

PLATO'S PHILOSOPHER KING IN THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF SIXTH-CENTURY BYZANTIUM

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The substance of this paper will be the fragments of an Anonymous dialogue entitled *On Political Science*,¹ which was written probably in Constantinople during Justinian's time from the viewpoint of the senatorial class. On the basis of internal evidence, the dramatic date of the work can be more securely placed at the beginning of Justinian's reign, certainly before the Nika Riot of A.D. 532.² Nothing is known about the author. He probably received his higher education in Plato's Academy in fifth-century Athens where he was taught the late Neoplatonic philosophy by the best known head of the Academy, Proclus (died ca. A.D. 485). The author was a Christian philosopher who presented his ideas in terms of contemporary Neoplatonism.³

The treatise is an important work in its own right because a) it was the first secular work written on Byzantine political theory, and b) it was an attempt to organize and systematize politico-philosophical concepts current in early Byzantium about the king / emperor and the state. On the whole, the dialogue's character is highly intellectual and eclectic. There is ample linguistic and philosophical evidence in the extant fragments that the Byzantine author had a solid knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, certain Hellenistic writers on kingship, and especially the later Neoplatonists from whom he borrowed much of his philosophical vocabulary. Thus, the author's politico-philosophical views are offered in a language which could be acceptable by both Christian and pagan readers.⁴

The purpose of the treatise was, it seems, to offer a written constitution or suggestions for a Byzantine constitution and thus put order to the chaotic conditions which often prevailed during the election of a new emperor at the beginning of the sixth century;⁵ the treatise "could be read as an affirmation of the right of the senatorial aristocracy . . . to have the major say in the choice of emperor."⁶ Of the six books only fragments of Books IV and V have survived on a Vatican palimpsest. The six extant folios from Book IV discuss the military class, the so-called Guardians, and the remaining seventeen folios of Book V deal with kingship. The size of the entire treatise should have been between 130-150 folios long,⁷ slightly larger than Cicero's *De Republica*, also written in six books.

An entry in the table of contents to Book V entitled *On Kingship* reads as follows:

A comparison of the *Republics* of Plato and Cicero: further a comparison of the entire philosophical system of Plato and Aristotle. Objections are also expressed to some of the ideas of Plato.⁸

In view of this revealing entry on the basis of five direct quotations or references to Plato⁹ in the body of the extant Book V, there is no doubt that the Anonymous had read the political works of Plato and was influenced by them in his use of the appropriate vocabulary and ideas. The influence of Plato, to a greater degree, and of the Neoplatonists to a lesser extent, is unquestionable.¹⁰ Is Plato then his model? The Byzantine author is cautious on this point. He says that he avoided any specific model for his state. Menodorus, the principal of the two speakers, says emphatically:

"We began to examine the state in general, I think, i.e. the moderate and the best kind, and not this or that particular type as Cicero did with the Roman constitution."¹¹

There are, however, certain specific aspects of Plato's *Republic* which were an obvious influence on the Byzantine *politeia*. I shall choose only four of them and trace them in the Byzantine dialogue:

1. The class stratification of the state.
2. Justice as the principal virtue of the ideal king.
3. The criteria for the selection of a ruler / king
4. The training of the philosopher king: his apprehension of the Good.

1. Class Stratification

The state, according to the sixth-century Byzantine author, is made up of three parts: counsel, manpower, and resources.¹² All three components are equally essential and complementary to each other. A state's health and strength are dependent on all three parts. On the basis of this evaluation, the Byzantine writer divides his state into three classes which reflect, as in his Platonic model, natural differences of endowment;¹³ in the state each individual is assigned into a certain class in which he performs his own thing.

