapple: How should society be organized? Plato was one of the first to write his response to that question. His work, the Republic, clearly outlines his plan for an ideal society. Aristotle, a pupil of Plato's, disagreed with much of what Plato offered in his work, and wrote a response, called Politics. At the beginning of book two, Aristotle states that the purpose of Politics was "to study which political community is best of all for people who are able to live as ideally as possible" (Politics, 1260. 27-28). In order to accomplish this, it was necessary to analyze the foremost work in the field, Plato's Republic. In his analysis, though, Aristotle's logic is imperfect and his criticism of Plato's structure for civilization is weak. A fundamental part of any society is the way in which citizens share things. Plato argues in the Republic that, among other possessions, "marriage, the having of wives, and the procreation of children must be governed as far as possible by the old proverb: Friends possess everything in common" (Republic, 423e-424a). Instead of presenting an argument against such a system, Aristotle dismisses it without discussion. Plato, however, had a valid reason for putting forth such an arrangement—he wanted to minimize the strife caused by differences in property ownership. Plato believed that by eliminating property entirely, one could also eliminate costly civil suits and other such property-based disagreements. Aristotle never illustrates a reason for disagreeing with such an organization of property distribution. Next Aristotle examines a basic premise of the ideal society and rejects Plato's stance. Plato asserts in the Republic: Is there any greater evil we can mention for a city than that which tears it apart and makes it many instead of one? Or any greater good than

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that which binds it together and makes it one? There isn't (Republic, 462a-b). It is this basic assertion that Aristotle attacks, claiming that "the more of a unity a city-state becomes, the less of a city-state it will be" (Politics, 1261a. 15-16). Aristotle believes that if a city-state becomes too cohesive, it no longer remains a city-state, but eventually becomes a household, and then finally an individual human being. What he fails to notice, though, is that Plato, in fact, wanted a city-state to resemble a single person as closely as possible. Plato does not delimit this well enough, as Aristotle indicates earlier in his argument, but still makes a valid point: if a city acts more like a single person, and shares pain, pleasure, and property, it will be able to survive more traumatic incidents. If, for instance, the city was attacked, if the citizens' reaction was uniform throughout the city, reaction would be easier to mobilize. Aristotle never acknowledges this good of unity. For the sake of argument, Aristotle assumes that Plato is correct in declaring that unity is best for a city-state. Instead, Aristotle attacks Plato's reason for desiring unity in his ideal city-state. In talking about this unity, Plato asks "then, is the best-governed city the one in which most people say 'mine' and 'not mine' about the same things in the same way" (Republic, 462c-d)? Plato states that it is. Aristotle counters this by saying that "people give most attention to their own property, less to what is communal, or only as much as falls to them to give" (Politics, 1261b. 30). There is a basic flaw in this logic, though. If each citizen truly felt that these communal objects or people was his own, he would treat each as his own property, not as communal property. Plato understands that this is a leap of faith of sorts, but relies on his citizens to understand the property sharing scheme. Aristotle assumes that the citizens will either not understand or not partake in this property

distribution schedule. There is another argument that Aristotle puts forth against Plato's ideal state. Murder, both voluntary and involuntary, is bad, even when committed against outsiders. Against family, though, it is especially impious. Aristotle claims that in a society where no one knows who their family is, murders and other crimes will be more prevalent ~~and~~ no one will be treated as family. What Plato argues, however, is that everyone will be treated as family, so murder will not exist in any form against other citizens of the ideal state. With shared parents and siblings, everyone would be treated as family, not no one, as Aristotle contends. Aristotle continues to argue his point against Plato, but is relying on a flawed assumption: that the citizens of the ideal city-state will not truly share all property. If everyone in the state actually shared the way that Plato envisioned, none of the problems that Aristotle raises would ever occur. Although it is true that Plato disposes of many common conventions, such as temperance with women and generosity, he believes those to be unnecessary in his ideal state. Aristotle tries valiantly in *Politics* to dispose of Plato's ideal state as delineated in the *Republic*. However, he never actually addresses problems with Plato's logic, arguing instead with Plato's assumptions about human nature. Even so, the question of organization of society remains a constant one in human existence, and the simple existence of this dialogue between great thinkers proves to be valuable in answering that question.