THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ANCIENT GREEK POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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> *You may not do evil that good may come.*
> *St. Paul, Letter to the Romans*

> *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas.*
> *Aristotle*[1]

Abstract

The context in which the ancient Greek Philosophers wrote was characterized by the guiding principle that a position is only as good as the arguments that support it. This principle represents the real and lasting legacy they left to the modern world. What really mattered for the Greeks were the criteria used to determine the sort of life one should live. Their intended aim was to search how to achieve *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, by means of *arete*, or excellence in human conduct, both at the individual and at the socio-political level. This was to become a major theme in the search for the just society conducted by social and political philosophy up to our time. They asked: (1) are State and Society there by Nature or Convention? (2) What is justice and its import on how to govern? (answering this question involves: whether to give persons what they want or what they need; how burdens and benefits of living in a society should be shared; who should make the decisions; and what are the sources of political obligation.) (3) Finally, how to practically implement what the nature of society and justice indicate we should do? (This means providing at least some practical guidance on how to reform politics in order to achieve the common good and construct a just society.) The Sophists seem to have already debated some of these fundamental issues. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle spurred on by the Sophists, but at the same time critical of them, took more convincing,

even though not entirely uniform, ethical stands. They have constantly been recognized as genuinely seeking the moral truth, thus setting the beginning of the still ongoing philosophical discussion about the role and ends of government.

INTRODUCTION

What good fortune for those in power that people do not think (sic).
Adolf Hitler[2]

"When are you going to stop killing people?
Said Stalin: When it is no longer necessary."[3]

I start from four general theoretical premises. The first premise explains how my interest for the ancient Greek social and political philosophy falls within the general concerns of what are commonly understood as the humanities; the second premise has to do with what I consider to be the specific role of social and political philosophy within the philosophical discipline and its methods; the third premise explains how I intend to look at the history of ideas; the fourth premise concerns the way I interpret philosophically the evolution of human societies.

My first assumption is that human self-expression and understanding is a cumulative historical process in which where we are now and what we now think of ourselves is rooted in the forms of life and expression developed in the past. Thus it will always involve some coming to terms with our history and our past. And of course, as it is widely recognized, the role of ancient Greek philosophy in this cumulative historical process still looms large. This is confirmed also by the fact that not only current political philosophers but also virtue ethicists, artists, theologians, novelists, and many others still often variously refer to such a legacy, either as a source of inspiration or, sometimes, even to distance themselves from it. A philosophical paper concerned about the history of political ideas is not only supposed to help us understand why certain conditions existed, but it should also help us look outside of the box in which our present cultural milieu inevitably confines and constrains us.

However, it is usually pointed out that in the West ever since the ancient Greek philosophers, social and political philosophy, in the same fashion as philosophy itself, has evolved and specialized, even though it

still remains for many an open concept. The direction taken by this evolution and specialization constitutes my second premise. To be more specific, social and political philosophy has evolved by promoting second order reflection not only on matters pertaining to society and government in general, but also often with a focus on the processes leading to political change and their annexed tensions. In doing this, social and political philosophy has become not so much concerned with the nuts and bolts of empirical politics (the concern of political science), but with discovering the most fundamental underlying principles of society and politics.[4] This is something which Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had already somehow initiated, but that they have progressively inspired Western social and political philosophers such as Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Burke, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Rawls etc. to mention only a few, to increasingly and more explicitly undertake.

Deeply intertwined with this second order philosophical reflection is also a specific normative endeavor. In fact, social and political philosophy is supposed to establish some principled justification of social and political organization, a justification that will properly discriminate between better or worse forms of society and polity and that can be used to establish basic norms of social and political justice.[5] In other words, social and political philosophy is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive in that it offers views about what we are supposed to do in order to improve society and polities.

It follows that the approach I am choosing is, on the one hand, both historical and normative, but accompanied, on the other hand, by the realization that "all history is a contemporary history". This realization constitutes my third premise.[6] In accordance with this, I assume that we are not wrong when we also tend to look at every idea developed in the past from the point of view of our own present concerns, ideally without being too narrowly confined by them.[7]

In view of the first three general premises, it should be no surprise that I share the view of those who consider the task of social and political philosophy as fundamental in developing the conceptual tools for managing the inevitable political conflicts arising in societies, one of our present concerns. This view constitutes my fourth premise. I will briefly explain the theoretical underpinnings of this view. Conflicts are all but inevitable, given that people are meaning-seeking beings defined by their conflicting identities. Plato's dialogues already highlighted that as rational beings, we pursue what we perceive as our own interests, either in a narrow or in

a broad sense. Contemporary scholars also highlight that interests and identities reciprocally shape themselves, and also shape both the individuals and the groups they form.[8] Furthermore, they argue that in turn, pressure groups aspire to shape political institutions that answer to their own interests and identities, which is not that far from what Plato and Aristotle pointed out. The result is that, according to contemporary scholars, interests, identities, pressure groups and institutions are not static but continuously evolving forces that reciprocally influence each other.[9] So it can be argued that Aristotle had already highlighted some important features of this process by giving us useful insights on what caused constitutions to change. In particular, he argued that certain interests, experiences, sensitivities, and especially identities (specifically, the Greek identity) are to be protected and promoted in order to maintain (or bring about) the good society which will promote the virtuous behaviour of its citizens. In other words, for the Greeks, the human flourishing which the political institutions are supposed to promote cannot be achieved so to speak from the outside, through a value-free view, but requires a view from the inside, and requires the proper enculturation in the experiences, values, sensitivities, interests, and identities of his time. Whereas the more modern tradition, building upon secularized Christian principles, universalizes the thesis of the value of a properly cultivated identity, promoting instead the intrinsic value of all human identities, while at the same time recognizing that these identities are different, that there are divergent and often conflicting legitimate interests which need to be mediated.[10] Thus any political order, or indeed moral theory, that dictates to us what the good life should be, rather than inspiring and helping us in the search for our own path to it, will be imposing a totalitarian restrictive order impinging on human rights and freedom.

Before starting to examine these enduring questions of social and political philosophy, I will briefly summarize my premises: (1) where we are now is rooted in the forms of expression developed in the past; (2) social and political philosophy is concerned with discovering the most underlying principles of society and politics and has a normative task to perform; (3) the history of ideas, like all history, is always contemporary history; (4) interests, identities and institutions are always evolving thus generating conflicts, and social and political philosophy ever since the time of the ancient Greeks had to grapple with the problems generated by these conflicts.

THE ENDURING QUESTIONS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

> *We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live.*
> Socrates[11]

Claims about origins in philosophy are usually arguable and difficult to accurately evaluate. However, a case can certainly be made that in the West questions about ethics and politics were comprehensively raised for the first time in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. Greece by the Sophists. These were itinerant professors of higher education; perhaps the most distinguished of whom were Protagoras, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus. But many others were also active and well-known members of this relatively large and widespread group of influential intellectuals. These paid professional teachers had to prepare their students, the offspring of the local well-to-do, to undertake the most sought after career of the time: to become a successful politician.

To become a successful politician, at the time, meant becoming a person who excelled in making speeches to convince listeners. In Athens, assemblies, consisting of large groups of the city's populace, frequently met to debate and decide courses of action. Every free adult male was expected to participate in these meetings where most matters of government were discussed and decided. This meant that, to a large extent, to be successful in life one had to be successful in one's interaction with others when political decisions were made. In other words, debating skills were essential to become a successful citizen. To their credit, the Sophists addressed this situation by developing a fundamental educational, which we may also call professional strategy. They realized that in order to help their students achieve the rhetorical excellence required to be successful, they had to train them to argue for both sides of any issue.[12] In this way, they would be best prepared to argue for or against any motion, according to what they found most expedient as circumstances arose. However, by teaching such skills that could be used for a variety of purposes, they also drew a lot of criticism. It was not surprising that many people, especially those who were not the beneficiaries of their services, would draw the unwarranted conclusion that applying this method meant abandoning altogether the search for the truth. As a result the Sophists were accused of teaching their students only how to pursue their personal benefit.[13]

This accusation may not have been entirely fair, but it was contin-

ued by Socrates and Plato. For them, if philosophy is the search for wisdom and understanding, it means that it seeks the most fundamental truths of any human activity including politics, whereas the Sophists were seen as confining themselves to the more superficial realm of political expediency. Of course, there is now recognition that this was an over-simplification and that even Plato's attitude towards Protagoras and the other Sophists was much more complex and nuanced. Now it is safe to assume that the Sophists were figures of major intellectual stature in the development of Western philosophy.[14]

The enduring questions about social and political organization which were raised by the ancient Sophists together with Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.), Plato (429-347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E), and which have arguably achieved an almost universal significance for political theory and philosophy, can be briefly summarized. They are:

(1) State and Society are there by Nature or Convention?[15]
(2) What are justice and its import on how to govern? In other words, what is the ethics of deciding whether the government should give persons what they want or what they need, how to share the burdens and benefits of living in a society, who should make the decisions, and what are the sources of political obligation.
(3) How to reform politics in order to achieve the common good?
At present, in countries like Thailand people seem to be most concerned with the last question: how to reform politics? So much so, that often not enough attention is paid to the other questions. But, in fact, answering the last question in a meaningful way requires careful consideration of the other questions.

