E-LOGOS/2006

ISSN 1121-0442

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Property: Past and Present

From Plato and Aristotle to Today

Keywords:
Plato, Aristotle, private property, international, environment, The Republic, communal property, middle-class, Machiavelli, Noel Malcolm, Helen Fisher, Oneida, natural law, Martha Nussbaum, cosmopolitanism, The Politics, The Prince

Abstract:
Property: Past and Present *From Plato and Aristotle to Today*:
Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *The Politics* boast certain similarities, including the description of property in terms of our everyday relationships; however, they differ in their analysis of these relationships. Plato is an ideological advocate for absolute parity within the guardian class. Each guardian holds their property in common, including wives, children and land (Plato, 155). Aristotle criticizes Plato's communist ideal with a more realistic view of property. He reasons that it is irrational to presume that equality for all people and property is achievable (Aristotle, 57). In this respect, Aristotle's realistic description of property is a more plausible explanation; however, Plato's depiction of communal property appears to be the more desirable form. Broadening these classical ideas to include our current reality direct us to a discussion of how the international community accepts and/or changes the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of property. Each individual is entitled to their share of private property; nevertheless, our international responsibilities are mounting and we can no longer think of communal property solely in terms of the family or the political community. I will argue that while Aristotle's description of our more personal relationships between man and woman, the household, the village and the political community are still somewhat relevant today, we have a growing obligation to the international community which necessitates a combination of private and communal property. I will address three central questions in this analysis: first, what is property and how is it approached in the classical literature of Plato and Aristotle? Second, how does the classical literature relate to the international system today? Finally, how do classical and current authors address the issue of moderating property legislation through education?

Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *The Politics* boast certain similarities, including the description of property in terms of our everyday relationships; however, they differ in their analysis of these relationships. Plato is an ideological advocate for absolute parity within the guardian class. Each guardian holds their property in common, including wives, children and land (Plato, 155). Aristotle criticizes Plato's communist ideal with a more realistic view of property. He reasons that it is irrational to presume that equality for all people and property is achievable (Aristotle, 57). In this respect, Aristotle's realistic description of property is a more plausible explanation; however, Plato's depiction of communal property appears to be the more desirable form. Broadening these classical ideas to include our current reality direct us to a discussion of how the international community accepts and/or changes the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of property. Each individual is entitled to their share of private property; nevertheless, our international responsibilities are mounting and we can no longer think of communal property solely in terms of the family or the political community. I will argue that while Aristotle's description of our more personal relationships between man and woman, the household, the village and the political community are still somewhat relevant today, we have a growing obligation to the international community which necessitates a combination of private and communal property. I will address three central questions in this essay: first, what is property and how is it approached in the classical literature of Plato and Aristotle. Second, how does the classical literature relate to the international system today? Finally, how do classical and current authors address the issue of moderating property legislation through education?

Plato's central concern in *The Republic* was the question of justice. He wanted to know what justice was and how it could be realized. He asked, if you took a just man and gave him a horrible life, and took an unjust man and gave him a great life, who would be happier in the end? Plato addresses this question with three main contentions. Firstly, the unjust man is ignorant of his surroundings since he never acknowledges that others may be more knowledgeable than he. The just man is prudent, since he recognizes that his knowledge is limited. Secondly, even thieves have a semblance of justice. They need to cooperate minimally to survive amongst one another. Accordingly, cooperation is needed to achieve a sustainable balance within a man's soul, thus, justice is essential. Lastly; Plato avers that happiness and virtue go hand in hand.

Essentially, the conclusion is that justice is more natural to the human soul than injustice (Plato, 32-40). Plato resolves that to address the complex nature of justice, an imaginary state must be constructed. He begins by founding an imaginary state and quickly adds luxuries (53). For Plato, luxuries are problematic because they distract us from pursuing the good, by causing tensional and physical conflict within society. The problems with luxuries create a need for armies that can mediate the struggle over acquiring land and goods. The army, which Plato eventually calls the guardian class, should recognize that acquiring excessive wealth and happiness can actually distract them from following a virtuous path (60-63). Plato reiterates this point when he describes the three sections of the soul; reason (knowledge), spirit (bravery) and appetite (urge). Reason is attributed to the rulers; the auxiliaries are credited with spirit and appetite is characteristic of the craftspeople. The best case scenario is for people to restrain their appetites by using their reason (chapter XII).

