



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**The Concept of Minimal Government by Robert Nozick: A Critical Study**

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper aims at highlighting the importance of Robert Nozick, an important name in Political Philosophy according to whom, there should always be a minimal government or state; A state that behaves like a watchdog. The Objectives of this research are to compare the powerful states (e.g., religious states of Medieval ages, Socialists states etc.) with the minimal and democratic states of the world and to make people understand the difference between Equality and Justice. The study is fundamentally theoretical and qualitative in nature and the original writings of Nozick, Rawls and Popper are used. Finally, it has been concluded that author agrees with Robert Nozick that a state should not interfere too much in the personal and social affairs of its people and recommends Social Democracy, as the best possible solution of the problems of the present world.

**KEYWORDS** Equality, Justice, Minimal Government, Political Philosophy, Watchdog

**Introduction**

The Western Political Philosophy has always been raising many interesting and important issues. The biggest old question of Political Philosophy is, who should rule the country? (Popper, 1945) One man? One family? One group of people or the majority of the people? Aristotle in his Political Philosophy presented six forms of government, the first three, according to him, are the three different kinds of government and the remaining three are the perverted forms of them. (Ackrill, 1981). They are as follows:

- i. Monarchy (one man's rule).
- ii. Aristocracy (one family's government).
- iii. Polity (the government of many people).

The three perverted forms are as follows:

- i. The perverted form of Monarchy is Tyranny.
- ii. The perverted form of Aristocracy is Oligarchy.
- iii. While the perverted form of Polity is Democracy.

In this regard, Aristotle discussed three types of government and their possible misuse of power. There always be a danger that Monarchy changes into tyranny, Aristocracy into Oligarchy and Polity in to Democracy (Stace, 2010). It is very interesting to notice that Democracy for Aristotle, is a nothing but a perverted from of Polity.

Before Aristotle, Plato raised the same question and answered – Philosophers should be Kings and Kings should be Philosophers (Plato, 1908). Karl R. Popper (1902-1994) reacted against the centuries old question of Philosophy and declared that this question could not be considered the fundamental question of Political Philosophy (Popper,

1992). For Popper the fundamental question of Political Philosophy should be, how can we protect the people of any form of government from the dictatorship or possible cruelty of the state? It should be remembered that Karl R. Popper was himself a Marxist in his early youth but gradually he became dissatisfied with the Political, Social and Historical views of Karl Marx (Popper, 1992, 31). The same was the case with Bertrand Russell. Russell was a Christian in his early youth, then he became Socialist after some time he rejected both (Russell, 1957). The question arises, what could be the source of dissatisfaction about Socialism for Popper and Russell both. Obviously, it was the style and structure of the Socialist states all over the world. Pretending themselves as the savior of equal human rights, the Socialist states all over the world have been extremely dictatorial and cruel to their own people.

John Rawls in this book *A Theory of Justice* again presented the concept of a very powerful state avoiding using the name Socialist or Communist (Rawls, 2005). Rawls presented a hypothetical situation in his book and tried to present that particular theory of justice which ensures the equal rights of its people. Robert Nozick in his famous book disagreed with him and presented the concept of Minimal government. He wrote:

*'The minimal state best reduces the chances of such takeover or manipulation of the state by persons desiring power or economic benefits, especially if combined with a reasonably alert citizenry, since it is the minimally desirable.'* (Nozick, 1974, 272).

### **Literature Review**

For the preparation of this article, the very famous and outstanding book of Robert Nozick titled *'Anarchy, State and Utopia (1974)'* has been utilized primarily. Since this book is actually a reaction against the book of John Rawls, titled *'A Theory of Justice (1971)'* has also been studied and comprehended. Apart from these two books, the original translation of the famous dialogue of Plato named *'Republic'* has been studied.

For proper understanding of the Political Philosophy of Classical and Neo-Marxism, the series of BBC T.V. hosted by Bryan Magee has also been watched and listened to. The views of Peter Singer and Herbert Marcuse are especially incorporated.

Being a great political philosopher of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the views of Karl R. Popper have also been studied and incorporated. His famous book *'Open Society and its Enemies'* and his original research articles compiled by David Miller have especially been used.

