



## THE ORGANIC THEORY OF STATE AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION: THE CASE OF PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

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### ABSTRACT

This article examined the organic theory of state as one of the philosophical theories of state in western intellectual tradition. It focused on the classical version associated with Plato and Aristotle and teased out its relevance for understanding the origin and form of the state.

**Keywords:** organic, theory, state and philosophy.

## INTRODUCTION

There are several philosophical theories of the state. Each gives its own account of the origin and form of the state; and each also is a response to the socio-political problems specific to each principal historical epoch or period. A philosophical theory of state is that kind of theory that deals with a subject matter in a holistic way and in which the idea of the state is emphasized in abstract. It focuses on how the state comes into being or existence, and how it maintains itself or dies through either an external aggression or attack or; on the other hand, through, internal disagreement or conflict. The organic theory of state for example recognizes human elements as part or organs of the state. That is to say that such element of the state performs a specific function. Together, these organs or elements, make –up the state. Among organic theorists are Plato and Aristotle (classical tradition), Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (Liberal tradition), Hegel (Dialectical tradition) and Marx (Instrumentalist tradition). This paper examines the classical tradition of the organic theory of state against the background of the contributions of Plato and Aristotle to the philosophical tradition.

### **The Classical Tradition of Organic Theory of State:**

The classical tradition of the organic theory of state was developed with specific reference to the historical problem of the ancient Greek societies. The ancient Greek societies attained their golden age during the time of Pericles in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C described by writers as the grand century. Of this century, Stobert (1962) says “never in all the world’s history was there such a leap of civilization as in Greece of the fifty century”. It was shortly after this time that the Greeks of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC started experiencing a theoretical revolution against the background of the crises that engulfed the Greek cities states in the Peloponnesian war and its aftermaths (Thucydides, 1952).

Thus, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C all the glory and Splendour that was Greece of the 5<sup>th</sup> century had unfortunately given way to chaos and crisis; to corruption and decadence, and to friction and mutual destruction of society. The problems of the Greek society of the 4<sup>th</sup> century to which Plato and Aristotle responded with their moral – ethical Philosophy were many and varied. By their philosophical system of ideas, they sought to explore the connections between the principles, politics and institutions of society/state, which reveals a socio-economic and political background and conditions.

The conditions were such that there was social differentiation among the people in terms of social inequalities in wealth, power, privileges and opportunities. More importantly, there was great disparity in the control of economic, political and social resources especially wealth, prestige and oratorical abilities, which were keys to political success. This was made possible by the emergence of slavery (both natural and conventional as in Aristotelean view) as the dominant mode of production and the preponderance of democracy (in the ancient sense of the word) as the prevailing idea. The ideology of democracy (especially at the time of Cleon and the Thirty Tyrants) emphasizes the pervasion of obligations and liberties and the rule of

laws and control of political power by a class of people least fit to govern. According to Plato and Aristotle (but especially Plato), they are least fit to govern because they lack the knowledge of virtue, of what is beautiful, and of what is just. And also, because their policies were informed by their passions rather than their reason. Consequently, this led to some problems which pushed the Athenian society and by extension the entire Greek societies from the ways of discipline and civilization to a culture of violence, wars, immorality, injustice and crass materialism such that replicates the views of Hobbes and Machiavellia on human nature in modern times. Hobbes for instance, writes To this war of everyman against everyman this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice has there no place... force and fraud, are in war the two cardinal virtues ... for everyman by natural necessity desire that which is good for him.

This view of Hobbes and that which holds that men are selfish and capricious and are moved more by their desires and appetites rather than their reasons was true of the ancient Athenian society of the fourth century B.C. The acquisitive nature of the traditional leading aristocratic families, their covetousness and absence of moral consciousness amongst them but especially the Thirty Tyrants, were the major causes of Athen's predicament of political stasis in the fourth century. The Thirty Tyrants ruled with strong handedness, banished their political enemies and began a system of private plunder. In consequence, Athens which Pericles said in his funeral oration for the first victims of the Peloponnesian war was the school of Hellas and its concept of discipline and civilization, turned from the development of human mind to the lust for wealth and power.

These problems tasked the intellect of Plato divine and his ablest student Aristotle to embark on developing an incontrovertible theory of state with a view to proffering solutions to the problems that characterized the once glorious city states of Greece.

Theoretically, there was a vigorous critique of the ancient Greek City – state, particularly, its institutions and values. The Sophists represented by Antiphon and Thrasymachus pointed out the difference between what was natural to man and what was superficial (i.e conventional) to him. They (the Sophists) argued that the *Pleasure* of the individual was natural to him and that the pursuit of self-interest was, also a natural rule of life. The state and its laws and institutions according to the Sophists, were simply mere conventions. To them, the state and its laws were impositions which obstructed the liberty of others (Stocks; Robin 1957, Armstrong, 1957).

