

Critically Assess Plato's critique of democracy

Plato, was a classical Greek philosopher born to a wealthy family, in Athens around 427 B.C., four years after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war, which subsequently dismembered the former Athenian dominance in Greece, to little more than an insignificant polity.¹

Plato gained much influence from the teachings of his famed mentor, *Socrates*, and between them, the foundations of modern philosophical thought; political and critical were laid, with *Plato* himself ascending to heights similar to that of his esteemed arbiter. Works of his, such as '*Republic*' (a ten-stage book focusing primarily on the intricacies of political theory), is regarded by some as one of the most poignant works of philosophy ever to have been produced. In like tradition to his own intellectual birth, *Plato*'s teachings would also conceive another famed philosopher through that of *Aristotle*, an equally acclaimed mind, and personal student of his.²

The purpose of this essay is to assess *Plato*'s critique of democracy, which derives largely from book VIII of his *Republic* series in which he outlines five constitutions, known more commonly as '*Plato*'s' five regimes': aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. His belief was that of the five, the latter four would be 'unjust', but that society would inevitably pass through each in succession, with the final stage, 'tyranny' being the worst of all.

The *Republic* is presented as a dialogue of justice delivered by *Socrates*, in the house of his friend; *Cephalus*. 'Some distinguished modern scholars hold that, even if the conversation never actually occurred, its substance represents the views not of *Plato* but only of *Socrates*'.³ It has also 'been traditional to assume *Plato*'s agreement with what he puts into the mouth of *Socrates* and so to ascribe to *Plato* the teachings of the *Republic*'⁴, however this is by no means a given. Although doubtlessly an important issue; this does not necessarily affect the specifics of this essay; for our aim is to solely assess the theorising surrounding democracy as played-out in the *Republic*'s text, and to competently do so, we will first summarise (in order of succession) the five political components to which the book refers. These are as follows:

Aristocracy

Since 'constitutions cannot come out of stocks and stones; they must result from the preponderance of certain characters which draw the rest of the community in their wake'⁵. Under this particularly simplistic rule, *Plato*'s *Republic* asserted that:

Those who ought to govern are those who are trained to know about politics and are trained to know what politics is about. To know about politics is to be able to produce and assess accounts of political processes; to know what politics is about is to be able to produce and assess accounts of the issues that people engaging in political processes use [...] to deliberate and decide.⁶

Accordingly, through his theory of hereditary monarchy, the role of philosopher king is already predestined to those of nobility, and therefore the knowledge necessary for rule can be asserted from birth; i.e. a correlating, and thus, correct mould.

Plato's craft analogy ponderates that 'just as medicine should be left to the experts, and a medical training only given to those most suited, so should ruling, and a training to rule'. If for instance you were ill, you would seek expert advice, rather than assemble a crowd of random bystanders to vote on a remedy. Using the analogy of seamanship, he further extrapolates that 'a true navigator *would* study the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars,

¹ T. M. Knox, *Plato's Republic* 3rd ed. (London: Thomas Murby & Co., 1938) p. 5.

² C. C. Meinwald, *Plato*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plato>> [Accessed 24th January 2019].

³ Knox, *Plato's Republic* 3rd ed., pp. 7-8.

⁴ Knox, *Plato's Republic* 3rd ed., p. 7.

⁵ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Francis Macdonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 261.

⁶ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, p. 247.

the winds and all the other subjects appropriate to his profession'; just as in the prior example of medicine, where he summoned that judgement should be left to experts, and experts only.⁷

Timocracy

Timocracy, he regards as the first point of noticeable decline. He states that 'if there are five forms of government, there must be five kinds of mental constitution among individuals'.⁸ Conforming to his theory, as we descend to each of the 'five regimes' - the mental constitution of associated individuals appears to breed consequential alignment, according to his definition that delineates differentials by determining virtuousness as a worthy creed and wealth-accumulation as its opposing force. *Plato* suggests that through an inevitable lax, 'the rulers [...] bred for the commonwealth, [...] will not be able, by observation and reckoning, to hit upon the times of propitious or otherwise for birth; some day the moment will slip by and they will beget children out of due season [...] and bring together brides and bridegrooms out of season too, from which their children will not be well-endowed or fortunate. He goes on to explain how the clause of a downward spiral, whereby neglect assumes a viral status, would thus infect the mindfulness of others in hereditary form; the reigning result being the failure to cultivate 'the mind, [...] so that young men will come to be worse educated'.

