

## HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Western thought has evolved and developed through centuries to reach its current situation. Liberties and freedom from each kind of restraint has been achieved in the name of democracy, eventually, after a long way struggle. Though, a lot of historical social, political, economic and religious factors have played their role through times in formation and development of Western thought, but role of three major aspects has been vital and basic. These prominent past features in the background of Western thought are Greek ideology, Roman political and social approach and massive revolt against the religious movement of Christianity. Political and social reforms by Solon in ancient Greece and afterward, thoughts imparted by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were the basic components of Greek ideology which stirred the Western minds giving them a dimension towards free thinking. Subsequently, Polybius and Cicero contributed towards political and social rights in Roman era. Public revulsion against authority of Christian Pope finalized the atmosphere for growth of modern Western mind set. The paper reflects different aspects of the fact.

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### **(1) Greek Philosophy**

Ancient Greece was divided into so many small independent city states. Two states, Sparta and Athens, had become prominent and well-known after going through some evolution process. In Sparta, a strict slavery system prevailed through long time and individual liberty did not exist. But human freedom blinked there in Athens intermittently. The system of government remained changing due to development of different political movements in Athens and hence, populace enjoyed freedom from undue restraints and could be able to play a vital role in the fields of

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knowledge and philosophy. Core population of Greek city states was divided into two classes i.e. farmers and landlords and in Sparta, landlord class always ruled over the farmers and behaved them as agricultural slaves. The same slavery was faced by the lower farmer's class in Athens too but they were protected from the slavery consequent upon the reforms provided by a reformer and legislator of Athens named Solon. The miserable social conditions of Athens' poor suppressed class are described by Adolf Holm in his book 'History of Greece' that the law about loan was very cruel and discriminative which was used by the authoritative class frequently without any hesitation. The poor farmers did not find at times, seeds at the stage of sowing and hence, they had to borrow some money from the money-lenders after getting their land pledged against the loan the payment of which was not an easy job for the poor farmers at that time due to high percentage of compound interest. Ultimately, the money-lender became the owner of poor farmer's land. Moreover, Athens' law was so brutal that for instance, whole body of insolvent person was considered the guarantee against the loan and hence, the lender had the right to enjoy services of the borrower as a slave and he could even sale him out to any foreign country.<sup>1</sup> Solon's reforms saved the common people from the suppression of the aristocrats and provided them with such a harmonious and balanced environment for the freedom and rights of the common people. Solon established a political theory with limited authority to the rulers and equal political rights to the common people. He admitted that universal political equality was impossible to be confirmed for each and every individual of the state. However a common man could not be deprived of his political rights just due to be a member of lower class of the society. He divided the political importance of the state into four stages to accommodate all classes of the society in political process as well as to dilute the supremacy of the privileged class introducing the principle that responsibility would be directly proportionate to the political rights. Solon further extended and protected the public rights through public courts established at that time in the state of Athens.<sup>2</sup> The city state of Greece was evolved to such a nature that the difference between individual and society was gradually vanished. There was no contradiction between state and individual rights in the sense that every individual preferred the state upon his own rights and the

citizenship meant nothing but to serve the state. Thus a specific group of people had the legal right to rule over the inferior cluster.<sup>3</sup> Fifth century B.C. is considered the beginning of evolution in Greek thought and great intellectual activities when some kind of uprising started against the authority of law and the state caused by particular social and political conditions of Greece. The pioneers of this rebellion doctrine called 'sophists'. In spite of classified social system of Greece this movement of sophists to declare every individual the standard of righteousness can be regarded as the very first European movement of 'free will'.

