

# The luxurious state

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## Abstract

Socrates reconstructs the state ‘from the ground up’ by progressively including elements and functions, and highlights motives and repercussions.

## 1 Introduction

Attempting to examine δικαιοσύνη ([Gk], justice, righteousness), Socrates devises a *method*: he takes the concept from the inter-personal context to the larger scale of πολιτεία ([Gk], state, republic) where it would be more discernible. Thus, Socrates progressively reconstructs the state in a dialogue with Plato’s brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantos, highlighting relevant motives, principles, and repercussions (Plato, ca. 360BC, Book II).

Whether presented by Plato (ca. 360BC) or Xenophon (ca. 360BC), Socratic dialogues are long. Nonetheless, short themes such as the origin of the state can be extracted and stand on their own. The particular extract was consulted in two versions of the original work of Plato: in English by B. Jowett (Plato, ca. 360BC) and in Greek by I.N. Γρυπάρης (1911). In the case of classics, consulting different translations helps to identify alternative interpretations (e.g. about the origin of war) and verify or trace concepts through terminology (e.g. luxury vs. καλοπέραση).

## 2 Core health

According to Socrates, sustained by his students (Plato, ca. 360BC, Book II), the state arises from *necessity* (ανάγκη [Gk])<sup>1</sup>. The reconstructive endeavour of Socrates turns evident a number of fundamental professions, organised in an additive model: first those that satisfy the basic necessities (e.g. food, dwelling, clothing), then others as a consequence of specialisation of labour (e.g. to craft the tools of the first group), and then others to satisfy advanced necessities such as local and long-distance trading — Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup>This idea is shared by influential philosophers of the illuminism (Lee, 1974, pp.45–46), including the works of Hobbes (1651) and Rousseau (1762).

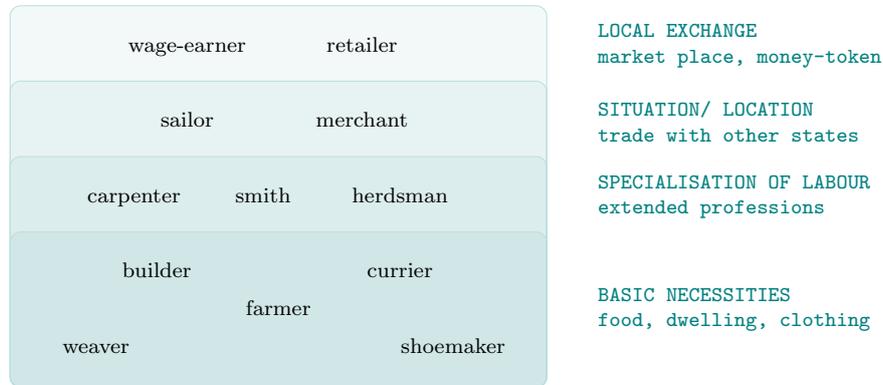


FIGURE 1 Professions and their motives in the core state

The way of life envisioned for the fundamental or ‘core’ state<sup>2</sup> is quite simple (Plato, ca. 360BC, Book II). It is characterised by a set of essentials, and enhanced by some delights of the kind that would be nowadays recognised as items of a ‘healthy living’ or vegetarian diet — Figure 2.



FIGURE 2 The simple way of life

Socrates and his students do not restrict themselves to presenting merely a description of the core necessities and corresponding professions (Figure 1), followed by characteristics of the resulting lifestyle (Figure 2). Socrates and his students agree that the people of the core state observe *principles* such as ‘not exceeding their means’, and ‘having an eye to poverty or war’ (Plato, ca. 360BC, Book II), and this both defines and safeguards the core state. The chief *values* of the people — at least those living in the core state — are said to be health (υγεία [Gk]) and peace (ειρήνη [Gk]) — Figure 5.

### 3 Introducing luxury

Subsequently, as requested by Glaucon, Socrates adds some ‘ordinary conveniences’ to life (Figure 3) and claims that this creates a ‘luxurious state’, and that a life of luxury calls for new professions — ‘not required by any natural want’, but associated to the production of the new goods.

<sup>2</sup>In the Greek edition, this state appears as the ‘true’ one (αληθινή [Gk]) because it is ‘healthy’ (υγιής [Gk]).

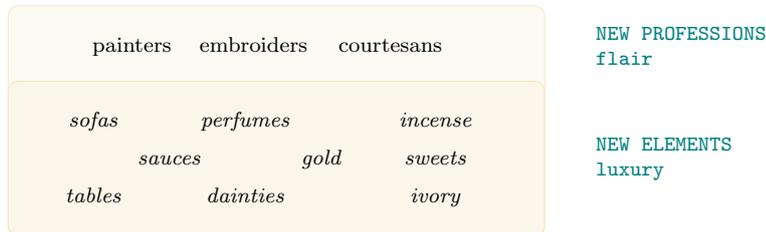


FIGURE 3 Glaucon’s ‘ordinary conveniences’ of life are deemed by Socrates as ‘luxury’

Socrates continues by adding more information to the state of luxury — namely, more new professions (Figure 4).

