

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT: PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

**Sumit Mondal**

Dept. of Political science  
Postgraduate from Rabindra Bharati University  
Emerald Bower Campus, 56A, West Bengal, India  
Email: sumitmondal03061986@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Plato and Aristotle occupy an exalted position in the history of Western thought. Their works and ideas are classics that have molded philosophical and political traditions, and they provide valuable perspective for reflecting on fundamental Questions. Their ideas continue to shape the way we think and understand the world. Their contribution had a profound impact on various fields, including philosophy, politics, and ethics. There are some difference and similarities in their thought. Plato and Aristotle held contrasting views on various philosophical concepts. While Plato believed in the existence of an Ideal realm of forms, Aristotle focuses on empirical observation and study of the physical world. Plato's metaphysical approach emphasized the ultimate reality of abstract forms, while Aristotle's emphasis was on the tangible world and the pursuit of knowledge through observation and analysis. Plato advocating for a utopian ideal state led by philosopher king and Aristotle's ideal state was moderate practical and moderate form of governance. Plato viewed justice as an internal harmony of the soul, where reason governs the appetites and as a societal structure where each class fulfills its designated role. Aristotle, on the other hand, defined justice as treating equals equally and unequal's unequally, emphasizing proportionality and fairness in distributing honors and resource. Plato believed in communism of wives and property within ruling class to foster unity and prevent corruption. But Aristotle believed that family and private property are natural and it is very important for well functioning society. Plato emphasized education as a means to achieve individual and social justice with a focus on developing individuals to their fullest potential. Aristotle believed that education was crucial for cultivating moral character and achieving happiness through a well-rounded life based on practical skill.

**Keywords:** Utopian, Ideal state, justice, philosopher king, Form of government, communism of wives and property.

Western political thought begins with the foundational works of Plato and Aristotle, two ancient Greek philosophers whose ideas have profoundly shaped the discipline. Plato, often regarded as the first systematic political theorist, introduced a vision of ideal state governed by philosopher king, emphasizing justice, virtue, and harmonious society. He explored the nature of Justice, role of education, and political order. In contrast Aristotle a stu-

dent of Plato adopted a more empirical and practical approach, focusing on the analysis of existing political system and condition necessary for stability and good Governance.

**Comparison in aspect of Approaches:** Plato's aspect is abstract, utopian, and idealistic because he wanted to build a perfect harmonious society that does not exist in reality and it is based on ideas rather than practical consideration. Plato describe an ideal state where justice, harmony and common good prevail and this society ruled by philosopher king who is wise, virtuous, and who have no private property or personal interests and govern solely for the interest of all. Plato's proposal and based on philosophical ideas of justice, wisdom and virtue. He advocated strict education to shape citizen character. This idea are idealistic because he assume that people and institution can be perfect through reason and education and that conflict can be overcome by aligning society with abstract principle of good. So it is imagines that perfect society governed by reason and justice rather than reflecting the complexities and imperfection of real life politics. A final observation may be made about Plato's method. He is first utopian of the western world. He is interested not in describing the state as it is or has been, but in the discovery of the ideal.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle criticized his mentor on the ground that he failed to defect the natural weakness of man and created utopia in the name of his ideal state.<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle's political thought is called realistic, and realistic because it is based on the analysis of existing political system and the practical realities of human society rather than being based on idealistic and abstract principal. He wanted to analysis the city-state condition and governance that led to stability and good governance. He observed various form of government (like democracy, oligarchy, monarchy) and gave practical solution for real world political problems. He wanted the well being of its citizen and balancing the different interests among the classes within society.

Aristotle's philosophy is realistic because it is based on observation and experience and it focus on practical outcomes and best possible governance under real-world conditions

Aristotle sought to evolve empirical method of studying politics and to combine it with comparative method. He was particularly perturbed by the prevailing instability of government in his contemporary Greek city-state. So he sought to develop a model constitution that would be ensure political stability.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Comparison in aspect on ideal state:**

Plato's ideal state was based on the concept of philosopher-king rule over a society structured into distinct classes. The structure of Plato's ideal state are—philosopher king (Rulers). At the top is philosopher king, who governed based on wisdom and forms of the good. These rulers are committed to justice and common good not to personal ambitions or self interest.