I will turn next to each of these three enduring questions posed by the ancient Greek philosophy, examining how Plato and Aristotle answered them. I will start from the first one: State and Society by nature or by convention?

The most famous question about social and political organization, the one that left the most enduring legacy in the history of political thought was: State and Society are there by nature *(phusis)* or convention *(nomos)*?[16] This was because the focus of the debate was the contrast

between two concepts which at the time were thought to be crucial to an adequate understanding of human affairs: *nomos* and *phusis*. So this question seems to have provided the catalyst for all subsequent questions.

Nomos, from which we have such English words as 'autonomy' (self-rule) referred to the practices established in a society, whether customs or positive laws (i.e., those laws which depend for their existence entirely on the legislative actions of human beings). Since these vary from society to society, and even, within a single society, change over time, what was *nomos* was changeable. In contrast, *phusis* from which we get the word 'physics', referred to what was unchangeable: nature, or reality. The contrast between the two notions was employed by the Sophists in order to distinguish the human world from the unchanging natural order. For the Sophists, the human world – human society and its institutions, including its moral beliefs – was a world of change, variety, convention: of *nomos* rather than *phusis*.

Plato's dialogues show the different interpretations placed on this conclusion by different Sophists:

> Plato tells us that among the Sophists there were partisans of both positions. In a relatively early dialogue by that name, Protagoras is a partisan of *nomos* who advocates an early form of democratic traditionalism stating that although law and morals are human creations which vary from society to society, they are nevertheless binding for human beings.[17] In *The Republic,* belonging to his middle period writings, Plato presents Glaucon as a partisan of phusis.[18]

However, once fully expressed, Glaucon's position gives rise to an early form of egoistic contractualism, now also called contractarianism, that uneasily accommodates *nomos* in order to restrain *phusis*. Glaucon states:

> They say that to do wrong is naturally good and to be wronged is bad, but the suffering of injury so far exceeds in badness the good of inflicting it that when they have done wrong to each other and suffered it, and have had a taste of both, those who are unable to avoid the latter and practise the former decide that it is profitable to come to

an agreement with each other neither to inflict injury nor to suffer it. As a result they begin to make laws and covenants, and the law's command they call lawful and just.[19]

There is a combination of *phusis* and *nomos* in this passage. In this way, to say that 'to do wrong is naturally good' also becomes an assumption concerning how human *phusis* gives rise to the formation of the state. Glaucon identifies the impetus 'to do wrong' with the natural inclination of 'every human nature to pursue its own advantage'. Here, there is an underlying picture of the human function understood to be that of unlimitedly acquisitive consumption of satisfactions. These satisfactions may be the result of the consumption of material goods, or simply of the domination of one's fellow human beings. This is a familiar theme in Plato's dialogues, a description of the 'fallen aspect' of human nature and institutions that he thinks needs to be addressed and transcended. So, in the early dialogue entitled *Gorgias*, Callicles not so differently from Glaucon maintains that human laws are a device of the weak to frustrate the natural order, which shows the strong to be naturally superior to the weak.[20] Plato's criticism against the theories of state and society by convention seems to operate more at a normative than at a descriptive level. According to Plato, all forms of conventionalism, even in Protagoras' not so skeptical fashion, are inadequate.[21] Plato holds instead that there is an unchanging moral reality, but one of which human societies, with their great variety of conventional practices, are largely ignorant. Like all knowledge, knowledge of goodness depends on being able to penetrate beyond the veil of appearances to the hidden, unchanging reality of the forms. Plato thus rejects the idea that morals and law are purely conventional. His theory can be understood as an attempt to show that human behavior is subject not only to established social rules, but first and foremost to an unwritten law – whether understood to be imposed by the gods, as it is put by Sophocles in the tragedy *Antigone*, or better, as a rule to which the gods themselves are subject.

The idea of natural law is sometimes described as the view that there is an unchanging normative order that is part of the natural world. According to the theory of natural law, there is an objective moral law either given by God and/or grasped by human reason binding all human beings and providing a standard for evaluating all human practices, including society and government.[22] If this is accepted, then Plato provided a natural law view in everything but name. This may, however, appear a

bit surprising since it is Aristotle who is normally credited with fully developing the view that state and society are by nature.

In regard to whether state and society are by nature or convention, it is important to point out that it was not only the specific answers to this question given by Protagoras, Glaucon, Socrates, and Plato to be of great consequence, but also the fact that the debate that they reflected, and to which they no doubt contributed, constituted by itself an avatar of democratic discussion, and also a significant contribution to the later theory and practice of democracy.[23] This was because discussing the origins of society inevitably involved taking into consideration at least as a hypothesis the idea that people have an equal claim to participation in the governing process, one of the theoretical underpinnings of democracy itself. In other words, the discussion of whether state and society are by nature or convention sets debates in which the first organic formulation of the idea of democracy is expressed. As a result, democracy was understood (and practised by every free adult male citizen) by the ancient Athenians, in virtually the same fashion as it is understood at a theory, but less so at a practical level nowadays, as government of the people, for the people, and by the people.

I will turn next to the second question posed by Greek philosophy: What is the import of justice on governance?

PLATO ON THE IMPORT OF JUSTICE ON GOVERNANCE

The history of political thought is the history of the moral evaluation of political power.
Hans J. Morgenthau[24]

The issue of justice lies at the heart of questions about legitimacy and orderly existence, determining whether citizens are willing to accept the law as binding. Once it is taken seriously, at least as the basis for further discussion, and perhaps even as a normative principle, the hypothesis that the people are supposed to be the main beneficiary of government, the next logical step is to probe where all this lead to. Justice is by definition about giving each person their due, as it appears from the answers to the following questions posed by Socrates to Glaucon:[25]

And are suit decided on any other ground but that a man

may neither take what is another's, nor be deprived of what is his own? Yes; that is their principle. Which is a just principle? Yes. Then on this view also justice will be admitted to be the having and doing what is a man's own, and belongs to him? Very true.[26]

If it is assumed that citizens are entitled to good governance, it must still be decided whether good governance requires giving them what they want or what they need. If the former is chosen we have more or less the theoretical underpinning of democracy as it is understood now, if we take the latter we have something similar to what Plato and, to some extent, also Aristotle theorized.

Today, largely as the result of the developments of modern Western political philosophy especially following Rousseau, we tend to assume that what the people want is what they need. However the ancient Greeks, those of aristocratic leanings, like Socrates and Plato, were inclined to think that the people needed a rational direction, and that the political structure could not pander to the whims of the intellectually inferior. To Plato democracy meant ochlocracy, i.e. rule by the mob. Plato thought that there are few people of high quality in any society and if all the people were allowed to rule, that is to say, if they were allowed to get what they want, those of bad quality, who are much more numerous, would control the state. This would result in a tyranny of the majority, which, in most cases, could not last for long. In the end, Plato thought, democracies will be short lived because the mob would soon surrender its power to a tyrant, thus destroying the popular government. In regard to this, Aristotle in Athens being of foreign origin, and for this reason not belonging to the traditional local aristocracy but to the non-native pro-Macedonian elite, had a more nuanced, even though not entirely different attitude.

But what is equally significant and enduring from a philosophical point of view is that trying to answer the question of whether we must give the people what they want or what they need leads to the principle that political structure should not be arbitrary but should have practical moral purposes, that is to say, it must provide justice and fairness for all the members of the community.

And of course, to say that the political structure must have moral purposes to be a meaningful proposition must also involve at least some sort of a call for a fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of living in

a society.

This is what Plato supposedly does in his *Republic*, where the members of the three classes he sets, the philosopher-rulers, the warriors, the merchants and laborers share with each other the benefits which each group can contribute to the community.[27]

Underpinning this conception there is a normative anthropology, a view concerning how people are supposed to behave. People are supposed to pursue *eudaimonia*, that is to say human flourishing. For Plato, the purpose of a human being is to know and practise the truth in a wholesome manner. However, this is a personal enterprise and political involvement is but a necessary service that the philosopher will reluctantly undertake to pay back society for having provided him/her with education.

Concerning the question about the sources of political obligation, an obligation is a requirement or duty to act in a particular way and political obligation refers to the duty of citizens to acknowledge the authority of the state and obey its laws. The earliest theory of obligation is outlined in one of Plato's early dialogues, *Crito*, also considered an anticipation of the social contract theory. After his trial for corrupting the youth of Athens, and facing death, Socrates explains his refusal to escape from prison to his old friend Crito. Socrates points out that by choosing to live in Athens and by enjoying the privileges of being an Athenian citizen, he had in effect, promised to obey Athenian law, and intended to keep his promise even at the cost of his own life.

