

Plato and Democracy

Plato believed if each part of society performs its proper function, justice is produced in the existing harmony. It is important to note that Plato did not see justice as equality. He believed the wisest citizens should rule in society, just as reason rules the soul. The idea of philosopher-king fits in perfectly with this concept. The philosopher-king possesses knowledge of what is truly good for the society and also the rational self-control to resist the temptation of harmful desires.

The following list outlines some of Plato's notions about democracy:

- He believed in the "doctrine of the expert," which argues individuals go to an expert when advice is needed for something of value; for example, if physically ill, people don't go to a carpenter; they go to a doctor.
- People differ in their capabilities to acquire and to exercise various skills.
- Ruling is a skill.
- Those who exhibit the greatest capacity for ruling should be trained in this skill, and when trained, they ought to be made rulers of the society.
- Because they have the greatest skill in ruling, they ought to be given absolute authority so that their laws will be put into effect.
- In democracy, the leaders are not always the most skilled; they are the most popular.
- Either the trained must rule, or the untrained must rule.

In *The Republic*, Plato outlines the various forms of governments.

Plato's Forms of Government from *The Republic*

In the following forms of government, Plato asserts that there is a gradual deterioration of the moral character of its rulers and citizens.

Aristocracy-rule by a few individuals (either the best qualified or a small privileged class)

Timocracy-government where a small amount of property is necessary (Also, a love of honor is the ruling principle.)

Oligarchy (or Plutocracy) — government by the wealthy

Democracy — rule by the people, popular election, direct rule

Tyranny (or Despotism) — unlimited power by the ruler

In book VIII of *The Republic*, Plato has Socrates describe the five stages of government. Below is a condensation of that discussion, focusing on the description of each, how they can be, and what their characteristics are. However, before we begin that discussion let us contemplate the following quote found on page 564 and 565:

...the truth being that the excessive increase of anything often causes a

reaction in the opposite direction; and this is the case not only in the seasons and in vegetable and animal life, but above all in forms of government.

True.

The excess of liberty, whether in States or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery.

Yes, the natural order.

And so tyranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme form of liberty?

As we might expect.

We can see from this excerpt that excess, the idea of anything taken too far, will cause destruction to all concerned. Socrates believed that an excess of a virtue would cause the opposite of that virtue to happen.

Now, on to the forms of government. In book VIII, Plato explains how his idea of aristocracy, a state ruled by The Ones Who Know, the philosopher kings, those who have escaped the chains of their senses and seen a truer reality, will succumb to others forms of government, ending in tyranny and ready for a rebirth of aristocracy.

In an **aristocracy**, the good and wise leaders, being human, will fail. The intelligence of the senses will seduce them into producing children and future leaders unworthy to be guardians of the state, people who are chained by their senses. The platonic relationships (people marrying for the best offspring and not for sensual pleasure) will become out of fashion. "Iron will mingle with silver, and brass with gold, and hence will arise dissimilarity and inequality and irregularity, which in all cases lead to hatred and war." Philosophers will lose their power to warriors, who are cruder and less knowledgeable about philosophy, leading to **Timocracy**.

Timocracy is patterned after Sparta. Here the warriors will rule, but the moneyed class will be empowered, for soldiers are miserly and covetous. Property will eventually be coveted more than the good of the state. Personal ambition will replace ambition for the state. Citizens will become overly obedient to the state.

The Timocratic youth is like the Timocratic state.

His origin is as follows: he is often the young son of a brave father, who dwells in an ill-governed city, of which he declines the honors and offices, and will not go to law, or exert himself in any way, but is ready to waive his rights in order that he may escape trouble.

And how does this son come into being?

[As a young man, he is influenced by the failures of his aristocratic father. The father is much too centered on the state and too little on his family. The mother will complain of neglect, of the lack of ambition of the father. The servants will tell the son of the many who owe the father money and have not been prosecuted, thus the family is denied many material things. The son will grow to dislike the father and what he stands for. The son will develop a personal ambition and will not subordinate his ambition for that of the state.]

Thus, timocracy will give way to **Oligarchy**.

As personal wealth becomes more important, its presence is needed in order to rule. The guardians of the state are all rich and two classes appear—the rich and the poor. The rich have power; the poor don't.

Characteristics of an Oligarchy

- Personal wealth ruins Timocracy. People break the law for money. All seek wealth and leave virtue behind.
- The rich are honored and cultivated. Virtues are neglected and shunned.
- Men love trade, materialism and money.

Flaws of an Oligarchy

- Rulers are elected because of material success: who would pick the richest sailor to navigate the ship rather than the most able and knowledgeable about navigating?
- Two classes—rich and poor— are united and afraid of war.
- The fondness of money makes citizens unwilling to pay taxes, thus leaving the state in disrepair.
- Homeless people wander the streets—ruined but alive and angry. Crime increases and more measures are needed to stop crime, more freedoms are curtailed. As more freedoms are lost and more inequalities are apparent, the need for freedom increases. As the rich make more and more decisions based upon their own personal welfare, more cries for justice and equality are heard and **democracy** is born.

