



## The Origin of the State according to Plato

Leo Ferrari

Volume 12, numéro 2, 1956

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019942ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019942ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

### ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Ferrari, L. (1956). The Origin of the State according to Plato. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 12(2), 145–151. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019942ar>

# The Origin of the State according to Plato

---

## INTRODUCTION

In two places in his works, Plato treats explicitly of the origin of the State. The first is in the *Republic*,<sup>1</sup> while the second is to be found in his work entitled *Laws*.<sup>2</sup> These expositions pose certain problems.

In the first place they differ quite markedly from each other. That in the *Republic* pictures the State as arising from the need of men for one another's assistance. Drawn by this need they come to live together and form specialised classes, each being devoted to the satisfaction of a certain need. However, the description in the *Laws* has it that the State is formed by the grouping of primitive families to form tribes, which in their turn eventually unite with one another to form the city.

These descriptions of Plato also present difficulties when compared with the agreed conclusions of historians. These consider the family, phratry and tribe to be most essential elements in the formation of the State. This agreement is evident even with two historians whose interpretations of the facts are quite diverse. On the facts themselves however, they are in accord.

Thus, Fustel de Coulanges, who attributes the formation of the first city-state to altruistic, religious motives, nevertheless admits the essential importance of the family, phratry, tribe social evolution, which preceded and led to the formation of the first city-states :

Ainsi la société humaine, dans cette race, n'a pas grandi à la façon d'un cercle qui s'élargirait peu à peu, gagnant de proche en proche. Ce sont, au contraire, de petits groupes qui, constitués longtemps à l'avance, se sont agrégés les uns aux autres. Plusieurs familles ont formé la phratricie, plusieurs phratricies la tribu, plusieurs tribus la cité.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise Gustave Glotz, who, in his book *La Cité grecque*, evidently writes without preconceptions, also emphasises the great role played by the family, phratry and the tribe :

Enfin, le trait le plus saillant de la cité grecque, c'est la répartition des citoyens en tribus et en phratricies. Nous n'insisterons pas ici sur ces

---

1. Book II, 369 b ff.

2. Book III, 767 a ff.

3. *La Cité antique*, p.143.

groupements, parce que nous avons assez longuement montré que la formation de la cité ne s'explique pas sans eux.<sup>1</sup>

When this conclusion of historians regarding the importance of the family, phratry and the tribe is compared with the two descriptions of Plato, certain difficulties arise. There is no mention of these social groupings in the description of the *Republic*, where Plato seems to substitute fabricating, and later governing classes. On the other hand, in the *Laws* he explains the origin of the State from the family and the tribe, but omits any mention of the phratry.

The question then arises as to why these two descriptions of Plato are so radically different, and why they are different from the accepted conclusions of historians.

#### HISTORY AND THE " HISTORY " OF PLATO

Firstly, from both M. Glotz and M. de Coulanges, we see the great importance of the social units of the family, phratry and tribe in the formation of the city. It would be futile to argue that Plato was ignorant of their rôles. If his examples have some historical basis, why then does he not refer to them?

This question bears more on the example in the *Republic* than in the *Laws* where there is some resemblance to these historically important institutions.

Taking the description in the *Republic* first, and remembering that Plato had in mind the nature of justice and injustice in society when he embarked on this description, we see the reason for this omission. The example is the instrument and basis for discovering the nature of justice and injustice. Does the family, or the phratry or the tribe explain why a society is just or unjust? Cannot societies be just or unjust who have never heard of a phratry or a tribe and never been constituted from anything resembling them?

Plato rightly diagnosed that it was none of these institutions as such which was at the basis of justice and injustice; they originate in a group of men having need of one another's services and products, hence the nature of the description. A description of family, phratry and tribe evolution would have been quite foreign to the purpose of his exposition and so much *poudre aux yeux* of his disciples.

What then of the example he does use? It would seem that Plato is proceeding in an historical manner which gives the impression of being rather *a priori* as if he were saying "this is how it *ought* to have all happened." To this we would say that the group of producers which he depicts as coming together from need of one

1. *La Cité grecque*, p.28.

another's products, is certainly an historical fact, though a library of history books could never prove it. The reason of this is that it is not the office of history *per se* to prove anything, but merely to record facts. Therefore history cannot prove *why* men first started coming together; the most it can do is merely to state *that* they did do this.