### **Material and Methods**

Like (almost) every research article of Philosophy, this article is also of qualitative in nature. Philosophy is supposed to give all the other forms of learning their fundamental assumptions and conjectures. If Politics is a practice, Political Science is the rules and regulations behind this practice and the Political Philosophy is the study of the fundamental theory in the form of assumptions, hypothesizes and conjectures etc. The methodology of this article is fundamentally theoretical in nature and its character is qualitative. The references are given according to American Psychological Association (APA) 6<sup>th</sup> Edition.

### **Discussion**

Behind the concept of Minimal government, there always been a libertarian view of the society (Nozick, 1974). According to Robert Nozick, a state (of any kind) should not interfere too much in the affairs of common people. The state should be responsible for providing its people the basic human rights for example, the right to be free, to consider equal before the law and to be free in acquiring or selling his or her private property. State should not decide what is good for them or bad for them in social and cultural life. State

should have no religion at all (remember the difference between Atheism and Secularism). The religious governments of Roman Catholic Church in Medieval ages are the great examples of the worst dictatorship and cruelty. The second major example of powerful states are the socialists' states of Russia, China and other socialist countries. In a religious state, one can notice the accumulation of two kinds of power.

- i. Religious Powers.
- ii. Political Powers.

In the case of socialist states, one can notice the accumulation of

- i. Political Powers.
- ii. Economic Powers.

In both of the above-mentioned kinds, the states become too powerful (all embracing) to usurp the rights of its people. Robert Nozick also arises an important question that, what is more important Equality or Justice?

### **Justice and Equality**

Philosophically speaking, the concept of Justice is different from the concept of Equality. Equality is closer to the concept of distributive justice (Allingham, 2014). In the distribution of goods, facilities or salaries equality or the equal distribution of goods tries to distribute things equally. But this kind of equality arises many questions.

- Who will distribute the things equally (A person, a Monarch or a State)?
- What would happen to the idea of justice if human beings by nature are not equal – they are not equal in their mental abilities, physical strength, passion and hard work.

Robert Nozick is very clear on the point that equality and justice cannot go hand in hand. If a political thinker values justice too much, he or she has to overlook a little or more the idea of justice and if a political thinker values equality more than the concept of justice than obviously he or she overlook the concept of justice. Equality leads to the at least one agent who will be held responsible for creating equality among people. In the concept of justice, this kind of authority is not needed.

One can take the example of Utilitarianism. The most famous statement of Utilitarianism is '*Maximum happiness to maximum people*' (Tardi, 2023). This kind of equality again arises many questions

- i. Is there any Universal criterion for happiness?
- ii. Can any state provide happiness to maximum people?

Robert Nozick has simple answers to above-mentioned questions.

- i. State should not be responsible for the happiness of its people (happiness being a very subjective state of the mind) but state should be a watchdog for the protection of their basic human rights (Nozick, 1974).
- ii. 'Maximization of happiness' and 'maximum people' are the phrases which are quite unattainable.

Karl R. Popper is right that the basic question of any mature Political Philosophy should not be – who will rule? But how we protect our people from the dictatorship and exploitation of any state.

### **Equality before the Law and Economic Equality**

Karl Popper in his article ‘The Defense of Rationalism’ explains many things (Popper, 1945). According to Popper, men are not equal in their capabilities, temperaments, tastes and tendency to work. For Popper, this inequality is not a bad thing but very desirable in many respects (Popper, 1945). The second most important thing which Popper explains in this article is to explain the difference between economic equality and equality before the law. One can explain this thing keeping in view the different concepts of justice in Philosophy. If Distributive Justice has something to do with equal distribution of everything (especially material ones), the Procedural Justice demands the equal right for anybody before the law.

