

Karl Popper's Criticism of Totalitarianism in Plato's *The Republic*

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Abstract

Plato considers the original or most primitive form of society is closest to the form or concept of a state. It is the best state and it is ruled by the most intelligent and sacred people. But Moral degradation causes political corruption and produces a series of vicious chain reactions. Plato's *The Republic* is the embodiment of his totalitarian thought. This reflects Plato's disappointment with the Athenian democracy. Because of his disappointment, he turned his attention to oligarchy and totalitarianism, trying to find a starting point for solidification and finding the unchangeable form of idea. In the context of modern society, Popper criticizes Plato's view of justice based on his ideology from the perspective of humanism, and he constructs his special view against historical determinism by criticizing Plato's claim. Generally speaking, Plato's political philosophy tends to be totalitarian, but his essentialist method is valuable in the field of sociological research, which can help us identify those things that are essentially the same in the changing historical course.

Key words: Plato; *The Republic*; Karl Popper; Totalitarianism

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1. THE BACKGROUND OF PLATO'S *THE REPUBLIC*

Plato was born in Athens in 427 BC, the second year of the death of the ancient Greek slave politician Pericles (495 B.C.-429 B.C.). Plato's family is a famous family in Athens. His childhood education includes aspects of Athens' art, politics and philosophy, which inspired him to learn politics of Athens. His father traced the genealogy to the ancient kings of Athens and continued to trace back to Poseidon. This affected his philosophy of religion. We know that Greek gods are heroes of idealized tribes with perfect personality traits. The relationship between God and man is like the relationship between Plato's idea or form and its imitations, or the relationship between *The Republic* and various national forms in real life.

Plato lived in an era of war and political turmoil. During his growing up, the collapse of the Greek tribal life caused a shackle in the city where he was born, and later led to the establishment of democracy. This kind of democracy defended itself and guarded against any attempt to repeat the rule of aristocracy and the oligarchy. In his youth, the democratic Athens was involved in a battle between life and death against the Sparta, the chief city of the Peloponnese, and Sparta kept the laws and customs of the ancient tribal aristocracy. The Peloponnesian War lasted for 18 years, and Plato's observations in the final stages of the war affected his attitudes towards the democratic politics of Athens. He saw that the democratic system could not produce a great leader, and he also saw how it treated Socrates, the greatest citizen of the Athens' city state. The decline of Athens and the death penalty of Socrates led to his desperation of the democratic system of Athens and the beginning of a new political dream.

The turmoil in Athens had created a sense of drifting helplessness. Plato believed that Heraclitus's theory is a reflection of such a world of eternal change and

immortality. Heraclitus believed that this orderly universe or Cosmos is the same for all things. It is neither created by God nor by human beings. Its past, present and future will always be composed by eternal fires, burning and extinguishing at a certain measure. But Heraclitus also explained that all things were produced in the Way which is like inevitable logos. Every real fire burns and extinguishes by having specific dimensions, which are special; but they all have certain scales, which are the product of rationality or logos.

Hesiod's *The Book of God* reflects the simple cosmology of the ancient Greeks. Although the Olympus gods are included in a single lineage, but within a moral order. There is still an impersonal force that controls the structures of the whole universe. This is one of the sources of the Heraclitus cosmology. Plato agreed with Heraclitus's law of the universe, and based on this, Plato put forward his own views about the decay of the universe. Heraclitus designed a circular rule that guided the path of rising and declining of energy. Karl Popper mentioned it in *the Open Society and its Enemies* that Plato also designed a similar circular rule to establish the starting point of his ideal state. In some of Plato's works, we can also find the formulation of the New Year, having the length which seems to be 36,000 ordinary years, and its improvement or generation period is roughly equivalent to the spring and summer seasons, and in contrast with the period of degeneration or decline, which is equivalent to autumn and winter. According to Plato's *The Republic*, the golden age is the Kronos era, and it is an era in which Kronos himself ruled the world. While in the Zeus era, the gods abandoned the world and allowed the world to operate independently. Therefore, that era was a time of decline. However, after the complete decline to the lowest point, God will once again become the helm of the universe, and things will begin to improve.

Plato believed that the principle of decay violated moral principles. Decline led to moral degradation. Moral degradation caused political corruption and produced a series of vicious chain reactions. Although the law of decay went through the historical destiny of mankind, he believed that this kind of decay could be curbed through efforts. His goal was to suggest that the Republic is an ideal form of state which had not been contaminated by the evil factors, and it would never change. It would maintain its original and perfect form.

