REFLECTIONS ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE GREEK CLASSICAL SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

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1.0 Introduction

This paper provides an analysis of the philosophy which the Greek Classical School comprising of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle propounded. The aim of the analysis is to ascertain the nature and effect of the contribution made by these three 'philosophic fathers' to the development of jurisprudential thought.

The genesis of philosophy and the area it encompasses are discussed in the introductory part of the paper which also embodies a flashback on the period of philosophic thinking in Greece prior to the emergence of the ideas of the Socratic School. The aim of revisiting the pre-Socratic period is to provide a foundation upon which we can concretely ascertain the kind of contribution made by the Socratic School and the impact that the contribution has had on the overall development of philosophic thinking.

The paper discusses the trends of thinking of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle respectively, in that order for a number of reasons. The main ones being that it is in that order that they lived, the first being the teacher of the second and the second having tutored the third.

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The socio-economic relations prevalent in each philosopher's period have been also been discussed, albeit briefly, because to a great extent the relations did influence their perceptions and therefore their manner of thought. A critical appraisal of each philosopher's ideas has been given in order to underscore the contributions that they had to the development of philosophy.

In the account that follows, one would not but admire the consistency of thought which had become possible through the revolution in thinking which the three philosophers brought about in the ancient world and which has remained the basis of practically all subsequent jurisprudential thought. However, before we embark on a detailed discussion on the trend of philosophic thinking employed and developed by the Greek Classical School, it is prudent to reflect on the genesis of philosophy itself.

2.0 Revisiting Philosophy

The term philosophy traces its origin from the Greek word *"sophia"* which ordinarily translated into English means "wisdom"; and the compound *philosophia* for which philosophy derives translated as "the love of wisdom." It has been observed that the word *"sophia"* had a much wider range of application than the modern English word "wisdom" commonly associated with it. *"Philosophia"* it has been stated connotes the "love of exercising one's curiosity and intelligence" rather than the "love of wisdom." [1]

[1] See Edwards, P. (ed) The Encyclopedia of Philosophy Vol. 6 , Macmillan Co & Free Press New York, 1967 p.216

Philosophy therefore may aptly be summed up as the critical and systematic attempt to understand human existence at its most fundamental level. It deals with the essential questions covering basically the meaning of life and it employs higher standards of logical precision, coherence and scope in both presenting and examining various phenomena and the theories that underlie them.[1] It is the science of the more general 'laws' governing development of nature, society and thought. As such, the estate of philosophy includes almost all fields of knowledge where problems have remained unsolved or at least not definitely solved. Philosophers therefore attempt at answering ultimate questions after critically analyzing and exploring all avenues that make such questions puzzling and after realizing all the vagueness and confusion that underlie man's ordinary ideas.

2.1 The Rise of Philosophy in Greece

The early civilization of society is marked by the decay of primitive communalism, the growth of slavery and inequalities of property. In Greece, this period was effected partly by the rise of military states and the territorial expansion of early slave societies. With the development of commodity production, accompanied by the rise of City states, a class struggle emerged among the citizens of Greece as a result of fundamental antagonism between those who were free and those who had been condemned to slavery. There emerged a group of various schools of thought in Greece who tried to analyze and explain the various conditions prevalent amongst the new class of rich industrialist and merchants and the prevalent conflict between the common people and the new class of the nobility.

In explaining the new phenomena, the Greek scholars during this era were actually pondering on the antagonism that existed by propagating and applying various theories. The scholars, coming from different classes of the Greek society, of course differed.

Among the scholars, there are those who tried to justify the system with a critical outlook on the one hand, and those who were not in favour of having some members oppressed, on the other. For example, those who belonged to the new class of aspiring slave owners advocated for theories which tried to explain and justify the necessity of the existence of the State (which upheld the interests of the emergent class of slave owners). Philosophers in this category such as the Pythagoreans argued that the State was a necessary instrument to uphold together conflicting classes with opposite interests. They tried to interpret the universal "laws" as being natural, basically implying that slavery was something god-given.

The development of changes in the relations of production greatly influenced and was also reflected in the approach of thinking of early Greek philosophers.

The early Greek philosophers therefore emerged in the early stages of civilization of the Greek society which was marked by the decay of primitive communalism, the growth of slavery and the inequalities of property. The philosophers of this period were those of the Miletian School and prominent ones included Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. These concerned themselves with discussing the material principle from which all

existing things derived their being and how a manifold and orderly world arose out of the primitive state of things. Their conceptions reflect the antagonism that prevailed amongst the emerging classes created by the social-relations of that time.

