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## Plato's Political Philosophy (abstract)

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PLATO'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY (ABSTRACT)

In recent years Plato's political views have been discussed often, perhaps too often. I do not propose to take up the question again in order to defend Plato or to accuse him. My interest lies in the quaestio facti rather than in the quaestio iuris, because I think much has still to be done to determine what opinions Plato actually held. This does not mean, of course, that I believe one could interpret the facts, shying away from the political issues that are involved, or the claims and counterclaims that have been made recently.

As the very title of my paper implies, I take it that any interpretation of Plato's political views must presuppose the fact that he has one consistent theory of politics, not two theories. In other words, the Republic, the Politicus, and the Laws form a unity, they are **complementary rather than contradictory**. Moreover, all these dialogues are theoretical. None of them provides a blueprint for political action. None of the dialogues tells what could or should be done at any time in particular situations. How much or how little of the theory can or will be realized, Plato does not profess to prophesy. He does, however, maintain that the pattern he outlines, be it in the Republic or the Laws, can never be realized completely.

What is the use of such reflections on politics that are frankly normative rather than practical? Without them man would be unable to recognize value. In experience a multitude of phenomena is presented, there is a natural dissension of opinion, and one cannot point to one fact that would settle the argument; in terms of Plato, there is no eidolon to which one can point. Political theory establishes the standard by which we must judge and thus allows us to act according to

an aim instead of wandering about aimlessly. Needless to add that such a standard cannot be gained by a scrutiny of historical data, for it is itself needed in the appreciation of historical facts.

Now in the Republic the theory in question is outlined. It is not so much the details that count and that are novel. Not even the philosopher king is the most striking innovation, perhaps not the totalitarian aspect of the solution either. The typically Platonic answer to the problem at issue is that there is no self-sufficiency of the political, that the political and the moral life are identical.

The Republic has considered the plan of action in an airtight compartment as it were. Laws are made and accepted. They seem an adequate expression of moral insight to the human situation. The difficulties involved in legislation itself, which in the Republic as well as in the Laws is the chief means of politics, have not been taken into account. (I do not believe that in the Republic Plato thinks of an imperium legibus solutum.) The needed clarification of the concept of law is provided by the Politicus.

This problem having been solved, Plato turns to another question. The Republic thinks of man as naturally willing to follow reason, as having no past or present associations and interests to which he clings. Such an obvious distortion of the situation has to be corrected, and it is corrected in the Laws. In the same way Plato constructs his theory of physical nature once from the point of view of reason, and once from the point of view of necessity. Politics as ethics is now considered under the presupposition that man is refractory to the moral law, and an attempt is made to determine how equality and difference, freedom and obedience can be incorporated into life, granted that man by nature is ineradicably selfish.

The working out of Plato's political theory took many years. That in the course of time he saw details differently, or expressed them in a mood or in a manner different from the one that might have been his in earlier years, it would be unhistorical to deny. The main content of his view remained unchanged.

In particular it cannot be said that in later years Plato put greater emphasis on religion. I do not believe that he altered his basic opinion concerning obedience to the law where it is in conflict with the conviction of the individual. And instead of a betrayal of Socrates, there is an effort to infuse the demands of Socrates into the life of everybody. If the state is man "writ large," Plato wanted the state to be Socrates "writ large."

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