> But he who has experience of the manner in which we order justice and administer the State, and still remains, has entered into an implicit contract that he will do as we command him. And he who disobeys us is, as we maintain, thrice wrong: first, because in disobeying us he is disobeying his parents; secondly, because we are the authors of his education; thirdly, because he has made an agreement with us he will duly obey our commands; and he neither obeys them nor convinces us that our commands are wrong; and we do not rudely impose them, but give him the alternative of obeying or convincing us; that is what we offer, and he does neither.[28]

From this point of view, political obligation arises out of the benefits derived from living within an organized community. The obligation

to obey the state is based upon an implicit promise made by the simple fact that citizens choose to remain within its borders.[29] But there is much that is going on in this passage and here Socrates alludes also to the idea that a person is bound to obey the law for moral reasons. To conceive of political obligation in this way is to move away from the idea of voluntary behaviour. Thus the debt of gratitude that Socrates owed Athens did not allow him to challenge or resist its laws, even at the cost of his own life. In other words, here it is also introduced the idea of a natural duty to obey the law. So it is implicitly present also the view that political obligation can be thought of as a natural duty. This points to the fact that according to Socrates (and Plato), we come by our political obligations for 3 reasons: (1) because we simply inherit them, as a given fact of nature like our parents and parental obligations; (2) because of self-interest – the state is a necessary means to things we want (physical safety, or security of property) and if we will the end we must will the means; (3) it is because we have certain moral duties (such as maximizing human happiness or securing justice and these cannot be discharged except through the mechanisms of political authority.

In sum, the reflection on the sources of political obligation by Plato points, once again, to the principle that to be a human person is to be a moral agent and that there is an objective human function which can only be fulfilled by obeying the laws of the state. And it is in accordance with this principle that Plato also recognizes a general import of justice on governance. There is in Plato, both implicitly and explicitly a call to practically implement this moral justice improving or changing the existing polities in order to make the citizens receive the rational direction they require, so that the common good can be achieved.

I will turn next to this topic, which is also the concern of the third question posed by the ancient Greek philosophy.

In order to reform politics to achieve justice, which he believes to be the common good, Plato identifies the sources of the good, stable political system in his utopian *Republic*. And in doing so, formulates the earliest version of the most fundamental argument against democracy. He argues that ordinary members of the people are simply not competent enough to rule wisely in their own interests.[30] So instead of democracy, Plato advances the idea of rule by the virtuous. He does so by describing an ideal polity in which rational direction is provided to the governed by the philosopher-rulers. Plato believed that good governance should reflect the radical form of natural inequality which he postulated. He sup-

posed that human beings were born with souls containing a prevalence of gold, silver or bronze, and were therefore disposed towards different stations in life. Justice and the common good could only be achieved if each group was assigned its proper natural role by the state. According to Plato, the state should function, so to speak, like a giant person. In accordance with this principle, there are different classes, each operating like the different parts of an individual's soul. Indeed, Plato takes the soul as having three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the passionate one, corresponding to gold, silver and bronze, and he postulated that in each individual, one of the three components would be dominant. (Plato's division between rational, spirited and passionate soul would later find some resonance in Sigmund Freud's vision of the psyche's components as *ego, superego* and *id*.) In other words, in order to achieve justice, the state should properly and harmoniously grow out of these components of the individual soul. The state, like the individual, should keep these three aspects of the soul in the proper balance. The required equilibrium is like maintaining at the political level the form of mental health that is required at the individual level, and vice versa. This was Plato's blueprint for political reform. It follows from these premises that his ideal republic is made up of three classes: a class of farmers and artisans, a class of warriors-auxiliaries and a class of philosopher guardians. Each class embodies one essential virtue. The workers, who provide for the city physical necessities, are supposed to possess moderation. The warriors should possess courage, which is the perfection of the spirited part of the soul. The philosophers, being in possession of the all-encompassing wisdom, are the only ones who have a completely excellent soul with perfection in every part of their being, as well as in the relationship between the different parts.[31] This means that they are also the only ones who understand justice, the most comprehensive virtue according to Plato. Allegedly, their education and communistic way of life will ensure that they rule on the basis of wisdom without being distracted by any interest for material goods. In regard to this, Plato is indeed adamant in his recommending that amongst the guardians entrusted to rule, property, and even family life, should be held in common.[32] In sum, because each class in Plato's republic performs its function well (producing food and making things, defending the state, and governing), and in doing so displays a particular cardinal virtue (moderation, courage, and wisdom), this ideal state is also considered the embodiment of justice. Thus, and most importantly, because the philosophers are those who know and practice the truth, they can for this very

reason supposedly secure the only just polity which can maintain stability. This is the reason why Socrates asserts:

> Until philosophers are kings or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils…[33]

However, this relies on the philosopher agreeing to perform the role of political rulers without regard for their own self-interest. This is based on the principle of the knowing maker, postulating that whoever "knew" the good (alas, according to Plato, most people do not know it) would become good himself/herself, and hence would also be willing to actually perform good deeds. The main reason for this would be, paradoxically, an egoistic one. If the philosophers refused to perform their duty to become rulers, assuming that they had been raised and educated to perform this role with public money by their own city, they would commit an evil act which would damage their own souls. This is something that they would never be willing to do, because it would be tantamount to damaging the soul, the noblest of human components, and the one which had once been in contact with the eternal and unchanging world of forms. In regard to this, he believed that if the proper conditions are met, i.e. if the soul is not further defiled, it was possible that, through the process of metempsychosis, humans could aspire to rejoin the unchanging world of forms. Supposedly, this incentive, or we may call it more appropriately spiritual motivation, should have been enough to motivate the philosophers to duly perform their task as rulers.

In practice, the process of identifying and educating these philosopher rulers who promote the common good would prove to be a stumbling block, as Plato's failed attempt in Syracuse attests. At best, Plato's ideal system looks like an authoritarian theocracy or military dictatorship, and at worst it could very easily be considered a forerunner of modern fascism or communism.[34] These proposals for reform look like radical cures that are likely to kill the patients (our societies). Platonic idealism, once put into practice, is likely to become a nightmarish dystopia. In other words, the remedy (either totalitarianism or authoritarianism) it is likely to be worse than the disease (political conflict, corruption, etc.)

it is supposed to cure.

Moreover, Plato sets justice as the primary quality of a good political order. Indeed, he regards justice as the all-encompassing political virtue, so that the good society and the just society are one and the same. However, perhaps he does so at the exclusion of other desirable qualities that a society should possess. It could reasonably be argued that a society and a country indeed need also to be economically prosperous, artistically fertile, successful in its undertakings, etc. In other words, the aspiration to justice always needs to be placed within a wider context which must practically take into account a multiplicity of factors which are somehow neglected in Plato's utopian reasoning.

This points to the fact that, all in all, Plato's proposals for political reform look unworkable and too abstract, even though they were the product of a uniquely genial mind animated by the practical desire for concrete solutions to real problems. This is because Plato followed a method that could be defined as both proto-idealistic and proto-rationalistic. He started with a concept (the unchanging form of the ultimate good as the archetype of justice), which he apprehended intuitively or accepted as a result of logical argument, and then used it to observe actual societies. It should then be no surprise that it is Plato's best and greatest student, Aristotle, who took on the task of finding more empirically viable approaches to the problem of how to reform politics. Indeed, Aristotle distanced himself from Plato by applying a kind of proto-empiricism which more directly appealed to common sense, and based his position on the observation of actual societies and on the acceptance of traditions that are passed down within them.[35]

However, before coming to the specifics of Aristotle's proposals for political reform, I will examine next how Aristotle answers the questions about the origin of society and the import of justice on governance. With this analysis, I intend to shed some more light on how the enduring questions of social and political philosophy have been pursued, answered and developed after Socrates and Plato originally set them. Scholars have always been divided between those who focus more on the continuity or the difference between Plato and Aristotle. My interpretation of their ethical and political philosophy (less so of their metaphysics) will tend to see a certain fundamental continuity of concerns between the two, in spite of their different solutions with regard to practical suggestions about how to reform politics. Aristotle's answer to the questions about the origin of society and the import of justice on governance is addressed in his theory

of natural law and justice, which will be the subject of my next section.

