
PLATO: A TOTALITARIAN OR DEMOCRATIC ?

Mahek Nanda

Shivaji College, University of Delhi

Article Received: 19/01/2025

Article Accepted: 18/02/2025

Published Online: 19/02/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.247

Abstract

This paper critically examines the common critique that Plato's political philosophy is totalitarian by nature. It scrutinizes Karl Popper's assertion that Plato's ideas promote an authoritarian, closed society by highlighting the absence of coercive mechanisms—such as secret police, harsh punishments, or militaristic controls—in his works. The paper reveals how his theory of justice and his vision for the state centres around well trained philosopher king and education aims for welfare and moral development of its citizens. The study argues that while certain aspects of his thought might superficially appear authoritarian, Plato ultimately advocates for an ideal state that transcends simple democratic or totalitarian classifications.

Keywords: Totalitarian, Democratic, philosophy, classifications

Plato, (428/7 BC - 348/7 BC), is an extraordinary Greek philosopher of his time. He is one of the most creative and influential thinker of political philosophy . He is known as the Father of Western Political Thought. Plato is an idealist ,for he laid down the political idealism in the west. Owing to his idealistic nature of understanding state and its phenomena, there have been greater amount of critique he had to face. **Karl Popper** (“The Open Society and It's Enemies”) and **R.H.S Crossman** (“Plato today”) are the strongest modern critiques of Plato.

The most dreading critique of Plato is that he is considered a totalitarian. Here , I would like to present some counter-arguments dealing with the assumption that , Is Platonic theory really a way to totalitarianism or is it just a presumption?

Totalitarianism is a type of political regime based on the subordination of the individual to the state and strict control of all aspects of the life and productive capacity of the nation especially by coercive measures such as censorship and terrorism (*Merriam Webster*).

Karl Popper has devastatingly criticized Plato by calling him an enemy of open society and an anti-democratic. But if Plato were truly a totalitarian, then he would have built a police state or a military state, would have made provisions for secret police, would have suggested harsh punishments, or have provided concentrated camps or establish terrorism or coercive forces. But in reality, neither Plato nor his platonic theory have suggested any of these instruments for the state.

Conversely, Plato is considered a highly influential philosopher with great zeal of promoting the Scheme of Education and justice and called a feminist. He gave a proper scheme of education for all the members of the society including women and artisan class, unlike Aristotle. The scheme of education played a vital role in becoming the self aware, skilled, intellectual, and a just person. Moreover, this scheme of education is advanced for the philosopher kings and queens. Plato holds the view that a ruler should know the art of ruling. He should have sound experience of politics, administration, exposure to the practical world with the knowledge of philosophy, literature and art.

A ruler possessing profound knowledge and extensive training cannot act as a tyrant in governing the state, as his actions would be geared towards the benefit and well-being of the nation.

Another opposing viewpoint arises from Plato's Theory of Justice. Had he aimed to establish a totalitarian regime, he would not have delved into such a comprehensive theory of justice, which aims at fostering peace, equilibrium, virtuous and a morally upright society.

In Platonic theory, there has been no mention of military or coercion or any other type of authoritative activity. Another point raised against Popper's thesis was that Plato did not exalt the state as the end-all of human life; i.e., he did not conceive of the state as an organic entity with the individual members of the state. (*Plato and Totalitarianism: A Comment Upon Basic Issues by Byrum E. Carter*)

Plato's philosopher king is tasked with laboring for the well-being of its populace and realm, while simultaneously disentangling oneself from all the mundane and material possessions such as land, riches and kin.

Plato's state provide certain opportunities to its citizens in terms of education, justice, autonomy, well-trained philosopher king or queen and many more.

Conclusion

Plato and his works have tremendous impact on the political philosophy. He was a brilliant writer with splendid understanding of concept of state. Plato's state is an idealistic state but not an utopia.

Some concepts of platonic theory might have hinted towards an authoritative state but we cannot deny the fact that Plato has exclusively promoted the welfare of state through number of enlightening concepts of education, asceticism, need for justice and Form of Good, a well-drilled, experienced and proficient philosophic king, and establishment of ideal state so that individual can live in harmony and attain the enlightenment. In my opinion, Plato is neither a totalitarian nor a democratic philosopher.

Even if we found that Plato's political theory is totalitarian, we should not turn from the study of platonic philosophy. Plato has contributed far more to man than a political philosopher. (*Plato and Totalitarianism: A Comment Upon Basic Issues* by Byrum E. Carter)

References:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41884387>, (*Plato and Totalitarianism: A Comment Upon Basic Issues* by Byrum E. Carter)

Citation:

Mahek Nanda " PLATO: A TOTALITARIAN OR DEMOCRATIC ?" *International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2025, pp. 245-247. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.247.