In a democracy, the desire for freedom will prove to be its downfall. In a democracy the people rule and the rulers are slaves to the people. The people demand more and more freedom, until they are free to do anything they want, without responsibility to anyone. Soon the anarchy descends into the family. The father is equal with his sons, and he begins to fear them. And the sons no longer respect their father, for he is their equal and they are free to do as they please.

Here Plato has Socrates explain to Glaucon how all this will happen:

Socrates: And then democracy comes into being ... and this is the form of government in which the magistrates are commonly elected by lot.

Glaucon: Yes, that is the nature of democracy...

Socrates: And now what is their manner of life, and what sort of a government have they? for as the government is, such will be the man.

Glaucon: Clearly.

Socrates: In the first place, are they not free; and is not the city full of freedom and frankness --a man may say and do what he likes?

Glaucon: 'Tis said so.

Socrates: And where freedom is, the individual is clearly able to order for himself his own life as he pleases?

Glaucon: Clearly.

Socrates: Then in this kind of State there will be the greatest variety of human natures?

Glaucon: There will.

Socrates: This, then, seems likely to be the fairest of States, being an embroidered robe which is spangled with every sort of flower. And just as women and children think a variety of colours to be of all things most charming, so there are many men to whom this State, which is spangled with the manners and characters of mankind, will appear to be the fairest of States.

Glaucon: Yes...

Socrates: Say then, my friend, in what manner does tyranny arise? --that it has a democratic origin is evident.

Glaucon: Clearly.

Socrates: And does not tyranny spring from democracy in the same manner as democracy from oligarchy --I mean, after a sort?

Glaucon: How?

Socrates: The good which oligarchy proposed to itself and the means by which it was maintained was excess of wealth --am I not right?

Glaucon: Yes.

Socrates: And the insatiable desire of wealth and the neglect of all other things for the sake of money-getting was also the ruin of oligarchy?

Glaucou: True.

Socrates: And democracy has her own good, of which the insatiable desire brings her to dissolution?

Glaucou: What good?

Socrates: Freedom, which, as they tell you in a democracy, is the glory of the State --and that therefore in a democracy alone will the freeman of nature deign to dwell.

Glaucou: Yes; the saying is in everybody's mouth.

Socrates: I was going to observe, that the insatiable desire of this and the neglect of other things introduces the change in democracy, which occasions a demand for tyranny.

Glaucou: How so?

Socrates: When a democracy which is thirsting for freedom has evil cupbearers presiding over the feast, and has drunk too deeply of the strong wine of freedom, then, unless her rulers are very amenable and give a plentiful draught, she calls them to account and punishes them, and says that they are cursed oligarchs.

Glaucou: Yes, a very common occurrence.

Socrates: Yes, and loyal citizens are insultingly termed by her slaves who hug their chains and men of naught; she would have subjects who are like rulers, and rulers who are like subjects: these are men after her own heart, whom she praises and honours both in private and public. Now, in such a State, can liberty have any limit?

Glaucou: Certainly not.

Socrates: By degrees the anarchy finds a way into private houses, and ends by getting among the animals and infecting them.

Glaucou: How do you mean?

Socrates: I mean that the father grows accustomed to descend to the level of his sons and to fear them, and the son is on a level with his father, he having no respect or reverence for either of his parents; and this is his freedom, and metic is equal with the citizen and the citizen with the metic, and the stranger is quite as good as either.

Glaucon: Yes, that is the way.

Socrates: And these are not the only evils, I said --there are several lesser ones: In such a state of society the master fears and flatters his scholars, and the scholars despise their masters and tutors; young and old are all alike; and the young man is on a level with the old, and is ready to compete with him in word or deed; and old men condescend to the young and are full of pleasantries and gaiety; they are loth to be thought morose and authoritative, and therefore they adopt the manners of the young.

Glaucon: Quite true.

Socrates: The last extreme of popular liberty is when the slave bought with money, whether male or female, is just as free as his or her purchaser; nor must I forget to tell of the liberty and equality of the two sexes in relation to each other.

Glaucon: Why not, as Aeschylus says, utter the word which rises to our lips?

Socrates: That is what I am doing, and I must add that no one who does not know would believe, how much greater is the liberty which the animals who are under the dominion of man have in a democracy than in any other State: for truly, the she-dogs, as the proverb says, are as good as their she-mistresses, and the horses and asses have a way of marching along with all the rights and dignities of freemen; and they will run at anybody who comes in their way if he does not leave the road clear for them: and all things are just ready to burst with liberty.

Glaucon: When I take a country walk, he said, I often experience what you describe. You and I have dreamed the same thing.

Socrates: And above all, and as the result of all, see how sensitive the citizens become; they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority and at length, as you know, they cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them.

Glaucon: Yes, I know it too well.

Socrates: Such, my friend, is the fair and glorious beginning out of which springs tyranny.

Glaucon: Glorious indeed,. But what is the next step?

Socrates: The ruin of oligarchy is the ruin of democracy; the same disease magnified and intensified by liberty overmasters democracy --the truth being that the excessive increase of anything often

causes a reaction in the opposite direction; and this is the case not only in the seasons and in vegetable and animal life, but above all in forms of government.

Glaucou: True.

Socrates: The excess of liberty, whether in States or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery.

Glaucou: Yes, the natural order.

Socrates: And so tyranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme form of liberty?

Glaucou: As we might expect.