‘The Good Life’: Greek Polis, Roman Empire, and Christendom

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of ‘the good life’ within a political and social context. The notion of the good life has been connected with the function of the state. The state provides a unique public sphere in which individuals perform their social activity. One of the essential components of the good life was its meaningfulness, and that was a reason why its meaning has been subjected to the conceptual changes from Ancient Greeks and their view of the city state (polis) onwards. The basic function of polis was the creation of a space to foster quality living. A number of understandings of classical Greek political thought have influenced the development of western political thought. The good life and the polis model are two important examples. The investigation of this short paper compares the methods and concepts of the good life in the case of the Ancient Greek city-state, the Roman Empire, and early medieval Christendom.

Keywords: Good life, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Christendom, law, polis.

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Everyone wants to be happy, or fare well, and no one disagrees about whether a good life is what he wants to live. 

Source: Plato (278e3–279a1) 

The Greek polis being as an atmosphere of mutual understandings was considered as a civil community, which appears to be the arena of ‘good life’. Philosophers offered ways and methods through which people follow ‘good life’. The function of philosophy is to develop wisdom, and the aim of wisdom is the use of reason to realize the norms. According to Plato’s thinking, reasoning gives an opportunity to define a ‘good life’. Reasoning has essential function in terms of defining the borders between the human (health, wealth, beauty) and divine (good judgment, self-control, courage) benefits. He emphasizes the role of knowledge saying that reason completes the meaning of true knowledge. Thinking about true knowledge Plato states that a ‘part of true knowledge is the recognition of the limitations of other views of justice’. Justice, after the intellectual suicide of Socrates, was considered as the cornerstone of Platonic thinking, which in its turn criticizes the Greek democracy. Justice is the prevailing virtue which seeks to provide a ‘good life’ for human beings. In order to provide a harmony in the coexistence of Greek city state, it is necessary to establish an order, which must be a just order. But who should establish an order in the state? Plato tries to answer to this question. He goes on to say that the guardians are educated in order to become just men. The guardians use power invested in them to provide justice and just order in Greek polis. In contrast to these ideas, Aristotle says that polis cannot exist only for very few just men; polis is equal for everyone.

During the times of Aristotle a transformation took place from city state (polis) to the empire (cosmopolis) and this mean that the methods of defining the ‘good life’ was changed. Platonic methodology was dialectical which tended to search ‘good life’ in an ideal world, whereas Aristotelian methodology was an empirical based on inductive reasoning and observations. Aristotle tries to find a ‘good life’ in real polis. And Aristotelian thinking about the world exploration was based on the concept of naturalness. Aristotle states that ‘man is by nature a political animal’ and men can only achieve a ‘good life’ by living as citizens of the state. ‘Good life’ provides citizens strong notion of identity and Greeks achieve much of their identity.

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3 Ibid., p. 60.
5 During the Ancient Greek colonization (8th-6th centuries B.C) Greeks established their colonies in the basins of the Aegean and Black seas. The colonial expansion of Greeks stretched from the coasts of Asian Minor (Ionia) to southern Italy (Great Greece) and North Africa. The populations of Ionia, Aeolia and Doria migrated from mainland...
from the *polis*. The main concepts of Western political thought since Plato and Aristotle consider that reason can find the primary principles and reality is rational in nature. Aristotle sought to find the ideal form of government and he observed that there are good (rule in the interest of all classes) and bad (rule in the interest of ruling classes only) governments. He offered a solution: the best form of government is one where power is invested in the middle class. The transition from *polis* to empire changed the worldviews and the methods the ‘good life’ were defined.

The Greek world was conquered by the Macedonians\(^6\) and the centre of decision making was transmitted from the *polis* to an empire. The definition of the ‘good life’ was changed in the empire model: citizens had an opportunity to travel across the empire and choose a place to live. As a result citizens acquired new cultural values, but on the other hand, their political participation in decision making processes was restricted and they were directed by specific principles. In the case of Rome\(^7\) the ‘good life’ of citizens was defined by the law - and good law tended to make good men. According to Cicero (B.C. 106-43) ‘law is a highest reason rooted in nature’ (I. 18)\(^8\) and he defines natural law as good and true law which aims ‘to order people to behave rightly and forbid them to do wrong’ (I.19).\(^9\) Cicero’s remarks on the nature of law helped to shape Roman law. And the longevity of the Roman Empire was strengthened by Roman law. The expansion of Rome from republic-state to a multinational empire was connected with virtues. Romans believed that a well governed city was given by ‘God’ and because of the Romans’ virtues.\(^10\) For both Greek (Aristotle, Plato) and Roman thinkers, states were ruled by citizen-made laws. The rule of law could help to provide the ‘good life’ for citizens because citizens themselves made the law.