The Sophists, representing in their point of view the disintegrating tendencies of the times, aimed to supply the instruction that would fit a young man for a successful career in the practical life of a citizen. They rejected the ideas of universal truth and of abstract principles of justice. They taught that "man is the measure of all things," each individual being qualified to judge, according to his own belief and desires, what was right. In denying fixed rules of conduct, they attacked the rationality of nature, which had been the basis of Greek philosophy and ethics. They pointed that such rules and laws varied widely, differing from government to government. So far were they from agreeing, that some laws expressly forbade what others commanded. Laws were thus mere conventions, not unchangeable laws of nature.<sup>4</sup>

Socrates, on contrary, acknowledges the universal principles of justice, righteousness and equality for the entire society. Differing from the notion of Sophists, Socrates admits the variation of abilities among the citizens to take part in state affairs. Political ability can be obtained through education which is not available to each and every individual, and that concludes in a political principle that government is the right of only some specific capable people. Socrates agrees that political ability is an art which neither can be achieved easily nor can be the outcome of collective abilities of citizens. There are very rare people in the society who can achieve this art through political education which should be compulsory for all in the society. Qualities of self-recognition and self-control is the true meaning of this art through which a man can achieve true knowledge of reality and understand the nature of universe, personal integrity and purpose of human existence in the universe. Only a few personalities can be able to achieve this high level of destination. Constitution of the state and system of

education should be made purposefully commensurate to that very target because the entire system of state would be in the hands of these specific personalities. Political ability is not a commodity which can be accessed by everyone.<sup>5</sup> Gettle, a Western writer narrates the typical individualistic theory of Socrates, which actually is a combination of individualism and totalitarianism, that impressed by the political and ethical anarchy of his day, Socrates taught that beneath the variety and confusion of laws and customs general and universal rules of morality might be found. He realized it was impossible to restore the old ideals and beliefs of the Greeks, and agreed with the sophists that conceptions of right must be subjected to the scrutiny of individual reason and not rest upon religion or upon traditional customs. But he believed that fundamental principles of right and justice might be discovered, that man was naturally, social that the state was a necessary and desirable result of human needs, and that its laws, if based upon wisdom would correspond to universal reason. He demanded political education, attacked the rampant democracy of his time, with its theory of equality among men and its choice of officials by lot, and proposed that the state be governed by an aristocracy of intelligence.<sup>6</sup>

Plato, another renowned thinker of Greece, declining individualism feels that merger of an individual into state is necessary for the sake of state benefits. That's why Plato is regarded as very first socialist in the world. Individual rights or freedom means nothing to him. He understands the benefit of individual himself lies in serving for the welfare of the state as a part of the community. He does not even feel appropriate to distinguish between individual and communal status of an individual in the state. According to him, state is the collection of individuals for the purpose of fulfillment of human needs which can never be done without state.<sup>7</sup> The only person who never thinks other than the community and is enthusiastic to serve for the benefit of community and society would have the right to govern. He states that we must choose from among our guardians those who appear to us, when we scrutinize their whole career, to be most completely devoted to what they judge to be the interests of the community, and prepared to act against them.<sup>8</sup> Plato is against absolute freedom or rights of an individual and declares that capability of doing something for society is the only standard of

ability and status of an individual. He believes that welfare of an individual lies only with the welfare of the state. Plato is certainly against false notions of atomistic individualism, natural rights and unrestricted freedom for man to do as he likes. An individual is a part of a whole i.e., the community and has his definite place in the whole. He has his part to play in the social whole. His individuality, rights or freedom have meaning in so far as they enable him to play his part in society freely and nobly. An individual is entitled to freedom and rights which might secure him conditions in which to enrich the society and himself.<sup>9</sup> All kinds of human behavior, wisdom or ability depend upon ones relationship with the state. Plato adds that the individual is wise in the same way and with the same part of himself as the state, and similarly with courage and with all the other virtues.<sup>10</sup> Like Socrates, Plato is also convinced by natural division of the society into different classes. He divides the society in three categories. He addresses to the citizens that undoubtedly they are brothers but God has created them in different positions. Some have ability to govern as they have been created of gold, some have been created of silver who are the assistants of the rulers while others have been created of iron so they are workers and farmers.<sup>11</sup> Plato believes in permanent existence of slavery in the society perhaps owing to the fact that one third population of ancient Greece were slaves and there was no clear way to abolish the slavery from the society. G. H. Sabine describes the situation of slavery and socially graded society of ancient Greece that the population was divided into three main classes that were politically and legally distinct. At the bottom of the social scale were the slaves for slavery was a universal institution in the ancient world. Of all the inhabitants of Athens, perhaps a third, were slaves.<sup>12</sup> Plato has deep sympathies with slaves asserting that they are truly ill-fated, more dangerous than death, but he did not take any initiative in his democratic outline of his Ideal State to eliminate slavery from the society.<sup>13</sup> Plato emphasizes the need of mutual harmony among all the factions of the society. He proclaims that reason ought to rule having the ability and foresight to act for the whole, and the spirit ought to obey and support it.<sup>14</sup> Plato is dead supporter of gender equality in all the fields of society. To him women, though weaker but never inferior, can take part in all activities similarly as the males do including state affairs. He regards that men and women have the