The philosophic epoch that followed was commandeered by the Pythagorean School. Prominent philosophers of this School were Pythagoras, Protagoras and Heralclitus.[2] These lived in a society of exchange through money where everything was determined by numbers. This development was reflected in their ideas and influenced their thinking. As a result of the mathematical influence, these philosophers argued that the struggle between the nobility and the peasant led to the "mean", which according to them constituted democracy.[3]

The Atomists and the Sophists were also another group of philosophers who preceded the Greek Classical School of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The Sophists who were widely traveled philosophers tried to justify the then existing system of rule by the nobility and the middle class. They asserted that the slave culture was god-given and hence it needed to nurtured and developed, rather than being cast away. They also argued that there was nothing like absolute justice and that the law was changeable on opinion, through the expression of arbitrary choice and force.

[2] Heralclitus is sometimes placed in the Miletian School mainly because his outlook was to a great extent reflective of the philosophies of this school, despite having been in a different epoch.
[3] Pythagoras theory of the unity of opposites which is a reflection of the emergence of the state as a necessary instrument to hold together the conflicting classes with opposite interests was for instance based upon the concept of the "mean" (average in mathematical terminology). See also Mihayo, P., The Development of Legal Theory East African Literature Bureau 1977, p. 7

The pre-Socratic period discussed above is crucial to understanding the contribution of the Greek Classical School in the jurisprudential arena. Having laid the above foundation, we can now proceed to discuss the philosophers of the Greek Classical School and their contribution to legal thought:

3.0 The Three Greek Philosophical Fathers: An Appraisal

3.1 Socrates

Socrates lived between 470 – 399 B.C. This was during the period when rudiments of resistance and fight for slave democracy started to emerge. It was the slave owners who were in control of the State.

Dissatisfied with the status quo, Socrates set out to challenge the existing philosophy of society maintaining that it was based on property democracy and the predominance of wealth.[4] He believed that the big landed slave owners were more influential than the small ones who owned practically nothing in state affairs, and was against this kind of democracy which was inclined in favour of only the landed proprietary class. According to Socrates, the divine law upon which the earlier philosophers sought to justify slavery was the law of only one god and as such it was supreme over that of man. He argued that divine law required that both the rich and the poor to cooperate for the good of each other, rather than the former dominating over the latter.

In propounding his ideas, Socrates applied the dialogue method based on a question and answer sort of session, using an elaborate system of making an inquiry from the

[4] See Mihayo, *ibid*, p. 15.

particular to the general – the induction method. In his analysis, he searched from something common to the categories of phenomena he analyzed to come to a conclusive criteria. Socrates also applied syllogism in analyzing phenomena. He added together various premises to deductively arrive at a conclusion.

Because he advocated against the democracy which favoured the proprietary class, Socrates was considered politically dangerous and an enemy of 'democracy' in the eyes of the ruling class. He claimed the right of independent criticism of all institutions including the state and as such, he refused to associate himself in State actions that he thought were wrong. However, he did not oppose the authority of the law and in fact taught people not to reject laws, even the bad ones! In Plato's Crito, Socrates, it is stated, rejected being smuggled out of jail by his friends. Believing in the principle that he was right to stand against arbitrary State actions and criticizing them, Socrates died by drinking poison (hemlock) after being condemned to death for allegedly corrupting the youth to revolt against the State.

Socrates' version of philosophy unlike that of most pre-socratic philosophers was conceived exclusively with the ethics of common conduct. He did not delve into pondering upon the origin of matter and as such he did not contribute to the development of philosophic thinking in this area. His approach therefore was quite different from the popular ideas that previously existed. Socrates' dismissal of physics and mathematics as useless had a negative impact on the development of the laws of physics in philosophic circles as advanced and propounded by the stomists.

Socrates however contributed handsomely to the development of philosophy. He was the orientation point and an inspiration to most subsequent thinkers and indeed a direct inspiration to philosophers who advocated against suppressing of some members of the society and especially State suppression. His methodology of argument was adopted by later philosophers. His influence on Euclides of the Meagra School is notable. The Stoics also grafted themselves onto the Socratic tradition.

Despite his undoubted contribution to philosophic thinking, Socrates has not been short of criticisms which may be construed as representing the negative contribution of Socrates to philosophy. It has been stated that he was a naïve pragmatist who believed that he could change society by convincing the ruling class to abandon their class position.[5] And further that he never mobilized the class he was representing and instead he advocated for persuasion rather than violation.

Socrates did not write on philosophy except maybe for the jottings of self-examination. It has also been stated that there exists no general consensus on the exact nature of his contribution to philosophy. This is grounded on the assertion that Socrates did not establish any School which left his followers at cross-roads, heading towards different directions each being critical of the other.

Much as the criticisms leveled against Socrates may be justifiable today, it is our contention that in the context of the period when Socrates advanced his ideas such criticisms would hold no water. The material basis for Socrates to have resorted to

[5] *Ibid*, p. 17.

violation was not in existence then because it was during the time when the State and the church had consolidated their positions in the eyes of the oppressed masses themselves. It would have been impracticable to have advocated revolutionary ideas that would have moved the masses to revolt against the state and the oppressive system.