That the mainspring of the first formation of imperfect states was need is a philosophical principle and follows from the very nature of man. That each man is limited in his talents and needs the help and fruits of other men's labours in living in any modest comfort, is a real fact. This is so today and always has been. Therefore it is from the nature of man himself that the origin of the State is to be explained; not from the evolution of family, phratry and tribe. Hence Plato certainly cannot be accused of an *a priori* approach to history.

What has been said about the description in the *Republic* can also be applied to the origin of the State as exposed in the *Laws*. Here, however, the description approximates to the historical stages of family, phratry and tribe.

Plato does not treat of these primitive social groupings as such because what he wanted to place in bold relief was the fact that Law arises from the exigencies of society *as such*, not for as much as it is phratry, or tribe, or city. He wished to avoid the danger of his hearers' confusing the *per accidens* and the *per se*. Phratry, tribe and city each had their respective laws, yet neither one of them, nor all of them together explain the *raison d'être* of law.

Although both in the *Laws* and in the *Republic* we claim that Plato's portrayals are not unhistorical, there may however seem to be a conflict between the two. In the *Laws* the description approximates to the stages of family, phratry, tribe and city. In the *Republic* he pictures the State as arising from the needs of men.

However, it is not difficult to see that there is no conflict between the two descriptions. Thus it is to be noted well that in the *Laws* Plato merely states *how* families started living side by side, without explaining *why*, which as we have seen would have been quite beside the point. In the *Republic* however, it is the reverse. He explains the "why" of men's coming together (i.e. through need) without a detailed description of the "how."

Therefore the two examples are not mutually exclusive. The example in the *Republic* still leaves room for the description in the *Laws* and vice-versa. That men came together from need does not exclude their society from passing through the stages of phratry, tribe and city, and likewise the fact of this evolution does not exclude need as the motivating principle.

We have it from reliable authorities<sup>1</sup> that the *Republic* was written long before the *Laws*. Therefore the accord in the two portrayals which he uses shows a remarkably consistent approach of Plato to the historical. Also from the manner in which he describes these two origins we can conclude to his approach to the historical.

It is evident that Plato makes great use of history, yet to me he works on the facts of history not as an historian, but as a philosopher. The approaches of one and of the other are far from being identical. The historian is concerned with the essential facts, but his picture to be complete must deal exhaustively with the multitude of accidental characteristics which surround the event: the "when," the "where," the "by whom" and a host of other details. This is rightly so, for the historian is attempting to reproduce a picture of the past, and if this picture is to be a faithful reproduction then it must include, as far as possible, the multitude of details connected with the original event. The historian is concerned with depicting as accurately as possible *what* happened.

However, when the philosopher comes to working on history, his predominant interest is not in the "what," but in the "why." Therefore the philosopher will strive to disentangle the essential from the accidental, and, indeed, for the purposes of his work he will abstract entirely from many accidental details. Hence, details which would be quite important for the historian; for the philosopher, are of no consequence.

This, it seems to me, is exactly the approach of Plato to the origin of the State. We have seen that this is the reason why he abstracts from the phratry, tribe and city in the origin as described in the *Republic*; and why he does not refer to them as such in the example in the *Laws*. In both cases Plato has taken the essential facts of history, divested them of their accidentals, and worked on these facts, not as an historian, but as a philosopher.

This explains the *rapport* between the history which Plato describes and the manner in which he describes it. However, there is another aspect of the examples he uses which I consider important. We have seen that Plato works on history, not however as an historian, but as a philosopher; that he abstracts the essential and works on this, leaving aside all the accidentals.

What then is Plato's attitude to the *historical* origin of the State? To answer this question I believe that we must take some account of the historical events which preceded Plato's lifetime and of which he certainly must have been aware.

---

1. See: *Plato's Republic* (Vol. 11, p.48), by JOWETT and CAMPBELL, and *Plato, the Man and his Work* (p.17), by A. E. TAYLOR.

Prior to Plato's life, Greece had passed successively through the political stages of monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny and, finally, democracy. Human suffering and the oppressive crimes of the ruling class deteriorated under the first three régimes and relief only appeared with the rise of tyranny. This régime succeeded in liberating the populace from their oppressive rulers and ushered in the promising era of democracy. However, it was not long before the people showed themselves totally incapable of preserving and using their liberty to the best advantage, with the result that once again the oppression of the poor by the rich occurred on a scale comparable with the hated days of the oligarchic régime.