ARISTOTLE ON NATURAL LAW AND JUSTICE

> *Man is by nature a political animal...Nature does nothing with-*
> *out purpose or uselessly.*
>   Aristotle[36]

Aristotle is indeed an early proponent of the natural theory of the origin of the state, even though he did not equate the natural with the unchangeable.[37] He believed that people should constantly seek moral perfection, which they will probably never reach. Still, he regarded this quest for moral perfection as the noblest of human pursuits, as it appears in the following statement:

> The good of man is the active exercise of his soul's facul-
> ties in conformity with excellence or virtue...this activity
> must occupy a complete lifetime [.][38]

Humans, according to Aristotle, are social beings by nature; that is, they naturally gather together and interact with one another, thus forming a community. This congregation takes place for reasons that go beyond simple biological necessity. Indeed, a community is a necessary condition for human fulfilment. The formal organization of the community is the state. The formation of the state is a result of the people's natural inclination to interact. Aristotle believed so firmly that the state was a society's natural environment that he claimed that people were humans only within the state. An individual outside the state was either "a beast or a god", the state being the only environment in which one could truly be human. The state was thus the central institution in Aristotle's philosophy; it was not only the manifestation of our natural inclination to interact but also the vehicle through which the individual could achieve moral perfection.[39] In accordance with this principle, what the state does to promote the achievement of moral perfection must be considered just and fair.

All this points to the fact that Aristotle introduces, more clearly than Plato, a social component in his notion of human flourishing as it appears from his theory of justice based on merit. So, for Aristotle, a

distribution of benefits or burdens is to be made in proportion to the degree of possession of the appropriate sort of merit by those involved.[40] Rewarding merit was supposed to fulfil what Aristotle tells us is the fundamental purpose of the *polis*. This fundamental purpose is the advancement of the virtue of its citizens, i.e., the *polis* must provide all that is necessary to make its citizens good and just.[41]

The same principle of justice based on merit, and the pursuit of the common good of the citizens, provides direction also for deciding who must make decisions. Accordingly, Aristotle says that "all man agree that what is just in distribution must be according to merit in some sense, though they do not all specify the same sort of merit, but democrats identify it with the status of freeman, supporters of oligarchy with wealth (or with noble birth), and supporters of aristocracy with *arete*[virtue]".[42] Even today, there is still much discussion about whether or not fairness entails that those who excel in moral virtues should rule.[43] But in regard to this, it may be pointed out that, according to Aristotle, in any case, the common good is best achieved by rewarding some merit of sorts without necessarily being too specific about what sort of.

However, the line that Aristotle most resolutely pursues is that, whatever the form of government, the fundamental purpose of the state must consist in the advancement of the virtue of its citizens as the embodiment of the common good. This is also the criterion to discriminate between better and worse forms of polity. But at the same time he argues with equal resolution in favour of the idea that there is a natural law requiring citizens to obey the state.[44] In doing so, Aristotle implicitly sets some criteria of legitimacy, and making them explicit will become one of the main concerns of Western political philosophy from the Stoics to Cicero, Aquinas, and Locke and beyond (to mention just a few names). In other words, Aristotle introduces the wide ranging idea that human laws are supposed to have a moral basis: there is an objective moral law that transcends human conventions and decisions, governs individuals, and can be known through reason and experience on the basis of the natural order of the universe and the built-in tendencies of human nature.[45] Accordingly, he tells us: "it has been well said that the good is that at which all things aim".[46] This statement points to his teleological vision of the (proper) aim of human conduct, which is supposed to achieve goodness, excellence, quality, flourishing, etc., and which should consist in the process of actualization (i.e., of reaching "the good") of certain inherent potentialities, but it also indicates that there is an objective moral order in

Giuseppe Mario Saccone 71

reality that is independent of us, just as there is a physical order in nature.

It follows from his teleological vision of reality that Aristotle believed that human beings are political animals whose very nature dictates that they are made to live in society. Aristotle argued that "the *polis* is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal". This means that the nature of a human person depends on the social setting supplied by the *polis*. In other words, against the view of the sophist Lycrophron that law is simply a convention to warrant mutual rights, Aristotle argued that by fulfilling political obligation the citizens fulfil their human function, i.e., they act as they should. That is to say, they act according to moral virtue, which he calls the practical wisdom *(eupraxia)* of living in society with one's fellows with all that doing so entails.

In accordance with this principle, all morally aware people have the potential to recognize that it is just and fair for them to obey any civil law which is in conformity with the natural order of things. In this way, Aristotle thought that the moral principles underpinning the natural law and political obligation are so basic that they do not require further proof.

To sum up, in spite of their differences, the reflection on the sources of political obligation by both Plato and Aristotle points, once again, to the principle that to be a human person is to be a moral agent, and that there is an objective human function which can only be fulfilled by obeying the laws of the state. And it is in accordance with this principle that Aristotle also recognizes a general import of justice on governance. But, obviously, he can do so only in very generic terms by identifying a common or universal law with 'all those unwritten principles which are supposed to be acknowledged everywhere'.[47] In other words, this is 'law according to nature'. In this way, he can also maintain that there really is 'a natural justice and injustice that is common to all, even to those that have no association or covenant with one another'.[48] Of course, the argument is not only descriptive, but also prescriptive. As there was in Plato, also in Aristotle there is both implicitly and explicitly a call to practically implement this natural justice improving or changing the existing polities in order to make the citizens more virtuous, so to achieve the common good according to natural law.

Finally, we come to the question of how to reform politics in order to achieve the common good. In regard to this, both Plato and Aristotle saw Athens in political (but not cultural) decline because of internal disunity. In order to stem this decline, they attempted to understand why it was taking place and to suggest how it could be avoided. These were the

parameters of their differing proposals for political reform, which were not intended to radically change the existing social order and class division between slaves (approximately one third of the population) and free adults.

Plato and Aristotle agreed in identifying the cause of the decline was the rulers' pursuit of their own personal or class interests instead of the common good. This behavior was contrary to virtue *(arete)*, and was the cause of internal instability, and vulnerability to external enemies. They also agreed that the remedy required searching for the sources of a good, stable political system. And the continuity does not even stop there. Aristotle's views on political reform must indeed be understood in view of the fact that he considers virtue as a kind of excellence which is achieved when a rich complexity has been successfully integrated into an organic unity, which is not that far from what Plato had already argued for. The moral inadequacy of this position is highlighted by the fact that it is at odds with the contemporary doctrine of human rights, which predicates that the good of each individual being, according to a principle of fairness and equality, has a normative value in itself, regardless of how successful is his integration in the organic unity of the state. For this reason, most contemporary moral and political philosophers, even though expressing admiration for their ideas, ultimately tend to distance themselves, at least to some extend, from both Plato and Aristotle.

Be that as it may, whatever our opinion as contemporary readers, we have thus identified the last fundamental objective in common between Plato and Aristotle: they shared the goal of reforming the Greek *polis* in terms of what they both understood as the moral endeavor of finding ways of achieving excellence in the governance of an organic state of sorts. This is where their similarities end.

Aristotle takes a more empirical approach than Plato to the problem of how to reform politics and does not create a blueprint for an ideal state.[49] In this sense, he can be considered more like a modern political scientist. He realized that there could not be a single solution to the most pressing problem affecting the Greek city states: the political factionalism and related instability which paved the way for the Macedonian conquest.[50]

However, he held the assumption that in order to improve the situation it was always necessary to determine first what kind of government it is best adapted to particular states, even though the best of these is often unattainable. Aristotle realized that, to be able to make any useful proposal, it was imperative to start with information as accurate as pos-

sible. For this reason, he sent out his students to gather data from the dozens of Greek city-states. With these data, he constructed his great *Politics*, a posthumously edited collection of essays, which is also closely linked to his two ethical treatises Eudemian and *Nicomachean Ethics*.

His general approach and the ethical importance he attributed to (good) politics can be seen from the fact that in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he already states that "the good of man must be the end [i.e. the objective] of the science of politics".[51] Indeed, Aristotle regarded politics as the "master science", essential for producing the good life, the aim of every practical pursuit or undertaking. In regard to this, Aristotle believed that whether a state produces the good life depends upon how its rulers behave. The good rulers seek to achieve the good of all, whereas the perverted rulers seek their own private gain. In accordance with this principle, when a government is functioning rightly, it governs for the common good of all the people, whereas a government is perverted when its rulers govern for their own private gain or interest.

So, in his *Politics*, it is this practical pursuit of the common good guiding Aristotle's project for political reform (even though he always self-consciously mixes the theoretical, the descriptive and the normative). More specifically, he commends or condemns certain political institutions according to whether or not they achieve the common good. In his *Politics*, Aristotle investigated and classified the political systems of many existing poleis and demonstrated that several different types were conducive to achieving the good life *(eudaimonia)*, the purpose of a properly acculturated (Greek) citizen. However, his preference was for a mixed constitution *(politeia)*, and he was not entirely shy about defining what was politically "best", as in this passage:

> [T]he best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and those states are likely to be well administered in which the middle class is large….in which the citizens have moderate and sufficient property; for where some possess much and others nothing there may arise an extreme democracy or a pure oligarchy, or a tyranny may develop out of either extreme… [D]emocracies are safer and more permanent than oligarchies, because they have a middle class which is more numerous and has greater share in government, for when there is no middle class and the poor greatly exceed in number, trouble arise,

and the state soon come to an end.[52]

In other words, Aristotle argues that systems that propagate inequality, or that seem unable to stem its rise, contain the seeds of their own destruction. Even though *The Politics* was written in the fourth century B.C., Aristotle it also sheds light on why democracies succeed or fail today. Indeed, it is a point confirmed by modern research that it often depends on the size of the middle class.

