

# Cooperation in *Republic and Politics*

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Most principles adopted in contemporary political theory originate from classical political thought. Democracy and justice - these ideas are synonymous with the works of both Plato and Aristotle, and our contemporary political landscape would not exist without them. Another idea that both philosophers allude to that is essential to every political association is cooperation. Cooperation is an essential concept in contemporary politics. Without it, the structure of international relations could not operate. International organizations exist on the basis of international cooperation as the means to achieve the most beneficial political, economic, and social policies worldwide. Although both Plato and Aristotle deal with the topic of cooperation indirectly, this topic plays a role in many of their fundamental arguments and aims. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *The Politics* both work towards finding the path to the attainment of the best life, and I argue that one of the main ways they seek to achieve this is through cooperation. They indirectly regard it as the means to the best life. Platonic and Aristotelian virtues, such as courage, wisdom, moderation and justice, are to be incorporated in this process in order for cooperation to succeed. Although both philosophers appear to be in favor of cooperation and view it as the key to the best life, there are differences in their opinions on methods that enable cooperation, and both fail to propose the correct formula for cooperation to succeed. They assume that this required cooperation will be flawless and do not explain the potential problems that might occur within cooperation. The first part of this analysis looks at Plato's viewpoint on cooperation and its influence on society.

The second part looks at Aristotle's viewpoint on cooperation, as well as the key similarities and differences that emerge between the two theorists when dealing with cooperation and methods of cooperation. In the third part of the analysis, I offer an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the analyses of cooperation given by Plato and Aristotle, which shows what their approaches to cooperation lack.

First of all, let us consider Plato's ideas. In Book II of the *Republic*, Plato describes Socrates introducing the idea of the formation of the city in the dialogue. The idea of the formation of the city itself is Plato's first sign of favoring cooperation. In his dialogue with Adeimantus, Socrates sets out the attributes of the ideal city and emphasizes the importance of the accurate division of labor. He argues that people of the city have to practice specialization, where citizens perform the task that each is suited for.<sup>1</sup> Through this division of labor, citizens will perform these jobs in the finest way, allowing for the highest efficiency. Through specialization, the craftsmen are dedicated to crafting, farmers to farming, rulers to ruling, and so on. Even the weakest of the citizens have jobs in accordance to their abilities, such as working in the business of exchange as Socrates proposes.<sup>2</sup> The potential for the highest efficiency in the ideal city indirectly implies that cooperation among citizens through this specialization is needed to have the best possible city. The citizens need each other and cannot reach the best outcome without helping one another. Therefore, as Plato indirectly proposes, by working together and dividing tasks among each other in the finest way, the citizens would be able to reach the potential of the ideal city.

Another illustration of cooperation through the division of labor is Socrates' myth of metals. Socrates clarifies his explanation

of the division of labor when he explains that people are mixed with different types of metals at birth based on their capacities. He explains that people mixed with gold at birth are the rulers, people mixed with silver are the auxiliary, and people mixed with bronze and iron are the craftsmen and farmers of the city.<sup>3</sup> This metaphor justifies people's social statures in society. Therefore, the farmers and craftsmen are the best producers of their products, the guardians are the fittest to protect the city, and the rulers are undoubtedly the best to rule the city. Socrates finds this aspect of the city of such importance because an inaccurate division of labor would never allow the highest benefit for all. The key point in Socrates' discussion of the division of labor is that his idea of the perfect city and the desire to attain it enables cooperation, and more importantly, leads to the benefit of the whole. The system allows something for everyone, rather than only benefiting the rulers and guardians. In this perfect city, the craftsmen and farmers are happy because they are ruled and protected by the most just rulers and guardians, and the rulers and guardians are happy because they have established a great and just city, and as such, all the different classes are able to share the benefits of the system.

Throughout book III of the *Republic*, Socrates focuses on the idea of 'benefiting the whole.' In his idea of founding the city, the guardians and rulers of the perfect city are "not looking to the exceptional happiness of any one group among us but, as far as possible, that of the city as a whole".<sup>4</sup> They will not be concerned with their own well-being, but rather with the well-being of the entire city. Plato argues that in order for them to ensure this outcome, the rulers and guardians should have no private property and they should "live in common".<sup>5</sup> Socrates elaborates on this point and explains the reason they should live like this is that "whenever they'll possess private land, houses, and currency,

they'll be householders and farmers instead of guardians, and they'll become masters and enemies instead of allies of the other citizens; hating and being hated, plotting and being plotted against, they'll lead their whole lives far more afraid of the enemies within than those without."<sup>6</sup> What Plato is implying here is that the guardians and rulers must cooperate, share, and live with each other on the same level and standard of living. The reason why he argues against private property is to give the guardians and rulers the ability to cooperate and benefit the city. To do this, they must be allies, respectful and honest with each other – and these are precisely the timeless characteristics of any group willing to cooperate, and by extension, the qualities of a cooperative society. What private property enables is the exact opposite of these qualities: hatred, dishonesty, and enmity. This would result in the lack of cooperation among the guardians and rulers, which would in turn result in the opposite of Plato's goal; the rulers benefiting themselves, rather than benefiting the whole. To benefit the whole the guardians and rulers must cooperate, and for them to cooperate, they must share common property.