Plato is a proponent of communal property. He argues that women should partake in the same activities and occupations and receive the same education as men, though it should be recognized that women are not of equal physical strength (153-154). Plato also avers that 1) to generate desirable qualities in children; they should be bred in the same manner as domesticated animals, 2) the guardian class should place the community's wellbeing above their individual familial interests, and 3) cohesion within the state should be of utmost importance (155). To accomplish these three contentions, Plato suggests that women, children, land, sexual intercourse, marriage and occupations be tightly controlled and in some cases be held in common (144-168). Consequently, parents can not know their children and vice versa. Only the best and brightest children should remain in the guardian community; thus, unions should only occur when both the man and woman are at their peak reproductive ages (160-161). Plato also insists that the guardians will be pleased to fight for their state if they are compensated with honor and glory and not necessarily with wealth and property (167). Accordingly, the guardians should protect the property of others even though they themselves are not entitled to own private property (108-109). Plato concludes that state cohesion and collective property will create the greatest good, because first, collectivity will abolish disagreements that begin with property ownership and second, the good is only realized when everyone is working towards the same communal end (166-167). Essentially, in

Plato's *Republic*, private property should not be available to the guardian class; the guardians should, however, be entitled to communal property.

In contrast with Plato's view of women as equally capable of accomplishing the same tasks and educational endeavors as men, Aristotle believes that there is an accepted division between men, the natural rulers and women, the naturally ruled (Aristotle, 36). The union between these unequal partners creates what Aristotle calls the household. The household's property includes its slaves. Women, however, are not considered slaves because they are not ruled for their master's advantage; they are controlled for their own benefit. To Aristotle, the division between men and women is necessary; since, men are by nature political animals and, thus, need to pursue activity as citizens outside of the home. Women are by nature, more inclined to remain in the sphere of the home and, therefore, are not fully human. You are only considered fully human when you are actively practicing virtue, liberality and moderation in the political community (37). When a number of these households are linked together, they produce the village, which is a part of a larger political community or *polis* (36-38). To achieve Aristotle's top priority: the good life, one must be an active member within this political community. He believes that we come together to live, but we stay together to live well (36-37).

Aristotle also criticizes Plato's argument that women and children should be held in common. He believes that parents will discover who their children are and love them more despite the controls placed on their ability to rear their own offspring. The same holds true for property - people will always pay respect to their own land before they value another's property (55-58).

Understanding Aristotle's criticism of Plato's inclination towards communal property necessitates a discussion of the middle-class. Aristotle believes that a rule by the many is superior to rule by the few or rule by one (book 3). Allowing private property provides the many or the middle-class with the means to rule; consequently, private property is considered a necessity rather than a luxury (Anesi, 3). Aristotle trusts that middle-class citizens are the most capable protectors of a stable constitution, since they are less likely to become corrupted than the rich or the poor (Anesi, 1). Aristotle allows this middle-class to acquire capital and private property so that they may gain authority in the political community. Riches and property will eventually generate

happiness, as people will have the means to employ their desirable qualities in the community (Miller, 312).

While Aristotle promotes property ownership, he also suggests that what we acquire from nature should be essential and practical, but not inexhaustible. He maintains that there is a distinction between natural acquisition, which includes using and exchanging articles with or without money, and unnatural acquisition, which is characterized by a desire for limitless wealth. Ultimately, happiness is not found in the excessive acquisition of external material things; it is established in the pursuance of the relationships that lead us to the good life (Aristotle, 46-48). Aristotle sees a need to set limits on wealth since acquiring money that is not needed and will likely never be used is irrational and wasteful. Aristotle and Plato would likely agree that excessive wealth distracts us from what we should be pursuing; in Plato's case, the good; in Aristotle's case, the good life.

