

# **On Plato's Criticism of Democracy: Does the Prescriptive Solution Establish Justice**

**Simple Rajrah**

M.A. International Relations, Jawaharlal Nehru University

**Abstract:** The paper presents Plato's criticism of the democratic state as primarily based on three concerns- the incapacity of the democratic soul to become philosopher ruler, the extreme moral corruption of the democratic system and the absolute enslavement accruing inevitably from a commitment to absolute freedom. Next, the paper argues that while Plato's condemnation of the perversions of democracy seems adequate, the prescriptive solution he offers is extremely totalitarian, and thus ineffective in establishing justice. Lastly, this paper concludes that a complete reinterpretation of Plato's political theory separating it from the anachronistic prescription must be conducted.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Plato, political, philosopher king, freedom, totalitarianism.

## **Introduction**

Democracy's constant creativity is even more dangerous. The audacity of post-truth to present itself as a valid category will be a matter of historical inquiry for theorists and academicians, but the manner in which it is being increasingly utilized by the dominant and powerful in democratic systems has dispossessed the oppressed of their most potent weapon, their authority over the truth and reality of their own experiences, their telling and retelling of trauma and violence. "Alternative facts", a close contender in the list of worse misnomers of all times next only to "war on terror", hopes to disguise

its brutal violence by appearing as just another innocent fact while simultaneously blurring the line between the factual repression that the majority lived and the apathetic opinions that the marked sites of knowledge creation generated. An understanding of the history of democracy, especially Plato's forewarning against the perversions of democratic systems and how we reached the Post-Trump pro-Yogi phase, is hence no longer a luxury; it is essential and seeks immediate attention.

### **Plato and moral reform**

George Klosko mentions that Plato is not simply interested in justice as an abstract question in moral philosophy but in moral reform and thus the inquiry into a just city is essential to understand how just souls can be raised. Book VIII of Plato's *The Republic* begins by Plato demarcating the four different types of regimes – and the first that loves honour is called timarchy or timocracy. Timocracy arises from aristocracy when it is marked by factionalism and social strife, such that it is pulled by the iron and bronze sections towards money making, while the other two sections pull it towards virtue. In timarchy, the auxiliaries elevate their position to that of rulers and lack any virtue of temperance whatsoever. This quickly degenerates into the second type of regime which Plato identifies as oligarchy, one founded on property assessment and hence the wealthy come to be honored in such a city leading to an incapable ruler with no conception of justice. This regime, Plato elaborates, degenerates quickly into a democracy primarily because of the insatiable character of the good that oligarchy proposes for itself. Plato's democracy comes up when the poor win, killing some of the others, making a mockery of freedom. Plato's democracy, an elaborate criticism of which follows, leads to the worse form of governance, tyranny, which represents absolute injustice.

Plato's four-part classification of ruling regimes finds its mirror replica in his four-part division of human beings primarily because, for him, if regimes are ultimately composed of people, there must be isomorphic linkage between them.

“Therefore if there are five arrangements of cities, there would also be five for the soul of private men” (544e)

While associating analogies serves as beneficial for methodological creativity, one is bound to be critical of the fact that Plato’s private man is in a realm of spatio-temporal permanence where his performance in the public sphere is necessarily linked to the category of city he is present in, which also leaves no scope for a city’s heterogeneous composition of men of all kinds. However, what seems ingenious about the Platonic method of relating cities to the men that occupy them, is that he locates the scope of revolution within individuals themselves. Therefore, since resistance can be summoned by men from within the body, its tumult with desires and a natural degeneration, Plato could be called a pioneer of liberalism; although it must be noted Plato has a very complex understanding of one’s agency. In Plato’s conception, doing what one really wants to do is an exercise of one’s agency only if the action is caused by a necessary desire and aligns with the overall aim to maintain justice; otherwise it would appear that the individual’s agency is overpowered by his own unnecessary, unjust desires.