On top of the social ladder are placed the so-called "best men," the *aristoi* or *tagma* of the *aristoi*.¹⁴ This elite group corresponds to the *Rulers* (*archontes*), that section of the Guardian class which Plato assigns the highest position in the state. In both Plato and the Byzantine author, members of this group form a deliberative and legislative body of the state because their predominant virtue is wisdom, the basis of their laws and orders. It is the only class whose interests coincide with the interests of the state as a whole: "They do always whatever they deem to be in the interest of the city," writes Plato.¹⁵ Likewise, the Byzantine author describes this class of "best men" as those "who have been appointed to continuously supervise the life and individual pursuits of each citizen . . . and accustom them to a life of moderation."¹⁶ There is, however, a fundamental difference between Plato and the Byzantine author: whereas Plato's *Rulers* are purely a deliberative and legislative body, in the Anonymous dialogue certain "best men" are assigned administrative, military, and financial functions.¹⁷ Obviously the Byzantine author wished to reflect more the realities of his time than Plato.

The second class in both authors is made up of the Guardians or the "warrior class,"¹⁸ whose natural aptitude, courage, is suitable to make them professional soldiers responsible for the security of the state. They are the executive branch of the state. Again there is a basic difference that most distinguishes the Platonic Guardians from the Byzantine. In Plato, the Guardians are an exclusive and separate group of warriors placed close to the *Rulers'* class, whereas in the Byzantine treatise only the high ranking Guardians are drawn from the class of the *aristoi*,¹⁹ while the rank and file are recruited from the lowest class. Again, the Anonymous chose to reflect the prevailing conditions of his time more realistically than Plato.

On the bottom of the social ladder is placed the productive class, whose only aim is to produce enough to satisfy their own physical needs and those

of the upper classes. The distinctive excellence of this large group is self-control over their predominant appetitive drives. In the Byzantine treatise these professional and labour groups are summarily entitled "the rest of the state groups, *tagmata* or *systemata*."²⁰ A fair number of them are reminiscent of the Empire's trade guilds. There is little precious information in the extant fragments about the third class. The Anonymous author in Book V is principally concerned with the first class, the "best men" with whom the king was inextricably connected just as Plato's philosopher king and the ruling Guardians were indistinguishable.

2. *The Philosopher King: His Justice*

At the top of the political and social structure stands the king (*basileus*), who is selected from among the class of the best men because of his high qualifications:²¹ virtue, expertise in public affairs, rank, suitable age, and dignity. The king's duty is to be an imitator of God, the image and even likeness (*homioma*) of God on earth.²² The Byzantine writer, borrowing Plato's identification between political and kingly philosophy, writes: "We have shown that kingship and political philosophy are identical, since it is an imitation of god."²³ The argument the Byzantine author used is missing, but Plato's argument was that the "statesman being an embodiment of all virtues could be the prototype of the kingly man."²⁴ So the two terms became synonymous.²⁵

The concept that the king should imitate God is an extension of the views expressed by Plato particularly in his *Statesman*,²⁶ where the analogy of God and the perfect king is discussed. The idea, however, as mentioned earlier, appealed to later philosophical schools, Stoic,²⁷ Hellenistic, Neopythagorean,²⁸ Neoplatonist,²⁹ and Christian writers,³⁰ who elaborated on it and made it a central theme of their imperial ideology.

The entire investigation into the imitation of God by the king, the topic of Book VI, is conducted on the basis of the Platonic language of *doxa* (opinion) and *episteme* (scientific knowledge). The Anonymous Byzantine author writes:

We shall attempt to conduct our inquiry into kingship scientifically (*epistemonikos*) . . . through reason (*logos*). Whatever, however, cannot be found out scientifically, we shall use as our guide right opinion (*doxa orthe*), which can give an account, and the divine creation.³¹

In the above excerpt the divine creation -- obvious a Christian element here -- becomes the last resort of the inquiry. Christian philosophical writers³² often used the divine creation as evidence for the good order in the world and the care of God for His creation.

