

On Tyranny in Plato's Republic

The Republic was written by Plato around 380 BC. It portrays a lengthy dialogue between Socrates, Thrasymachus, a noted sophist and teacher, and Plato's brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus. Several others from Athens and elsewhere are present for the dialog including Polemarchus and his father Cephalus, the hosts of the evening gathering. The theme of the dialogue is justice. What makes a person just or unjust, and by extension, what makes a city-state just or unjust? Socrates offers a concept of justice having to do with how a person's soul is organised. The soul is made up of three parts: desire, thumos (or the spirited part), and wisdom. If these parts of the soul are organised rightly, each part doing what it does best like a well-functioning city-state, that soul is just, and as a result that person will be as happy as they can be in their particular circumstances. But if these parts of the soul are organised in a way that allows the wrong part to govern the personality, and thus the wrong motivations to dominate, the person will necessarily make the wrong choices, their behavior will be irrational, and Socrates argues they will be profoundly unhappy. Socrates points to the life of the tyrant to illustrate his point.

Thrasymachus - Book I, 344a

The key question that drives the discussion is introduced in Book I by Thrasymachus, who in a burst of frustration articulates the main concern of the interlocutors: It seems, he says, that those who are deeply unjust and who don't care about others, like the tyrant, have riches, power and influence, and live the happiest lives. If this is the case, what good is Socrates' justice?

A person of great power outdoes everyone else. Consider him if you want to figure out how much more advantageous it is for the individual to be just rather than unjust. You'll understand this most easily if you turn your thoughts to the most complete injustice, the one that makes the doer of injustice happiest and the sufferers of it, who are unwilling to do injustice, most wretched. This is tyranny, which through stealth or force appropriates the property of others, whether sacred or profane, public or private, not little by little, but all at once. If someone commits only one part of injustice and is caught, he's punished and greatly reproached--such partly unjust people are called temple-robbers, kidnappers, housebreakers, robbers, and thieves when they commit these crimes. But when someone, in addition to appropriating their possessions, kidnaps and enslaves the citizens as well, instead of these shameful names he is called happy and blessed not only by the citizens themselves, but by all who learn that he has done the whole of injustice. Those who reproach injustice do so because they are afraid not of doing it but of suffering it. So, Socrates, injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, freer, and more masterly than justice. And as I said from the first, justice is what is advantageous to the stronger, while injustice is to one's own profit and advantage.

Adeimantus proceeds to summarise the challenge to which they are calling Socrates:

Adeimantus - Book II, 366d

Socrates, of all of you who claim to praise justice, from the original heroes of old whose words survive, to the men of the present day, not one has ever blamed injustice or praised justice except by mentioning the reputations, honors, and rewards that are their consequences. No one has ever adequately described what each itself does of its own power by its presence in the soul of the person who possesses it, even if it remains hidden from gods and humans. Others would satisfy me if they praised justice and blamed injustice in that way, extolling the wages of one and denigrating those of the other. But you, unless you order me to be satisfied, wouldn't, for you've spent your whole life investigating this and nothing else. Don't then, give us only a theoretical argument that justice is stronger than injustice, but show what effect each has because of itself on the person who has it—the one for good and the other for bad—whether it remains hidden from gods and human beings or not. - *Book II, 367d*

Socrates is forced to bring his best argument to the table. His first move is to step back from looking at justice and injustice in the individual and to look at how these qualities come to be in a city-state.

Book II, 368d

The investigation we're undertaking is not an easy one but requires keen eyesight. Therefore, since we aren't clever people, we should adopt the method of investigation that we'd use if, lacking keen eyesight, we were told to read small letters from a distance and then noticed that the same letters existed elsewhere in a larger size and on a larger surface. We'd consider it a godsend, I think, to be allowed to read the larger ones first and then to examine the smaller ones, to see whether they really are the same.

That's certainly true, but how is this case similar to our investigation of justice?

I'll tell you. We say, don't we, that there is the justice of a single man and also the justice of a whole city?

Certainly.

And a city is larger than a single man?

It is larger.

Perhaps, then, there is more justice in the larger thing, and it will be easier to learn what it is. So, if you're willing, let's first find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual, observing the ways in which the smaller is similar to the larger.

That seems fine to me.

If we could watch a city coming to be in theory, wouldn't we also see its justice coming to be and its injustice as well?

Probably so.

And when that process is completed, we can hope to find what we are looking for more easily?

Of course.

Do you think we should try to carry it out, then? It's no small task, in my view. So think it over.

