**[In praise of the Platonic system](https://nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2020/in-praise-of-the-platonic-system%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

Raja Rafiullah March 02, 2020

It was during those young intellectually vibrant days of my university sophomore year that I remember taking a class on the philosophy of Plato. The classroom was one of those dimly lit lecture-rooms situated in the rather scarcely visited corners of the main academic block. And our professor who was himself an Ivy-League trained researcher was more interested in telling anecdotal stories than explaining the content. “I am not a school teacher; I am a professor, I profess!” - He had exclaimed during one lecture when being annoyed by that student in class who asked too many questions on course logistics.

Anecdotes aside, as a part of course assignment I wrote commentary paper on the political philosophy of Plato. For those of us who don’t know Plato, he was an ancient Greek philosopher who is often called the father of philosophy. Most modern thinkers, scientists and social scientists in the Western world in one way or the other trace their lineage back to Plato and the philosophical milieu of ancient Greece. Plato’s political philosophy is too deep and extensive for it to be covered in one article, let alone trying to list down his entire philosophical treatise.

Nevertheless, I feel that the fundamentals of his political thought are not too complex. They can be condensed such that a general understanding can be formed.

The political system that Plato espouses in his work is closely centred around his idea of ‘Justice’. This Platonic justice, however, is not used strictly in the sense that we use the concept of justice in modern polities. The Platonic idea of ‘Justice’ can instead be described as a form of peaceful coherence that holds and sustains a society together. How this coherence is achieved in Plato’s ideal system of government is a rather controversial idea. And it puts Platonic political thought in confrontation with the modern fundamentals of liberal democracy. Plato argues for a system that is divided into classes based on each class’ best utilitarian contributions to society according to their aptitude. In due course, despite being fundamentally amicable to the idea of free rationality, Plato is often criticised as someone who champions a totalitarian form of government.

In my commentary paper for the course, it was this totalitarian inclination of Plato that I most vehemently attacked. My particular issue was with the classist system of Platonic political thought. This system is rather best articulated by Plato in his famous work called The Republic: the ideal state for Plato will have three different classes – the worker/producers, the soldiers and the philosopher kings. The job of the workers is to produce goods for consumption. The soldier class is responsible for protecting the state from invaders. And the philosopher-king class is the one that rules and makes decisions.

Now for a boy like me who had grown up under the influence of a left leaning father, exposed to demi-gods like Marx and Lenin from an early age, the Platonic system sounded ridiculously unfair. Good nine years have passed now. The time has gradually lifted the veil in front of me and made me ascend into the light of balanced reason. Perhaps I was too unkind to Plato back then. Too young and naïve to understand what Plato really meant. I admit, Plato’s system is indeed classist, but it isn’t as ‘totalitarian’ as we are supposed to believe it is. For one to grasp the essence of the Platonic system, one has to remember that Plato is proposing a radically new system, one that has not existed before. It’s the ideal system of an ideal state. As to how this system can be brought about practically is of only minimal concern to Plato.

The Platonic system is not ‘totalitarian.’ Rather than putting economic, social & racial privileges at the basis of class divisions, the Platonic system divides people based on their aptitude and capability to transcend the shackles of self-interest and favour societal well-being.

The Philosopher-King class is best suited to rule because they are wise and have the mental faculties to pursue the overall well-being of society. Although Plato doesn’t touch the topic of how such ‘Philosopher King’ individuals can be selected directly. It is abundantly clear that he never proposes a system where such membership is granted because of birthright. Philosopher Kings are trained individuals – well versed in use of reason and impartial decision making through years of mental conditioning.

Furthermore, the other classes in the Platonic system are not fundamentally inferior to the Philosopher King class. It is just that their skills are better suited to perform their specific role in the ideal society. The classes, rather than being in a strict hierarchy, are cogs in the machine that maintains harmony, coherence and above all, justice in society.

To conclude, I do agree that the Platonic political system is fraught with inconsistencies and lacks practicality. But on a philosophical level, it is not as appallingly totalitarian as it has been presented to be. And if ever such a system was to evolve in our far future, it might be surprisingly beautiful.