Their decisions are motivated by what is best for society as a whole. They live simply and without private property to prevent corruption. second class is Auxiliaries: — The laborers, farmer who provide good and service.

It would have already become to reader that the Platonic states consists of three district classes, distinguished from each other not by qualification of birth and wealth, but their innate capacities and specific functions they discharge. They are (i) producing class comparable to the Vaishay class (ii) the warrior class corresponding to the Khattriya class and (iii) the ruling class corresponding to the Brahman class in Ancient India.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand Aristotle's ideal state was based on a mixed form of government and emphasis on middle class which balanced the interest of rich and poor. The structure of state are class composition-Aristotle Identified three classes-the wealthy (prone to arrogance), the poor (prone to crime), and the middle class. He was supporter of middle-class rule as the "golden mean" because it prevent extremism and fostered stability. According to his opinion mix government blending democratic and oligarchic element which emphasis on common interest is best form of government? Worst form of government are Tyranny (selfish-monarchy), oligarchy (rule by rich), and democracy.

He observes that foster the division of society into the rich and the poor, greater chance of revolution. The poor would never tolerate the luxurious ways of living of the rich. However, if a large and strong middle probability of revolution would be minimized.<sup>5</sup>

#### **IN view form Role of individual in society:**

According to Plato state comes first; and believes in limited individual freedom. For him the state is not just a collection of individuals but a necessary condition for city state and fulfillment of human potential. He believes that individuals are interdependent and cannot satisfy all their need alone. Therefore, the state arises form need of people to cooperate, leading to the division of labor and social harmony. For Plato, the well-being of the whole community is more important than the happiness of any single individual and the interest of individuals are best served by a well-ordered state. He emphasis duties and laws over individual rights, believing that individual must serve their role for the common good and thus Justice state achieved by everyone's contribution to state. Plato's state therefore comes first and individualism is subordinate to the needs and order of the community.

On the other hand According to Aristotle state serves individuals and light upon on individual freedom. Aristotle argues that "man is by nature a political animal" meaning that human are social In born and can't achieve their full potential outside of the state. State is highest form of human association which is able to live a good and fulfilling life. Thus state acts as service provider like virtue, participation in community and realize their purpose. In this since state serves the Individuals by creating environment in which individual can achieve excellence and self-actualization.

### **Comparison in view form Education:**

Plato wanted education for citizen so that they full fill their role to society. So he mainly focuses on philosophical and moral education. Plato suggested idea of state controlled education to build an ideal state depending on soul or virtues of people. Plato has provided equal education for men and women.

Plato's educational system is found on the principle of compulsory and full equality of opportunity for all citizens, with no discrimination on ground of birth or gender. So all newly born children, boys and girls, would be separate from their parents and placed in the custody of state.<sup>6</sup>

Plato makes another innovation upon the current Athenian Practice; he is for giving the same type of education to both boys and girls; in his system women play the same role in the state as men do.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand Aristotle emphasis development of both intellectual, moral, virtue and physical aspect so that well-rounded individuals capable of contributing to society and achieving eudemonia (Human flourishing). He emphasis more on physical education rather than Plato for developing a healthy body and mind. He also emphasis on developing reasoning skill and acquiring knowledge through various disciplines, including mathematics, science. Aristotle believes that education should not be limited to childhood and adolescence. He wanted that individuals continue to grow acquire new knowledge from experience. Educational philosophy of Plato was idealistic but Aristotle's education was practical based because he emphasized to real -world situations. Along with theoretical knowledge, practical application also very important so that individuals can truly master a subject and make influential contribution to society. Aristotle's idea included district approaches to education for men and women, rooted in his views on their natural roles and capabilities. Aristotle believes men were naturally more rational and suited for leadership. Education for men, practically those who would be citizens should cultivate reason, virtue and practical wisdom. Aristotle believed women's role was in household and look after children so education should be focus on domestic skill and moral character and child rearing.