The measures that he recommends to reduce the risk of disorder and revolution in general involve making the constitution more moderate by sharing power more widely and by reducing the grievances of potential opponents. Most importantly, Aristotle urged that there is nothing which should be more jealously maintained than the spirit of obedience to law. And, we are also reminded that, people will always criticize their government unless their conditions of living are such that they can achieve happiness in the form of what they consider the good life.

Once we universalize the thesis of human moral worth underpinning Aristotle's recommendations for political reform, we discover that the problems he addresses are not at all far from our own 21st century concerns.[53] I will highlight some of the differences and similarities that the political philosophy initiated by Plato and continued by Aristotle share with us in my conclusion.

CONCLUSION

> *To neglect human affairs when necessity forbids is wicked.*
> Aquinas[54]

As contemporary readers, we might object to the fact that both Plato and Aristotle founded their hopes on politicians, instead of the development of a free and vibrant civil society with grassroots forces underpinning the development of democratic institutions. In other words, they were neither principle nor process democrats, nor could they have been, given their elitist cultural milieu.[55] But Plato thought that philosophers themselves ought to be the politicians who carry out such work; and so he proposed to the philosophers a choice of life and a course of training which would make them simultaneously both contemplatives and men of action – since knowledge and virtue imply each other. Aristotle

believed that the philosopher's activity within the city should be limited to forming the politicians' judgement, and that it is the politicians' task to act personally by their legislation to ensure the citizens' moral virtue. The philosopher, for his part, should choose a life devoted to disinterested research, study, and contemplation – a life which will ultimately be independent of political worries.

Both Plato and Aristotle saw the pursuit of the Socratic Method as the solution for political woes. Thus, for Aristotle, as for Plato, philosophy was both a way of life and a way of discourse giving practical advice on how to improve the existing Greek *poleis*. However, what remains as most enduring are not so much their differing detailed proposals for the solution of specific political problems, but the fact that they pursued the search for the solution to the problem of how to improve governance to its intellectual and ethical horizons. They did so by setting a continuous ideal dialogue with their readers, by posing the most meaningful questions (for instance, by asking what are justice, goodness, the just citizens, rulers, etc.) and by searching for the right answers (describing and prescribing the ideal form or forms of government). All this inspired, as perhaps it was supposed to, the search for new questions and new answers by their illustrious successors, both among the ancient and the modern ones. But, and not the least, this is also at the root of a pedagogical, hopefully still ongoing process which goes behind the mere search for political expediency for its own sake, and touches deeper ethical issues which are at the heart of the essence of education in general, and of academic freedom in particular (i.e., the intertwined principles that to pursue good education it is necessary to never stop asking questions, that science is at its best when it acknowledges uncertainty and focuses on defining how much can be known, and John Stuart Mill's idea that truth is most quickly discovered when opportunity is given to refute falsehoods, and what I take as the corresponding political principle that all elites without public scrutiny are corrupt or abusive, not only elected politicians, because the formula for corruption or any other abuse is monopoly of power without accountability, and by having an authoritarian regime, there is by definition no accountability).

So Plato and Aristotle spurred by the Sophists had the merit not only of identifying the enduring fundamental questions of social and political organization. Their attempt to answer these questions resulted in opening the debate about several wide ranging ethical and political concepts that are still relevant to us (and whose identification constituted

milestones in the history of Western Moral and Political Thought). They thus set the beginning of the still ongoing philosophical discussion about the role and reciprocal position in terms of priority of the major political values which are the most commonly recognized ends of government: the concepts of justice, security, prosperity, liberty and democracy. In regard to this, both Plato and Aristotle gave to justice the paramount importance. (But, whereas for Plato achieving justice is a matter of remembering the Form of the ultimate good of which the individual soul had knowledge before birth, for Aristotle it is the exercise of practical wisdom or reason acquired by direct experience, i.e. *phronesis* sometimes also translated as prudence, which is supposed to guide us on how to achieve justice). Nevertheless, both Plato and Aristotle based justice on notions of merit by birth, gender, status, etc., rather than on a principle of equality or fairness, as 20th century theorists like John Rawls did.

For all the differences and distance in time, political philosophy as we understand it today owes a lot to the Sophists, Plato and Aristotle (and to the Stoics, Cicero, Aquinas, etc., which followed). It enables us to get involved in systematic and historical reflection on the beliefs that we often absorb in insidiously superficial fashion from our social, cultural and political environments. The mental process set in motion by this systematic historical reflection should contribute to fostering more informed and reflective political commitments.

This is a good thing especially in the present historical predicaments. Societies are caught between the Scylla of a common and widespread political disinterest and the Charybdis of turbulent militancy.

The former consists in the rejection and disgust for anything explicitly having to do with politics. In regard to this, a strange process takes place. The 'death of ideologies' (and annexed political theories and philosophies) paradoxically gives rise to a stillborn but insidiously quasi-ideological mental process, a Phoenix of sorts which egoistically makes the private sphere the primary concern of human beings, whereas the public sphere has shrunk to a bare minimum.[56]

The latter danger consists in the renewed social and political turmoil when conflicts of interest reemerge between competing groups. This often leads to a resolution through political militancy, which is often based on narrow regional identity politics, and fills the ideological void with political beliefs haphazardly collected from various sources. Many societies are caught in this predicament (with various degrees of gravity), of which the recent political conflict in Thailand could, arguably, be inter-

preted.

Endnotes

[1]This is a Latin translation of a Greek original which the ancient Romans attributed to Aristotle: "Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth".

[2]Quoted in: Judith Boss, *Analyzing Moral Issues,* p.1, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. This quote it is in no way intended as giving respectability to Hitler's views or to those of his fanatic followers, nor, as far as the cynicism towards the value of human lives, as most briskly represented in the next quote goes, to many of Stalin's policies. But it is intended, in the spirit of moral and political philosophy as a warning against the unexamined compliance to authority which allows leaders such as Hitler to fool the masses, as he himself was admitting to be doing: "The broad mass of a nation…. Will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one". (Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kamp,* Vol.1, ch.10). Or others like Stalin to impose a personality cult to the same effect. On the other hand, this should not also be constructed as a criticism against the lawful obedience due to legitimate authority of which Socrates' behavior after his conviction in a public trial by the citizens of Athens is a magisterial example, even though his behavior perhaps looks a bit too extreme and uncompromising in the eyes of ordinary people. For an account of what it is to be understood as legitimate authority, I would recommend John Locke's *Second treatise on Government*.

[3]Quoted by Hans Morgenthau, in "The moral blindness of scientific man", p.9, (pp.7-15) in Robert J. Art, Robert Jervis, *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues,* New York: 6th Edition, Longman Pearson Education, 2003.

[4]See, for instance, David Stewart, H. Gene Blocker, *Fundamentals of Philosophy,* pp.5-9, 379-382, Upper Saddle River New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Fifth Edition, 2001.

[5]See, Michael J. White, P*olitical Philosophy: An Historical Introduction,* p.2, Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2003.

[6]Of course, there is always inevitably an element of subjectivity in all premises. This one in particular refers to a historical method that I did not follow in my previous writings on Hobbes. I previously followed the historical method set by Quentin Skinner (which I still very much appreciate) of reconstructing intellectual contexts without allowing our present concerns to interfere with our understanding of the history of ideas. However, this is a method that I no longer follow in this writing where I am looking at the past with one eye to contemporary concerns.

[7]Accordingly, the neo-Hegelian Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) identified philosophy with history: All thought is 'historical judgment' and all history 'contemporary history' because the past is 'lived' and reworked in Spirit's, and hence humanity's present experience. "The practical need, which is at the root of every historical judgment, confers to each history the character of contemporary history, because, however remote or most remote may seem chronologically the facts involved, it is in reality, history always referred to the present need and situation in

which those facts are propagating their vibrations". See: Aphorisms by Benedetto Croce, htpp://aforismi.meglio.it/aforisma.hml?id=7563

[8]Here the reference to the role of interests and identities it is not necessarily intended as an endorsement of utilitarianism as an ethical theory, setting the standard for private choices in Bentham's, or Mill's fashion, or in any of the various subsequent utilitarian or consequentialist theories (such as the ones of J. Austin, G.E. Moore, H. Sidgwich, R.M. Hare, G. Scarre, etc.) which in fact broadly speaking center their philosophies on the notion of an assumed individual and collective interest in the pursuit of pleasure and/or happiness. However, it is to be seen as recognition that a democratic polity requires that everything be run through people's preferences and interests. Two corollaries, always in precarious balance and in tension one with the other follow from the approach I am taking. The first is that it is necessary that public policy maintains at least some degree of benevolent neutrality (although, obviously, not a total disinterest) about official preference between the various competing theories concerning, for example, what the Aristotelian concept of human flourishing, or for others one of the competing versions of 'the good', 'the right', or 'the true' (especially concerning religious revelations), etc. is supposed to consist of, and how it could be achieved. The second corollary is the need for a notion of *rights*, possibly enshrined in a constitution (either written or implicit such as the idea of common law, or of 'a cultural constitution' like some academics vaguely refer to in the case of Thailand), constraining utilitarian maximizing, to protect vulnerable individuals and weak minorities against excesses. This view can be seen as compatible with some version of Rawls' theory of justice, but also with the tenets of any tolerant philosophy or religious tradition.

