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# Greek political philosophy: A brief study

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**Abstract**
In fact political philosophy of the Greeks was a reaction to developing civilisations in other parts of the world. There were definitely varied and various factors which were responsible for the development of political philosophy of the ancient Greece which cannot better be described than the words of Professor Bowles when he said that, "For the development of political thought the emergence of Greek city state is of cardinal importance. The heavy routine of Near Eastern Empire, the bureaucracy of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the recklees irresponsibilities of Iron Age, tyrants of old Testament, give place to something new. The free play of speculative intelligence, the brilliant formulation of vocabulary of thought in language expressive of the stable shades of meaning, the purposive coherence of Greek ideals all these things mark the greatest step forward the political speculation has ever made.

**Keywords:** Egypt and Mesopotamia, Greek political philosophy, citizenship, education, virtue, justice, city states, equality

## Introduction

The Greek political philosophy is one of the ancient philosophies of the world which has carefully been preserved and passed on to the generation. It will, however, be a futile attempt to trace the origin of political-philosophy and pin point the name of the mother state in this regard. Some of the European political historians have in vain tried to establish that European political philosophy began with the Greek because it is equally well established that ancient Indian. Babylonian and Egyptian too had their political philosophies which are as old as the ancient Greek Philosophy. It is also an undisputed fact that during their own times these civilisations and their political philosophies were studied with keen interest all over the world. Its origin is connected with calm and clear rationalism of the Greek mind." In this respect ideas of Maxey appear to be more sound when he says. "The closer and fuller acquaintance with the civilisation of remote millenium which we now enjoy reveals an astonishing abundance of the political ideas among the people of those vanished areas and show how both in thought and practice they anticipated, paralled and to some extent laid the foundations for ideas which subsequently appeared in European political consciousness".

Now it is quite well established that other civilisations as well produced such treatise as the 'Republic' of Plato or 'Politics', of Aristotle but Greeks could get an upper hand because they could preserve their national heritage, whereas other civilisations could not pass on their writings to the succeeding generations. It is only due to non-availability of writings of philosophers belonging to other nations that the Europeans had to borrow from the available Greek philosophy. That perhaps is also the reason why the Europeans were widely influenced by the Greek political thought. Mayer says, "The categories of European thought and approach to the understanding of life have been permanently moulded by the Greeks from the very beginning. So long as Europe continues in its endeavour to know the historical world. It is adaptation of Greek ideas and concepts which makes this knowledge at all possible".

Greek philosophers mainly pondered over two ideas namely "Is man a political animal?" and "what is the nature of State?" They did not bother about the relation of state with church and industry. Their approach to the problem was rather scientific.

They also realised that man is a social animal and also that he has social as well as political instinct. Basically they believed that man could attain perfection only in a healthy society. They also believed that State was a necessity both for the sake of life as well as good life. In fact state was the main point round which their philosophy developed. They are the fore-runners of the idea of classification of governments. They also gave birth to the idea that each form of government was subject to change and decayed with the passage of time. It was bound to degenerate and decay at one stage or the other. They also made an attempt to find out the law governing this change and the remedies for removing causes of their instability. They did not bother about the relationship of State with church or economic institutions and organisations but attached importance to education which a State ought to impart to citizens.

**Greek view of life**

Early Greeks were quite rational in their thinking and took nature as their friend and not foe. To them life had social as well as political aspects. They viewed religion more as a matter of personal concern rather than that of State. They did not consider individual as an isolated personality but took him as an integral part of the society. They usually did not distinguish between the State and Society and followed the policy of religious toleration. According to them, perfection was possible only in a society in which there was development of the relationship between the individual and the society on the one hand and the individual and the Divine on the other.

**Curiosity for Knowledge**

One of the salient features of Greek political philosophy was that Greek political thinkers had curiosity for knowledge. They were never satisfied with what they had got or attained. They were always engaged in the increase of knowledge: testing the soundness of what they had been accepting and whether that truth still stood the arguments. It has been said that the Greek in the past expounded their philosophy in the same manner, as one breathes in the air. They thus always initiated new philosophical ideas, argued them out and accepted what appeared to them most sound and national, leaving irrational to its own care.