To summarise; timocracy stems from the mixing of castes (as designated within aristocracy) between those of the ruling class (guardians/gold); those within the middle caste, i.e. the warrior protectors (auxiliaries/silver), and those of the lowly class who obey all (producers/bronze). This leads to a social divide within the ruling echelon, between those who'd rather pursue wealth over virtue and vice versa; and thus disharmony begets, then enmity, and war, followed by a settlement, subsequently birthing a new body of governance with the revoke of the previous tertiary-collectivism to one of authoritative timocratic rule based upon a two-pronged overwatch of the traditionalists versus the modernists, and adhering the masses to a forced serfdom-like subservience.⁹

Oligarchy

The downfall of timocracy alights from the ambition for ever more wealth, by those that agreed to a balance with virtuosity. In the transition from timocracy to oligarchy:

Virtue and wealth are balanced against one another in the scales; as the rich rise in social esteem *however*, the virtuous sink. These changes of valuation, moreover, are always reflected in practice. So at last the competitive spirit of ambition in these men gives way to the passion of gain: they despise the poor man and promote to power the rich, who wins all their praise and admiration. At this point they fix by statute the qualification for privilege in an oligarchy; [...] no one may hold office whose property falls below the prescribed sum'.¹⁰

'Oligarchy, by making wealth the end of life and failing to check the accumulation of property in a few hands and the ravages of usury, so weakens itself that the poor see their opportunity to wrest power from the degenerate rich'¹¹ It is therefore a constitution characterised by the love of money, where wealth is the end of life for all.'The state [...] suffers a further loss of unity by the outbreak of that class war of rich against poor which *Plato* sought to avert by denying all private property to the ruling order and limiting the acquisition of wealth by tradesman and farmers'.¹² It is essentially through envy, and want for that which the rich possess that brings about the transition of oligarchy to democracy, and the new ruling order of the mob.

Democracy

Plato criticises democracy as the rule of idiocy through populism, whereby, adopting 'liberty' as their slogan; the assumption goes that only in their democratic country can a free spirit exist; thus creating a citizenry so sensitive

⁷ J. Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996 [Rev. 2006]. pp. 66-68.

⁸ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, p. 261.

⁹ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, pp. 263-4.

¹⁰ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, pp. 268-9.

¹¹ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, p. 273.

¹² *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, pp. 267-8.

that there grows resentment towards even the slightest application of control. The father becomes afraid of his sons as they show no fear or respect; whilst generally speaking, the young argue and will not do what they are told. The old meanwhile, anxious not to be thought disagreeable tyrants, imitate *them*,¹³ and so as capital multiplies, so do the drones and paupers; the luxurious life of body and mind, takes young men to become lazy and effeminate creatures, incapable of resisting pleasure or enduring that of the pure.¹⁴

He will set all his pleasures on a footing of equality, denying to none its equal rights and maintenance, and allowing each in turn, [...] to succeed, as if by the chance of the lot, to the government of his soul until it is sacrificed. When

he is told that some pleasures should be sought and valued as arising from desires of a higher order, others chastised and enslaved because the desires are base, he will shut the gates [...] against the messengers of truth, [...] declaring that one appetite is as good as another and *that* all must have their equal rights. [...] Every now and then he takes a part in politics, leaping to his feet to say or do whatever comes into his head; or he will set out to rival someone he admires, a soldier it may be, or, if the fancy takes him, a man of business. His life is subject to no order or restraint, and he has no wish to change an existence which he calls pleasant, free, and happy. That well describes the life of one whose motto is liberty and equality.¹⁵