Aristotle, like Plato, shows evidence of favoring cooperation in *The Politics*. Aristotle explains different associations in a society, which include the family, the household, the village, and the state. He argues that the state exists by nature, and that it is "the end of those others, and nature is itself an end; for whatever is the end-product of the coming into existence of any object, that is what we call its nature – of a man, for instance, of a horse or a household".<sup>7</sup> To Aristotle, each individual, family, and household are all part of the state, and these individual parts cannot function unless they are joined with the whole. For this reason, he claims "the state has a natural priority over the household and over any individual among us. For the whole must be prior to the part".<sup>8</sup> He

clarifies this further by using the analogy of the hand,<sup>9</sup> which implies that a single hand is useless unless it is attached to the body. Aristotle's key point in this argument is that only the end product reaches self-sufficiency. This recognition of the end product being the truly efficient association in itself favors cooperation, because it implies that no individual on his or her own can function or accomplish anything unless it joins a larger association. This implication shows Aristotle's indirect desire for cooperation. He argues that an individual cannot achieve self-sufficiency because the individual is the useless part. Aristotle understands self-sufficiency in accordance with the good life.<sup>10</sup> As cooperation among the minor associations in society leads to self-sufficiency in the state, it also leads to the good life.

There is a key similarity between Plato and Aristotle regarding the concept of efficiency. Aristotle makes his arguments in a very economic-oriented way, and Plato does give adequate attention to the effect of the economy on the city. Both philosophers are in favor of specialization, in which jobs are allocated accordingly and are performed in the finest way possible. Though they both agree that specialization leads to efficiency, Aristotle focuses more on the idea of the entire city being the only efficient association, whereas Plato simply implies that specialization depends on each individual carrying out his or her job in the best way. In other words, Plato argues that if each individual does his or her part in the economy, the outcome will benefit the whole. Aristotle suggests the same concept, but with a more specific focus on the state as the only sufficient association.

Aristotle's distinction of different associations in society differs from Plato's view of these associations. In the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, Socrates regards the application of

a quality to an individual as equivalent to the application of the same quality to the city and the family.<sup>11</sup> The implication is that Plato understands the structures of different associations in society to be equal. Aristotle disagrees with this view, saying that the structure of the family is much simpler than that of the polis. In *The Politics*, the city is much more complex.<sup>12</sup> It is concerned primarily with economic benefits, followed by military benefits, along with the provision of the best life beyond meeting mere economic and military needs. For this reason, Aristotle would say that cooperation in the family cannot be generalized to apply to the whole city as Plato does, because the nature of this cooperation would be much more complicated with greater concerns to consider than the family.

Among oligarchy, democracy and tyranny, Aristotle shows preference to mixed, rather than pure forms of these so-called defective regimes.<sup>13</sup> His preference is a mixture between oligarchy and democracy because it allows for moderation.<sup>14</sup> This moderation between oligarchy and democracy enables the cooperation of the two regimes, resulting in the most desired realistic regime. This outcome is the result of the extraction of the most desirable features of the two regimes, allowing this amalgamation the best of both sides. This cooperation leads to “the most valuable of principles in a constitution: ruling by respectable men of blameless conduct and without detriment to the population at large”.<sup>15</sup> Aristotle regards this constitution as the closest to perfection as a regime can realistically be. In this argument, Aristotle indirectly implies that moderation is the key to the cooperation between oligarchic and democratic elements, and this type of cooperation enables the best possible life.

Another Aristotelian idea that favors cooperation is his support of private property. Aristotle argues that owning private property is important in a state because private land would be given great care and effort.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he explains that common property would be in poor condition because public goods are not cared for, due to a general lacking of a sense of ownership.<sup>17</sup> He argues that we “find more disputes in common than we do among separate holders of possessions, even though, as we can see, the number of those who quarrel over partnerships is small as compared with the great multitude of private owners”.<sup>18</sup> Aristotle also argues “there is a very great pleasure in helping and doing favors to friends and strangers and associates; and this happens when people have property of their own”.<sup>19</sup> Private property allows this pleasure because the effort put into private land results in better food and goods, which in turn generates surplus. Property owners become hospitable and generous with their friends and associates by offering them this surplus, and they gain justifiable pride in this cooperation. Therefore, Aristotle indirectly implies that private property facilitates cooperation, which is enabled by the generosity property owners exhibit to share their surpluses with friends.

