

The Influence of the Rationalist Philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and the Roman Stoics on the Western Political Tradition

by Dr W B Vosloo*, Wollongong, November 2015

The major legacy of the ancient Greeks and Romans to Western civilisation lies in their efforts to tame man and nature through the application of reason. They were the first to go beyond personal observation and experience to apply the analytical skills of science and philosophy to discern the recurrent regularities of natural and human phenomena that constitute to this day one of the distinctive elements of western civilisation. They also pioneered the systematic study of politics.

Plato

The first treatise that attempted to apply systematic reasoning and critical inquiry into political ideas and institutions is to be found in Plato's Republic. It is based on the assumption that the "right" kind of government and politics can be legitimate objects of rigorous rational analysis: that political and social issues can be clarified by argument rather than by force and dogma. They demonstrated that man's intellect can discover the nature of the good life and the means of attaining it by philosophical inquiry. Plato proceeded by using the Socratic approach based on *docta ignorantia*, seeking answers to basic questions with an open mind.

Plato's Republic focuses on the central question, "What is justice?" In his theory of justice the relations of man to nature, to the polis, and his fellow men, form an architectonic whole. It responds to a cynical challenge that what is considered as "just" and "right" means nothing but "what is to the interest of the stronger party".

Plato's response is the answer of a democratic sceptic. Plato believes that the capacity to govern is possessed by only a small class based on selective breeding. This hereditary aristocratic ruling class, according to Plato, on the foundation of their superior character and rational knowledge, has the capacity to use the speculative and intuitive faculties of the philosophical person to rule those who do not possess these capacities. The most famous passage in the Republic, which summarises Plato's conception of a society in which the best rule, states that if the vision of the Good is the highest form of human activity, "... there can be no rest from troubles" for states or for all mankind, "...unless either philosophers become kings in their countries or those who are now kings and rulers come to be sufficiently inspired with a genuine desire for wisdom...".

In Plato's classification of forms of state, anarchy is the worst and democracy the second worst type of government. He maintained that democracy is "... an agreeable form of anarchy with plenty and variety and an equality of a peculiar kind for equals and unequals alike". He regarded the fluid, changeable and speculative understanding of truth which prevails in democracies to open the path to dissolution and disintegration. Its members forget that they are not merely individuals with rights and liberties, but also social beings with duties and obligations. Plato's critique of democracy is certainly full of sound warnings. He showed how difficult the achievement of a "just" life of freedom and fellowship can be and thereby performed a major service to the cause of democracy.

Aristotle

No less important is the legacy of Aristotle (384-322BC) for the development of Western political thought. Educated in Athens at Plato's Academy, he spent time acting as tutor to the future Alexander the Great, son of King Philip of Macedon. Aristotle founded his own school, the Lyceum, in Athens. His best known treatise on government is The Politics which displayed the same basic values as those held by Plato. Life's highest purpose is the achievement of virtue by which he meant morality, which he understood as consisting chiefly of the possession and exercise of rationality. The realisation of virtue, so defined, he thought to be possible only through membership in a just (that is rationally and morally organised) political community. Man is an innately social animal meant for political association since every creature's highest virtue lies in the completest possible fulfilment of its inherent potentiality and function. The essential nature of things consists in their consummation. The unique potentiality of man is his inborn faculty to think. Hence his greatest virtue consists in the fullest possible exercise of his rational faculty – which he can best achieve in the organised system of interdependence and morality of a polis (city). Justice belongs to the polis, for justice, which lies in the determination of what is just, is a way of ordering which requires a political association. The chief component of this process is “deliberative rationality”. The central challenge of politics is to see that all society's decisions are made by those most highly endowed with the faculty of “deliberative rationality”.

Although Aristotle's basic values and assumptions largely paralleled Plato's, his primary intention was not to depict politics as it ought to be, but to describe and analyse it as it actually was. Aristotle's Politics is the work of a political scientist rather than a political philosopher. Aristotle collected and analysed examples of around 158 actual city-state constitutions ascertaining how many citizens held supreme political power and for whose benefit those powers were employed, the rulers or the ruled. On the basis of these two criteria, one numerical and the other qualitative – Aristotle designed a matrix of six types of constitutions: monarchy and tyranny, aristocracy and oligarchy, and polity and democracy. The first category ruled for the good of the whole state and the second merely in the interest of those in control. These constitutional forms, Aristotle noted, tend to evolve from public-spirited types to their corrupt counterparts. This trend to corruption Aristotle attributed to the inherent human inclination to use power selfishly.