‘The only outcome of too much freedom is likely to be excessive subjection, in the state or in the individual; which means that the culmination of liberty in democracy is precisely what prepares the way for the cruellest extreme of servitude under a despot’ - i.e. tyranny.¹⁶

In conclusion, the parallels between a “tyrannical” leadership, and aristocratic leadership are seemingly absolute; that is to say, in terms of their political structure - for are they not both dictatorial? *Plato’s Republic* chose to brand the former’s chief-overseer as a “Philosopher King” as he believed status within an aristocracy, stemmed from intellectual enlightenment, whereby those who attained their positions of prominence did so as a result of their philosophical mindset; i.e. their capacity to weigh-up decisions through intellectual wisdom. On the contrary, according to his scale of decline which pits “tyranny” at the base-point of a five-tier descent, a “tyrannical” form of government is one deriving from the failures of populist approach, which worsen the virtues of society from a prior emphasise on discipline to one of inevitable anarchy through the declination of principles and valoristic causation as the transition from aristocracy mutates to the timocratic and oligarchical, before soiling itself upon the depths of depravity in the penultimate stage, known as democracy, where power has been largely transferred to the rule of the unfit; i.e. the people. Thus “tyranny”, is the final-tier in the point of rebuke, where society, having reached a level of unsustainability through instability, is restored back to order through swift and forceful mechanisms.

My own perception of this tier system is one of fluidity. Whereas, *Plato* opts to rank the political spectrums, from “best” to “worst” or “beginning” to “end” - I myself see all such systems as unalterable mediums, or inevitable and indefinite transitions, rotating in circular form, with each feeding into the next as a universal continuum. Democracy along with oligarchy and timocracy are given intermediary positions within the *Republics* philosophy; yet it appears evident that this critique is bundled with contradictions; for instance, it was said through the words of *Plato* that; as ‘hard as it may be for a state so framed to be shaken, yet, since all that comes into being must decay, even a fabric like this will not endure for ever, but will suffer dissolution.’¹⁷ ‘The only outcome of too much freedom is likely to be excessive subjection, in the state or in the individual; which means that the culmination of liberty in democracy is precisely what prepares the way for the cruellest extreme of servitude under a despot’.¹⁸

Having accessed *Plato’s* critique of democracy, we must rekindle the respective era and recall to mind some important factors. Firstly, the scale of political preference, whether a determination of *Plato* or *Socrates* is the constitution most befitting to the the author(s); for it is the very ideology from whence they came. Although their class must not necessarily alter their objectivity, it is certainly worth highlighting that the constitutional definitions all stem from their own moral reasonings, which in-turn derive from their societal stance. Secondly, the age in question

¹³ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, pp. 280-3

¹⁴ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, pp. 274-5.

¹⁵ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, p. 280.

¹⁶ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, p. 283

¹⁷ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, pp. 262-3.

¹⁸ *Plato, The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, p. 283.

imposes such characteristics that are no-longer of our own, and therefore alter our interpretations of the constitutions provided. An example would be the slave populus who gained no mention within the societal structures mentioned in the *Republic*. Therefore such definitions remain incomplete.

Nevertheless, inclusive of the above points, the text still provides enhancing insight into societal production, and the changing course of political environment within that of a generation. *Plato* and *Socrates* both witnessed the rise and fall of Athenian prestige, from which this book derives, and so the dialogue accords value in truth, for that which happened. Perhaps indeed *Plato* viewed the thirty leaders of the Spartan lead coalition upon the fall of Athens as “tyrants” - however this may also be a consequence of *Socrates* execution, for *Plato* himself was offered their membership; yet who can be sure without the gift of time travel? Regardless of such, we can be certain from his intellectual prowess, and the response from academics since his departure, that his reasoning accords validity in many ways, or at the very least, admiration.

“In the infinity of time, past or future’ the ideal state may never have existed or be destined to exist; but if we suppose it realised, nothing in this world of mortality and change can last forever’.¹⁹

Bibliography

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¹⁹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Cornford, p. 259.