This leads into the subsequent investigations of the Republic and eventually to Socrates' description of the ideal government, one which values truth and goodness above all else. In Socrates' view, this would be a special form of Aristocracy, based not on wealth or family but on the tried and tested wisdom of a highly trained ruling class. The dialog then opens into an analysis of different forms of government that are less than ideal, how they arise from each other, how they are constituted, and how they degrade.

Book VIII, 544d

Do you realize that of necessity there are as many forms of human character as there are of constitutions? Or do you think that constitutions are born "from oak or rock" and not from the characters of the people who live in the cities governed by them, which tip the scales, so to speak, and drag the rest along with them?

No, I don't believe they come from anywhere else.

Then, if there are five forms of city, there must also be five forms of the individual soul.

Of course.

Plato characterises five types of political systems in the Republic (along with the types of souls they are supported by), identifying the values that are dearest to each and describing each in the order in which they typically arise:

- *Aristocracy – government by the best (i.e. wisest) - values wisdom above all else*
- *Timocracy – government by those who hold honours – values honour above all else*
- *Oligarchy – government by the wealthy – values wealth above all else*
- *Democracy – government by the masses – values freedom above all else*
- *Tyranny – government by the self-serving individual – values power above all else*

Plato is famously critical of democracy. Athens was clearly declining in its power and influence at this time. It was ruled by the Assembly – a body of 500 free men who voted directly on all the critical decisions of the city-state – and it had made some very bad decisions, perhaps the most damning, in Plato's view was the execution of his beloved mentor, Socrates.

But Plato's argument was not only that democracy, or rule by the mob, is a misguided and inefficient form of government. He believed it lead naturally and inevitably to the worst form of political rule: tyranny. Just as timocracy devolves into oligarchy, and oligarchy devolves into democracy, because of the excessive liberties and equality among people in it, democracy devolves into tyranny.

On how tyranny comes into being from democracy - Book VIII: 563c

The same disease that developed in oligarchy and destroyed it also develops [in democracy], but it is more widespread and virulent because of the general permissiveness, and it eventually enslaves democracy. In fact, excessive action in one direction usually sets up a reaction in the opposite direction. This happens in seasons, in plants, in bodies, and, last but not least, in constitutions. That's to be expected.

Extreme freedom can't be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery, whether for a private individual or for a city.

No, it can't

Then I don't suppose that tyranny evolves from any constitution other than democracy—the most severe and cruel slavery from the utmost freedom.

Yes, that's reasonable.

But I don't think that was your question. You asked what was the disease that developed in oligarchy and also in democracy, enslaving it.

That's true.

And what I had in mind as an answer was that class of idle and extravagant men, whose bravest members are leaders and the more cowardly ones followers. We compared them to stinged and stingless drones, respectively.

That's right.

Now, these two groups cause problems in any constitution, just as phlegm and bile do in the body. And it's against them that the good doctor and lawgiver of a city must take advance precautions, first to prevent their presence and, second, to cut them out of the hive as quickly as possible, cells and all, if they should happen to be present.

Yes, by god, he must cut them out altogether.

Then let's take up the question in the following way, so that we can see what we want more clearly.

In what way?

Let's divide a democratic city into three parts in theory, this being the way that it is in fact divided. One part is this class of idlers, that grows here no less than in an oligarchy, because of the general permissiveness.

So it does.

But it is far fiercer in democracy than in the other.

How so?

In an oligarchy it is fierce because it's disdained, but since it is prevented from having a share in ruling, it doesn't get any exercise and doesn't become vigorous. In a democracy, however, with a few exceptions, this class is the dominant one. Its fiercest members do all the talking and acting, while the rest settle near the speaker's platform and buzz and refuse to tolerate the opposition of another speaker, so that under a democratic constitution with the few exceptions I referred to before, this class manages everything.

That's right.

Then there's a second class that always distinguishes itself from the majority of people.

Which is that?

When everybody is trying to make money, those who are naturally most organized generally become the wealthiest.

Probably so.

Then they would provide the most honey for the drones and the honey that is most easily extractable by them.

Yes, for how could anyone extract it from those who have very little?

Then I suppose that these rich people are called drone-fodder.

Something like that.

The people—those who work with their own hands—are the third class. They take no part in politics and have few possessions, but when they are assembled, they are the largest and most powerful class in a democracy.

They are. But they aren't willing to assemble often unless they get a share of the honey.

And they always do get a share, though the leaders, in taking the wealth of the rich and distributing it to the people, keep the greater part for themselves.

Yes, that is the way the people get their share.

And I suppose that those whose wealth is taken away are compelled to defend themselves by speaking before the people and doing whatever else they can.

Of course.

And they're accused by the drones of plotting against the people and of being oligarchs, even if they have no desire for revolution at all.

That's right.

