Classical Political Philosophy and the Design of Ideal Government

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Introduction

The field of political philosophy has, for a long, focused on the philosophical underpinnings of an ideal government. It seeks to address questions about the nature and boundaries of its institutions and public agents, as well as the relationship between the two. Classical Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle and their Chinese counterparts Confucius and Mengzi have put forth ideas that can guide the political philosophy of today, including the issues of justice, liberty, rights, and laws. Keeping into consideration Confucius, Mengzi, Plato, and Aristotle's view of the government, this essay aims to present a government design along with the criteria for electing leaders and their roles. The essay also sheds light on the responsibilities of citizens to the government and one another.

Government Design

The classical Chinese philosopher Confucius is regarded as one of the primary philosophers who advocated the way which is described as living one's life and organizing a society in the right manner. The most important aspect of Confucius's philosophy is the "cultivation of virtue", with Mengzi being a proponent of the same. Although Aristotle identified three forms of government, namely, aristocracy, kingly rule, and constitutional government, Confucius purported the rule of a virtuous monarch as the only ideal form of government. Based on the ideas presented by these philosophers, the most ideal government design is the one that focuses on humanity and building a harmonious society. Following these philosophical underpinnings, the ideal government would be paternalistic and focus on creating harmony between man, nature, and Heaven.

Criteria For Electing Leaders

The ideal ruler for this government design would be the one who is an embodiment of virtue and would treat people with benevolence by upholding the principles of humanity. The chosen individual must fulfil the criteria of being compassionate and righteous, and also, as Plato highlighted, the leader must possess the virtues of wisdom, courage, and self-discipline. Only a leader who can provide for the people has a right to govern and has a legitimate entitlement to authority. A leader would be elected on the criteria of goodness, love for learning, and empathy. Moreover, an ideal leader is an individual who is loyal and trustworthy as a friend, affectionate as a parent, and familial as a son. The leader must not be ruled by his desires. Instead, he must have deep knowledge about the Way of

Heaven to flourish and be prosperous. The ruler must imitate the Way of Heaven. These characteristics of the leader would incite allegiance among the followers on free will. Such individuals would be automatically supported and accepted as leaders, making governance the only natural course of action.

Role Of The Government

The role of the government would not be to dictate by force; rather, it would be to guide through moral strength. As posited by Confucius, the role of such a government would be to guide society on the Way to harmony, peace, and security. The primary focus of such an institution would be to do good that would benefit the general public. The government would be responsible for creating a society that would best accommodate the limitations of human nature. Just like we cannot expect "impartial caring" to be exhibited by every individual in a society, we can also not presume that humans are inherently self-interested. Therefore, the role of this ideal government would be to create an environment that not only accepts the partiality of human nature but also does not ignore moral emotions. Providing "an environment conducive to virtue" would be the responsibility of the government.

Governed by virtue, the primary role of the administration would be to care for its people. Its foremost goal would be the well-being of the masses. This would be done by ensuring that the basic or the physical needs of the individuals are met. Following the fulfilment of the basic needs, the government would then be responsible for the ethical development of its people. It would devise an educational system that would focus on instilling etiquette and morality among the children, along with curricular development through literacy and numeracy. The role of the government is ultimately to help its people achieve the "Great Learning" that is characterized by the reasoning of what entails goodness. Equality among all, regardless of social or economic status, would be ensured for the provision of necessities, lesser learning, and great learning. Virtue would not be limited to a selected handful of people in the government who would prosecute people for their wrongdoings, rather the government would be responsible to help its people achieve high standards of virtue too and achieve harmony of the self with the "Heaven-given nature".

Responsibilities Of The Citizens

The paternalistic care provided by the government would be reciprocated through obedience, and trusting the government would be one of the citizens' responsibilities. To create a peaceful society or a harmonious world, the citizens would fully accept their role in cultivating morality and would embrace it with minimal dissent. As people are responsible for their moral advancement, their role in society would not only be their ethical development but also that of the people around them. Loyalty, filial piety, and upholding tradition would be the responsibilities of citizens. For a society governed by this design, loyalty and obedience of the citizens to the institutions would be very important. The

responsibility of citizens to one another would be based on the idea that such a society is like a family where the younger generation is responsible for following the traditions and the teachings of their ancestors. At the same time, the elders of the community would be responsible for teaching etiquette and morality to the young. Ethical cultivation could be achieved by forming a strong bond with loved ones and other individuals in society. This should be the goal of every individual in society. Moreover, the citizens would equip themselves with the Great Learning and introspect the reasons for the transcendental truths, creating harmony between the developing compassion and a sense of shame. Both these are required for creating harmony, as only through shame can people learn the right kind of behaviour.

Conclusion

Although philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, as well as Confucius and Mengzi, belonged to opposite continents of the world, their views about the political structure were somewhat closely aligned. The importance of virtue and harmony is highlighted by the Greek and Chinese philosophers. While the Chinese use the word “Sage” for the most virtuous, the Greeks refer to him as a “philosopher” or a “king”. Regardless of the title, the government design embodies compassion, benevolence, wisdom, and piety. With people being the topmost priority, this political structure aims to alleviate unrest in societies by promoting equality, providing people with the necessities, and helping them align themselves with their inherent nature. The ruler is not the one most rich or most privileged. Rather, he is the one who is most disciplined and virtuous. Through such governance, citizens can find a balance between impartial caring and egoism, thereby maintaining the natural stability of human nature as bestowed by Heaven and nurtured by a harmonious society (‘The Influential Confucian Philosopher You’ve Never Heard of | Aeon Essays’).

Works Cited

‘The Influential Confucian Philosopher You’ve Never Heard of | Aeon Essays’. *Aeon*, https://aeon.co/essays/the-influential-confucian-philosopher-you-ve-never-heard-of. Accessed 13 Oct. 2021.