

An analysis of Plato's criticisms of Democracy in Book 8 of the Republic

We often consider Democracy to be the pinnacle of political governance, yet one of Western philosophy's most influential thinkers had some devastating critiques about it. With a system of government whose famous maxim is *rule by the people*, characterized by an eligibility of all citizens to hold positions of power and vote for any candidate they please, it may seem to many that this supplies the most ideal form of government through its provision of freedom for all. And in essence this may be true, but for Plato, this excessive freedom is at the heart of its demise. It leads to a system that allows for the unfit to rule the masses, inevitably leading to tyranny. If political decisions require wisdom and expertise, what justifies allowing everyone, regardless of knowledge and wisdom, to participate equally in governance? This question remains urgent today as modern democracies grapple with the concerns of whether voters possess sufficient competence to make complex policy decisions.

We see hints of Plato's criticisms of democracy throughout the Republic, but these are more explicitly stated in Book 8. It follows from the previous books after Glaucon and Socrates finally finish describing their ideal city. This ideal city encompasses a form of governance closely resembling that of Aristocracy where power is held by the small ruling class, the guardians, who are capable of ruling and protecting the city. A form of eugenics is installed to ensure that children who inherit specific leadership qualities are brought to become guardians, ensuring homogeneity and quality of this ruling class. After enduring a thorough education process that lasts most of their lifetime, these guardians are said to possess the character traits necessary to rule well. A philosopher king is chosen out of this guardian class to rule above all who possesses a love of learning that will help him reveal the reality which always is, and not

driven away by what appears to be. He encompasses a knowledge of the Forms which is exclusive to him — everyone else lives in a world of reflections from these Forms. Though prosperous for a time, Socrates maintains that people are susceptible to flaws and this ideal city will inevitably crumble due to shortcomings in eugenics, resulting in those unfit to rule to hold positions of power and thus lead the city astray. Democracy is described as the fourth constitution of diseases that follow after oligarchy and before tyranny, which is the last and most corrupted of the cities (544c).

Socrates describes how a democratic city emerges from oligarchy when the poor overthrow the wealthy, establishing a system based on liberty and equality for all. However, this freedom becomes excessive and anarchic as people “get drunk by drinking more than it should of the unmixed wine of freedom” (562d). Their consideration of freedom as the ultimate good leads to an insatiable desire for it. Ultimately, he describes how this can lead to a rejection, even a complete reversal of all hierarchy and authority; a father can accustom himself to behave like a child and a son like a father, a teacher can fear his students and his students despise him, and the young can imitate their elders and their elders stoop to the level of the young (562e). Mochingly, Socrates even goes as far as to say that this can even extend to animals who are implored to “roam freely and proudly along the streets, bumping into anyone who gets in their way” (563d). So much is this thirst for freedom that those who simply obey any kind of rule insult this very essence of life, “if anyone even puts upon himself the least degree of slavery, they become angry and cannot endure it” (562d). The key idea that Plato is bringing forth is that when freedom is considered the ultimate goal, the result is chaos masquerading as liberty and all natural order dissolves.

Plato then analyzes the composition of the democratic city, identifying three groups. The first are the drones, these are men who manage all democratic politics due to their dominance and sheer ferocity. The second group is the wealthiest who distinguish themselves from the majority of the people and “provide the most honey for the drones” (564e), that is, fund the drones with the immense wealth they’ve acquired. The last group make up the majority who take no part in politics and have few possessions, but when assembled are the largest and most powerful class (565a). Plato characterizes a democratic city as a constant conflict between these groups where the drones accuse the wealthy of plotting against the majority class even if they have no desire for conflict at all (565b). The third class ultimately become agitated towards the wealthy, but remain divided and unable to mobilize collectively. Their poverty and lack of material possessions render them from assembling properly as the wealthy can readily secure their compliance through monetary incentives. From this chaos emerges the tyrant who establishes himself as the champion of the people, initially appearing as a benefactor and almost godlike to the people, rallying them towards a counter-revolution against the other two classes. But once he tastes the power he has amassed, transforms into a cruel and oppressive ruler who exercises power unjustly. Always under threat, he exiles his enemies and gives to his own desires but is forever insatiable (566a). The people, inappropriately enamored by freedom, have “put upon themselves the harshest and most bitter slavery to slaves” (569c). Through this formulation, we see the contention that from democracy emerges tyranny, and thus, from an excess of freedom emerges an excess of slavery.