Stoic philosophy became dominant in the Roman Empire, particularly the virtue of ‘self-control’. According to the Stoics there is one God whose function is not the governance of the

\(^6\) The term ‘Macedonia’ became the major conflict issue between contemporary Greece and Macedonia. A difference of opinion exists about the ethnic roots of Macedonians. One of the contradictions is connected with language issues; contemporary Macedonian language has both Slavic and Macedonian elements. Despite the modern Macedonia (with its mixed of Greek and Slavic roots), the ancient Macedonians represented an independent descent of the Indo-European community and language. Greece demands that the Republic of Macedonia change its name because the ancient Macedonians had no Slavic roots, therefore the contemporary Slavic people of Macedonia cannot call themselves Macedonians. See. L.M. Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), p. 158. Many world countries and international organizations recognize the country under the reference ‘Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’. Thus, the term, used in the article, refers to ancient Macedonians.

\(^7\) Roman Empire starts from the Augustan Principate (27 B.C.-A.D. 14) with the reforms aimed at combining the Republican traditions with the monarchic tendencies. The Golden Age of the regime occurs in A.D. 96-192 under the ideal princeps.


\(^9\) Ibid., pp. 111-112.

\(^10\) McClelland, *A History of Western Political Thought*, p. 84.
universe, but rather to call men to their duty.\textsuperscript{11} Stoicism also played a key role in the process of the acceptance of Christianity in the Roman Empire. With the emergence of Christianity a debate was established between the Roman Church and the Roman Empire.

St. Augustine (A.D. 354–430) was one of the Christian political philosophers who tried to elucidate the relationships between the Church and empire. In the ‘City of God’\textsuperscript{12} (A.D. early 5th century) he speaks about the ‘earthly city’ and ‘heavenly city’. Augustine considers Rome to be an earthly city, and in seeking to secure the good life for its citizens it could only achieve minimal peace. Like Plato and Aristotle, Augustine is also against the militarism. He thinks that citizens (Christians) can only achieve perfect peace in a heavenly city formed by the love of God. In contrast, the aim of earthly city is to provide social order. Plato believed that royal princes must be the happiest of men because of their authority, Augustine compares this with ‘God’s rule over the heavenly city and the rule of the best prince over the best of the earthly states,’\textsuperscript{13} which means that earthly city cannot make citizens truly happy. Thus Augustine concludes that secular government cannot provide the ‘good life’ or happiness for its citizens. According to his pessimistic view human beings are not able to establish a perfect regime on the earth, because there is a one true God who can make this happen.

The Christian scholar whose theory became as a turning point for political thought was Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225–1274). He suggested that the earthly state can coexist with the divine ideas, and the Church supervise the state. So this means that Aquinas considers the Church and the earthly society as inseparable parts, which will secure happiness for citizens. One of the most important concepts of Aquinas’s thinking was the essence of law derived from human reason. He argued that reasoning ability is a gift given by God for human beings to understand their purpose. Similar to Aristotelian thinking, Aquinas emphasizes the rationality of the law. There is a hierarchy in Aquinas’s laws in which the role of God’s mind was to provide coherence. The rule achieved by human law and divine law does not destroy human life because it emerges from natural reason.\textsuperscript{14} We can conclude that the role of a Christian king or prince is not only governance, but also the establishment of appropriate conditions through which citizens can achieve their happiness.

To conclude, in this paper we have discussed the ideas and concepts of justice, law, empire, God and Church, and state through which citizens of Greek city state, Roman Empire and early medieval Christendom, achieved the ‘good life’. In every community the notion of the ‘good life’ has specific meaning because of the value system and the worldviews of its citizens. So the differences of the understandings of the ‘good life’ mostly depend on the particular historical, cultural and political contexts.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 81.
\textsuperscript{13} J.S. McClelland, \textit{A History of Western Political Thought}, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{14} R.W. Dyson, trans. \textit{Aquinas: Political Writings}; Introduction, St. Thomas Aquinas (UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), p. xxv.