same natural capacity for guardianship, save in so far as women is the weaker of the two.<sup>15</sup> It is the extreme of Plato's socialistic view that he is adherent of common wives and children of the society. Only need based procreation would be permissible under the control of the state without any personal relationship of husband or wife. The state will allocate the women to men keeping in view that they both must be from same upper class<sup>16</sup> so that the state may be provided with the best new generation. Thus Plato regards the children a common national production and absolutely negates the individual rights and free will. Utter concept of rights, according to Plato, and ultimate demand of justice is no more than the government of particular privileged class upon the common people. He believes that justice or right is nothing but the name given by the men actually holding power in any state to any action they enjoy by law upon their subjects.<sup>17</sup> Plato is against democracy because he thinks it provides equal freedom to all individuals of the society, promotes lust among them to achieve authority and more rights and hence formulates an autocratic and tyrannical government. Consequently, the society may deteriorate and abate because of the 'fight' for authority and rights. He elucidates that an excessive desire for liberty at the expense of every thing else is what undermines democracy and leads to the demand for tyranny. A democrat society in its thirst for liberty may fall under the influence of bad leaders, who intoxicate it with the neat spirit; and then, unless the authorities are very mild and give it a lot of liberty, it will curse them for oligarchs and punish them.<sup>18</sup>

Aristotle, on the other hand, declares that freedom and equality are the basic components of democracy and elaborates the freedom or liberty as doing what one wants.<sup>19</sup> But he believes that such an absolute concept of liberty can never practically exist, it requires a constitution for its protection. In this way constitutional bindings are not refutation of liberty but it is its fortification. He speaks that it ought not to be regarded as a denial of liberty to have to live according to the constitution but rather as self- preservation.<sup>20</sup> Aristotle has also criticized democracy along with other systems of government and declared it an abhorrent style of regime. He comprehends that democracy is a government in the hands of man of low birth, poverty, and vulgar employments.<sup>21</sup> Background of Aristotle's analysis against democracy is, like Plato, that very concept of a society divided into different classes. He is also scared

of human equality because he considers equal rights and liberty to everyone means no rights or liberty at all. Describing the characteristics of democracy he mentions that equality and liberty to the individuals of different categories in society is essential as the general characteristics of democracies. And from the ideas of justice that is by common consent democratic, that based on numerical equality, springs the most thoroughly democratic democracy of the demos; equality such that rich and poor exercise exactly the same influence in government, no individuals having sovereign power but all together on an equal and numerical basis. In this way, so they think, they can create equality and freedom in the constitution.<sup>22</sup> He disagrees with such a concept of justice which is based upon equality without distinction and supports a concept of justice based upon the social status of the individuals. According to him justice is a social virtue, for it is the rule of the social state, and the every criterion of what is right.<sup>23</sup> He is protagonist of permanent existence of two social classes, rulers who are free and ruled over who are the slaves by virtue of nature. It is in benefit of slaves that they must obey the ruling class. He states that it is clear that some are free by nature and others are slaves, and that in the case of the later the lot of slavery is both advantageous and just.<sup>24</sup>

It has been made clear that in spite of Solon's reforms, Socrates' objective principle of universal good, Plato's concept of united community and Aristotle's idea of individual liberty, Greek thought could not be separated from biased approach of the society divided into two permanent classes of the independents and the slaves. Greek thought is actually a search for justifications of slavery considering it a naturally existed phenomenon while essentially it was a result of their national prejudice and specific political background. B. H. Zaidi passes shortest but comprehensive remarks on Greek viewpoint that The Greek thinkers infect, accepted slavery as something natural.<sup>25</sup> That's why Aristotle believes that slavery is a compulsory social factor and a deprived class is essential for smooth running of a social system.<sup>26</sup> Aristotle accepts slavery and shows no tolerance to oppose it despite rejecting Plato's concept of nationalization of lives as killer of individualism. He has differed in forceful words with Plato's Idea of sacrificing personal rights and family for the

sake of state but his prejudice regarding slaves stands still there like other biased Greeks.<sup>27</sup>