As God's representative on earth, the ideal king should govern his subjects in imitation of the heavenly king and his virtues should be a copy of the virtues of his prototype, i.e. goodness, justice, wisdom, powerfulness, and foresight, which he should apply in governing his state.³³ Like his Platonic counterpart, the Byzantine king, being good, should inculcate virtue in his subjects through his own example, in word and deed;³⁴ moreover, he should be like a father to them and thus benefit them as much as possible.³⁵

But the most important virtue the king should possess and practise is justice.³⁶ This concept permeates the entire fragmentary treatise and becomes the *sine qua non* requirement by which power and honour are distributed to the citizens "according to their worth." The justice of the king is conceived in exactly the same terms as that in Plato's ideal statesman. Drawing heavily upon Plato's threefold division of the soul in the *Republic*,³⁷ the Byzantine author makes the soul the foundation of his just state and society:

A just king is a man in whose soul reason (*logos*), spirit (*thymos*), and desire (*epithymia*) are kept in perfect balance and perform their proper function which justice applied to God, things divine and civil matters would flow forth as if from a natural source.³⁸

Briefly, justice in Plato is defined as a cardinal virtue whereby the three parts of the soul, reasoning, spirited, appetitive, perform their own function and produce in this manner a harmony, a "psychic harmony."³⁹ Piety to God, however, as part of the king's justice, though not mentioned in the *Republic*, is found in other Platonic dialogues.⁴⁰ The word *hosiotetes* (holiness) in Plato is replaced by the more Christian term *eusebeia* (piety) in the Anonymous treatise. Further, the Anonymous' definition of kingship is written entirely in Platonic language and content:

Kingship is concerned with political matters; its aim is to achieve the well-being (*euexia*) of these matters according to justice; its end is the very performance of just acts from which a useful thing comes, namely the salvation (*soteria*) of men.⁴¹

The word "salvation" in this context may have a Christian ring to it, since the Byzantine author was a Christian Neoplatonist.

3. Criteria for the Selection of an Aristos as a Ruler

In connection with the Anonymous' class of the "best men" (*aristoi*) from whom the ruler / king was chosen, there are two questions that should be addressed: first, what were the qualifications that allowed someone to be or become an *aristos* and second, by what criteria was the king chosen from the class of the *aristoi*.

We have no idea what the size of the aristocratic class of the "best men" was, but judging from the requirements of an *aristos*, it should have been pretty small. The qualifications which entitled one to become a member of this elite class of *aristoi* were precisely the same⁴² as specified by Plato in his *Republic*⁴³ for the class of the Guardians, that is, a good nature (*physis*), a proper upbringing (*trophe*), and a right education (*paideia*). In fact, both political writers, in discussing the selection and training of the best nature (*ariste physis*), make an interesting comparison between human and animal breeding and training.⁴⁴ They both come to the conclusion that there is no guarantee that the best will always produce the best no matter how good the training might be. Plato talks about parents of gold begetting children of silver or bronze, and the opposite can also be true. Children of gold selected from the Guardian class but also from the third class of producers should be given an early training in *mousike* and *gymnastike* under strict state supervision to impart the right convictions in them.⁴⁵ Only children so chosen and so educated will preserve their attachment to the laws of the state and be guided by right opinion and true knowledge. To rise to the status of the ruling class, a member is required to pass arduous testing at all ages and stages of the educational program Plato devised for them. Wisdom will be their ultimate goal: "When we find one who has come unscathed through every test in childhood, youth and manhood, we shall set him as a ruler to watch over the state."⁴⁶

All others in whom courage is a predominant part of their soul will serve in the class of the Auxiliaries (military) and a few in whose soul neither the rational nor the spirited but only the appetitive part became dominant, will be relegated to the lowest class of the Artisans. By the same token, if any children who were chosen from the third class, because of their good nature, advance through various stages of Plato's education and thus prove that they possess the virtues of the Guardian class, then they should be registered in the appropriate group.⁴⁷

Likewise, the Byzantine author devised a downward and upward mobility of individuals "at any age period" because an *aristos* "can change and fall

behind in nobility and magnificence of the soul, as it often happens with plant seeds, and become inferior in judgement (*doxa*) and dignity (*axia*)."⁴⁸ And vice versa, a person from the lower ranks of society "if found to possess the magnificence of nature and other political virtue,"⁴⁹ should be enrolled in a separate "system" or *tagma* of "best men" who were assigned a financial function, that of trade and commerce. Obviously, the Byzantine author is closer to the prevailing conditions of sixth-century Byzantium where the finances of the state were in the hands of mostly middle but also of upper class citizens.⁵⁰