In a similar vein, another philosophical school known as the Cynics and represented by Diogenes and Anthiatenes pushed the Sophist theory of state forward by arguing that the wiseman needs nothing other than his thoughts to live a self-sufficient ( a self-sufficing) life. According to the Cynics, the wiseman must not obey the state and its laws since they are not necessary for his happy life. From all intent and purpose, it may be said that the Cynics theory of State was also a subversive theory, since it sought to annihilate the state with its nihilistic philosophy (Oates, 1940).

But against the background of these theories of revolt, Plato and Aristotle invoked their great intellectual might and sought to restore the cherished ideals of the once glorious city –states. They theorized that the state exists to further the goodness of the individual and that the purpose of the state is to secure the right manners for its citizens to live a perfect life. Hence, the state itself becomes an ethical-moral state and the individual cannot be separated from it. The state is ethical because it teaches the individual ethics of moral perfection.

### **The Platonian Theory of State:**

On the origin of the state and how it functions properly, Plato in the Republic says; A State I said, arises, as I conceive, out of the needs of mankind: no one is self-sufficing, but all of us have many wants. Then as we have many wants, and many persons are needed to supply them, one takes a helper for one purpose and another; and when these partners and helpers are gathered together in one habitation the body of inhabitants is termed a state.... And they exchange with one another, and one gives, and another receives, under the idea that the exchange will be for their good. (p.149).

From the above, it can easily be seen that for Plato, the state comes into being on account of *economic necessity* of men but grows on account of *luxury*. The *exchange* which individuals in the state need for mutual co-existence and upon which the state functions properly is that based on the *division of labour*. Plato delineates six critical functions to be performed by individuals and which when performed become organs of the state.

#### **These are:**

1. The farmers – produce what society eat (food)
2. The Bakers – process the food produced by farmer
3. The carpenters – Build houses for the society
4. The tailors – make cloths for the people
5. The cobblers – make shoes for society
6. The Blacksmith – produces equipment in which others use to do other functions

When these functions which can be broken into different levels, are brought together, then the state will come into being. But for Plato, a state of the above nature, will be one which will be close to a sedimentary society. And for him, if we want a better life, then we should “bring in people who are specialized in a particular function or role. Thus, for the sake of the specialized function and proper functionality of the State, Plato stratified the individuals in the State into three classes: the *economic class*, the *military class* and the *guardian class* of philosopher-rulers. This corresponds to the tripartite division of the human soul. While the economic class also called the money –making class made up of producers as well as the first class to emerge in a state, supply the basic needs of the state and by so doing fulfill the demands of the appetitive nature of man; the military class defends the state against external aggression and maintains internal order

and peace.

Finally, there comes the guardian class of philosopher rulers. Since the class is engaged in abstract philosophical speculation, it is able to understand the true harmony of the universe, and apply them in the conduct of human affairs especially politics which is described by Finley (1973) as the highest human activity. For it is in the training and organization of power and political activities by the philosopher-rulers that justice is achieved in the state.

But how would the philosopher rulers be produced in a just State? Plato assigns this task to the educational institution, which selects the children of gold and silver elements among men in contradistinction to the baser elements of ordinary humanity or the vulgar crowd. This is because, Plato believed that men were brought out of earth like the metals they represent – Gold, Silver and Bronze. This is what Plato calls the Royal lie in the political myth of the metals for which critics such as Fite (1934), Crossman (1959) and Popper (1974) have criticized him as a mere piece of propaganda. Thereafter, the Guardians in whichever class they are identified are to be trained in music, athletics, dancing, singing and such others as would imbibe the qualities of wisdom, courage, temperance and justice in them. Thus, the philosopher rulers are imbued with the ability to know the truth, discern the true forms (ideas) that shape all things human and divine. Thus was laid the theoretical foundation of the classical state theory, which has had far reaching significance for the understanding of the organic state theory and the philosophical tradition (Guthrie, 1969; Foster, 1935; Bosanquet, 1899).

### **The Aristotlean Theory of State:**

The Platonian state theory was further enhanced by Aristotle. The Aristotlean theory of State is sharp and turns out very neat. Aristotle developed a theory which culminated in the view of the State as a supreme community of citizens which is the product of nature. Against the background of the radical view (i.e, the views of the Sophists and Cynics as in Cornfield, 1953) which had already found favour in ancient Greece, Aristotle puts forward a theory that the state is the Telos of man which man himself cannot grow outside of it. Here, Telos implies the end point as well as the reference point of the State which is the individual enlarged or magnified. Infact, in Aristotle's theory of Teleology, Telos implies the finished and matured form of a thing. It is the finished completion of the potential and therefore, it is natural. Aristotle argues the naturalness of the State by showing that it is the actualization of man's instincts for a gregarious life (Ndu, 2004). The potential of man for group life finds its first impression in the family which comes into being by the operation of the law of the Immanent Impulse and the law of superordination and subordination. Through the law of the Immanent impulse, the family is borne out of man's natural urge or desire to preserve and procreate/propagate life. Here, the reproductive instincts brings together man and woman as husband and wife. Similarly, the instinct for self-preservation operating under the law of superordination and subordination, brings together master and slave, i.e the provident mind, and the sturdy body- for mutual aid. In all, we have an association of three persons as the family and household, which is the first institution, and