Plato believed that the form or idea of this kind of state existed in the distant past and appeared in the golden age of history. If the passage of time means decay, then the more we go back, the more we will find the perfect starting point. At this point, Plato has similarities with Parmenides. Parmenides is more convinced of logical reasoning than what the naked eye sees. Therefore, he believes that change and diversity are illusions. There is only a single, eternal, and unchanging thing. It is called

"the One". We can form concepts and say about things that exist and we can only regard the process of change as an illusion. "The One" consists of indivisible things, and it must remain unmovable. From this, we can see that the phenomenon can produce opinions, which is the basis of truth. Sensual activities must be replaced by rational activities. This has profoundly affected Plato's division of the visible world of truth and the visible world of opinion, as well as his doctrine of the ideal state. Since all states that exist as phenomena can be regarded as illusions and untrue opinions, then there must be an absolute truth behind any opinion, and that is the foundation of an ideal state which remains unchangeable. This perfect state is like the ancestors of the later ones, and the ones to come are just the descendants of this ideal state. Plato firmly believed that an ideal state was not an illusion, not a dream, not a concept in our hearts, because it remained consistent. It is more real than a decaying society which is in a flux.

According to *The Republic*, the original or most primitive form of society is also closest to the form or concept of the state or the best state. It is the monarch ruled by the most intelligent and sacred people. Plato believed that Sparta, one of the ancient Greek city states, had many similarities to the Republic. Sparta was known for its strict discipline, authoritarian autocracy and militarism. It advocated oligarchy. In the Peloponnesian War, Sparta and his allies defeated the Athens' Army and occupied the whole Greece. In the book *Open Society and its Enemies*, Karl Popper distinguishes the open society and the closed society. Any mysterious, tribal or collectivist society can be called closed society, by contrast, any society in which everyone who can make any personal decisions becomes an open one (Popper, 1945). Popper believes that any closed society comes from a barbaric, primitive tribal form of society, and the representative of a closed society is like what Plato has described in *The Republic*, an ideal city state based on the collectivist concept of justice.

Plato talks about the best, most primitive city state is a nomadic mountain tribe commanded by a patriarch. As the rule of the elders who inherited their authority from their father or mother; all the rest followed him like a flock of birds, thus forming the most justified form of the patriarchal authority and all monarchies. The single nomadic tribe was ruled by the king. These nomads, in the name of Dorian, are said to have settled in the city states of the Peloponnesians, especially Sparta. Plato became the propagator of the "Spartan myth", and Sparta's polity and lifestyle became the supreme example of eternal existence. It has a far-reaching influence. This reflects Plato's disappointment with the Athenian democracy. Because of his disappointment, he turned his attention to oligarchy and totalitarianism, trying to find a starting point for solidification and finding the unchangeable form of idea.

2. THE MAIN FRAMEWORK OF PLATO'S *THE REPUBLIC*

In *The Republic*, Plato suggests a strict hierarchy. He believes that different levels are like different parts of a person's soul. Different types of countries and their unique virtues and evils and different types of people have similar virtues and evils. Each part should be assigned to its own functions, cooperate with each other, and have the appropriate relationship to put the state and individuals at right tracks. The state is a giant, and justice in virtue is the best sign. The goal of building up this kind of state is not for the unique happiness of a certain class, but for the greatest happiness of all citizens, because we believe that it is most likely to find justice in such city state. The primary task is to cast a model of a happy state, rather than to fragment a state that is happy for a few people.

The state also originated from people's economic needs. After cutting off the natural bounds that are incompetent, people can not be self-sufficient and need to make exchanges with others to meet their various needs. It is necessary to rely on various skills to supply various needs, so division of labor is required. In *The Republic*, Plato proposed that each of us recruits a variety of people for all kinds of needs. Because we need a lot of things, we have gathered many people to live together as partners and assistants. This is the Republic. In the residential area, we call it a city state. A person can give something to other people, or take something from someone else. Everyone feels that it is good for him to be in it (Popper, 1957).

But it is not enough to satisfy the appetite for survival only. It should be a life higher than animals. But everyone will be affected by their own desire. If it expands indefinitely, people will become greedy and bloated desires will be catastrophic for the whole society. People have to wage a war of aggression, and the battle between them will be constant and this will disturb the peaceful state of being. In order to resist foreign enemies, the state must establish an army, so that there are three levels of division in the crowd: farmers with various kinds of skills, and craftsmen and merchants, in contrast with those defenders, who will become the rulers of the state and they will become the elites of the whole society. The three levels of the state are an extension of the three parts of the soul. The laborers represent the lowest part of the soul or desire, they are the people at the lowest social class. Those defenders embody the spiritual elements of the soul, and they are the supreme rulers representing reason of mind. Though the divisions sound reasonable, people are not willing to be satisfied with staying at their own social level. Once they have the opportunity to climb up their social ladder, they will contrive to win the battle.