Plato's aversion to capitalism is evident in the *Republic* when he condemns the economic man and replaces him with a socialistic motive. Thus private possessions, the source of all social evils and wars, are banned from the Guardian class and allowed only for the lower class. Whatever little property the Guardians are allowed is held in common. However, they receive their meals and sufficient pay for equipment and the necessities of life from the state.⁵¹ Unlike Plato, however, the "best men" in the Byzantine *politeia* are allowed to possess a "reasonable" amount of private property and anything in excess to the allowable "should be handed over and managed by the next of kin."⁵² No citizen may increase his property at the expense of public funds or property. The class of "best men" receive pay for their livelihood from the state treasury. The pay varies according to the dignity (*axia*) of the *aristos*.⁵³

Where the Byzantine author most violently disagreed with Plato was over the question of marriage and family rights for the upper class. The Platonic communism of habitation,⁵⁴ children, wives, and husbands, was an abomination to him who writes:

Let the best men take their abode in the acropolis around the palace separate from the other inhabitants; let the abode be not a single common dwelling, as Plato thought fit, but a residence for each man individually together with his wife and children.⁵⁵

4. *Contemplation of the Good.*

One of the duties -- in fact, the main duty -- of the king both in Plato's *Republic* and in the Byzantine treatise, is the contemplation of the Good (*Agathon*) and the acquisition of truth. The ascent⁵⁶ of the mind to the comprehension of the Form of the Good is modelled on the Platonic description in the *Republic* VII⁵⁷ concerning the allegory of the cave and the four stages of cognition. The Byzantine text runs as follows:

Thus after the mind has seen, to the best of its ability, these most divine contemplations and has imprinted itself in them, [the mind] on its return descends by the same path by which it ascended; after the mind has seen these more clearly than before -- and much more clearly than when it used *hypotheses* based on opinion (*doxa*) and thought (*diaroria*), but having ascended and reached the summit, it became illuminated by divine light, by purest intellect and true knowledge -- and thus it has acquired, to the best of its ability, truth in the likeness of the Form of the Good which is imprinted in each created thing.⁵⁸

The content of this excerpt is a very close approximation of Plato's description of the four mental states of cognitive activity which in ascending order were:⁵⁹

- a. CONJECTURE (*eikasia*) is a type of cognition whereby the mind received reflections or images of reality.
- b. BELIEF (*doxa / pistis*) is an activity by which the mind moves to a more tangible world of sense objects.
- c. THOUGHT (*dianoia*) is the stage where the mind uses hypotheses as the basis of conclusions.
- d. KNOWLEDGE (*episteme*) is the final activity through which the mind attains perfect knowledge and truth.

It is the final step on which, according to Plato:

the mind transcends hypotheses and goes up to a principle which is above hypotheses, making no use of images . . . but proceeding only in and through the Forms themselves.⁶⁰

The "first principle beyond hypotheses" is, for both authors, Plato and the Anonymous, the Good / God, the source of knowledge as well as knowability. It is like the sun which illuminates everything and gives sight to the eye and visibility to the objects.⁶¹ The divine light has, in both writers, not only intellectual / spiritual but also moral and political significance. In other words, upon its return, the king's mind possessing greater knowledge will inquire to find its right place in the created world. The king will find out, according to the Byzantine author, that the structure of the cosmos is hierarchical wherein all beings are arranged by God in accordance with their worth and power. Moreover, God placed on each series of orders

a supervising power to help in the coherence of the order.⁶² Similarly, the king bearing the divine image twice over will discover that the human race, also, has been composed of two parts, the ruling and the ruled, the former being "like God in worth and power."⁶³

The Anonymous' description of the hierarchical structure of the cosmos is purely Neoplatonic in language and content. In Plato, simply the philosopher king after acquiring true knowledge of the Good gains insight into the teleology of the universe; he writes:

The philosopher, who consorts with what is divine and ordered, himself becomes godlike and ordered as far as man can.⁶⁴

The contents of the Platonic passage, though given a Christian tinge, are reflected by the Byzantine author in the concluding section of his discourse *On Kingship*.