[9]See, Jeffrey Kopstein and Mark Lichbach, Eds., *Comparative Politics: Interests, Identities and Institutions in a Changing Global Order,* pp.10-19, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

[10]Accordingly, the rise of secular liberal democracy as advocated by John Rawls is based on the idea that the variety and heterogeneity of human goods is such that their pursuit cannot be reconciled in any single moral order beyond what we would agree in a hypothetical contract based on a principle of equality, and made under a veal of ignorance about the specifics of our interests and identities.

[11]Plato, *Republic,* bk.1 344e.

[12]Aristophanes, the Athenian comic dramatist (c.450-385 B.C.E), famously pokes fun on this method of confrontation of rival ideas in his play *The Clouds*. The rival arguments are brought on the stage as Virtue and Vice, and Vice, of course, drives Virtue out of the field. This, of course, had only satirical, but no philosophical intent.

[13]Protagoras had said that there are two arguments about everything, two sides to every case, and that the art of effective advocacy which he taught aims at making the weaker case, that which unskillfully presented would have got the worse with the audience, become the stronger. This is consistent with his famous motto that "man is the measure of all things", reported to as by Plato in his dialogue *Theaetetus*, 160d.

[14]However, in more contemporary times, the criticism once directed against the Sophists, it is now often directed, especially at a popular level, against politics

itself. Because politics has to do with achieving, maintaining, and managing power over civil society, it is seen by many as being inherently self-serving. People blame politics rightly or wrongly for many of the hardships they suffer. Unfortunately, and somehow incongruously, a very common reaction it is the withdrawal from active citizenry, and the limiting of the people's concerns to what pertains to their individual private sphere.

But among the many other negative results of this, there is also the fact that, even among many intellectuals, political science itself as an academic discipline looks tainted, and a similar dose of suspicion it is cast towards its practitioners, as it is against politicians. Anything and anyone having to do with politics must be having self-serving purposes.

However, political philosophy seems, at least in part, to escape the same criticism. Political philosophers have a better image than political theorists, even though the difference between the two it is not always so clear cut. This is because as a normative search for wisdom and understanding concerning government, political philosophy looks more morally engaging, and for this reason also more respectable than the colder and more scientifically minded analytical study of ideas and concepts, both normative and descriptive, about politics performed by political theory. Political philosophy can be more clearly seen, even though in differing and mostly contrasting ways, as advocating an ethical reform of politics itself; it can be seen as calling for its transformation from the activity of gaining power over societies to the one of achieving the common good of the human community. This call for transformation, even though not unchallenged, has always been and it still is likely to gain the interest and support of many both from within and without the academic community. However, it is also important to remind here that, in fact, political philosophy and political theory can best be seen, for all intents and purposes, as reciprocally complementary disciplines.

[15]The ancient Greeks did not draw a clear distinction between state and society. This is closely tied to the size and characteristics of the Greek city-states the Poleis. Even up to the beginning of modern philosophy (Hobbes), political thought is centred on a clear cut dichotomy between a dangerously lurking state of nature and civil society. This paradigm changes with Locke, Rousseau and Kant. A new dichotomy emerges: the one between state and civil society.

But, the most organic version of the distinction between state and civil society is the one developed by Hegel. (1770-1831) His principal political work, *The Philosophy of Right* (1821) advanced an organic theory of the state that portrayed it as the highest expression of human freedom. He identified three moments of social life: the family, civil society, and the state. Within the family, a "particular altruism" operates, encouraging people to set aside their own interests for the good of their relatives. He viewed society as a sphere of "universal egoism" in which individuals place their own interests before those of others. However, he held that the state is an ethical community underpinned by mutual sympathy, and is thus characterized by "universal altruism". This stance was reflected in Hegel's admiration for the Prussian state of his day, and helped to convert liberal thinkers to the cause of state intervention. Hegel's philosophy also had considerable impact upon Marx and other so-called young Hegelians. However, in more recent years especially since the fall of

the Soviet Union, interest for Hegel and Marx has somehow decreased, even though not altogether disappeared. The dominant dichotomy now becomes more nuanced: it is the one between the public and private sphere. It is no longer mainly a matter of deciding the relation between private and public property. Anyway, in most countries the latter is mostly reduced to a minimum level for both practical and ideological reasons. From a philosophical point of view, it is no less relevant the dichotomy between a public sphere, which at least in liberal democratic societies (challenged by the authoritarian ones) is supposed to be neutral because of competing conceptions about the nature and function of human beings (different religions, ideologies, views, etc. must coexist and the state mostly acts as a referee) and a very rich and diverse private sphere (but with many poor and marginalized people) characterized by all these conceptions. The public sphere which reached its apogee in the ancient city state of Athens, more or less at the time of the Sophists, with heightened participation of large sections of the populace to assemblies where major issues were discussed and decided (even though attendance was reserved to non slave adult male citizens) it is now inexorably shrinking. What a human being is as a private person it is so much more important than what he is as a citizen. In most countries, people vote only once in a while and they have virtually no other participation in government. Furthermore, even that once in a while vote it is often made, in various ways, to become irrelevant by the competing private interests of major lobbies. There is certainly still much that we can learn from the love for wisdom of the ancient Greek Sophists: their capacity to analyse in a rational way every angle of the issues at stake. This is best highlighted in Plato's dialogues.

[16]Although no definitive evidence exists, we are now fairly certain that the state evolved because society had a practical need for it. As farming developed, people ceased their nomadic wanderings and private property became important. The state probably evolved as a way of organizing society to maximize the exploitation and distribution of resources, which had become limited when people stopped moving. Further, the instruments of the state (the law and government) were used to define, protect, and transfer property. Yet, in previous eras, philosophers and theologians explained the origins of the state in several other, more politically compelling ways to maximize the loyalty of citizens. There are probably some elements of truth in some of these myths; most of them, however, are demonstrably inaccurate, and some are even fanciful. True or not, however, these theories have been believed by people and have motivated their political behavior. The main theories about the origin of the state were: the natural theory, the force theory, the divine theory, the divine right of kings' theory, the social contract theory. See, for instance, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought,* pp.503-506, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

[17]This position seems, at least in part, more akin to Aristotle's view of the moral and political virtues as being the common possession of all the properly educated free citizens than to Plato's more elitist views. Eventually, this democratic traditionalism also influences the Roman republican thinking of Cicero, find some resonance in Thomist thought, and in common law thinking.

[18]Glaucon who is a character in *The Republic*, a longer dialogue divided into ten books, is Plato's elder brother.

[19]Plato, *Republic,* trans. G.M.A. Grube, bk. 2, 358e-359b.

[20]Callicles (c.484 - late 5th century B.C.E.) was an ancient Athenian political philosopher depicted as a young student of the sophist *Gorgias* in Plato's dialogue Gorgias. He argues in favor of an oligarchic amoralism which predicates that it is natural for the strong to dominate the weak and unfair to legislate to limit the power of the strong. His ideas, despite the scant surviving sources, influenced Friedrich Nietzsche, and also subsequently the elitist extreme right wing political views of Fascism and Nazism.

[21]Protagoras is considered the first great sophist and is a character in the homonymous 53 pages dialogue *Protagoras*.

[22]On the legal and political consequences of this on our contemporary societies and global politics, see, for instance: Rhoda E. Howard and Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights in World Politics", p.29 (29-46), in Robert J. Art, Robert Jervis, *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues,* New York: 6th Edition, Longman Pearson Education, 2003.

[23]The relevance of this question it is not confined only to political philosophy, but it is crucial for understanding the very nature of what is a human being. How we answer this question it is crucially important for all social sciences. Also the origin of the study of psychology can be traced to this debate about nature or nurture. Indeed, another way in which the ancient Sophists formulated this question was to ask whether human capabilities are inborn or acquired by experience. This is one of the fundamental problems to solve in order to define mental life, and the ancient preliminary stage from which modern psychology as the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes has developed. Even today, one of the current areas of enquiry is how nature and nurture combine to shape our behaviour and mental processes. See, for instance, Atkinson and Hilgard's, *Introduction to Psychology,* pp. 5-6, Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Belmont, CA, USA, 2003.