**Greeks on Education**

The Greeks had not a very elaborate system of education. They studied in the open air. Their system of education was practical and stood to promote modesty, self-control, patriotism, along with reverence, strength and sociability. It also took into consideration collective religious advancement and moral development. Education aimed at advancement of these aspects, so as to make one fit for membership of city state. Gradually, education became a part of politics. According to Barker, Greek system of education to a certain extent wanted to develop a type of character "which corresponds to the demands of the State upon the individual and is, therefore, because it means a harmony between the two, calculated to preserve the integrity and stability of the State". They wanted to tune the minds of the people so as to bring them at par with the spirit of the constitution.

**Greek Ideas about Law**

Greeks had deep reverence for law which for them was the product of superhuman wisdom. It was the duty of every citizen to see that he obeyed law no matter whether it appeared to him wrong or undesirable. They believed that every citizen was a slave of law. They cared more for spirit rather than letters of the laws. Gettele is of the view that the laws were then obeyed because of the superhuman nature and also because of their perfection and permanency. It is, however, worth-while to remember that the state was supposed to obey, rather than to create laws. Laws were not the product of popular will.

**Greeks on Citizenship**

Greeks believed that a good and ideal citizen was one who had the capacity to rule and to be ruled. They did not extend citizenship rights to the slaves because it was felt that they could not discharge their obligations towards the State. Even the working classes were denied this right on the ground that they had no speculative mind. Citizenship required leisure which only the land-owners could afford and as such citizenship rights should be vested only in land-owning classes.

**Greeks on Reason**

In Greek political philosophy reason occupies a very significant place and position. The Greeks believe that one can remain free only as long as one has freedom of reasoning. A soul which had ceased to reason is slave. It is with the help of reason that individual can be identified with corporate life and thus an individual leaves his selfish and personal interests and leaps into the realm of wider views.

**Greek View about Justice**

To Greeks justice was a conception of morality. It meant to them 'virtue in action'. Justice should prevail in an ideal state. According to Plato 'Justice was the virtue of sound injustice its vice". Justice was willing obedience to laws. For them it was a channel which provided equal and proper opportunities for the development of human factulties. Justice was highest virtue and must be conducive in proper discharge of duties. A government was best which administered justice best.

**Greek Views about Individuals**

Greek political thinkers believed that man was the crown of species. Each and every individual has his own dignity which must be protected at all costs. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all believed that the study of man about what man should be was the noblest investigation. According to them every individual has a right to think in his own way and publicaly express himself. Law is only an instrument for the benefit of the individuals. Plato in his 'Laws' has said that society is an aggregate of individuals. They seem to believe that both the state as well as the laws were necessary evils for the individuals.

**Greek Views about Virtue**

Greek philosophers distinguished between human and functional virtues. There might be certain features which might make a person virtues but might not make him functionally virtuous. Plato believed that a person was virtuous if he had wisdom, courage, justice and temperance. Whether a person was virtuous or not, or whether he was partially or fully virtuous depended upon the extent of qualities which he possessed.

**Greek on Discussion**

According to Greek political thinkers no truth could come out unless there was proper reasoning and discussion. In the absence of discussions truth goes in the hide. For them discussion was a piece of literature. They, therefore, attached great significance to discussion and one of their methods of presenting their ideas and philosophy was by way of discussion between the two parties, one initiating and other replaying to arguments to derive the truth of philosophical ideas.

**Greeks on Equality**

The Greeks were very clear in their philosophy that equality was something which was not ideal. On the other hand inequality of gifts and talents was to be found everywhere. In fact they felt that it was something impracticable; unnatural and undesirable. Thus we fmd that Greek political philosophers had practical rather than theoretical view of life. They were realists rather than idealists. They had a pointed approach to every problem with foresightedness and penetrating insight.

**Greek Views about City States**

The Greek political thinkers based their political philosophy on the concept of 'city state'. They believed that the area of a state should be so limited as to be visible practically from the roof of every house. They also favored the idea of limited population. In fact, according to them in an ideal city state population should not exceed 5040 and in that there will be no question of indirect election or legislation but there will be direct approach to every problem. They strongly believed that only a city state could deliver the goods to the masses because it was the only possible political organisation in which the people could come in direct contact with their rulers. The people will have direct approach and say in every matter.