When . . . the king philosopher, or the philosopher king, as Plato says, finds out by this method as discussed earlier, who he is and what place in the Universe he has been assigned, he should naturally seek, to the best of his ability, to rule in a manner similar to that of Him whose likeness and image he is. Otherwise, he would not be a true king but would only bear in vain an empty name.⁶⁵

In this and other passages, we have examined how certain Platonic ideas influenced and shaped significantly the Anonymous' political thought. Further, we have seen how the Byzantine author modified some of Plato's ideas either to conform with the socio-political realities of sixth-century Byzantium or to reflect concepts from his contemporary Neoplatonic and Christian thinkers.

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NOTES

¹ The treatise originally comprised six books of which only fragments of Books IV and V survive in a Vatican palimpsest (Vat. Gr. 1298). The

fragments were first deciphered and edited by A. Mai in *Scriptorum veterum nova collectio*, Vol. II (Rome 1827) 590-609. A substantially improved edition was recently made by C.M. Mazzucchi, *Menae patricii cum Thoma referendario De scientia politica dialogus*, Univ. Cattolica di Milano, Scienze filologiche e letteratura 23 (Milan 1982).

² A. Fotiou, "Dicaearchus and the Mixed Constitution in Sixth-Century Byzantium: New Evidence from a Treatise on 'Political Science'," *Byzantion* 51 (1981) 533-47; cf. Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985) 250.

³ Cameron (at n. 2) 251.

⁴ See the Introduction to and notes in a forthcoming edition and translation of the fragments.

⁵ The author's criticisms of the prevailing political anomaly is found at the end of Book V: "You know, I assume, Thomasius, that most men -- I do not say all lest I seem to be exaggerating -- simply plunge into political offices without having the vaguest notion ($\phi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\sigma\lambda\alpha$) at all about political science; they even venture kingship itself; by night and in broad daylight they purchase offices with money, flattery and subservience" (V. 218). (All references are to Mazzucchi's edition.)

⁶ Cameron (at n. 2) 250.

⁷ Cf. C. Mazzucchi, "Per una rilettura del palinseto Vaticano 'sulla scienza politica' del tempo di Giustiniano," in G. Archi, ed. *L'Imperatore Giustiniano, Storia e Mito* (Milan 1978) 240.

⁸ Mazzucchi (at n. 2) 15, lines 17 ff.

⁹ v. 35, 48, 123, 208, 210.

¹⁰ v. Valdenberg, "Les idées politiques dans les fragments attribuées à Pierre le Patrice," *Byzantion* 2 (1925); K. Praechter, "Zum Maischen anonymous peri politikēs epistēmēs," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 9 (1900) 621-32; A. Pertusi, "I principi fondamentali della concezione del potere a Bisanzio. Per un commento sul dialogo 'Sulla scienza politica' attribuito a Pietro Patrizio (secolo VI)," *Boll. del Ist. Storico Italiano Muratoriano per il Medio Evo* 80 (1968) 1-23; Mazzucchi (at n. 7) 243 f.

¹¹ v. 63.

¹² v. 99: ἡς τῆς πολιτείας ἐν τρισὶν ξυνισταμένῃς, βουλῇ τε καὶ σώμασι καὶ χρήμασιν.

¹³ *Rep.* 581c, 415a-c; cf. G. Klosko, *Plato's Political Theory* (New York and London 1986) 131 ff.

¹⁴ v. 60 f.

¹⁵ *Rep.* 412d.

¹⁶ v. 94.

¹⁷ v. 31 f.

¹⁸ In Plato this class is distinct from the Rulers: "The young men whom we before called Guardians may be more properly designated auxiliaries who will enforce the decisions of the Rulers" (*Rep.* 414b).

¹⁹ v. 29: τούτους χωριστέον τοῦ τῶν ἀρίστων καταλόγου καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις τῆς πόλεως τάγμασιν εἴτε στρατιωτικοῖς εἴτε ἀστικοῖς, ὡς ἡ ἐκάστου ἀξία, ἐγκαταλεκτέον.

²⁰ v. 89: οὕτω δὴ καὶ ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀρίστους ἐπιστήσαι τοῖς τῆς πόλεως καὶ πολιτείας τάγμασιν.