[24]Hans J. Morgenthau, "The moral blindness of scientific man" p.7.

[25]However, justice can mean different things to different people depending on the culture and context. It can usually be understood, especially in the west, in a broad and in a narrow sense. In the broad sense, it is a matter of distribution, or about who gets what, when, and how. In a narrow sense, it is about punishment for breaking the law, and about rules of truth and evidence to determine judgments in the law. See, for instance, Thomas M. Magstadt, *Understanding Politics: Ideas, Institutions, and Issues,* p.61, Boston: Wadsworth, International Edition, 2011.

[26]*Republic,* bk.4, 433-434. Interestingly, a definition of justice ostensibly similar, but in fact rooted in conceptually different premises, to the one given by Plato in *Republic* bk. 1 332: "justice is the giving to each man what is proper to him, and this he termed a debt", appears also in Hobbes' Leviathan but without directly mentioning Plato, where it is stated: "Justice is the constant Will of giving to every man his own". *Leviathan,* Part I, chap.15, p.202, London: Penguin Classics, 1985. The difference is that in Hobbes and in (much of) the subsequent Modern Philosophy, the rational foundation of justice does not lie as in Plato and Aristotle in a normative universal natural order, which in Medieval Islamic and Christian Philosophy clearly becomes the work of a creator God increasingly seen as the source of the rational order of things, but in the conventional and more subjective faculty of the Will according to a process of deliberation which answers to a formal notion of

reason as opposed to the classical substantive one, and which will ultimately lead to Hume's famous statement: "Reason is and ought to be the slave of passions". According to Hobbes, "the Will is the last appetite in Deliberation". Hobbes is a self-professed admirer of Plato and a critic of Aristotle blaming his influence, and that of Roman followers like Cicero, as the cause of subversion and turmoil in seventeenth century England. But, in fact, Hobbes is also an accomplished scholar of Aristotle having among other things also translated his *Rhetoric.*

[27]See, Plato, *Republic,* bk. VII, 519-520.

[28]Plato, *Crito or the Duty of a Citizen,* Trans. by Benjamin Jowett, p.16. Website: www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/…/plato/crito.p…See, also: http://ebooks.adelaide. edu.au/p/plato/p71cro/

[29]Political contractarianism based on an implicit promise died out during the nineteenth century. The legitimacy of government becomes determined by the justice of its actions, not by the contractual nature of its historical origins. First there never was such a contract. Secondly, a hypothetical promise in a 'hypothetical contract' is no promise at all, for no one has undertaken an obligation. I am obliged to keep my promises, not my hypothetical promises. What contemporary contract theorists such as John Rawls draw from earlier traditions it is not the emphasis on promising but the idea that obligations are conventional because they arise from the interactions of individuals who are naturally equal, and the fact that conventional obligations secure important human interests. For a brisk summary of the concerns of contemporary contractualism see, for instance, John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness", pp.187-202, in Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

[30]The idea that democracy is flawed because ordinary people are not competent enough to rule will be shared by the elite theorists of the 19th and 20th century. However, whilst Plato believed that democracy leads to bad governance, the later elite theorists argued that it is altogether an impossible foolish dream, because political power it is always exercised by a privileged minority. So Gaetano Mosca (1857-1941) argued that in all societies there are two classes of people: a class that governs and a class that it is governed. Even in a parliamentary democracy, a small and cohesive minority it is always able to control and manipulate the masses. Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) believed that the qualities needed to govern conformed to one of two psychological characters: the fox, who rules by cunning and it is able to manipulate the people, thus obtaining their consent; and/or the lion who rules by the use of force, that is to say, it manages to obtain the submission of the governed either by violent means, or even by simply inspiring fear. Robert Michels (1876-1936) described what he called "the iron rule of oligarchy". He maintained that in all organizations, however democratic they may seem, power will naturally concentrate in a small group of dominant figures rather than in the more apathetic rank and file members. Jose Ortega Y Gasset (1883-1955) argued, in similar fashion to Plato, that mass democracy has overthrown civilized society and the moral order, paving the way for authoritarian rulers that appeal to the basest instincts of the masses. See, for instance, Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory: An Introduction,* pp.231-233, 299, London: `Macmillan Press, 1999. There have been a number of answers to these criticisms of democracy. On one level, it is possible to argue that the idea that ordinary

people are not competent enough to rule it is, at least to some extent irrelevant, or missing the main point of representative democracy, because in fact people are not supposed to rule by themselves, but only to choose representatives which in turn will have to be able to select personnel competent enough to sort out problems according to the mandate bestowed on the representatives by the electors. Also, liberal democracies recognize the need to avoid what Alexis de Tocqueville described as "the tyranny of the majority", and afford some inalienable rights to minorities, thus eschewing at least the most obvious forms of authoritarianism. But the main argument against elitism operates at a more fundamental level. It is based on a different normative principle than the one assumed by the elitists. That is to say, it is based on a fundamental axiomatic principle that assumes the moral equality of all human beings against the more conservative notion of natural hierarchy advocated by the elite thinkers from Plato on to Ortega Y Gasset. Among others, John Rawls has examined and clarified the ethical and political implications of this principle of equality. See, John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness", pp.187-202.

[31]See, *Republic,* bk. IX, 582-3.

[32]Plato's abolition of private property among the philosopher-rulers inspired Sir Thomas More's philosophical romance *Utopia* written in 1514-1515, and the work of the anti-Aristotelian astrologist, heterodox Dominican monk, and staunch supporter of Galileo's heliocentric views, Tommaso Campanella entitled *The City of the Sun*, originally written in Italian in 1602, published in Latin in Frankfurt in 1623, and later Paris in 1638. These Renaissance works portray an ideal state where private property is altogether abolished. Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella thus, in some respect, pre-figured ideas later developed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848.

[33]*Republic,* bk. V 473.

[34]Yet, the appeal to so called, usually by (self)definition of interested parties, enlightened elites, supposedly in possession of greater wisdom and capacity than ordinary people, as national saviors against the corruption and self-interest of leaders appointed by the masses is proving against all odds as extraordinarily resilient. Of course, this resilience lasts only up until the enlightened elites are themselves put to test. The remedy they provide it is indeed, usually, fatally flawed.

[35]It may be useful at this point to include some observations on Plato's and Aristotle's methods of enquiry referring to their different metaphysical assumptions and their role for the rise of modern science in general and modern political science in particular. Plato's thought was fixed upon the static realm of timeless being, whereas Aristotle oriented his thought towards the dynamic realm of becoming. Accordingly, Aristotle's whole metaphysics depends on his substitutions of the notions of the causes and of actuality and potentiality for the work of Plato's forms. The simplification of outer reality by the senses is necessary for practical survival and activity; however it is a hard and counterintuitive business to wrestle for a theoretical understanding of what in nature lies beyond the senses, which is the task of science. Because of his width of knowledge, intelligence and conformity to common sense observations Aristotle came to be the predominant figure in European scientific thought for centuries. By turning away from Plato's transcendentalism (despite his espousal of an unmoved moving God) Aristotle also turned away from Platonic skepticism about

ordinary language and perception. However, it is also true that such skepticism it is a condition of fresh thinking about the world.

If this is the case, it may seem odd that modern science has arisen in the West given that Indian thinkers, especially the Buddhists, had earlier expressed a much more modern approach to language and perception than the western one. However, in the West scientific Aristotelianism and scholasticism never completely wiped out the influence of the anti-dogmatic attitude engendered by Plato's skepticism about ordinary language and perception, and this provided some impetus to scientific researches which challenged conventional wisdom. But, arguably, the most important factor for the rise of modern science is the contradictions which appeared so sharply in Western philosophy because of the Renaissance and its aftermath. These contradictions were tied with an emergent and highly rationalistic account of God which stemmed from Aquinas. This rationalistic account of God paved the way for a questioning of the universe as probably displaying the mind of God and hence conforming to rational patterns.

[36]Aristotle, *Politics,* bk. 1, 1253a 2-3; 1256b 20-21.

[37]It could be very schematically said that in the ancient and medieval world the dominant answer and associated paradigm was the Aristotelian assumption that because "man is a political animal", state and society are natural institutions, reflecting the natural order of things. Modern philosophy, instead, from Grotius and Hobbes onwards, signalled by developing the social contract theory a paradigm shift: a move from the idea of an objective natural order to the centrality of the conventional role of the political will in the establishment of the institutions of government. Eventually, from Hume onwards, the idea of a clear cut social contract was abandoned, but the centrality and sovereignty of the political will of the people has remained as a fundamental principle of all democracies. However, the idea of the natural rights of every human being to political freedom and human dignity has remained as equally important in the development of liberal theory. The combination of popular will (by convention) and respect for human (natural) rights and freedoms constitutes the moral and political aim of liberal democracies. It also represents the contemporary ideal synthesis and legacy of the ancient debate about whether state and society are or should be by convention or by nature. Of course, the problem now is moving from the realm of the programmatic ideals to the realm of practical application, or put it in Hegelian terms moving from the abstract to the concrete.

