

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.
Article – “It Started with Plato” (18-20 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS/KEY

Goal

Students learn more about Plato’s philosophy on government and contrast it to the Biblical model on government’s proper functions.

Instructions

1. If possible, print the articles for students front to back!
2. Instruct students to read the article and answer the Questions for Review. (Take 10-12 minutes.)
3. Have students discuss in pairs/groups, then together as a class.

Key

1. What does the author mean by the government’s either being a “captain of the team” or a “referee”?
Whether government either runs everybody’s lives or simply acts as a judge, preventing individuals from harming or stealing from others, or punishing them if they do.
2. In the *Republic*, what were Plato’s two “primary assumptions”?
The community must be made up of only two classes, those who govern and those who are governed, and that human qualities are hereditary, so “rulers must beget future rulers.”
3. What did Plato advocate about the rulers of such a republic? Explain his disturbing views on the state’s control over the family.
Selective breeding to produce the ruling class, trained by the state to rule; segregation of men and women, shared wives, and the state ownership/rearing/feeding of children.
4. What did Plato believe the state should do in regard to individual work and careers? What is your take on this belief? Who was influenced heavily by this philosophy?
Control it, basically. The state’s “wise men” would tell everyone what his job was “according to, and commensurate with his proven abilities.” All property would be held by the state. More, Hitler, and Mussolini were influenced by this philosophy.
5. Find the phrase (second-to-last paragraph) that well sums up Plato’s philosophy on government. How does this philosophy contrast with the Bible’s take on the proper functions of government?
“State planning and control of all human activities from the cradle to the grave.” This is drastically different from what the Bible teaches are legitimate functions of government: threatening and punishing violence and theft and executing “judgment and justice.”

Debrief

Ask students:

- Is it clear the difference between the Bible’s take on government and the take of other philosophies, even ones that are often praised today?
- When people say today, “I think the government should do ____ and ____, can you see how it’s fair to ask what they base their beliefs on? And that when you don’t have a Biblical foundation for government you can justify anything by saying, “Well, that’s my philosophy?” Is it apparent what kind of dangers this can put individuals in?

It Started with Plato

Mises Daily

S. Harcourt Rivington • 08/19/2009

Our modern civilization is ravaged...by a political controversy. [It] concerns the proper functions of government—a subject of crucial importance to human welfare. No other national problem has ever produced so deep and unbridgeable a cleavage in public opinion.

The issue is, to use a sporting metaphor, whether in the game of life the government shall captain the national team or shall act as referee. That is to say, whether the government shall take the principal part in the activities of the community and control with [unlimited] powers the movements and welfare of the members, or whether it shall stand apart from the struggle, arbitrating upon its issues, guaranteeing fair play to all, and insuring that the rules of the game shall be faithfully carried out.

To be more specific, whether the government shall take upon itself the power and functions of the old-time slave owner, or shall leave the community free to sort themselves out into employer and employed, while the government acts as the judge, ready in the community interest to use its influence and authority against the wrongdoer.

Plato, the First “Planner”

Many people believe that this issue arose with the advent of socialism a century or so ago and was given its impetus [push] and virulence [intensity] by the communist class war dogma of Karl Marx [*The Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848]. That is not so.

The controversy is almost as old as civilization. It began in ancient Greece, almost four hundred years before the Christian era, with the doctrines of Plato. He was the first of the “planners” and the true founder of the communist economy which deifies [makes a “god” of] the state. In his *Republic* the Athenian philosopher set out a virtual blueprint for the evolution of what has come to be called the “Welfare State.”

Plato’s ideal republic was founded upon two primary assumptions: (1) that the community must be comprised of only two classes, those who govern and those who are governed (the latter owing implicit obedience to the former), and (2) that human qualities are mainly hereditary and therefore that rulers must beget future rulers. (It should be noted that Plato belonged by birth to the aristocratic governing class who hated the democracy no less than the principles upon which the democratic system is founded.)

The ancient philosopher’s proposals followed logically from these assumptions....He advocated the procreation of a privileged governing class—a sort of brain trust—to be produced by a system of selective breeding....The “wise men” so born and trained would be the backbone of the state administration.

To secure a virile [sturdy] race and to keep the population within predetermined limits, Plato counseled the segregation of the sexes...communism in wives, and the state ownership of children. From birth onward children would be reared in public nurseries where mothers would have to feed whatever child the state officials directed, to assure that no mother would be able to identify her own child, and no child would know its own parents.

State Direction of Labor

To secure maximum economic progress, Plato advocated the specialization of labor under state administration. Each person would be given work according to, and commensurate [matching] with, his proven abilities. The choice of work would, however, not be the individual’s own: it would be decided by the “wise men.” Rewards in prestige, property in trust, and material assets generally would be determined by the rulers following the individual’s needs—these being fixed according to his preordained status in the regime. To give effect to these proposals the philosopher argued logically that property must be held by the state, that is to say, there must be overall “nationalization” of production, including labor as well as materials and finance.

This...conception of the state control of all human activities was the inspiration of all subsequent “welfare” schemes. It was the philosophy upon which Sir Thomas More evolved his fantasy *Utopia*....It was the prime source of the socialist nationalization doctrine and the foundation of the class war dogma of Karl Marx, which was merely Platonism in reverse, with the revolutionaries as rulers.

Moreover, it was the fount from which both Hitler and Mussolini imbibed [absorbed] their system of totalitarian planning—although those dictators may conceivably have been unaware of their indebtedness to the old Platonic philosophy. The methods differ, but the final objective is always the same: state planning and control of all human activities from the cradle to the grave.

None of these schemes has ever won universal acceptance, because each embodies ideas that are contrary to some of the deepest concepts of human intercourse. Moreover, all such proposals constitute a frontal attack

upon private initiative. They can be brought into practical shape only by an intolerable intervention of compulsion [force]. Such state control of activities is the antithesis [opposite] of the democratic ideal which assumes that the individual shall be the arbiter and architect of his own career, and be thus free to organize his life and that of his family in any manner which suits his needs.

*This article was originally published as “It Started with Plato” in The Freeman, August 13, 1951.
The article may be found here: <https://mises.org/mises-wire/democracy-not-same-thing-freedom>*

Questions for Review:

1. What does the author mean by the government’s either being a “captain of the team” or a “referee”?
2. In the *Republic*, what were Plato’s two “primary assumptions”?
3. What did Plato advocate about the rulers of such a republic? Explain his disturbing views on the state’s control over the family.
4. What did Plato believe the state should do in regard to individual work and careers? What is your take on this belief? Who was influenced heavily by this philosophy?
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