²¹ v. 40.

²² v. 122, 197-206.

²³ v. 9; cf. Plato, *Statesman*, 295d, 266e, 267c, 276b, 292e.

²⁴ *Statesman*, 311c, 296e.

²⁵ Plato, *Statesman*, 259d, 267c.

²⁶ 303b; cf. Aristotle, *Pol.* 1285b9.

²⁷ Diogenenes Laertius 7, 92 (an anonymous Stoic essay *On Virtue*).

²⁸ Sthenidas, *On Kingship* in L. Delatte, *Les traités de la royauté d'Ecphante, Diotogène et Sthénidas* (Liège / Paris 1942) 274 f.; cf. also Diotogènes, *ibid.*, p. 270.

²⁹ Proclus, *Elements* 121 in E.R. Dodds, *Proclus: The Elements of Theology* (Oxford 1963); the idea of imitation features in the writings of Dio Chrysostom, (or 3, 82 ed. Arnim) and Aelius Aristides, (or 35, p. 259, 13 ed. Keil), both composing speeches on kingship in the second century.

³⁰ From the Christian writers most prominent was Eusebius of Caesarea who made use of the concept in a political context first in his panegyric to Constantine in 329, *de laude Const.*, pp. 198, 34 ff., ed. Heikel; cf. also Synesius, *de regno* 4.5 (PG 66.1069B) and deacon Agapetus, *Ecthesis* 37 (PG 86.1, 1163-86).

- 31 v. 8.
- 32 Cf. St Basil, *hex.* 28B.
- 33 v. 129.
- 34 v. 130.
- 35 v. 132.
- 36 v. 138.
- 37 44e, 444d; cf. J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1981) 124 ff.
- 38 v. 138.
- 39 *Rep.*, 444d; cf. M.J. O'Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill 1967) 149 ff. and especially pp. 155 f.
- 40 *Euth.*, 12d et *passim*; *Prot.*, 329c, where $\delta\sigma\iota\delta\omicron\tau\eta\varsigma$ is part of justice. Further, $\delta\sigma\iota\delta\omicron\tau\eta\varsigma$ is defined as that part of justice which is related to the gods, cf. *Euth.*, 12e, 13c and *La* 199d.
- 41 v. 16; cf. Plato, *Statesman*, 297b, in reference to the king's duties in distributing justice, in protecting ($\sigma\phi\lambda\epsilon\iota\nu$) the citizens and in improving them morally.
- 42 v. 22-33.
- 43 374de, 376c, 424a, 429d - 430e, where Socrates subordinates nature and upbringing to right opinion; cf. O'Brien (at n. 39) 143.
- 44 Plato, *Rep.* 459a; Anonymous, v. 23 f.
- 45 *Rep.*, 510c - 511d; cf. Klosko (at n. 13) 128 ff.
- 46 *Rep.*, 413d; cf. Klosko (at n. 13), 139 f.
- 47 *Rep.*, 414d - 415c; cf. R.W. Hall, *Plato* (London 1981) 45.
- 48 v. 29.
- 49 v. 31.
- 50 R.J.H. Jenkins, "Social Life in the Byzantine Empire," *Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge 1967) Vol. IV, Part II, pp. 84 f.
- 51 *Rep.*, 416d - 417b; cf. Klosko (at n. 13), 141-43.
- 52 v. 37.
- 53 *Ibid.*

- 54 *Rep.*, 416e, 458e - 460a; cf. Hall (at n. 47) 106.
- 55 v. 35.
- 56 In fact only the descent of the mind (ΝΟΥ) survived on folio 299^r (V. 116 f.); but it is possible to reconstruct the ascent from the language employed to describe the mind's descent.
- 57 509d - 511e.
- 58 v. 116 f.
- 59 See F.M. Cornford, *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford 1941) 221-23 and O'Brien (at n. 39) 159 f.
- 60 *Rep.* 510b.
- 61 *Rep.* 508d - 509a; Anonymous, V. 118 f.
- 62 v. 118 f.
- 63 v. 121.
- 64 *Rep.* 500c.
- 65 v. 123.