As such Socrates should be credited for the position that he stood for in such a State of affairs under the circumstances prevalent at that point in time. On the contrary, he was, at his time, a social force. It is still possible that the Socratic tradition is still growing even now and although Socrates is dead, the memory of what he did and said while still alive is just as helpful in understanding and expounding upon jurisprudential and philosophic thinking.

Having underscored Socrates' contribution to philosophy we now proceed to discuss the next philosopher of the Greek Classical School:

3.2 Plato

Plato was a student of Socrates. He came from an aristocratic and wealthy family. It has been noted that although Plato made arguments according to the Socratic Method, in some cases, he had a rather different perception from his teacher.[6]

Plato expressed his thinking in the compositions he wrote referred to as 'dialogues.'[7] These were concerned with the analysis of moral virtues. His most celebrated work of

[6] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[7] The earliest comprise of Lysis, Enthyphro and Charmides. See Edwards, P. *op. cit*. p. 319.

the middle ages is the *Republic* which is a study of individual and social justice in which he attempts to express the moral philosophy of Socrates and develop its epistemology and metaphysical implications.

Plato was a more speculate and theoretical philosopher than his teacher. He contended that it was not possible to know the material world because it was impossible to ascertain that which is in constant motion. To him, the world consisted of ideas which were divine and immutable. Like Socrates, therefore, Plato did not seek to expound upon the puzzling question which the pre-socratic philosophers had dealt with – the nature of matter and the universe.

In many of his dialogues, Plato attempted to paint pictures of a better State. He conceived the State as a most perfect unit which regulated justice and was of the view that the existence of a conducive relationship between the State and the individual brought about virtue. This approach, it should be noted, reflects the social class that Plato represented and had a considerable influence on later philosophers.[8]

By construing the relationship between the individual and the State, Plato developed the idea of the noble lie.[9] He asserted that citizens were categorized by god. Because the society he envisioned was one to be governed by a class of guardians, Plato accordingly stated that there were men of gold; who could run societal affairs (Rings), men of silver who constituted the State coercive machinery and men of copper who were the farmers

[8] For instance St. Thomas Aquinas considered the State as necessary for the satisfaction of human needs.
[9] See Wild, J. Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law, University of Chicago Press, London, 1959 p. 15.

and peasants. Accordingly, because the individual was to be governed and dominated by wisdom, it was therefore inevitable that the State be the controller of society as it is he who could bring happiness. Plato argued that if the men of copper intervened in State affairs there was bound to be a failure. Plato's construing of 'happiness' was later developed by post-socratic philosophers who referred to it as utility.[10]

Due to his categorization of society, Plato construed justice as non-interference by strata into other strata's affairs. This was in effect a caution against class struggle which according to Plato was against the laws of god. According to Plato, if his categorization of society in strata was maintained, then there was no use of laws.

Plato's categorization of the citizens was developed by later philosophers to explain the departments of the State machinery in its exercise of control over the subjects. Montesquer's separation of power's principle may also be traced in Plato's idea of the noble lie.

Critics have not, however, spared Plato. It has been stated that he had no understanding of personal freedom and democracy or the concern for the value and dignity of the individual. It has further been submitted that his categorization of citizens in the noble lie principle reveals Plato as a reactionary aristocrat opposed to every manifestation of social progress[11] leading to the conclusion, among some of the critics that Plato's philosophy

[10] For example the concept of *Lex Humana* developed by Bentham and St. Thomas Aquinas.
[11] Wild, J. *op cit*. pp. 40-42.

was a defence of tyranny.[12] Modern English writers have gone a step further in the criticism of Socrate's student, to the extent of associating Plato with authoritarianism and fascist ideology.[13]

In defence of Plato, against the criticisms leveled against him, it has been stated that indeed Plato may have had an exaggerated conception in his categorization (the noble lie) but certainly, he recognized the basic unity of all men as possessing a common nature and the need of giving equal opportunity to all. In defense of Plato some have argued further that he was not arguing that those in the bottom rung of the ladder had been condemned to poverty. That on the contrary, in his categorization he qualified the categories by stating that one may eventually move from one stratum to another after attaining the requisite qualification.[14]

When compared to the modern ideal of democracy, Plato's Republic may be deficient in certain aspects but not totally opposed to democracy. Most critics have failed to see Plato's contribution to philosophy in view of the socio-economic reality of his time. His contribution, despite the few deficiencies, has been vast and in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in his moral philosophy which coupled with his social philosophy has had a deep effect on the intellectual history of western Europe no wonder the observation that;

[12] *Ibid*.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 114.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 49.

