

# THE DYNAMIC REPUBLIC

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**Abstract – Plato writes through the words of Socrates in “The Republic” that the ideal order and character of a just city-state can be found by examining the soul of a just man. In Book IV, Plato writes that there are three parts to the human soul – “appetite, spirit, and wisdom”- and by analogy, Plato concludes that these categories directly translate to the way in which an ideal state/society should be organized. I argue that there are two significant flaws with Plato’s ideal city: (1) The lack of social mobility, which may limit the dreams and ambition of people causing the overall happiness to decline; and (2) the lack of necessary details in determining class assignments (that is, by whom and when), which may lead to considerations of non-optimal power distribution in the city and potential error in placement of its citizens. As a solution, I propose a formal method of regular reevaluation of the classes of the city leading one to reconsider Plato’s model as dynamic rather than static as originally presented.**

*Key Words – Philosophy; Plato; Republic; Soul; City*

## INTRODUCTION

Plato writes through the words of Socrates in “The Republic” that the ideal order and character of a just city-state can be found by examining the soul of a just man. In Book IV, Plato writes that there are three parts to the human soul – “appetite, spirit, and wisdom”- and by analogy, Plato concludes that these categories directly translate to the way in which an ideal state/society should be organized. He says that based on the part of a person’s soul that is dominant, one is placed into one of the following hierarchical categories in the city: A worker (the producing, ‘appetitive’ class), an auxiliary (soldier/police of the ‘emotive’ class), or a ruler (the ‘rational’ most broadly educated class). In this paper, I argue that there are two significant flaws with Plato’s ideal city: (1) There is no apparent means of moving in one’s life time between the social classes Plato has created, which may limit the dreams and ambition of people causing the overall happiness to decline; and (2) there is ambiguity in how (that is, by whom and when) a person is decided to be in one of the groups, which may lead to considerations of non-optimal power distribution in the city and potential error in placement of the citizens. First, I begin by outlining the guidelines that

Plato set forth for an ideal city. Second, I establish the particular problems I see in the Platonic city system and discuss their implications, while also putting forth some of Plato’s counter arguments to the problems. Third, I provide some potential solutions to the obstacles that I see and also discuss some elements of Plato’s ideas which are visible in our modern democratic states. I conclude that a philosophical discourse on the Republic’s ideal state can offer pragmatic, usable information about the current state of political affairs in the world.

## DISCUSSION

Plato begins Book IV by saying that the goal of his ideal city is not to make one group of people happy at the expense of another, but to make the city as a whole happy. He says, *“And our answer will be that, even as they are, our guardians may very likely be the happiest of men; but that our aim in founding the State was not the disproportionate happiness of any one class, but the greatest happiness of the whole; we thought that in a State which is ordered with a view to the good of the whole we should be most likely to find justice, and in the ill-ordered State injustice: and, having found them, we might then decide which of the two is the happier. At present, I take it, we are fashioning the happy State, not piecemeal, or with a view of making a few happy citizens, but as a whole; and by-and-by we will proceed to view the opposite kind of State”* (Plato 275). Making the city as a whole happy is a logical goal to set, however, in the end, I see the happiness of individuals being compromised in order to follow the ‘ideal system’. I return to further analyze this point later, but I cannot resist noticing a connection between Plato’s goals and those stated by past and present communist states. Plato, through the words of Socrates, creates some interesting regulations that he believes will form a perfect society and make the city as a whole content. Firstly, there is to be no money in order to ensure that wealth/poverty creates no disruptions in the peace and happiness of the community. Currency is useful when it is necessary to defend one’s country in battle, but according to Plato there will be no need to defend themselves since the state – the Platonic state - will

be superior and all others will be willing allies (Plato 277). Secondly, a warning is put forth at the start of the book about the city becoming too large and ungovernable; a cap on the population is said to be necessary (Plato 278-279). Lastly, Plato decides that it is best if a state is free of laws and the named rulers make decisions as necessary (Plato 280). I view all of the Platonic conditions for a perfect city-state as unprecedented for their time. However, what I see as a most novel concept presented in the book is the tripartite division of an individual's psyche. "Appetite", "spirit", and "reasoning/wisdom" are the three components that are said to make up human soul. The categories directly translate to, and were the inspiration for, the blueprint of the Platonic city – the three categories of the soul become the three categories of people in the city (Brown). The people with dominant trait of "appetite" are those driven by materialistic desire who make up the producing class, the workers. Those full of "spirit" are the courageous who have the ability to control their desire and take the roles of the auxiliaries, the fighters and the police officers. Lastly, the group of "reasoning and wisdom" is the rulers, the philosophers, those capable of logical judgments. A modern, though often regarded as failing, example of Platonic theories is Singapore's social class separation in the 1990s. The Prime Minister of Singapore at the time performed a separation of people similar to Plato's tripartite division. He, however, exercised unprecedented control on human behavior including arranged marriages among the purported intelligent class for the proliferation of the "right species" (Nussbaum).

