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Plato's Philosopher king: It's relevance in contemporary era

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Abstract

Background: The world today is in the grip of numerous problems such as global warming, climate change, corruption, conflicts within and among the nations, pandemics such as covid 19, zika. Such a situation require intellectual leaders to enable cooperation among the nations and cooperation of the citizens with their leaders to come out of the challenges successfully.

Aim: To use the concept of Philosopher king given by Plato to deal with problems of contemporary era.

Objective: To understand the concept of Philosopher king and how it continues to be useful despite changes in the context in which it was written.

Methodology: Qualitative analysis of the concept through In-depth study of Plato's political philosophy.

Keywords: Plato's, Philosopher, relevance, contemporary, era

Introduction

The concept of Philosopher king was made famous by Plato in his popular treatise The Republic. It was the result of Plato's discontent with the conditions prevailing in then Athens which was ruled by amateurs resulting in prevalence of corruption and rulers ruling to fulfil their selfish interests.

To overcome these weaknesses of Athenian rule Plato gave the idea of Philosopher King who was the lover of wisdom and passionate seeker of truth. The philosopher king was the basis of Plato's ideal state. The concept of Philosopher king is based on trinity of human soul, that is, reason, spirit and appetite which is embodied in the society by rulers, soldiers and peasants respectively.

The philosopher king was to be the embodiment of knowledge which he gained through the educational system suggested by Plato. As per Plato 'Virtue is knowledge'. Knowledge for Plato was when a person sees "beauty without beautiful thing". Through his knowledge the philosopher king could see better than others the betterment of community. Through the in-depth knowledge of good he would equate his interest with the interest of the society. The element of Reason would enable the philosopher king to realize that happiness of the part depends on the happiness of the whole. He would work for the welfare of the community instead of striving to achieve his self interest. The concept of Philosopher king also serves the idea of justice which means each person performing his duties as per the dominant element of their personality. Thus the idea of Philosopher King aimed to ensure functional specialization also. Such a functional specialization would be in the interest of the society as everyone would perform the function he is capable of performing best.

"Until Philosophers rule as king or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is., until political power and philosophy entirely coincides.... cities will have no rest from evil.... there can be no happiness either public or private". Socrates

Because of the possession of knowledge by philosopher king, Plato supported absolute ruling powers to be placed in the hands of such a king. This idea he supported on the ground that ruler has been chosen as the king because of his knowledge. Also as the decrees of the king would be based on his ripened wisdom it would be more flexible than the laws. At the same time Plato clearly states that the Philosopher king is not absolutely free from all restraints. Some of the principles to be followed by philosopher king are as follows:-

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1. They should check the excessive flow of wealth in the state.
2. To ensure self sufficiency the size of the state should be kept under check.
3. Rule of justice should be maintained.
4. No changes should be made in education system.

As far as the relevance of Plato's philosopher king in contemporary world is concerned it gives lessons from which a lot can be learned. Plato's Philosopher king has been criticized by many as the rule by few which is considered against the concept of democracy which involves participation of all in the governmental processes. The philosopher king is considered as leading to a tyrannical government.

Also it has been considered as against the concept of Equality which involves providing equal opportunities to all in social, economic and political spheres. By allowing only intellectual few to rule it deprives the majority from opportunities to participate actively in the political process.⁸ The system of community of wives and property recommended by Plato for philosopher king is considered against nature. Prof Karl Popper opined, "The state interests dominate the life of the citizens from mating of his parents to his grave". The philosopher kings shows resemble to modern dictators.

At the same time despite these limitations the concept of Philosopher king provides valuable suggestions to improve the present day governmental functioning. The first and foremost is the emphasis on the wisdom of the leaders. The wisdom and virtues of the ruler is a necessary prerequisite in the establishment of a welfare state. This aspect of ruling for the welfare of the subjects has also been highlighted by Kautilya in his famous work Arthashastra.

It also focuses on the need of rule by experts. It focuses on the need for a certain amount of knowledge to enable the rulers to understand the problem better and provide for relevant solutions.

The open minded attitude enables the rulers to maintain unity and integrity of the nations. The wisdom enables the rulers to rise above the narrow societal divisions based on caste, religion, gender, ethnicity etc. and to respect the specializations among the people.

Also the an all encompassing educational system enables full fledged development of the rulers covering aspects such as physical and mental health, knowledge of maths and literature. Such an all encompassing educational system ensures a healthy and an intellectual ruler as well as citizenry in the era where world is in the grip of corruption as well as pandemic. The knowledgeable leadership also ensure the respect, cooperation and trust of citizenry which is a sine quo non for dealing with present day challenges. For example the control of covid 19 pandemic have been made possible due to cooperation of citizens in maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, handwriting etc.

The wars and convicts like Syrian crisis, Spring revolution, Glorious revolution, nationalist movements, succession movements, Terrorism such as ISIS, AL Qaida, Boko Haram etc. are a result of dissatisfaction with the governments around the world. An expert ruler would ensure all round development of various sectors, regions, religions, gender, caste etc. thus not providing space for the seeds of dissatisfaction to grow. The challenges such as global warming and covid 19 requires wisdom and

cooperation among the leaders at the global level. At this stage the wisdom and knowledge of the rulers will pave the way for a welfare state and society. For example the international cooperation of leaders led to control in ozone layer depletion and success of Montreal Protocol.

Thus despite some weaknesses the concept Of Philosopher king by Plato still can go a long way in solving present day challenges. The views of Plato can be best understood by having a knowledge of the context in which the treatise was written and learning from such recommendations which remain relevant in the present context also.

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