According to them, it was not difficult to collect 5040 people at one place and arrive at some decision. A Greek city state was more or less a college community in which, though the members were drawn from various community yet they had common interest in the development of social and political institutions. They had no attraction for the religion and their regard for politics was more than that of the religion. The state was considered responsible for the development of personalities of citizens. According to Prof. Barker, "it is the precedent condition of all political thought that the antithesis of the individual and the state should be realised, as it is the task of every political thinker to reconcile and abolish the antithesis whose force he has realised".

**Government of city states**

The city state was classless in which there were equal opportunities for all. Men had full honour and respect in such a society. The individuals had their separate entities. Each city state had its own administrative system which suited its convenience. It differed from monarchy to democracy. Not only the states differed in forms of government but in each state there were different types of people who had different notions about an ideal form of government to administer their affairs. Moreover, there was no stability in the FEIMI of government in the city states which changed quite frequently. It was a self-dependent unit supposed to remove all those hindrances which hindered the progress of citizens. According to Prof. Barker, "The theory of city state is, therefore a theory which admits reality the full action of the state and inquiries particularly with the proper methods of its exercise. It is a theory of and for the legislation".

**Education in city states**

Greeks held state exclusively responsible for promoting education as well as political institutions. Education was considered responsible for making ideal states. Therefore education was held directly responsible for producing citizens. In other words, in addition to its being a moral and political institution, state was also an educational institution. Thus in the Greek city states there was a complete state controlled system of education. In Greek city states citizens had perfect right to demand development of human personality, freedom to worship, freedom of movement and settling permanently in the state. They had economic, political and social freedom.

**Life in city state**

According to Barker "The Greeks were never tried of telling themselves that while in their communities each man counted for what he was worth and exercised his share of influence in the common life...It was the place of a common life and the home of a union of classes. Life within common walls drew men natural intimacy. It did not abolish the prestige of wealth and birth and culture, it established a tradition of easy intercourse between all classes". There was a healthy combination of nobility of land with those of craftsmen. They did not distinguish between the state and government because the state controlled all activities of the citizens. It was 'be all and end all'. All religious festivals, for the practical purposes were civic celebrations. There was no rigid social division which most likely was due to close intimacy among the citizens which is impossible in modem nation states. Sabine has rightly said that "Modem states are relatively so large, so remote and so impersonal that they cannot fill the place in modem life that the city state filled in the life of a Greek." They combined rural and urban life. They wanted to make state economically self-sufficient so that the people could enjoy independent, self-respecting life and promote their own happiness.

The Greeks regarded all others as barbarians and thus ignored the study of empires. They did not consider the possibility of `individual vs. State' and thus did not develop individualism or `individualistic philosophy of life. They, however, in their own way respected individual and his sentiments.

**City State and Slavery**

Slavery was a salient feature of city states. It was felt that the slaves provided leisure to the citizens which were essential for them for the performance of their duties. The slaves constituted a majority of population but they were not citizens of the city states. They however, worked at various useful places and thus enriched the states. In addition to this the slaves were also given to others on payment and thus used by their owners for every purpose. They were treated as lifeless and exchangeable commodities.

**Salient features of Greek States**

City states followed a system of direct government and legislation. This was possible because population was small

and the people knew each other quite well and had personal contacts with each other.

- The states were socialistic in nature and required to perform many fold functions.
- The city states were more or less self-sufficient. Both Plato and Aristotle wanted to make it a perfectly self-sufficient unit.
- The city states were theocratic but there was no division between the state and the church.
- The state and the individual worshipped the same gods. The church and politics had been blended together. All religious functions were considered social celebrations.
- The state was considered mainly 'individual writ large' and thus they as no anti-thesis between the individual and the state.
- The individual had no private life because he was to be viewed only in relation to state. There was thus no place for 'Individualism'.
- There was universality of functions i.e., it was supposed that every individuals was competent to perform each and every type of function. There was thus no strict division of labour.

**Conclusion**

Political philosophy of the Greeks was a reaction to developing civilisations in other parts of the world. There were definitely varied and various factors which were responsible for the development of political philosophy of the ancient Greece which cannot better be described than the words of Professor Bowles when he said that, “For the development of political thought the emergence of Greek city state is of cardinal importance.

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