In short, All Greek thinkers including Solon, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have almost same typical perception about human being notwithstanding their all differences of opinion and thoughts with each other. Studies show that actually, they observed a society of living individuals without any belief of beginning or end of this world so they were accustomed to perceive and resolve all the issues in perspective of human needs. This notion evolved to 'Humanism' in Europe afterwards in sixteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Liberty or free will means nothing in Greek culture except to locate a social status of independent Greeks so that they may have a distinctive position in the society as compared to common citizens living as the slaves. For this reason, only a particular category of citizens legally had the civil rights in Greek city states even after the development of thoughts and culture.

## **(2) Roman Approach**

Greek city states gradually merged into Macedonian kingdom and the mindset was changed about the political structure of the city states as an impact of different new philosophies like stoicism and cynicism. Privileged class culture vanished with the passage of time and equal rights became possible to think for the common people too. At least theoretically equal rights had been ascertained even if practical situation could be found sometimes different in a particular city. No doubt the Stoic philosophers helped in propagation of Greek civilization, but they entirely changed the mindset regarding typical political philosophy of Greeks.<sup>29</sup> The belief of the Stoics which made a standard to common wisdom and experience and declared it the guidance of nature and reason, is very important in the history of political science. Theory of 'Jus Naturale' (Law of Nature) was the outcome of this belief which mounted to a political status in Roman law and proved to be a legacy for rest generations.<sup>30</sup> Roman leaders and thinkers focused upon governing the state rather than developing political theories and philosophies, and did not establish any mentionable political theory. They established a strong judicial system by preparing a unified Roman law through mutual cooperation and coordination of general public and aristocrats which was the strength of Roman Empire. Roman law was flexible in nature as it reflected the



particular national character of Roman nation who had a positive behavior blended with the archaic and progressive theories. They used to modify their civil laws time to time in line with the demands of time and situation. The Stoic philosophy played a vital role in judicial system and political thoughts of Roman Empire. As described by American writers Elliott & McDonalds that the triumph in Roman thought of the Hellenistic school of stoicism founded by Zeno in 300 B.C. shows clearly both in the legal system and in the philosophy of Cicero. In the legal system this broad humanitarianism gave a moral justification to the expansion of Rome through the superiority of its law. Panaetius and the jurists laid the groundwork for a broadening of the conception of *aequitas* (equity) in the civil law of Rome, so that the *jus gentium* is sometimes regarded as an instrument for innovation rather than as the source of Stoic influence as Sir Henry Maine thought. The idea of the common rationality and equality of mankind underlay a world wide state and a universal law. The supreme and unchangeable natural law was a common possession of all men through reason, and it bound both rulers and ruled.<sup>31</sup> Roman national character made the Roman law popular in spite of discrimination among citizens regarding civil rights. Slavery system was continued same as in Greece. The popularity and acceptance of Roman law throughout the empire was due to its accordance with the customs and traditions of Roman nation because they were proud to be citizen of Roman Empire. Roman nation remained politically satisfied due to rule of law and political faculty of Roman leaders.<sup>32</sup> The existence of cruel slavery system in Roman Empire was managed through rule of Roman law which had two variant facets called '*Jus Naturale*' (Natural Law) and '*Jus Gentium*' (National Law). Both the features of law were equally important and it was understood that existence of both the classes (rulers and ruled) was legally permissible. Actually it was lawful according to '*Jus Gentium*' (National Law) but it was in contrast to '*Jus Naturale*' (Natural Law) because all human being are born free in reference to natural law. These two elements of Roman law contributed a lot in continuing both, the slavery and urge for liberty.<sup>33</sup> Role of two Roman political thinkers, Polybius and Cicero, is prominent in formation of Roman approach towards politics and society. Polybius who was originally from Greece stayed in Rome and observed the system of government for many

