

Nehemias Jimenez
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"A Platonic Critique of Democracy"

Plato's criticism of democracy is based on comparisons to other forms of government and in light of the constitution of a person with a democratic soul. I will attempt to delineate the different constitutions of the souls that correspond to a form of government to show Plato's discontent with it. And I will also critique Plato's critique of democracy in this paper.

Plato's criticism of democracy is based on a hierarchy of government forms that starts at the kallipolis and down to tyranny. What he says about each of the other governments in the middle such as timocracy and oligarchy also has connections to what Plato thinks about what a government should accomplish and the ways they accomplish it. Here lies the first democratic critique. After the kallipolis which is ruled by philosopher-kings, Plato believes that timocracy is the second best government. This is characterized by praise and honor seeking leaders which is connected to the spirit part of the soul. (the soul has a spirit part, rational part, and passion part) A timocratic government is one that is after glory and honor meaning that a ruler would incentivize conquest in his people and a warrior mentality. And the same is for the oligarchy, except that the spirited part is based not on glory or power through warrior honor rather on money. In this kind of city the people are concerned with wealth as a means of power. Plato in talking of how one's soul arrives to certain inclinations believes that rulers of an oligarchy have more than likely lived in poverty and consequently made attaining money as the goal of their lives. In this way they are not concerned with obeying all the temptations of indulgence in the appetites, rather are power hungry and use money as a means to get it.

Something is underlying these three governments that I believe shows a base to Plato's critique of democracy. The kallipolis, timocracy and oligarchy are ruled by people who give a

unified direction to the city. The culture they perpetuate to the people is a big deal to Plato. People in the kallipolis are encouraged, or at least shown, that the most important part of life is virtue. It also will show that those in power should look to attain philosophical insights. And in the same line of thought those who cannot do so, should not try to be leaders. The same can be said of the Timocracy that puts the idea in the head of the people that status and honor is everything. In an oligarchy this same culture revolves around the acquisition of wealth. The same cannot be said of the democratic or tyrannical. Both of these kinds of governments make every man for himself, especially in a tyrannical city. The individual is put at the center of the government which makes for a government characterized by appetites.

Here is a good summary of Plato's criticism based on what other governments can accomplish. Clearly, the first thing that Plato is concerned with is that a ruler and government should create a unified culture with meta ideas that the subjects of the city can identify with. After this comes the ordering of which ideas are best to model to the subjects. It's important to note that democracy does have a direction, although not entirely uniform as in the other forms of government. The direction is that all individuals bring rule from their appetites into the city. In Plato's mind this is a lesser ideal than that of the rational or honor seeking ideals. He believes that they are better and the way the ideal is played out in the city is better in the kallipolis, timocracy and oligarchy. Democracy for Plato does not really set the right ideal and it doesn't do it in a unified way like the other governments would.

The second critique of democracy is really what upholds the first. Plato's belief that particular values are less than others is based on his view of the soul in three parts; rational, spirited, and appetites. Now there is a way these parts of the soul can be aligned in a person which gives them a particular nature. And the same way the nature of their soul is, so will be the kind of city be if that person was the leader. According to Plato the best part of the soul to be ruling an individual is the rational part. With this part of the soul in rule, the appetites that are evil or unjust can be neutralized and the acquisition of money or honor does not corrupt the

individual. For someone that is ruled by the spirited part of their soul is to be led to only want either wealth, honor, or status. This ideal is not as good as the rational because he believes that some evils do come out of people obsessed with wealth and without the rational it will be hard to not just push after this glory without caring for the cost. And finally the person entirely ruled by the appetites is the tyrannical person. This person has no control over what they do, they are a slave to their passions. And it is a vicious cycle that is within this person that cannot be stopped. Now for Plato the Democratic person can fall into being a tyrannical person rather than climb up to the most virtuous constitution of the soul. The democratic person is usually a person who falls from the oligarchy constitution because of newer desires that arise in him. Plato uses the idea of a father who is after money and does not educate or care enough for his son. This neglect creates desires in the young boy as he grows which in turn leads to a democratic life. One that goes with the wind to some degree and has no structure in it. Plato calls it "yielding day by day to the desire at hand" (561 c).

I believe what this shows is that Plato believes democratic government is too whimsical and has no structure. It moves day by day and is too pragmatic or has too many different opinions. The problem with this is that in comparison to the kallipolis led by those with the truth from the Forms, democracy has no correct virtues that will lead to enlightened lives. The democratic person and in turn that kind of government will be filled with diverging opinions which is a problem from a viewpoint of truth for Plato and is then easily detected as leading to tyranny. This would be when one democratic person pushes over the edge and truthfully does things in his appetites without regard for anyone. Plato's criticism of this kind of person also is backed up by the order in which one falls from grace in some way. This logical structure of falling into lower tiers also substantiates his claims about democracy being on the lower end of the forms of government.

In response to Plato's critique of democracy I have a few things to say. The first is that democracy is the only government that does not center full authority into one person. To Plato

this seems like a bad thing. Too many ideas that are mere opinions take over. One could take the position that the philosopher king is best equipped to show virtue to a city and make virtuous laws. The issue is that virtue is only relative to the philosopher. In a democracy there seems to be an inherent possibility that the very subjects would agree to be ruled by a particular virtue that they agree on after discourse. And so Plato's critique of democracy is that it does not make virtuous laws or encourage people to learn virtue. Which ironically if the people are not philosophers, there is no point in trying. So is democracy that bad when it allows the proponents of it to have an understanding and agreement in the laws being made? Another point to make here is that the other forms of government also fail at putting up the philosophical virtue on display. The reasoning behind Plato putting democracy under these forms of government is my point of contention and critique.

Plato honestly makes up a logic that can easily be flipped around to get an opposite point across. For example, couldn't the same oligarchical father who did not give his son attention because of his desire for money produce another outcome in the boy? Plato believes the only logical response is that the child becomes bored and opens his mind to the dangerous appetites that will one day make him a democratic constituted person. On the contrary, couldn't the boy want to impress his father so much that he decided to look for glory, honor and riches somehow making him a timocratic person in the future? Or even on the wild side, couldn't the father demand the son to only find value in wealth as well, only for the son to see its emptiness, therefore leading him into philosophical endeavors of where true happiness comes from? I believe that the critique he makes is based on a logic that is manipulative and not objectively true. And if it were true of Athens, it clearly does not fit the bill for all of culture in different eras.

In conclusion Plato's argument against democracy is solid if you agree with his assumptions on human nature, the logic behind the hierarchy of soul constitutions and the movements between them. Without it though, there are many holes to poke in the argument and overall it seems as though the only ones happy in his city are the philosophers. And so,

although it was ideal, what made the people happy in Athens and in modern day nation-states is democracy.