On the basis of the empirical information he gathered in his comparative study of constitutions, Aristotle came up with remarkable insights into what kind of system ought to work best. He came to the conclusion that most political conflicts involved two different definitions of equality: one was the notion of absolute equality advanced by the poor majority; the other was the concept of proportional equality subscribed to by the rich minority. Absolute equality, Aristotle pointed out, was based on the belief that a man's political rights derived from, and were completely justified by, the mere fact of his existence as a human being. The concept of proportional equality, in contrast, held that those who possessed superior ability, social background or wealth were thereby entitled to a corresponding measure of superior privilege in the government of the state. In the course of time, the majority claiming absolute equality bring to bear greater physical force in a revolutionary showdown so that the sovereignty of one or a few was fated sooner or later to be turned into government by and for a greater and greater number – a reality that even Bismarck realised more than two thousand years later!

Although ideally government should be by those with the greatest virtue (rational capacity), such a solution fades out of reach because the most virtuous citizens are so few in number. Hence Aristotle

advised that a solution could best be achieved through the constitutional form he described as a polity – a form of government by a majority ruling for the benefit of the whole state.

Aristotle argued that the central characteristic of the polity, as he defined it, was that it sought to balance the conflicting claims to absolute and proportional equality by dividing constitutional power between the rich and wellborn and the poor and common. Although the rich and wellborn do possess superior knowledge and culture, the poor majority most likely represent a greater measure of common sense. Being more numerous they tend to be less corruptible than smaller cliques might be. Hence it was best to secure the best possible contribution from both elements in the community and to base government on the compromise between the two groups. Aristotle concluded that government by compromise could most easily be achieved in a state with a large middle class. Such people are most ready to listen to reason. Those at extreme ends of the spectrum find it hard to follow the lead of reason.

In retrospect, the limitations of Plato and Aristotle lie in their circumscribed focus on an aristocratic Greek minority within the context of the small-scale city state. Their attachment was to an aristocratic way of life for people of Greek stock. They did not consider all men equal and did not advocate the development of any larger and more inclusive type of political unit. They remained champions of the classical Greek city-state and were committed to its values and limitations. But their rich contributions to the language of systematic political analysis and the intellectual depth of their thinking remain an unsurpassed achievement.

The Stoics

The classical Greek rationalism found its most influential and immediate expression in Stoicism – an offshoot of rationalist philosophy – which held that all of nature was the manifestation of a universal rationality that could be considered as synonymous with the concept of God. As a thinking creature, man shared in this rationality and was capable, through intellectual effort and self-discipline, of understanding and reconciling himself to the universe's and/or God's meaning. Such understanding and adjustment were potentially open to everyone since all people were endowed with the potential of rational thinking. The Stoic philosophy of universalism and egalitarianism enabled man to accept life's imperfections and frustrations and to find comfort in the thought that in nature all things ultimately worked out according to plan. The secret of happiness, Stoicism urged, lay in self-mastery and contemplation – in the mastery of willing all the value, good and suffering of life. The wise person recognises willingly in that whatever befalls him/her, the fulfilment of the providential purpose and asserts his/her unconditional freedom in the face of it by willing it to be – what it is.

The Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, described his convictions clearly in his personal journal, Meditations, to the effect that our common reason, which commands us what to do, and what not to do, is the source of a common ideal and Universal Law of Nature against which all reality can be measured. In contrast to Plato's and Aristotle's aristocratic Greek perspective, Stoicism proclaimed a faith in the rationality and equality of men and women everywhere. They introduced breadth and humanity into the world view of ancient Rome and inspired the conception of a "law above the law", which became the fundamental principle of modern constitutionalism. The Roman Empire produced, apart from a strong military machine and a network of roads and defences, an efficient legal and administrative system. But the Roman Empire never succeeded in reconciling the long-gathering struggle between the Roman aristocracy and the Roman masses.