years and found it good for the society. Important element of his philosophy is regarding balanced division of entire power among the different branches of the government. He understands that absolute authority of government should not be consolidated in any one group or class but that should be limited and divided among all categories of stake holders of the society i.e. the public, aristocrats and armed forces. This idea of split authority had been adopted afterwards by a French thinker Montesquieu and stood very much admired. Polybius believes that more fatal internal hazards arise when a prosperous nation is externally secure and protected. The nation could be saved from this lethal jeopardy only by balancing the authority and power among all the groups. It is analyzed that when these external alarms are past, and the people are enjoying their good fortune and the fruits of their victories, and, as usually happens, growing corrupted by flattery and idleness, show a tendency to violence and arrogance, it is in these circumstances, more than ever, that the constitution is seen to possess within itself the power of correcting abuses. For when any one of the three classes becomes puffed up, and manifests an inclination to be contentious and unduly encroaching, the mutual interdependency of all the three, and the possibility of the pretensions of any one being checked and thwarted by the others, must plainly check this tendency; and so the proper equilibrium is maintained by the impulsiveness of the one part being checked by its fear of the other.<sup>34</sup> Cicero, the other Roman thinker, declares the country a 'common wealth' founded by the citizens due to human instinct. He extracted the doctrine of 'General Law of Nature' from Stoicism and asserted its importance for the life of a common individual. He realizes that constitution of the state should be figured out keeping in view the 'General Law of Nature'. The state itself is always constituted by the partnership of all individuals. McIlwain states that law common to all men and to God and as old as time is also the source of the state itself- a state is nothing else than a partnership in law.<sup>35</sup> Moral law is the main source of constitution according to Cicero. He believed that moral principles are as applicable to political matters as they are to private affairs, and that true law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting.<sup>36</sup> Cicero explains the nature of liberty and affirms that state of liberty and civil rights should be equally available to all individuals of the

society and equality in rights can only be confirmed in 'Common Wealth' of individuals. It is elaborated as if liberty is not equally enjoyed by all the citizens; it is not liberty at all. And yet, how can all citizens have an equal share in liberty. No form of government is better, more liberal, or more prosperous, since the people have control over legislation, the administration of justice, the making of war and peace, the concluding of treaties, and over the civil status and property of individual citizen. This is the only form of government which can properly be called a common wealth.<sup>37</sup>

Roman concept of human freedom was the blend of Greek thought and Stoicism and was comparatively broader than Greek's limited idea of freedom. It could be regarded as a balanced way between Greek's support to merge individuality into state for collective benefit, and Stoic's universal idea of human equality. Romans consider the state an essential body and natural organization which ensures rights, responsibilities and duties for both the individual and the state.

### **(3) Revolt Against Christianity**

Political thought in entire Europe underwent a new turn with Roman's acceptance to Christianity. Prior to that religion and politics escorted each other with compromise and cooperation in Greece as well as in Rome. Christianity entirely changed the political situation of conciliation and unity. Now 'religious' and 'secular' were two poles apart in terms of rights and duties. The king (Caesar) and the church both demanded their rights from the individual separately. The poor individual, whose rights and liberty had not yet been defined clearly at variance with the state, had now been restrained by two authorities. The state claimed from the individual to comply with its orders in response to provision of physical needs and facilities while the church demanded submission and obedience being responsible of spiritual welfare and salvation of entire humanity. This situation initiated a theoretical as well as practical scuffle between the state and the church in addition to doubling-up the restraint upon the rights and liberty of the individual. Western writers and thinkers tried their best to balance the authority between state and the church but all went in vain due to non-political and monastic character of Christianity. The church proclaimed itself the responsible of king's own salvation too in the hereafter and declared the limitation of his