### **Comparison on Forms and Government:**

Plato advocated for monarchy ruled by philosopher king. There are two types of government in mind of Plato but monarchy (philosopher king) is best. He refuses a democratic government because it was a majority of Jurors who sentenced the wisest man Socrates in all Athens to death totally trumped up charges. According to Plato people who are in themselves ruled by reason; therefore, the state is one ruled according to wisest principles. Aristocracy-which means ruled by philosopher king is the best and tyranny. For Plato, even military dictatorship or government by rich elite would be better than this rule of the rabble. As for "Aristocracy" in Plato's language this meant rule by the best and most just sort of people.

The conclusion that the government in ideal state should be entrusted to person possessing supreme wisdom naturally follows the principle stated above. Plato advocate this conception of government by the elite, by a few highly trained expert, in the following famous and oft-quoted passage: 'until philosophers are king of kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one and those commoner nature who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from evil, no-nor the human race, as I believe,-and then only will this our state have a possibility of life and behold the light of day.'<sup>8</sup>

So, Plato categorizes Five types of Government in the order of best to worth. These are- 1) Aristocracy (Rule by philosopher king), 2) Democracy (quality and virtues of leader in Aristocracy is inferior called Democracy) 3) oligarchy (wealthy people control the power) 4) Democracy (Rule by Lower class people) 5) Tyranny (Lawless Government by tyrant). Among this Aristocracy as monarchy as told by philosopher king is best form of government.

On the other hand Aristotle also recognized different form of government but believe in best government form was a mixed government (Monarchy, aristocracy and democracy). Aristotle studied 158 constitutions, and considers 6 type of constitution or government there are monarchy, Tyranny, Aristocracy, oligarchy, polity and democracy. According to Aristotle polity is the best practicable form of government. Polity avoids the two extremes. The extremes of richness and extreme of poverty, the extreme of arrogance and ignorance and represent the golden mean between oligarchy and democracy. where Plato supporter for monarchy government but Aristotle was against monarchy.

Monarchy was good under normal condition. But in the absence of any effective control over the absolute power of monarch, it degenerated into tyranny was followed by a rebellion by the chosen few who overthrow it and set up aristocracy in its place.<sup>9</sup>

According to Aristotle Plato's philosopher-king or a tyrant may be able to discipline the citizens without help of Law. A king should as organ and instrument and guardian of Law. Aristotle argues that it is more easy to corrupt for a king because he is liable to be swayed by greed and lust for power. But Law is not easily corruptible because it is reason unaffected by desire and passion. So, he wanted a constitutional government which is polity.

Aristotle goes on to distinguish between five different types of monarchy into the details of which it is not necessary to enter. Only this much may be said that in general Aristotle was no eulogist of monarchy; he argued different arguments against each of the five forms. While discussing absolute monarchy Aristotle is led to raise the problem of despotic rule versus rule of Law. There are arguments on either side. Personal rule has the merit of initiatives; the rule of law has that of impartiality. The rule of law being of major importance, Aristotle concludes against absolute monarchy

and in favor of constitutional or limited monarchy.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Comparison on theory of Justice:**

Plato has divided the human soul into three virtues; knowledge, courage, and appetite. As for Plato 'the state is individual writ large' and the same case also applied to the border conceptions of Justice on the level of a city state. Hence, essential components of Plato's Justice Theory are functional specialization, non-interference, and following the norm of come virtue-one class –one duty'.

On the other hand Aristotle's theory of Justice is known as the 'Theory of proportionate Justice'. In Aristotle's view, Justice is concerned with the regulation of human relations. He identified is three type of Justice—

1. Distributive Justice 2. Retributive Justice (also called corrective, certificatory or remedial) and 3. communicative Justice. In distributive Justice means allocation of honor and wealth According to merit, Retributive Justice means punishment and payment of damages for full restoration of loss and communicative Justice means full equivalence of goods and service to be transacted. Aristotle said "It is Justice to treats equals, emerald. It is equally unjust to treat unequal, equally. 'His theory of Justice is linked to the theory of equality. According to Aristotle, Justice Demands that persons who are equal and posses equal merit ought to be treated equally. As example- treating master and slaves as equals would be unjust.