which exists to provide the daily recurrent needs –food, shelter and cloths. The family and its households expands through its internal dynamics, produces the village and with it, the society comes into being and there is the development of exchange; a proper economy begins, and as the economic system develops, culture also comes in, and the issue of justice and rationality also comes in. The village in turn grows and develops into an association of villages which invariably becomes the state or ‘polis’ Thus, the unfolding of man’s potential for better life or good and perfect life manifested first in the family and later, in the village, and finds its ultimate consummation in the association of the villages – the State. Hence, the State, for Aristotle (1982) is the finished completion of man’s potentials for good life. The state is the natural home of man.

For Aristotle, the State exists to give or provide man with full self-sufficiency. This means that the individual can only be self-sufficient within the state which gives him meaning and relevance. It is only at the level of the State that laws come into being in society. Outside the State, the human being is just like any other animal (ie. a beast). The State, by the agency of law, transforms the individual into a human person. The law has a habituating influence on the individual and the more he obeys the law, the more obedience becomes a second nature to him.

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that the Aristotelean theory of state is pervaded by the idea of nature as the driving force of man. The laws of nature move man and man obeys the natural law. The hallmark of man is the employment of his Reason by which the laws of nature are expressed. Aristotle says that man is at his best when according to the law of nature, man employs his reasoning power and associate in the state. Since the state is the supreme association of all communities, it aims at the highest good for those in it because nature always aims at the best. The instrument by which this aim can be achieved is the law. The law is the will of nature articulated and pronounced by the citizens. The law ensures that everyman achieves a good life. In order to promote common good therefore, Aristotle invested sovereignty on the people. The citizens possess the natural right to participate in the administration and government of the State. The citizens are the integral part of the human elements that make up the State after the necessary conditions (ie the economic aspects of state formation have been satisfied.

They are the real and proper citizens who acquired citizenship of the State on account of consanguinity and linguistic affinity. For Aristotle, citizenship is limited only to those who have property and leisure and therefore fit for virtue.

Aristotle, also categorized the State into six forms of government, three of which are good, and three are bad. The good forms are:

- Monarchy - Government by one best man
- Aristocracy - Government by the few best men
- Polity - Government by the many good men (the middle class)

The bad ones are:

- Tyranny - Government by one lawless man
- Oligarchy - Government by the few rich men
- Democracy - Government by the many poor

For Aristotle, 'polity' is the best of all the forms of State.

## CONCLUSION

Since the crisis of the city – states of the 5th - 4th century bordered on the ascendancy of the political, be it of the community, state, roles, authorities and individuals, over all other competing claims between states, groups and individuals, the Platonian and Aristotlean theories of state were to discover grounds upon which the political, especially the ethical – moralist state should exercise authority over its members in order to protect man from the uncertainties, deprivations and miseries of this world. In other words, Plato and Aristotle had the objective of providing a basis why for example, the political bond should be placed over and above others in society; the political role over all roles of kinship, religion, occupation and place; the political intellectual over all other intellectuals, the political authority over all competing social and cultural authorities. They had a valid problem of social disorder, dislocation and disillusionment resulting from the inexperience and lack of knowledge of the nature of things, of what was good and just on the part of the rulers of the City-State. Their theories of state were therefore a plea to remedy the seemingly endless civil strife through the rationalization and justification of the naturalness of the state as the basis for a perfect moral life and the realization of justice in society. Infact, it was right and proper that Plato and Aristotle should develop the contention that the ethical –moralist state as basis for the realization of perfect life was in the interest of all in the society as well as justified in organic nature and hierarchy of things. Using their great intellectual might, they did this as best as they could within the philosophical tradition. It will be recalled that their philosophies were infact, an exhortation to rulers of the state to follow and pursue philosophy. In this regard, Plato for instance, based his theory of the political leadership of the state not on the natural equality of all men or heredity. Instead he derives a philosopher – ruler through a classificatory principle of natural inequality in talent, ability and skill and a special educational programme, which enables the philosopher – ruler to know what justice is. To Plato this was logical given the nature of man which he saw as mingled with some sting of savagery and irrationality. Justice whether at the level of the individual or State is the only force that could ensure harmony, order and peace in society. This objective is central to Plato and Aristotle in their theories of State and explains their idea of the good or “the form of the good” (as in Plato) or the idea of law (as in Aristotle) as the ultimate principle of their philosophies being at once the source of all being and of all knowledge. It would be out of context to assess their contributions towards a philosophical system of states and by extension, towards discipline and civilization in Western intellectual discourse outside the circumstances of their writings and in isolation from the task they set out to achieve as most critics have done. For according to G.C. Field, “the chief aim of Plato’s Philosophy may be regarded as the attempt to re-

establish standards of thought and conduct for a civilization that seemed on the verge of dissolution". The same applies to Aristotle also.

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