authority essential for harmony and smooth running of the state. It is mentioned in a letter to the king written by a pope, named Pope Gelasius in fifth century A.D. as "The true and perfect king and priest was Christ himself. Christ knowing the weakness of human nature and careful for the welfare of His people, separated the two offices giving to each its peculiar functions and duties. Thus the Christian emperor needs the ecclesiastic for the attainment of eternal life, and the ecclesiastic depends upon the government of the emperor in temporal things."<sup>38</sup> The supremacy of the church on state proved to be somewhat in favor of the individual despite Christianity was totally ignorant of politics. Actually political activities have no importance or standing in the eyes of Christianity. This situation saved European society, on one hand, from tyranny of absolute individualism and on the other hand, enhanced the significance of individuality declaring the individual responsible for his own welfare and success. Thus human conscience made him the supervisor of his personal deeds. The personality of the individual flourished and developed in a way that individual could be able to fight against absolute authority of the state in sixteenth century A.D. <sup>39</sup>as well as to challenge the tyrannical hegemony of the Pope. The church and the king played their role independently with harmony and cooperation up to eleventh century. The rights of God and Caesar were demanded separately without any clash and even the church necessitated obeying Caesar. In spite of all concurrence, the church and Caesar started blaming each other the transgression of power and authority. The church used to maintain its preeminence in the name of harmony and equilibrium and declared that its dominance was Divine. Actually their enmity went severer with the passage of time and resulted in a grave revolt. The situation is mentioned by Gettle as "at first, this perfect harmony between secular and spiritual authority in a unified church-state was conceived to be the divinely ordained system for ruling the earth. Each power was to rule in its own sphere, and neither was to interfere in the affairs of the other. But unhappily, this theory of dual authority was unworkable in practice. It proved impossible to separate secular from spiritual matters under the conditions of medieval life. Each authority charged that the other encroached upon its own domain, and each tried to build up a system of doctrine that would justify the extension of its own powers. Each could appeal to historical

facts and biblical passages to support the widest claims and to justify the submission of its rival."<sup>40</sup> Western thinkers remained supporting the supremacy of the church for the sake of justice and human rights up to twelfth century and thought that dominance of the church is better as compared to the king even if he is more pious, just and exalted. John of Salisbury, an English bishop of twelfth century, reached the extreme to proclaim that a cruel king may even be assassinated. If the prince acted unrighteously he became a tyrant who caught to be put to death.<sup>41</sup> This aptitude was actually a revolt against deteriorating conditions of human rights. St Thomas Aquinas, a catholic priest of Italy in thirteenth century and supporter of same very church dominance, stresses to develop a society full of justice so that individual rights and liberty can be affirmed in a balanced atmosphere. It reflects ruthless situation regarding human rights during the fight for dominance between the church and the state. Maurice Cranston, a Western writer, describes the idea of liberty and stable society given by Aquinas as follows. "Aquinas, again never speaks of the 'natural right to liberty' in the manner of later theorists. Liberty he was inclined to regard rather as a feature of a justly ordered common wealth than as an inalienable right of the individual. Indeed it was part of his purpose to show, against some of his more individualistic and anti-political predecessors, that liberty and government go together and the sub ordination of one man to another in a political community should not be confounded with the subjection of one man to another in the institution of slavery. And he maintains that liberty is successfully combined with government whenever the man who rules directs others to act either in ways which are conducive to their own personal good or to the good for all. For by doing this, the ruler is instructing ;the people to act as they themselves would wish to act; and thus there is brought about in a properly governed society a harmony between what men want to do and what they ought to do, between natural drives and Nature's end."<sup>42</sup> Dominance of popes and the church had been challenged and reduced by the state under the fervor of French nationalism. The church could not stand against the acute wave of nationalism in France<sup>43</sup> which proved to be the first serious step of the widespread revolt against Christianity during later years in entire Europe. The prestige of pope and the church had been ruined with the measures taken by French emperor when Pope Boniface proclaimed to be

Caesar too by himself in the beginning of fourteenth century. Afterwards, European public was incited and provoked for revolution against the ideas in addition to the authority of the church by Western intellectuals like Pierre Dubois, Dante, Marsiglio, and William of Ockam. The pope and the church were representing Christianity and Christianity was the only religion the Western public was acquainted with. So the revolution occurred actually against all kinds of religious beliefs which ultimately provided the Western society with freedom from every kind of limitations through the way of getting liberated from religious control. This revolt continued in the West in subsequent centuries in the name of different trends of theories and practice like secularism, rationalism and humanism etc.

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