So in the end, when they see the people trying to harm them, they truly do become oligarchs and embrace oligarchy's evils, whether they want to or not. But neither group does these things willingly. Rather the people act as they do because they are ignorant and are deceived by the drones, and the rich act as they do because they are driven to it by the stinging of those same drones.

Absolutely.

And then there are impeachments, judgments, and trials on both-sides.

That's right.

Now, aren't the people always in the habit of setting up one man as their special champion, nurturing him and making him great?

They are.

And it's clear that, when a tyrant arises, this special leadership is the sole root from which he sprouts.

It is.

On the relation between tyranny and desire – Book IX, 572c

Recall, then what we said a democratic man is like. He was produced by being brought up from youth by a thrifty father who valued only those desires that make money and who despised the unnecessary ones that aim at frivolity and display. Isn't that right?

Yes.

And by associating with more sophisticated men, who are full of the latter desires, he starts to indulge in every kind of insolence and to adopt their form of behavior, because of his hatred of his father's thrift. But, because he has a better nature than his corrupters, he is pulled in both directions and settles down in the middle between his father's way of life and theirs. And enjoying each in moderation, as he supposes, he leads a life that is neither slavish nor lawless and from having been oligarchic he becomes democratic.

That was and is our opinion about this type of man.

Suppose now that this man has in turn become older and that he has a son who is brought up in his father's ethos.

All right.

And further suppose that the same things that happened to his father now happen to him. First, he is led to all the kinds of lawlessness that those who are leading him call freedom. Then his father and the rest of the household come to the aid of the middle desires, while the others help the other ones. Then, when those clever enchanters and tyrant-makers have no hope of keeping hold of the young man in any other way, they contrive to plant in him a powerful

erotic love, like a great winged drone, to be the leader of those idle desires that spend whatever is at hand. Or do you think that erotic love is anything other than an enormous drone in such people?

I don't think that it could be anything else.

And when the other desires—filled with incense, myrrh, wreaths, wine and the other pleasures found in their company—buzz around the drone, nurturing it and making it grow as large as possible, they plant the sting of longing in it.

Then this leader of the soul adopts madness as its bodyguard and becomes frenzied. If it finds any beliefs or desires in the man that are thought to be good or that still have some shame, it destroys them and throws them out, until it's purged him of moderation and filled him with imported madness.

You've perfectly described the evolution of the tyrannical man.

Is this the reason that erotic love has long been called a tyrant?

It looks that way.

Then doesn't a drunken man have something of a tyrannical mind?

Yes, he has.

And a man who is mad and deranged attempts to rule not just human beings, but gods as well, and expects that he will be able to succeed.

He certainly does.

Then a man becomes tyrannical in the precise sense of the term when either his nature or his way of life or both of them together make him drunk, filled with erotic desire, and mad.

Comparing the tyrannical man and tyranny in the state - Book IX, 577c

Bearing in mind the resemblance between the city and the man, look at each in turn and describe its condition.

What kinds of things do you want me to describe?

First, speaking of the city, would you say that a tyrannical city is free or enslaved?

It is as enslaved as it is possible to be.

Yet you see in it people who are masters and free.

I do see a few like that, but the whole city, so to speak, and the most decent part of it are wretched, dishonored slaves.

Then, if man and city are alike, mustn't the same structure be in him too? And mustn't his soul be full of slavery and unfreedom, with the most decent parts enslaved and with a small part, the maddest and most vicious, as their master?

It must.

What will you say about such a soul then? Is it free or slave?

Slave, of course.

And isn't the enslaved and tyrannical city least likely to do what it wants?

Certainly.

Then a tyrannical soul—I'm talking about the whole soul—will also be least likely to do what it wants and, forcibly driven by the stings of a dronish gadfly, will be full of disorder and regret.

How could it be anything else?

Is a tyrannically ruled city rich or poor?

Poor.

Then a tyrannical soul, too, must always be poor and unsatisfiable.

That's right.

What about fear: aren't a tyrannical city and man full of it?

Absolutely.

And do you think that you'll find more wailing, groaning, lamenting, and grieving in any other city?

Certainly not.

Then, are such things more common in anyone besides a tyrannical man, who is maddened by his desires and erotic loves?

How could they be?

It is in view of all these things, I suppose, and others like them, that you judged this to be the most wretched of cities.

And wasn't I right?

Of course you were. But what do you say about a tyrannical man, when you look at these same things?

He's by far the most wretched of all of them.

There you're no longer right.

How is that?

I don't think that this man has yet reached the extreme of wretchedness.

Then who has?

Perhaps you'll agree that this next case is even more wretched.

Which one?

The one who is tyrannical but doesn't live a private life, because some misfortune provides him with the opportunity to become an actual tyrant.