Born in 106BC, Cicero attempted to promote the Aristotelian idea of a polity in which the majority was allowed access to power but in which there was also an admixture of tempering aristocratic elements. But Cicero's main intellectual contribution lies in his notion of the Law of Nature. He considered nature, rationality and morality as synonymous. The functioning of nature reveals certain laws to man. These laws indicate to man's intellect what is natural, rational and moral. This understanding provides man with absolute standards of right and wrong by which all human conduct should be guided and judged. There is a true law – namely right reason – which is in accordance with nature, applies to all men, and is unchangeable and eternal ... binding at all times upon all peoples.

For Cicero the state gives effect to the consciousness of mutual obligations and the mutual recognition of rights that binds its citizens together. The state is a moral community, a group of persons who in common possess the state and its law. For this reason he calls the state the *res populi* or the *res publica*, "the affair of the people" which is equivalent in meaning to the English use of the word "commonwealth". The moral ties among the citizens do not make immorality impossible, but in the measure that it does so, it loses the character of a true state. The state exists to supply its members with the advantages of mutual aid and just government. Its authority arises from the collective power of the people; its law is the common property of the people: *salus populi suprema lex esto*.

The state itself and its law is always subject to the law of God and the moral principles of natural law which is a higher set of rules and rights which transcend human choice and human institutions. Force is only justified insofar as it is required to give effect to the principles of justice and right.

Because law had occupied a highly honoured place in the Roman scheme of things, the Stoic notion of Natural Law was incorporated into the Roman legal system. Initially Roman law had been pronounced the law by an aristocratic council of "pontiffs", but later, in the time of the Republic, by an annually elected official called the *praetor*. This official was assisted by *jurisprudents* (legal experts) who wrote legal opinions upon which the praetor's decisions came to be based. Compilations and textbooks of the opinions of jurisprudents became the foundations of the logical and precise definitions that were characteristic of Roman Law.

The legal experts of Roman Law recognised three basic types of law: *jus civile* (customary municipal law pertaining to Roman citizens); *jus gentium* (law of peoples for cases where one or both parties were non-Romans); and, *jus naturale* (a body of ideal standards). Enriched by the incorporation of Stoic concepts, Roman Law received its final systematisation in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, the vast codification of the opinions of the leading Roman jurists that was carried out between 529-534AD at the behest of Emperor Justinianus.

The lasting influence that the Stoic-inspired humanising process introduced into Roman Law and later European legal principles can be summarised as the interpretation of law in the light of such concepts as equality before the law of all persons, faithfulness to engagements, fair dealing or equity, the superior importance of intent to mere words and formularies, the protection of dependents, the recognition of claims based on blood relationships, the resting of contracts on agreement rather than on words of stipulation, protecting people from cruelty, and, above all, of accepting as the guiding star of all law, the realisation of justice.

These general principles of government – that authority proceeds from the people, should be exercised only by warrant of law, and is justified only on moral grounds – achieved almost universal acceptance and remained part of the common heritage of the Western political tradition. It does not say who

speaks for the people, how he/she becomes entitled so to speak, or exactly who “the people” are for whom he/she speaks. It took several centuries before the ideal of representative, constitutional democracy could become possible. But the ideas and principles pioneered by Plato, Aristotle and the Stoic philosophers are today as relevant as they were in ancient times.

Bibliography

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Butz, Otto | <u>Of Man and Politics</u> , Holt, Rinehart & Winston, N.Y., 1966 |
| Ebenstein, William | <u>Great Political Thinkers: Plato to Present</u> ,
Holt, Rinehart & Winston, N.Y., 1969 |
| Friedrich, Carl Joachim | <u>Man and His Government: An Empirical Theory of Politics</u> ,
McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1963 |
| Sabine, George H. | <u>A History of Political Theory</u> , Holt, Rinehart & Winston,
N.Y., 1961 |

* Dr W B Vosloo, PhD, Cornell 1965, is a retired former professor of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa (1966-1981) and was Chief Executive of the South African Small Business Development Corporation, Johannesburg (1981-1995). He is now retired and has been living in Wollongong, NSW, since 1998.