### **Critique of the democratic soul – the incapacity of the ruler**

Plato’s critique of the democratic character is closely linked to his theory of the tripartite soul, which, as Klosko mentions, is based on the phenomenon of psychological conflict. His tripartite division of souls refers to the appetitive part as comprising of bodily appetites like hunger, thirst and sex; a reasonable part which calculates the Pareto optimality of situations; and the third spirited part, which is naturally allied with reason. Because Socrates perceives of justice as some sort of relationship between the three parts and their harmonious being, it is impossible for the democrat to be just as the democrat is involved only in appetitive indulgences. While the just soul is dominated by reason, the timocratic man is ruled by spirit, the oligarchic is ruled by different appetites, and so is the democratic soul. However, although the oligarchic soul has the ability to differentiate between necessary and

unnecessary appetites, the democratic soul is unable to prioritize and hence is lost in the maze of varied appetites. The tyrant, worse of all, is completely overpowered by the most pervert or lawless of the unnecessary desires, in Socratic terms “love lives like a tyrant within him in all anarchy and lawlessness (575a)”.

Not only does Plato present the democrat as constantly occupied by the vagaries of life and unabashedly numerous desires, he ascribes this disunity in the democratic self to be unfit of ruling and hence problematic. Because Plato’s conception of justice is closely related to the theory of class specialization, he believes that a just city will be one which is based on just laws and run by a just ruler. Moreover, he believes that a ruler must also be selected as per requisite skill and aptitude, which as theory of education would suggest can be acquired, and considers the democrat as especially unfit for being the ruler. Clearly Plato understands this multiplicity of desires to cause multiple actions, and while his problem is not against multitasking or people living a holistic public life (Athens had various festivals and carnivals), he is deeply concerned about people performing actions according to their irrational desires rather than rational suitability. Such a person, Plato suggests, would prefer living in a democratic space only because it would give him the freedom to pursue his wants. Theorists have argued that underlying Plato’s criticism of the multiplicity of desires of the democratic man is his primary disrespect for the desire satisfaction theory of good (Santas 2000). This is also linked to Plato’s condemnation for absolute liberty and his preference of justice and happiness over and above liberty, as the paper explains further.

### **Moral corruption of a democratic system**

The second level of criticism that Plato has against democracy is that it is an extremely morally corrupt system which is closely related to his disdain for sophistic doctrines, especially those concerning rhetoric. E. R. Dodds has placed the date of the text *Gorgias* which contains Plato’s critique of rhetoric

and popular opinion as 387 BC, just twenty-four years after the tyranny of the Four Hundred; two of Socrates's most successful students had led the revolutions that resulted in bloody oligarchic tyrannies and their anti-democratic exploits contributed much to the Athenian death sentences against Plato's beloved Socrates. Plato's desire for oligarchic government in Athens rested on his foundational epistemology; access to true knowledge was limited to those with wealth and high birth, and those few born with these qualities were the only legitimate candidates to be counted among the philosophic ruling few (McKomiskey 1992). In *The Republic*, Plato mentions how the democratic man who represents an absolute perversion of the system (because he cannot differentiate between his rational, necessary desires and unnecessary, vulgar desires) is often quite popular amongst many men and women because everyone can relate to some or the other shade of regime and character present in him. Even though Plato mentions that democratic men do engage in politics and philosophy often on their own whims and fancies, his treatise appears to be largely philosophical elitism having classified how different sections must remain faithful only to the work they are supposed to perform - the guardians to military wellbeing, the auxiliaries to wealth creation and the philosopher ruler to maintenance of justice. Plato's statement, "[a]ren't the people always accustomed to set up one man as their special leader and to foster him and make him grow great" (565d), shows how Plato is skeptical about leaders being popular precisely because it is this rhetoric that the leader employs that causes him to become a great tyrant. Under the disguise of cancellation of debts and redistribution of land, the leader not only comes to be praised and hence occupies the supreme power over people's minds, but also engages in bloodshed and rioting without being noticed by those drunk on freedom. More importantly, because Plato essentializes justice as related to freedom, he remarks that the tyrant would wage wars as a beginning precisely to make sure that leadership remains, hence compromising the overall happiness of the citizens. Much like what happens in contemporary fascist regimes, the tyrant no longer requires pretense of niceties or the use of populist appeals and does away with anyone who criticizes him, leading to absolute indiscriminate purgation

such that only the new citizens speak well of him while the wise men tragically flee from him.

### **Absolute freedom enslaves absolutely**

The third level of critique that Plato employs against democracy is its commitment to absolute freedom, which, as he explains, lays down the foundation for tyranny:

“Freedom, I said. For surely in a city under a democracy, you would hear that this is the finest thing it has, and that for this reason it is the only regime worth living in for anyone who is by nature free”(562c).