Aristotle asserts that the city is constructed of disparate peoples with differing interests. He states that, "the virtue of all the citizens is necessarily not single, just as that of a head and a file leader in a chorus is not single." (90-91). Unlike Plato, Aristotle believes that diversity is desirable since a commonwealth cannot be administered by a community of un-wealthy people. Furthermore, the rulers have to have someone to rule over, so the distinction between wealthy and poor, and ruler and ruled must be made (94).

Property, in this essay, will be distinguished by two different approaches. On the one hand, private property constitutes property which is owned privately and which the community has access to under restricted conditions with the permission of the owner. Alternatively, communal or collective property will be defined as all things subject to ownership which are shared by the many and the many have stake in the community as a whole. Ultimately, Aristotle's somewhat revised arguments supporting limited private property have been more broadly accepted in developed capitalistic societies. Allowing private property is one of the ways in which individuals are supplied with the means to pursue their own interests and, therefore, their own happiness. As the Italian diplomat, Machiavelli warned the princes of his time,

> the prince…should concentrate upon avoiding those things which make him hated and despised…what makes him hated above all else is being rapacious and a usurper of the property and women of his subjects…in most cases, so long as you do not deprive [your

> subjects] of either their property or their honor, the majority of men live happily (Machiavelli, 61).

In addition, private property is necessary for economic, political and social advancement. Individuals will thrive when given the opportunity to capitalize on their own self-reliance.

Alternatively, Plato's argument for communal property fails to address the issue of an indeterminable number of differing abilities within the guardian class. He mentions only two separate groups contained in the guardian category, "the auxiliaries [and the] rulers" (Plato, 103), when realistically many divergent interests would likely be present. This problem is best represented with a statement written by academic, Noel Malcolm in his analysis of the potential for failure in the European Union. He emphasizes that trying to combine a number of states' interests or in Plato's case individuals' interest's leads to "childlike logic…Think what a beautiful color we can make if we mix all the colors of the paint box! The result, inevitably, is a muddy shade of brown" (Malcolm, 68). The unexpected result in Malcolm's paint box may parallel Plato's guardian society if unequal ability produces resentment among the guardians. Anthropologist, Helen Fisher in her book *The Anatomy of Love*, describes a colony in Oneida, New York in the 1830's. John Humphrey Noyes set out to create a Christian community where all labor, land, women and children were shared communally (like Plato had suggested). Personal belongings and romantic love was looked down upon. The community was a failure; Noyes eventually rebelled against his own rules and fathered a large number of children in the community. Additionally, men and women fell in love regardless of Noyes' original rules (Fisher, 71). According to Fisher, "the human animal seems to be psychologically built to form a pair-bond with a single mate," (72). Plato was unaware of the evolutionary aspect of human nature at the time of his writing, so he may be forgiven for his failure to recognize the human inclination to pair-bond. However, Aristotle's argument receives some validation from the Oneida Christian community's failure. Aristotle believed that even if Plato's unified ideal was achievable, the outcome would be undesirable. He avers that the city is different from the household in the sense that the household is unified and the city is a mass of differing peoples. Trying to unify the city as if it were a household would inevitably destroy the city (Aristotle, 56). The city itself comes to

exist when dissimilar people form it. Aristotle solidifies this point by reiterating the importance of the continuum of relationships,

A household is more self-sufficient than one person, and a city than a household; and a city tends to come into being at the point when the partnership formed by a multitude is self-sufficient. If, therefore, the more self-sufficient is more choiceworthy, what is less a unity is more choiceworthy than what is more unity, (56-57).

Unity may appear to be the ideal, but it actually destroys the notion of harmony within the city.