Aristotle and Plato have opposing views on the matter of private property. While both philosophers relate the concept of private property to cooperation, they do so in opposite ways. While Aristotle implies that private property facilitates cooperation, Plato implies that private property leads to distrust and the destruction of the idea of the perfect city. He prefers the common ownership of property because he views this common ownership as the facilitator of cooperation that benefits the whole city. Aristotle, on the other hand, argues that common ownership leads to the poor treatment of the property because no one will truly own the land

and care for it. Plato did not consider Aristotle's notion of the surplus to be the result of private ownership. Aristotle regards Plato's argument as unrealistic and impractical.<sup>20</sup>

Plato and Aristotle both work towards building the perfect life through this concept of cooperation. Both philosophers argue that there are many other factors that contribute to the foundation of the perfect life, but without cooperation, all other factors would be useless. Wisdom, courage, moderation and justice in their purest forms are essential to them both, as well as education, philosophy, politics, and monitoring the economy. I do not overlook any of these factors, nor do I undermine them, because cooperation is the process in which all of these factors work together to attain the best life. This argument complies with both Platonic and Aristotelian thought, as they argue for many policies that enable this kind of cooperation. Though it is not explicitly defined in the *Republic* and *The Politics*, the importance of cooperation among citizens in several different ways is nonetheless implied. Although their analyses of cooperation are implicit, they do thoroughly involve the concept in their arguments.

Plato's clearest approach to cooperation is his introduction of the division of labor. This concept has been an essential tool in maintaining the economy throughout the centuries, and is used by many philosophers after him. In this analysis of the division of labor, Plato introduces two things: the most basic principles to any efficiently functioning economy, and the means by which a society can begin in the process of cooperation. Both of these points are crucial to his formula of the best possible life. Aristotle deals with the same matters of cooperation as Plato, but in more depth and detail. In some cases, such as the case of the analysis of common property, Aristotle responds directly to Plato. In others, it is more



of an indirect response to the concepts Plato proposes. Aristotle's analysis of cooperation regarding the distinction of societal associations is more accurate than the one Plato offers. Plato equates the characteristics and foundations of the individual to the family and the city, and any other association in society. This is an unrealistic method of analysis, and Aristotle accounts for the flaws in Plato's argument. It is critical to note that a family or an individual are much simpler than a village or even a city. A family is based primarily on the nature of relationships and rules within, whereas a city is based on a complex economy, a military, and the need to provide beyond necessities, and it is therefore important to consider these distinctions when analyzing the cooperation each association participates in; the cooperation that takes place in a family is not equal to the cooperation in the larger and more complex city.

Aristotle also picks up on Plato's analysis of common property. He argues that private property is a good thing, especially for cooperation, because it enables surpluses and generosity to others with these surpluses. This is an example of how virtues function within cooperation to lead to the best life, where the generosity in sharing surpluses is a cooperative action that gets a society one step closer to the best life. Aristotle's analysis of private property is more applicable to a realistic city. In Plato's argument of common property among the guardians and rulers, he fails to account for the potential problems that might occur among them despite common ownership. Although he does examine the elimination of competition and distrust among citizens, he does not consider other possible conflicts that might arise among them. Plato assumes that as long as all the guardians and rulers own everything commonly, there will be no factions among them. This is a false assumption, because it is unrealistic to predict the

elimination of factions solely on the basis of common ownership. Factions do not only arise due to competition and private ownership as Plato assumes. For example, factions can arise among the guardians in decision-making, since the auxiliary and rulers are in charge of a city, which inevitably requires large responsibilities such as making impromptu decisions. Under such a circumstance, common ownership would not prevent factions. Indeed it might help in the sense that guardians and rulers would not make decisions based on their own interests but rather for the whole, though here I argue it is the opinion on these decisions made for the whole that will differ. These differences will be based on the differences from one individual to another. Although all rulers will have engaged in philosophy and will have the highest ability to rule, they cannot share the exact same opinions and thoughts about issues. For this reason, I argue that Plato's position on the matter of common ownership is too simplistic. It does eliminate most potential conflicts, but not all. It is also important to note how he disregards the fact that guardians and rulers are human beings with emotions. Plato argues that guardians should be separated from their children at birth, in order to prevent nepotism. But no female guardian or ruler would willingly accept the anonymity of her children. Due to this, I conclude that Aristotle's argument of private property is a more realistic and practical approach to property owning, which will in turn allow attainable results from cooperation.