Plato’s criticisms of democracy are clear. A democratic city gives the perception of freedom because it promises a free state led by free men; it is as though it displays a palette of diverse colors signifying a diverse range of moral arrangements. Yet these appealing features of

democracy mask the underlying reality of the situation. Plato contends that democracy's commitment to freedom rests on a false premise — that all people are equally capable of ruling. Because there is no understanding of the kind of life someone led before entering political life, all someone has to do to win over the masses is say that they are a friend of the people. Popularity becomes the determinant of leadership, not knowledge and wisdom. Democratic leaders will focus on flattering the people and satisfy their desires rather than guide them towards virtue. The people's thirst for freedom will become so excessive and anarchic that they will surrender rule over themselves to whichever desires come along, "and so he lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand" (561d). This hedonistic way of life will lead the individual to lead a disorderly life without having any knowledge of it, culminating in the corruption of his soul.

Plato argues that democracy's refusal to distinguish between the qualified and the unqualified produces incompetence in the city, leading to social disorder. Students disrespect their teachers, children disobey their parents, and even animals behave with excessive boldness (563d). Since freedom characterizes democracy, it comes in constant conflict with law and order, so much so that even those who follow the most miniscule set of rules will be bashed for not exercising their liberty correctly (562d). There is no respect for authority or hierarchy, which undermines the social order necessary for stability and cohesion within a society. From this, three groups will take shape in society; the poor majority, the rich minority, and those seeking political life. This last group will cause further social disorder by plotting the other two against one another in order to amass power, plaguing the city with death and destruction.

When liberty becomes license and disorder becomes unbearable, the people, desperate for order and seeking protection from oligarchic attacks, welcome a strongman who promises to

restore stability. They grant extraordinary power to this individual, leading him to become a tyrant who uses it unjustly. The very freedom democracy promises becomes the mechanism of its destruction. This descent from democracy to tyranny reveals an underlying paradox; excessive freedom inevitably results in its opposite, excessive slavery. Plato's criticisms of democracy allow for him to substantiate his main claim: social order can only be achieved when we reserve political positions to those with knowledge and wisdom, like the guardians, and not by popular vote because a city that serves to please the masses is not what is genuinely good for the city.

While Plato's criticisms reveal concerns about rewarding popularity and flattery rather than quality and merit — which remain relevant to this day — I argue that his fundamental error lies in assuming that political wisdom and knowledge can only be possessed by a select few in the elite class rather than emerging through collective deliberation of the masses. The idea that democracy empowers a populist figure to emerge, whose sole focus is to gratify the people rather than lead them to virtue, is a valid concern, but it does not mean that it cannot be inhibited and prevented from happening. If the people were to receive a similar education that teaches them about the Forms and the reality of the world around them, then they could be better prepared to make actionable choices that will put those fit to rule in positions of power. With this newfound knowledge, people could learn to still exercise their freedom with restraint so as to not indulge in it excessively. People could respect authority if they deem it to respect them. Social cohesion could still exist in a democracy if political wisdom ceases to exist as a body of knowledge only accessible to the elite.

Moreover, Plato's introduction of the philosopher king as the most pragmatic response to a city well ruled ignores how practical wisdom is distributed throughout a community. He fails to consider that the wisdom of the collective far outweighs the wisdom of the individual. A

community includes individuals from different industries of work, and the bigger the city the more industries there are. An engineer grasps knowledge of the scientific, mechanical, and technical principles to design and build structures and machines, a doctor grasps knowledge on how to practice medicine, and a farmer grasps knowledge of agriculture and livestock. I argue that this extensive distributed knowledge cannot be aggregated into a single philosophical mind, no matter how well-trained. This is more true for a philosopher king whose isolation makes him lack experience on how to deal with policy decisions when challenges arise in this spectrum of fields. A democracy allows for collective deliberation to exist, making the city better suited to maneuver these complex industries the best way that it can. Political wisdom requires practical judgement that can only emerge from experience, deliberation, and engagement with diverse perspectives.

Democracy is not perfect, and Plato's criticisms are worth taking into consideration because democracy can be flawed. Unqualified people can take positions of power by appealing to the masses and make mistakes that can cost deeply to a society. But democracy recognizes that no one has privileged access to objective political truth. It does not guarantee wise outcomes, but it ensures that political power is distributed in a way that respects the citizen's equal moral standing and creates accountability. Plato acknowledges that mistakes can be made, but fails to recognize that the collective can retain the capacity for self-correction if continued deliberation and education is performed in a responsible manner.