#### **On communism of wives and property:**

Plato understood that arrogance and ignorance as the key factor responsible for corruption. He argued that arrogance comes from property and ignorance from family, hence, he advised the communism of property and wives in his book 'The Republic: concerning Justice'. Communism applies to 'guardian class's which includes both the ruling class and the auxiliary class. He prohibited the use of private property and provided that the state will decide on the wives and the institution of marriage will be only for producing good offspring and nothing more than that.

In this sense, they will follow the principle of communism of wives. They will not be tempted to amass gold or silver or other forms of wealth for anybody, nor for themselves. The twin principle of communism of property and communism of wives will strengthen the character of guardian class so profoundly that they will become impervious to all sorts of temptation and corruption.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand Aristotle support for private property because for hones hold and life and it is necessary for existence and proper functioning of other activities. No man can live well without property.

He needs to food to satisfy hunger, a house to live in, and garment to protect himself against the rigors of climate.....private property must there for exist; it cannot be abolished.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle rejected the idea of communism of wife and children. Aristotle argues that if it be conceded that the state should have the greatest possible unity, the community of wives and children (and of property) is not the

way to realize it. Instead of promoting it, the recommended means will retard it. If community of wives has any meaning, it signifies that every man's wife will be the wives of every other man. This will be in practice breed discord and disharmony and give rise to jealousy.<sup>13</sup>

Though there is well-known differences, Plato and Aristotle share several similarities in their political thought also. In pursuit of virtue and knowledge- both philosophers believe that aim of political life is cultivation of virtue and knowledge. They admit that a well ordered society should promote moral and intellectual development of its citizens. In the view from role of state-they believe that humans are inherently social and political beings and the state exist to full fill human needs and enable individuals to reach their highest potential. Both Plato and Aristotle emphasized the importance of a harmonious and balanced society. They wanted that political systems which would achieve stability, justice, and common good. Both were critical of pure democracy as a form of government because it prone to instability and the rule of ignorant majority. They favored system where the most virtuous or capable individuals had significant influence. Both thinks are central point to the development of western political theory.

#### **Endnotes**

1. Jyoti Prasad Suda: History of political thought vol. I Ancient and Medieval: p. 47
2. O. P. GAUBA: WESTERN political thought P. 45
3. O. P. GAUBA: WESTERN political thought P. 69-70
4. [JOYTI PRASAD SUDA: HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT VOL.I ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL: P.61]
5. O.P.GAUBA : WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT: P.72
6. O.P.GAUBA: WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT : P.50
7. JYOTI PRASAD SUDA: HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT VOL . 1, P.71
8. 1 JYOTI PRASAD SUDA: HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT, VOL. 1, ANCIENTAND MEDIEVAL : P.75.
9. [O.P. GAUBA WESTURN POLITICAL THOUGHT : P.70.
10. [JOYTI PRASAD SUDA: HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT VOL 1, ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL: P.156
11. [O.P. GAUBA: WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT (4<sup>TH</sup> EDITION): P. 51
12. [JOYTI PRASAD SUDA: HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT VOL. 1, ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL: P. 136.
13. [Ibid. P.140]

#### **Bibliography**

- Gauba, O. P. western political thought (4<sup>th</sup> edition), national paper backs -4230/1, Ansari road, fourth edition: june 2019.

- Som, Subhas Chandra, pashchatya rastrachintar itihas (a history of western political thought), calcutta book house (private) limited 1/1, Bankim Chaterjee street, kolkata-700073 4<sup>th</sup> edition: june, 2009
- Dash, P. G. pashchatya rastra chinta bharatiya rastradarshan (western political thought and Indian political thought), new central book agency (pvt.) Limited 8/1 chintamoni lane, kolkata - 7000009.
- Suda, Jyoti Prasad, history of political thought, vol. 1, ancient and medieval jai Prakash nath & co. Educational & law publishers, Meerut. Fifth edition, 1965.
- Mukherjee, Subrata & Ramaswamy, Sushila. A History of Political Thought, PHI Learning Private Limited Delhi- 110092, 2018.

---