Aristotle's approach to cooperation appears as a modified and corrected version of Plato's approach, as he is always offering a much more practical way of enabling cooperation. Nevertheless, both philosophers do propose very strong formulas for reaching the best possible life through cooperation. However, there is one common defect between both of their formulas. They make the

dangerous assumption that in all their mechanisms of private or common property, the division of labor, and different societal associations, all individuals will be willing to contribute to the overall process of cooperation. This is the greatest fallacy of all in their arguments, because they do not consider the conflicts that might arise within this process. Both Plato and Aristotle acknowledge the different classes in the city and that the majority of individuals are inferior to the guardians or rulers. Despite this acknowledgement, they assume that these inferior individuals will accept their inferiority, contributing adequately in their jobs and their duties. This is a false assumption, because no inferior individual would be willing to do his or her part as much as a ruler, or someone of a higher position in society. There are no repercussions for an inferior individual to not do so, so there would be no desire to contribute as much. Aristotle makes a very clear distinction between the capacity of a man and his wife and a master and his slave.<sup>21</sup> In placing the master in a higher position than the slave, Aristotle cannot assume that the slave will be willing to contribute to his duties as much as the master, who is prized for his greater capacity. Plato, in the same way, assumes that all the craftsmen and farmers are willing to contribute to the city as much as the guardians and rulers. Although it is possible that the lower classes of a society are accepting and understanding enough to be willing to make equal contributions, it should not be assumed. Indeed, people have different natures, as well as different capacities. Some men are only productive with physical work, while others are only productive with their minds. It is only natural that some people are capable of greater things than others, but this does not imply that those who are less capable will accept their inferiority and contribute as much as those who are superior. This is a problem that might occur within a cooperative society, which Plato and Aristotle do not consider when presenting their formulas

of cooperation that lead to the best life. Therefore, their approaches are not flawless.

Overall, the *Republic* and *The Politics* implicitly utilize cooperation as the tool to achieve the best life. Both philosophers deal with similar concepts when approaching cooperation, though the methods they use to approach these concepts differ. While Plato sets out the division of labor and specialization among the different groups in society, Aristotle proposes a different view of the extent of cooperation that occurs within specific groups, which is to consider the greater complexity of the city than the family. Also, Plato argues that common ownership is the facilitator for cooperation, while Aristotle disagrees with this, and argues instead that private ownership is the facilitator of cooperation. Plato explains that common ownership will allow the rulers and guardians to benefit the entire city rather than just themselves, whereas Aristotle argues that private ownership will allow for surplus that can be shared. Aristotle adopts a more realistic and practical approach than Plato, and provides a formula that can be used in realistic circumstances. He even considers every aspect of the city regarding cooperation, including economic, political, and social aspects. He proposes a design for the most wholly beneficial regime, which is a mixture between oligarchy and democratic. These regimes are to cooperate with each other to produce the best possible political culture, where respectable and intellectual citizens who have the right to rule are the rulers, and in this regime both the rulers and the ruled benefit. Although Aristotle considers every aspect, he and Plato fail to consider the possible conflicts that might arise in these proposed approaches to cooperation. They both assume that every individual, despite his or her position in society, would be willing to contribute to his or her duties equally. Cooperation, in a general sense, involves honesty, respect and

equality, but most of the people in the cities proposed by Plato and Aristotle are inferior. They fail to consider that it is highly possible that a servant or a craftsman will not enjoy their inferiority to higher classes, despite their lower capacities, and that they will not be willing to contribute their share to the city. This shows that the formulas to reach the best life presented by Plato and Aristotle are not flawless, because they make an unrealistic assumption of the contributions made by each individual in society.

## Notes

- 1 Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 47.
- 2 Ibid., 48.
- 3 Ibid., 94.
- 4 Ibid., 98.
- 5 Ibid., 96.
- 6 Ibid., 96.
- 7 Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. Sinclair (London: Penguin Books Limited, 1981), 59.
- 8 Ibid., 60.
- 9 Ibid., 60.
- 10 Ibid., 59.
- 11 Plato, *Republic*, 121.
- 12 Aristotle, *The Politics*, 59.
- 13 Ibid., 369.
- 14 Ibid., 369.
- 15 Ibid., 369.
- 16 Ibid., 114.
- 17 Ibid., 114.
- 18 Ibid., 116.
- 19 Ibid., 115.
- 20 Ibid., 116.
- 21 Ibid., 65.