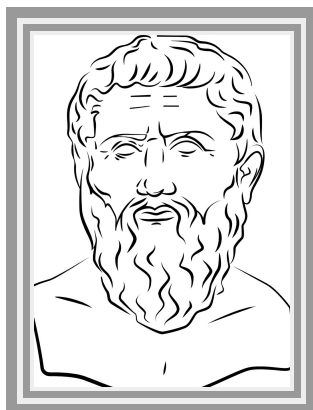


*corvus oculum corvi non eruit.*<sup>1</sup>

## Classical Thought<sup>2</sup> Plato (428BC – 347BC) 4



### Plato's View of Politics

#### The Three Divisions

Plato taught that the soul had three divisions.<sup>3</sup> He also thought that society had three divisions that correspond to or reflect the three divisions of the soul.

SOUL	SOCIETY
reason	reasonable people = intellectuals or philosophers
appetite	People governed by appetite = merchants
Temperament or volition (will)	People governed by will = soldiers and slaves, those who take orders

#### Who should Rule?

As you see from the chart Plato thought that not everyone had reason governing the soul. He distinguished two other types. These three, he said, make up society. The best society, according to Plato is one where the reasonable people govern the other two kinds. This is the idea that he put forward in his book *The Republic*. Just as reason must be the charioteer of the soul so the philosopher must be in charge of the direction of the state.

#### The State and Religion

Plato wanted to move away from the idea that the state was identified with religion. This was how it was in his day. Plato had witnessed Socrates die because he was thought to be irreligious. This was because Socrates opposed the “common sense” view of his fellow citizens and questioned how things were governed. To question the state was to question religion.

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<sup>1</sup> A crow will not pick out the eye of another crow. Anon.

<sup>2</sup> These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnw.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr. Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

<sup>3</sup> See Term 2 Week 6 Day 4

Plato wanted the state to be identified with reason and philosophy. When we looked at Plato's ethic<sup>4</sup> we saw that if human nature is not morally good at base intuitions are not necessarily reliable as a source of knowing what is good. Plato's answer was education. That raises the question who should do the educating. Now Plato's answer to the question becomes clear: philosophers. Philosophy is the salvation for the individual and for the state.

### **Character of Plato's State**

What kind of state did Plato envisage? Plato's state is the dominant institution in the citizen's life. Because it knows better than the citizen, it controls the raising of children and even marriage. When we read *The Republic* we see a description of a communistic, despotic tyranny where there is no freedom for the individual.

### **The Christian View**

How should a Christian comment on Plato's ideas? When the state takes upon it tasks that God has never told it to do, it does them very poorly and everyone suffers. The Christian view is that the state should be connected with religion but not in the ancient Greek manner where religion is whatever the state says. The Christian puts it the other way round. The state should do what the religious authority – God's Word – tells it to do. The state should be subject to God not to the philosophers. This will give law and order balanced with individual freedom.

### **Importance of Plato**

You have now studied the philosophy of Plato. It has not always been easy to understand but it is very good to have a grasp of it if you can. Over the next thousand years the philosophy of Plato and of his pupil Aristotle<sup>5</sup> dominated thinking, sadly even Christian thinking, paving the way in large measure for the errors of the Roman Catholic Church which controlled the Western World until the Reformation.

### **Exercise:**

Talk to you parents: can they help you identify any societies, today or in the past, which control aspects of the citizen's life such as how many children they are allowed to have and how they should be educated? What is it like to live in such a society?

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4 See Term 2 Week 6 Day 4

5 See Term 2 Week 8 Day 4