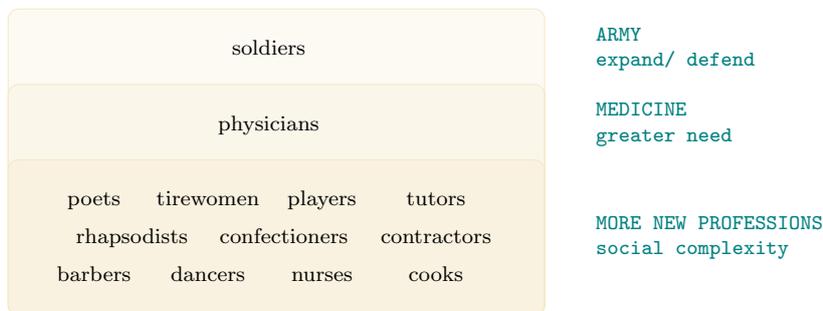


FIGURE 4 Characteristic professions of the luxurious–expansive state

Two consequences of luxurious living (Figure 4) are carefully detailed by Socrates: (a) excess is known to impair health, so illness is likely to be more frequent or severe — hence the greater need for physicians (Figure 5(a)); (b) the high economic activity for enlarging the borders of the state — probably at the expense of the neighbours (Figure 5(b)) — and thus the expanding state becomes invasive, maintains an army, and is likely to go to war.

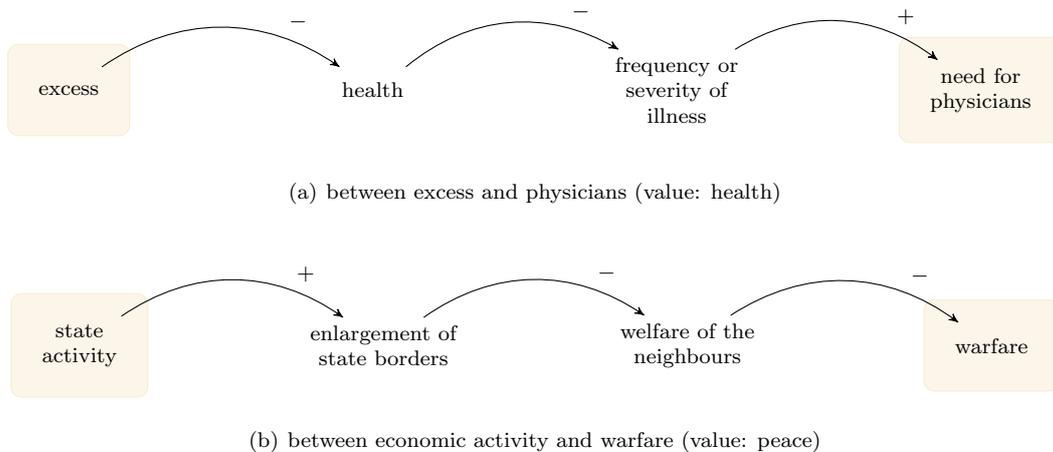


FIGURE 5 Socrates presents arguments with explicit causality regarding the chief values (v. end of § 2)

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Simple life

Socrates depicts the ‘simple life’ through a set of loose elements that are mere indicators (Figure 2). Indicator profiling remains a popular technique many centuries later (Esty et al., 2005; European Environment Agency, 2005), but does not transmit a full *modus vivendi* because it omits the relationships between the indicators. While these relationships are meant to be completed mentally by the participants, the presented profile of ‘simple life’ is not a complete (or explicit) mental model — cf. Figure 5.

‘Simple life’ may be considered as the ideal of Socrates — at least as suggested in the Greek edition (Γρυπάρης, 1911). However, knowing the Socratic style of dialogs in search of the ‘truth’, it is possible that Socrates takes this position for the sake of argument, as he often does. As a third alternative, there is also the possibility that Socrates expresses a sense of mockery — and hence disapproval — towards the ‘simple’ lifestyle (Lee, 1974, pp.56–57).

### 4.2 Overshoot and collapse

The ascent of the state from a ‘healthy’ core towards ‘luxury’, as indicated by the progressive addition of professions and complexity of lifestyle, eventually leads to war (Figure 5(b)). This marks an ‘overshoot and collapse’ behaviour — recurrent, it can be argued, throughout the course of human history. Socrates and his students agree that this pattern contravenes the principles that avert poverty and war (§ 2). Hence, a good advice could be extracted: in order to avoid the disagreeable ‘collapse’ effect, attention should be given to restricting ‘overshoot’ — Figure 5.

Socrates and his students also agree that — as applies to all other professions — maintaining an army for the state requires time, attention, aptitude, and training to develop appropriate skills. While all this investment is indeed a concern, the appalling situation appears to be the disruption to the normal life of the state through its involvement in war<sup>3</sup>. Reaching war concludes the exploration of Socrates about the *origin* of the state, while the exploration of other aspects of the state continues in the rest of the book.

## 5 Challenges

Being of philosophical intent, the exploration led by Socrates<sup>4</sup> has the intrinsic value of making us think and wonder: Is the ‘healthy’ state (§ 2) too simple to be wholly satisfactory to human nature? Is it unreasonable to expect the observance of the precautionary principles (§ 2) within the ‘luxurious’ state (§ 3)? And how are the causes of ‘overshoot’ — i.e. regarding health and peace — practically contained? Applications should require more than the Socratic hallmark of ‘knowing oneself’ (αυτογνωσία), and well towards discipline and self control (αυτοέλεγχος).

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<sup>3</sup>Seen in another way, war is practically disruption of relations with other stakeholders, often resulting from the failure of negotiations — e.g. by awkward statemanship.

<sup>4</sup>Or, perhaps, attributed directly to Plato (Γρυπάρης, 1911).

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