Only through extensive training, people can be placed in their respective ranks and finally settle in the status quo, and the whole society can be as stable as one imagines. Plato are convinced that we must persuade the guards and

their supporters to do their own part by fulfilling their own jobs. Other people will conduct their own behaviors in the same manner. In this way, the whole state will develop in a very harmonious way, and all classes will be guaranteed with everlasting happiness.

Plato believes that a state is like a giant. Justice is in the full play with a virtuous person and it is also a sign of a good society. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that the best approach to understand what is right is to analyze the nature of the state. He believes that we should explore from what does justice mean in a state, and then we can find its specific and micro-correspondence among individuals (Plato, 2002). In Popper's view, Plato's thinking is like a holistic approach. Holism is a method of studying things that cannot be considered as separate parts and must be studied comprehensively. Karl Popper believes that Plato's historical determinism cannot be approached from certain individual aspects of social life, but from the overall society. He opposes the idea of holism and believes that holism has shortcomings, because the whole thing contains infinite aspects, and there are sophisticated connections among various aspects, therefore holism can never become a scientific research approach in general (Popper, 1966).

3. KARL POPPER'S CRITICISM OF *TOTALITARIANISM IN THE REPUBLIC*

According to Popper's analysis, Plato's theory of idea has at least three different functions in his philosophy. First, it is one of the most important methodological designs, because it makes pure scientific knowledge possible, and even makes it possible to apply knowledge to the changing world. For the changing world, we can't get any knowledge directly, but only get opinions. Therefore, it is possible to explore various problems in the changing society and establish political science. Secondly, it provides clues to the theories about change and decline, especially for the study of history.

Plato's Republic is seen as a continuation of a certain form or concept which never declines. He tries to reproduce such a form or concept to describing a state, or a society by following ancient traditions. The social system of Sparta is the oldest social form that can be found, in which he recognizes the persistence of even older tribal societies.

But he needs a principle to distinguish the good, primitive or ancient features of the existing system from their degenerative symptoms. He discovers this principle in the law of political revolution. According to this principle, disputes within the ruling class are the root of social change. Therefore, rebuilding the best state should be as thorough as possible. Eliminating all disputes and recessions is a necessity. That is to say, we should focus on the conditions necessary to maintain the unbreakable

unity of the masters, guaranteed by their ties of blood, economic restraints and social status.

Karl Popper points out that Plato's totalitarianism is reflected in his attempt to counteract all social changes with strict rules binding different social classes. To stop this change, it is necessary to let the various classes do their best, that is, as long as the ruler rules, the workers work, the slaves are slaves, the state will be in a justifiable way. Totalitarianism is a wonderful excuse to control all people. Since the democratic system in the time Plato lived was imperfect, there was no real freedom. It was only mass democracy. The drawbacks Plato saw from such state led him to be an extremist. Like his hatred of ever-changing society, he also hates freedom of individuals. Like what Karl Popper has said, in the field of political science, freedom of individuals in Plato's eyes seem to be the devil itself.

To a certain extent, Popper's critique of Plato's social and political theory are correct in some way. As far as the results of the arguments on justice in *the Republic* are concerned, justice in a city state is hardly the same as that for an individual in a democratic society. Popper's criticism of Plato's thoughts with totalitarian tendencies is reasonable. According to the historical determinism, the ideal city state can only ensure that it is not affected by the law of historical decay, and that the distinction and stability of this class should be based on the obedience of individuals. The most important thing is that each class can only serve the needs of the entire state. Personal interests are subject to collective interests, which are manifestations of collectivism. Plato's thought is characterized by the pursuit of goodness in the whole. The purpose of all social classes remains the same, that is, the pursuit of the overall happiness of the city state. Both the ruling class and the servants are aimed at reaching this ultimate goal. The overall happiness is also the guarantee of the happiness of

all classes. Therefore, Plato's theory can be regarded as totalitarianism based on the pursuit of holistic goodness. Karl Popper points out that the basic principles in Plato's thought are characterized by metaphysical dualism. In the field of logic, this dualism presents the opposition between universality and particularity, and in the field of mathematical speculation, it presents the opposition between one and many. In the field of epistemology, it is the opposition between rational knowledge based on pure thought and opinions based on concrete experiences. In the field of ontology, it is the opposition between origin, and falsehood or phenomenon, between pure existence and change. In the field of cosmology, it is the opposition between the producer and the one who is being produced and must vanish. In the field of political science, it is the opposition between collectivism and the interests of different individuals. Generally speaking, Plato's political philosophy tends to be totalitarian, but his essentialist method is valuable in the field of sociological research, which can help us identify those things that are essentially the same in the changing historical course.

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