Keeping in view the above discussion, some important concepts of Political Philosophy become clear. The Liberal view in Political Philosophy demands lesser government because according to this concept, the more powerful the state is, the more danger for the people to be oppressed and exploited. Concentration of power always leads to exploitation and suppression of basic human rights. Pretending as the savior of the equality of human rights, powerful governments or states, usually, become a danger of human liberty and dignity. The libertarian view in Political Philosophy has its own limitations. Democratic states always claim that they ensure the freedom of their subjects but the biggest problem relating to these states are the problems of disparity. It is the common observation that in the Liberal and Democratic societies, the problem of disparity persists. In free market economy along with consumerism, the rich become richer and the poor becomes poorer. Can Justice be practiced without giving the people equal opportunities?

### **The concept of Minimal Government (or Lesser Government) – A reaction against the traditional concept of State**

Plato in his dialogues writes about Metaphysics (Objective Idealism), Ethics, Epistemology and also about Political Philosophy (Hamilton, Edythe & Cairns, 1985). In *Republic* he gives the concept of a very powerful state in which there exists nothing like individual rights (Plato, 1908). He explains everything with a collective approach. In this state, philosophers should be kings and kings should be philosophers. Everything is in the hands of the state. Man is not free to choose his or her life partner. He gives the concept of collective marriages. His approach is to get a healthy nation (both mentally and physically) through the collective interactions with healthy males and females. His approach towards the grooming of children and teenagers is also of collective nature. It will not be incorrect to say, that Plato’s whole approach, in his Political Philosophy, is collective in nature in which there is no room for individuality and individual freedom. It is not surprising to notice that many Socialists consider Plato as the Utopian Socialist (Magee, BBC, 2017) and it is also interesting that the philosophers belonging to Neo-Marxism (Marcuse, Adorno and Erich Fromm etc.) accepting the basic thesis of Classical Marxism, consider it true but insufficient (Overdose, 2022).

The Political Philosophy of Aristotle seems much convincing than Plato’s. According to Aristotle (as discussed above) government could be in one man’s hand, in the hands of some families or in the hands of many people but the misuse of power turns monarchy into Tyranny, Aristocracy into Oligarchy and Polity into Democracy. The question arises, what perverts these three forms of government or what does one mean by ‘misuse of power’? Misuse or powers starts with the concentration of powers in some hands. Popper in his article ‘Logic of the Situation’ narrates a very interesting situation (Leach, 1968). The

department of police is essential and necessary for the smooth working of any society. But what will happen when this department corrupts and the misuse of powers becomes their daily habit? The answer of Robert Nozick is simple i.e., there should not be concentration of powers in any sections of society. Popper explains his point of view by giving an interesting phrase '*The Unintended consequence of the situation*' (Popper, 1944, 311). It is quite easy to understand that the concentration of powers corrupts much then the de-concentrations of them.

In this way, it is not inappropriate to conclude that Platonic concept of state, the Socialist states or the Religious states are the great examples of the powerful states system and the political views of Aristotle, the city-state pattern of ancient Greece and Liberal and Democratic states of the world always advocate the minimal or lesser government. It is the credit of Robert Nozick and his book '*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*' that through this book, Robert Nozick presented the concept of minimal or lesser government in a logical and coherent way.

### **Conclusion**

There have been many kinds of states or governments in the world. It is necessary to remember that government is temporary, short-lived or changing thing but the state is comparatively a stable and longer living entity. A state is basically the sum total of the relations among different institutes of any country. A state could be a Monarchy, Aristocracy or Polity (according to Aristotle). A state could be religious (like the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Europe). A state could be a Socialist state (the Russian, Chinese and other Socialist states of the recent past). The fundamental difference between these two kinds of states is the difference between minimal or powerful states. In any powerful state of the world, there is always be a danger of dictatorship and exploitation. In a minimal government (governments of many European Countries), there could be a problem of disparity. Behind these two kinds of states, there are the concepts of Equality and Justice also. The author agrees with Robert Nozick that a state should behave as a watchdog and should not interfere too much in the personal and social affairs of its subject.

### **Recommendations**

Keeping in view the above discussion there are the following two recommendations of the author

- Social Democracy is the best possible solutions of the problems of the present world since it is the blend of Socialism and Democracy.
- Even in a Social Democratic Country, the state should behave like a watchdog as Robert Nozick suggested and should not interfere too much in the affairs of common men.

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