The inherent equality of a democratic system wherein, as Plato says, the metic is equal to the townsman and the woman to man because if everyone can pursue what one desires it ultimately leads to everyone being alike. And because slaves and women who consider themselves free in their desires perceive themselves of being worthy of receiving what they demand, they would be irritated as soon as denied, and this precisely would cause disobedience of laws and ultimately lead to anarchy, which would create space for a tyrannous ruler.

Further, Plato is wary of the fact that in the democratic regime, the third class is one which possesses little but is always compensated and hence kept from revolting against the system. Plato also talks about some sort of redistribution happening from the richest to the poorest where the wealth is passed via the leaders, and just like our contemporary democracies, the trickle effect is rather minimal, such that it hardly reaches the poor. Is Plato’s prescription enough?

It must essentially be noted that not only was Plato skeptical of democracy as a regime, his theory of rigid differentiation of function is in itself against the very principles of democracy. He differentiates three forms

of classes – the rulers of philosopher kings who must protect the moral fabric of the city, the auxiliaries who must obey the philosopher rulers and are the guardians of the city's physical safety and the productive class made up of craftsmen and traders who must engage in economic well being. This differentiation is obviously underlined by a strict hierarchy and separation, which shows how Plato's regard for moral and political concerns features well above economic matters. Plato's theory of four traditional virtues wherein wisdom and courage are the virtues of particular classes (philosophers and auxiliaries primarily) and the other two virtues, namely temperance and justice, are concerned with the relationship between the classes. What Plato fails to decipher is that it would be difficult to maintain such strict separation because even education and moral reform cannot compose one's desires, more so because of their temporal nature. Therefore, this inherent hold on people's inner desires would soon turn oppressive and be detrimental to their happiness, and hence Plato's urge to impose justice would inherently lead to injustice. Moreover, Plato's remarks in favour of censorship and against art, which in itself is a natural expression of one's feelings, emotions and desires, explains how Plato's happy citizen would ultimately be in a constant battle with oneself as well as the state. Not only this, Plato's discrimination against the two classes barred from ruling displays an absolute disregard of the moral worth of those two classes closely associated with a fixed differentiation of labor and lack of occupational mobility linked with a fetish for eugenics and racism. Richard Kraut also mentions that Socrates's disregard for the intellect of the masses arises not from an a priori prejudice but from personal experience of having cross-examined many people with the Socratic method, even though it must not be forgotten that most of the people who could afford the luxury of this philosophical inquiry were aristocrats whose moral conceptions he couldn't change.

Further, Plato's perception of a near-perfect world with its perfect differentiation and order is closely linked with his idea of Forms, where Plato perceives that everything that is visible in the sensible world has a perfect

replica or form which is intelligible only when once the good is known. The Theory of Forms furthers the Heraclitean conception that knowledge of only those entities can be acquired that are not in flux. Klosko mentions that the implication of the divide between the imperfect sensible world and the perfect world of Forms is extreme political radicalism. The Allegory of the Cave also suggests that people have been raised in a world of shadows and would resist any attempt to free them. Resembling the conception of negative and positive liberty, Plato also analyzes the distinction between what seems good to people and what people really want.

In fact, Kraut uses Karl Popper to analyze how a form of authoritarianism must be attributed to both Socrates and Plato. From the myth of the metals to the notorious class hierarchy, to the complete repression of an individual's desires, Plato's system reeks of totalitarianism. While his condemnation of democracy seems legitimate, his prescription of a totalitarian system instead displays a failed attempt to understand human intellect. Moreover, the complete submission of feelings and emotions to the higher order rationally, explains how Plato's concept of the political was deliberately distanced from the emotional. Furthermore, the totalitarian prescription reeks of a very instrumental notion of social conduct particularly because Plato mentions that the inability to perform one's requisite functions renders life unworthy of living, an extreme form of which would justify the rhetoric of social Darwinism. Plato's paternalistic state that will be confronted from the same challenges that the doctrine of benevolent despotism brings to the political plane is deeply humiliating to the mental and bodily dignity of men and women.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, therefore, authors like S. S. Monoson argue for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between Plato's thought and the practice of democracy and explain that it is marked by a substantial measure of ambivalence, not unequivocal hostility, which she argues is possible when

features of the Athenian civic self image are juxtaposed with Plato's account of philosophical practice. Further, a reinterpretation of Plato's debt to Heraclitus's flux which forces him to advocate radical political reforms must also be analyzed carefully in order to understand the relation between the theory of Forms and Plato's conception of democracy.

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