It seems to me that these facts are of great importance in fully appreciating Plato's doctrine. He had seen from history that no régime could effectively control the needs of the populace. On the one hand he saw that the superior class always sought to satisfy its needs at the expense of the lower classes ; yet when the oppressed became the rulers they proved themselves even far worse than their former masters. It was always a case of might trampling upon right.

The very fact of this strife and suffering prior to, and during Plato's life-time served in the first place to focus his attention on questions which have some bearing on man's happiness in society. Then again by his search for justice and injustice in the *Republic* he shows most definitely his profound conviction that peace in the State must be preceded by the interior peace of each of its citizens. This peace is only attained by the harmony which virtue places in the soul. Hence the need for virtue is the most important of man's social needs, and at the same time, the need which he is most apt to overlook.

In this perspective, we see Plato's doctrine as elaborated on the origin of the State as a profound remedy to the political ills that had plagued Greece for centuries before his own life-time. This applies particularly to the doctrine in the *Republic* but also with some modifications to that in the *Laws*. Thus by placing his doctrine in its historical setting, we see it not only as an ideal to be set before all states in general, but especially before his own country of Greece in particular.

This historical setting of Plato's life-time also offers another and secondary reason for his abstraction from the family, phratry, tribe evolution. When put in the historical setting of Plato's era, an explanation using phratries and tribes could not but fail to have some undesirable political flavour. Men's passions would be incited and the objective light of reason would be dimmed.

For a similar reason, the thorny topic of political régimes is not placed in evident connection with the origin of the State as proposed in either work. It is Plato's sincere wish firstly to conduce men to the truth, then possessing this they can judge about such matters with reasonable impartiality. Thus, though the question of the preference



of régimes does enter into the *Republic*, it is in the *via iudicii* and not in the *via inventionis* that it finds its place.

Regarding the historical setting of Plato's own times, another interesting question poses itself. In which of the two origins which he describes is Plato nearer reality ; that is, nearer the exigencies of the sickened and disillusioned State of his own era ?

To me there is a curious but definite parallel between the answer to this question, and the manner in which Plato describes the origin of the State in the two works.

Firstly, regarding the answer to this question, I would say that we could regard the *Laws* as a concretion of the *Republic*. In the latter we see Plato as an inspired idealist who seems imbued with the conviction that knowledge is the only barrier to virtue. He thinks that the beauty of the ideal if it is clearly represented to men will inevitably attract them to imitate it. He takes little heed of the battle between good and evil that is constantly being fought within each man ; that only too often is wisdom over-ridden by passion. In short, he is pre-occupied with the ideal man, rather than with real and imperfect human beings.

In the *Laws* however, he has descended to the concrete ; he has come to grips with the complex problems posed by a wounded and weakened humanity. His answer is no longer the method of ideal representation. Law is seen as the chief instrument of promoting the good in society. Compulsion is substituted for attraction. This is more in accord with human nature as we know it.

The *Laws* also represents concretion in another way. Two kinds of States are described in the *Republic* — the frugal State, and the luxurious State. In the frugal State, men are much less prone to evil and less unruly. It is this State which seems to correspond more to the pattern of the *Republic*. However, it seems to me, that though the problem of the luxurious State is raised in the *Republic*, nevertheless we do not find a solution apportioned to it until we come to the *Laws*. It is Law which must control and channel the infinite variety of needs which arise in the luxurious State. Here again we are more in contact with reality.

Now an interesting parallel is found to exist between the two descriptions of the origin of the State, and the process of concretion which we have just remarked upon.

The portrayal of the origin in the *Republic* abstracts more from known facts of history. There seems to be even something of the *a priori* about it, though as we have had occasion to remark, men must have first come together from need ; this follows from the very nature of man. History does not and cannot have anything to say from this aspect.

However, in the *Laws* Plato has become more concrete in his source of portrayals. The picture of stages he gives corresponds to

the historical stages of family, phratry, tribe and city ; without being identically the same. Nevertheless, in this portrayal Plato is closer to the known facts of history than with the portrayal in the *Republic*.

Thus we see a definite parallel between the themes of the *Republic* and the *Laws*, on the one hand ; and on the other, between the origin of the State as described in the respective works. The portrayal in the *Republic* is more abstract in keeping with the theme of the *Republic*, while that in the *Laws* is more conformed with the facts of history and therefore more concrete, in keeping with the theme of the *Laws*. This correspondence is a result of Plato's use of these portrayals as a means, or instrument, to the establishment of a moral principle, while also, at the same time, they serve as the basis of the ensuing discussion in Plato's dialogues.

LEO FERRARI.