One might argue that we may now extend Plato's and Aristotle's descriptions of property far beyond the constraints of the family, outside the borders of the state and into the realm of the international community. Interestingly, while Aristotle's arguments have been more accepted in modern times, Plato's ideas are perhaps more relevant to the ideal international community. Obviously, most authors would not be so radical to suggest that children and wives be held in common; however, the general notion of communal property is beginning to resurface in proposed methods for environmental management. Thomas J. Cioppa of Colorado State University mentions that state sovereignty and state property or territory actually undermines the commitment to environmental protection on an international level as states will always advocate for their own benefit before promoting the concerns of the international community (1). In the same way that Plato's guardian class required a relaxation of individual interests; environmentalists demand a lessening of state interest and a strengthened collective arrangement.

Coppia, like many other literary scholars asks the question, is collective environmental protection achievable in a world made up of independent states? (2) He responds that state sovereignty continues to play a dominant role in international environmental law; nonetheless, he is hopeful that future declarations will produce a more cohesive international system, (3). Aristotle would likely argue that a collective system of environmental protection is not feasible, since locating individual interests above collective concerns is a natural human behavior. Some argue, however, while Aristotle may have been partially correct, there is such a thing as natural law. Natural law reasons that universal values can be found in human nature by the grace of God. These principles are binding on all communities in the absence or

presence of positive law. Natural law has been instrumental in forwarding human rights and has also pushed the idea that those who infringe on the rights of others should be punished. Accordingly, since the environment is shared by all people, its destruction may be perceived as infringing on others' rights and, therefore, as an opposing force to natural law.

Plato would possibly suggest that as long as people are introduced to proper education before age ten, it is possible to unify individuals through a very specific didactic structure. He proposed a very explicit educational layout for the guardian class in which they would study math for ten years, dialectic for five years and practical experience for fifteen years (Plato, 66-93). Once they had accomplished all of these minor educational tasks, they could undertake larger responsibilities (102-103). For Plato, the goal of education was to provide students with a means of understanding the "harmonious order," (89) of the world. Once this ideal is reached, it is possible to move closer to the good, which lies beyond our world. To Aristotle, education was not a means of finding something outside of reality; the goal was to ensure that men had the instruments needed to reach a balance of virtue, liberality and moderation. Aristotle would add that education may limit the desire for property, but paradoxically, properly educated people would not desire irrational amounts of private property rendering property legislation unnecessary[1]. Martha Nussbaum, a cosmopolitan scholar, agrees with Aristotle's method of teaching. She suggests that educating people to see life and humanity as a continuum of relationships, similar to Aristotle's continuum, may be the key to creating cohesion in today's international system. Nussbaum uses the Stoic's example of concentric circles to solidify her argument,

> We think of ourselves not as devoid of local affiliations, but as surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The first one encircles the self, the next takes in the immediate family, then follows the extended family, then, in order; neighbors or local groups, fellow city-dwellers, and fellow countrymen…Outside these circles is the largest one, humanity as a whole, (Nussbaum, 9).

This type of education, which Nussbaum calls "cosmopolitan education," (11) encourages a combination of local affiliation or identification and recognition of humanity as a whole, (13). Aristotle never comes to

[1] This argument is taken from the class notes October 18, 2004

include humanity as a whole in his structure of relationships; but, he would likely agree with the Stoics that in order to find and maintain the good life, expanding relationships further would aid his process of discovering the good life. Extending liberality into the international system would expectedly be welcomed by Aristotle.

Today's world requires a combination of Plato's theory of communal property, and Aristotle's notion of private property. We must continue to permit private property ownership, as it is the only means of furthering productive individuals and dynamic societies. We must, however, recognize that international obligations may call for collective action and, thus, some conception of collective property is necessary. These obligations are only functional when we limit our desire for private property and acknowledge environmental and human rights issues. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *The Politics* provide a very significant primary blueprint in which to base future assumptions; nonetheless, it is important that we not confine ourselves to any one conception of property as there are circumstances under which property may possess a chameleon like character – it transforms as its surroundings change. If we are forced to choose which type of property (collective or private) should be the end sought, then it may be suggested that communal property holds the most desirable outcome, whether it is realistic or not, since it is only through collectivity that we may truly embrace humanity as a whole. In the famous words of John Donne,

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main…Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee…(Meditation 17)

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