'The history of western philosophy is merely a series of footnotes of Plato.' [15]

3.2. Aristotle

Aristotle is the last of the philosophers from the Greek Classical School discussed in this paper. He lived between 384 – 322 B.C. and was a student of Plato for about twenty years but unlike his teacher, Aristotle was more practical. Philosophy to him was an attempt to explain the natural world and although he fundamentally remained on the side of Plato and Socrates he employed a different approach in advancing his theories.

Plato's student believed in the divine being which he asserted was a fast mover and that it imparted form and motion to matter but held that the being was itself motionless and formless.[16] This was a different conception of being in comparison with the pre-socratic philosophers in regard to the concept of matter. Aristotle was influenced by factors prevalent in the period of slave labour in which he lived. This made him believe that the body was inferior to the soul just as a slave was to his master.

Aristotle retained the Platonic view of knowledge as knowledge of the universal and of the real and in his attempt to systemize the various branches of knowledge on the basis of changed and changing conceptions of the universal and of causes led him to make profound changes to the general pictures implied by Plato and the pre-Socratics.[17] Due to

[15] Edwards, P. *op. cit*., p. 3864.
[16] See Guthrie, W.C.K The Greek Philosophers Methuen and Co. Ltd. London, 1962. p. 139
[17] *Ibid*., pp. 128-130

the changes being so vast, Aristotle has been regarded not only as the greatest scientist but also a philosophic innovator of the first importance.

To Aristotle, the heart of logic was the syllogism but unlike Socrates, he expounded upon the syllogism method with a practical application and as such his syllogistic teachings and reinstatements had been provided as a basis of teaching of traditional formal logic until the beginning of the 20th century.

Aristotle's conception of the State was influenced by the fact that the state was dominant during his time. He believed, therefore, that it existed before the individual and as such regulated the life of citizens through laws and that citizens were subject to its control. He advocated that, because they emanated from the State all laws contained justice and that there were therefore no unjust laws.

In his formulation on the problem of justice, Aristotle distinguished between distributive and corrective justice. He stated that whereas the former applied to honour of property to individual and it was aimed at the principle that associates were to receive merits for following up justice and adhering to the law. The latter dealt with the regulation of mutual relationships and was used to measure damages and profits. Today, this latter category is found in the corpus of law, for example in the law of tort and contract. Aristotle looked at concrete cases and analyzed how one could develop a general principle to decide whether something fell on the distributive or corrective category. He believed that the laws worked hand in hand with one another and that none could be

applied in complete isolation of the rest – a fact appreciated even in today's legal systems.

In agreeing with his teacher Plato, Aristotle was of the view that there should be a rule of the majority but disagreed with him that the 'men of gold' had a natural and automatic right to leadership. He maintained that these ought to be chosen by the majority.[18] In a way though, Aristotle seems to have agreed with Plato on the fate of slaves as he contended that slavery was a dictate of natural law and as such he sought to convince the slaves that they were to be content with their position. Aristotle feared that alienating the majority of the slave owners would cause them to overthrow the government and allowing them to a mass wealth was equally dangerous. He therefore justified slavery as necessary for economic prosperity but cautioned against excessive property advocating that leaders also ought to abstain from amassing wealth.

Aristotle held that according to the law of nature, citizens were only the propertied class, who had the ability and chance to participate in government, but because all men sought happiness, it was necessary to involve them all as for every act of change; there must be an external force.

The approach and interpretation of Aristotle, like Plato's has been a part of subsequent history of both European philosophy and Christian ideology. It has also been observed that Aristotle anticipated the major themes that emerged in the western legal philosophic

[18] For example, Jean Rousseau's social contract theory.

circles[19] and further that Aristotle's philosophy represents 'the final flowering of Greek jurisprudential and philosophic thought in its natural setting.[20]

4.0 Conclusion

From the above appraisal of the Greek Classical School of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, it is evident that with its emergence, the philosophic outlook of nature and the law of nature assumed a very different meaning from that which dominated prior to the emergence of the Socratic school. Nature not only became the order of things but also incorporated man's faculty of reason.

The development and contribution to philosophy by the 'three philosophic fathers' (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) should be analyzed in view of the social relations prevalent at the time each one of them lived, and the social class that each sought to protect. Socrates was critical of the existing system of the state and completely rejected the oppressive nature of the legal system. Plato and Aristotle, however, tried to justify the system. All three did not expand upon the ideas of the pre-socratic philosophers – this may be a negative contribution by them but again, it is because they were addressing themselves to the issues at hand, and their ideas reflected on these issues. As a result of their non-contribution to the concept of the origin of matter, all the same, this has remained quite in the dark in as far as philosophic thinking is concerned.

[19] Friedman, W. *op. cit*., p. 13
[20] Guthrie, W.C.K. *op. cit*., p. 160

On the other hand, the impetus that the ‘three philosophic father’s put on the development of philosophy generally has indeed been a boost in the estate of philosophic thinking.