I have no intention to argue against Plato's partitioning of the citizens in "The Republic" into workers, auxiliaries, and rulers. One can see, however, that there is no obvious way for people to move from group to group in the way Plato has created the 'hierarchy'. There are three groups strictly defined with the rulers/philosophers being at the clear top of the pecking order. Plato does not believe in social mobility. He rejects the idea that humanity is malleable. Humans, according to him are bound by their natures. According to Plato's theory, people have no dreams and ambitions beyond their class. In fact, they do not need dreams and ambitions because the state takes care of them and, in turn, they take care of the state, which leads to general happiness. Consider the case, then, where one or more worker citizens, inspired maybe by political events and city-state infighting and wars, wish to step up to the soldier class to defend their homes and homelands. Plato's system does not seem to offer a way for this change. Consider also a soldier who risked their life fighting state enemies in lands near and far and accumulated such life experiences, best and worst,

that make them wise, significantly wiser than their early years. Such a soldier cannot join the ranks of the rulers if they wish. The lack of ability to transition between classes will limit the ambition and aspirations of people, which disagreeing with Plato, I believe people will always have. In this system, a worker will be a worker, a soldier will be a soldier, and a ruler will be a ruler forever. This, in long term, can affect an individual's happiness which may also eventually hinder the overall happiness of the city (a goal of Plato in his quest for perfect justice).

The second issue I find with Plato's model is that it is unclear who decides what category each person belongs to and when in one's lifetime they are placed in their respective group. It seems that there should be designated personnel in charge of identifying people's prevailing characteristics and assigning them to groups in order to have the process be as objective and just as possible. Plato responds to the problem at hand by presenting the idea of having all children taken away from their parents at a young age and having 'specialists' work with them who then decide where the children fit best based on early signs of characteristics associated with people of each group (Bramann). However, there are further concerns with this method. There is ambiguity as to what type of people the specialists are; are they a category of their own – a new, fourth category? Due to the critical importance of this question in the formation of the ideal state, further information and supporting details seem necessary. Lastly, there must be a broad window or time frame for when a child needs to be placed in its appropriate group. There is a risk of misplacement and inaccuracy if people are classified prematurely.

The problems of class mobility and the specialists in Plato's state are not uncorrelated. A solution to one should also treat the other. A consideration is to maintain the three-class partition of Plato and let the class of philosophers/rulers (the wiser of all) be 'the specialists.' The other citizens (workers and soldiers) will be evaluated and consulted by the specialists on a regular schedule. Their just desires will be discussed and accommodated appropriately by the wisemen. The wisemen themselves will meet and consult with each other for evaluation and possible own class reassignment.

There are thinkers that consider Plato's Republic an assault to democracy since it denounces many freedoms that democracies embrace (Nussbaum). Yet, Platonic principles are evident in modern day democracies including the US. Plato's city in today's language and times seems a state run by the educated elite, that is, by those in the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of the government. Today, part of the working class in this country, the United

States, believes that this is indeed the current state of political affairs (Williams) despite the fact that our political system is a representative democracy. Division of labor/separation of classes and ruling by the wisemen, the educated elite, are the foundations of the ideal society according to Plato and will lead to justice and happiness (Nussbaum). However, “*history has taught us to mistrust what the government [wisemen] will do when it tries to take control of our lives through superior wisdom*” (Nussbaum). Corruption of government (wisemen, rulers) minimizes access to opportunity and, maintaining the class status quo, is promoted as natural. This leads to a growing, loud discontent with the ‘educated elite’ who are seen as indifferent, or disinterested, in serving the real needs of the working class. Social classes with minimal opportunity for mobility create class-type envy and hierarchies that may lead to hatred from below and discrimination from above. A prime example that manifests the discontent of the working class toward the educated elite (philosophers/rulers) has been at the voting poll. My “solutions” or, better said, modifications to Plato’s system seem to attempt to break the workers-to-rulers barrier and assign a broader definition to ‘education’ or ‘wisdom’. Through life experience and personal reflection and growth, any worker (or soldier) can become equal in wisdom to preassigned rulers and is given the opportunity to join them in their place of governance (after all, an aging soldier cannot be as effective a soldier anymore). In the opposite direction, under my solution-to-be, a ruler can at any time be transitioned to the producing or fighting class which should justly motivate any one of them to pay close attention to the needs and wills of these two classes.

## CONCLUSION

In Book IV of “The Republic”, Plato put forward the unprecedented concept of an ideal city of just people partitioned in three classes, the working, the fighting, and the ruling. Strong arguments by Plato, in the words of Socrates, explain how this state system can maximize the happiness of the city. In this paper, I raised two concerns: (1) The lack of social mobility and (2) the lack of necessary details in determining class assignments. I proposed as a solution to address these concerns a formal method by which rulers, fighters, and workers convene in regular intervals to discuss and evaluate the will and growth of individuals and, through persuasion rather than coercion, agree in upward and downward class movement. If this solution were implemented successfully, class barriers would not be formed

and the individuals would remain free to reach for their evolving dreams and ambitions and pursue their own happiness as they perceive it. In these terms, maybe we should reconsider Plato’s model as dynamic rather than static as originally presented. After all, following Plato’s own analogy with the individual soul (appetites, emotions, reason), we can argue that just as we grow and change from birth to old age, so should Plato’s Πολιτεία<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Πολιτεία is the Greek word for city-state.