[38]Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, bk. I, 1098a 16-20.

[39]Although it was made up of interacting individuals, the state to the ancient Greeks was actually greater than any single person or any group. It became an entity with a life, rights, and obligations apart from those of the people it served. This organic theory of the state was later supported by diverse people such as Thomas Aquinas, Rousseau, and Mussolini. Some leftists, today, also still often refer to the organic society.

[40]However, the thesis of human moral worth, at least in the sense of fullest moral worth, is not applied universally to human beings by Plato and Aristotle: it is withheld or restricted, for example, in the case of 'natural' slaves, of women, and even of common laborers. The tendency of much later Western moral and ethical thought, especially following the spread of Christianity, has been toward increas-

ingly making universal this thesis of human moral worth. In later thought, human moral worth has not always been so closely tied to enculturation or socialization into a moral community. It is by and large as a result of the development of these ideas that a central issue in the history of Western political philosophy is the import of the thesis of human moral worth with respect to two questions concerning political decision-making: who should be making decisions directed toward the common good and how should the content and scope of these decisions respect the thesis of human moral worth?

41See, Aristotle, *Politics,* 3.9.1280a31-b12.

42Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1.3.1131a 25-29.

43But even assuming that this should be the case, how and by who should these qualities be assessed? Furthermore, from Machiavelli and the theorists of the 'Reason of State' such as Guicciardini, Hegel, Morgenthau, etc. onwards, the very notion of what is to be virtuous, and of virtue itself has become contentious in the political realm. Statecraft has often been frighteningly at odds with morality. The Aristotelian practical wisdom, or excellence in all human behaviour, if it ever did, no longer seems to operate in statecraft. But do we still need it? The jury is still out on this, as there no longer seems to be consensus about moral objectivity because, as I have argued in one of my previous papers about Hobbes, the rise of modernity is characterized by a dichotomy between the recognition of the moral subjectivism characterizing human behaviour and the supposed objectivity of the natural word as described by science. See also, Giuseppe Mario Saccone, "Hobbes and the rise of modernity": 'once liberalism has surrendered any belief in objective truths, all personal subjective beliefs become true. The result is that, on the positive side, the only way you can take decisions is according to your own conscience. But on the negative side, once [if] all things are equally valid, the only way to attain supremacy is through war and power'. In other words, as Nietzsche said, might is right. This remains a problem. The winners always get the spoils and also write history. But, on the other hand, this is not always strictly true. For instance, Spartacus lost his final battle, but became the archetypical symbol of the still enduring struggle against all forms of slavery. The same can be said about Socrates and many others, including above all for Christians Jesus Himself. Anyway, most importantly, wars are not fought only by sword, or short term success, but also by long term cultural legacies.

44After Aristotle, the theory of natural law was developed by the Stoics, Cicero, and Aquinas. Eventually, with the rise of modernity, the demands of natural law came to be expressed through the idea of natural rights. Natural rights were thought to be invested in humankind either by God or by nature. This is the line of thought followed by Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, and Thomas Jefferson. See, for instance, Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

45With the rise of modern philosophy, starting from the 17th century, there is a break in the Aristotelian unity of knowledge. Science becomes the realm of objectivity, whereas ethics and politics start becoming the realm of values and subjectivity. Eventually, the Aristotelian model will be criticized by Hume for falling into the trap of unduly deriving what we ought to do from what it is, and similarly for falling into what later the 20th century ethicist G.E. Moore will call the naturalistic fallacy. Alleg-

edly, we fall into the naturalistic fallacy trap, by attempting to make factual information the basis for social and moral imperatives. Modern philosophy from Galileo, Bacon, on to Hume considers this as a failure to recognize the essential difference between science and the humanities and, by implication, the essential nature of science as aiming at objective value-free knowledge of the natural world. An approach based on the naturalistic fallacy is likely to subvert both true science and a proper understanding of the source of value in the lived experience of generations of human beings. See, for instance: Donald Palmer, *Why it's hard to be good: an introduction to ethical theory,* pp.10-15, New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006.

[46]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics.* bk. I, 1094a 2-3.

[47]Aristotle, *Rhetoric,* trans. W. Rhys Roberts, 1.10.1368b8-9

[48]*Ibidem,* 1.1373b6-9.

[49]Both Plato and Aristotle understood the structure of the *polis*, and indeed moral goodness itself in terms of the fulfillment of the purpose of human nature (as virtue ethicists such as the Neo-Aristotelian Alasdair MacIntyre, Rosalind Hursthouse, Elizabeth Anscombe, Nel Noddings, and Linda Zagzebski have done recently). However, on the one hand, Plato introduces a form of political rationalism which would later also lead to the development of philosophies centered on the role of rational intuition in our quest for knowledge. And moral rationalism will find its apogee in Emmanuel Kant. On the other hand, Aristotle argues in favor of a form of proto-political empiricism which could be seen also as inspiring the evolution of moral empiricism which will later culminate in the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, which though will ultimately bypass the classical moral and political theories.

[50]Of course, having been for a while the tutor of Alexander, Aristotle could not have been overtly hostile to the Macedonian conquest. In fact, it seemed to have been very supportive of this conquest by advising Alexander to handle respectfully the citizens of the Greek cities, whilst he recommended ignoring the interests of the foreigners living there. After the death of Alexander, a hostile democratic faction came into power in Athens, and Aristotle, having thus lost political favor and protection, was exiled. He went to live in his family estate in Chalcis, where he died one year later, in 322 B.C.E.

[51]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* book, I, 1094a 1-3, b 6-7.

[52]Aristotle, website: members.tripod.com/batesca/Aristotle.html

[53]Of course, the thesis of human moral worth, universal for us, it is severely restricted in Aristotle. In its fullest sense, it is the prerogative only of the properly educated Greek citizens. A large majority of the population is at least in part excluded from this moral worth and the liberty which it entails. For Aristotle, women are (supposed to be) inherently deficient in regard to this, and so are the natural slaves. (Plato has a different take on women, but only if they belong to the philosophers' class.) According to Aristotle (and Plato concerning slaves), some men are slaves by nature, and it is therefore permissible to make them slaves in fact. It follows that slaves may enjoy a good life only if they have good masters; they are not supposed to have either liberty or rights on their own.

[54]Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* Prima Secundae Partis, Q.61.

[55]Here principle democrats are intended as those who following from the

ideas of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau believe that the process of making decisions is only part of democracy itself. Accordingly, principle democrats argue that what should be considered as most important are the basic goals of democracy, such as ensuring the freedom and independence of individuals, including for later thinkers (from Jeremy Bentham onwards) promoting social welfare. Process democrats are those considering democracy simply as a process by which decisions are made on a popular mandate. Their historical inspiration would come from the more conservative Edmund Burke and James Madison who wrote after the first generation of democratic theorists already somehow set the foundational principles of democracy itself. See, Leon P. Baradat, *Political Ideologies: Their origins and impact,* p.62, Eight Edition, Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2003. According to process democrats, democracy would thus be more of a path than a destination. I think that Aristotle's position, although not unequivocally advocating any form of democracy, being more a forerunner of mixed constitutionalism, could nevertheless arguably be seen more akin to the one of process democrats. On the other hand, if my interpretation is correct, Plato being closer to the elite theorists would more definitely be equally hostile to both principle and process democrats. However, this does not necessarily reflect the way in which the history of political theory has actually developed. The above mentioned principle democrats of classical liberalism variously advocated, or were at least partially inspired by the social contract theory of Grotius and Hobbes which, in turn, arguably and paradoxically finds some initial inspiration in the contractualist position described in Plato's dialogues in order to be rejected both on moral and rational grounds by Socrates and Plato himself. Process democrats and many of the theorists of the separation between legislative, judicial and executive powers were inspired by Charles Montesquieu who was a self-avowed admirer of Aristotle's political philosophy. Thus the entire history of western political philosophy and indeed of philosophy itself could be seen as a continuous dialogue and /or unfolding dialectics between the influences of Plato and Aristotle.

[56]In regard to this, as the leftist neo-Marxist theory of Noam Chomsky (1928) points out, once the public sphere it is made to shrink, alas, it is reinforced the principle that no matter who is in government the small guy gets screwed by the various rich and powerful private individuals, pace Socrates, with Callicles' posthumous blessings. It is of little comfort that, of course, different governments allow different levels of exploitation giving more or less leeway to the various local very important persons to directly or indirectly screw their workforce and also more generally civil society by diverting precious collective resources to their own private, often idiosyncratic enterprises. The common good is often the main casualty of this unhindered privatization process.