

The role of democracy in modern society is seen by many fortunate enough to live within such an environment as the epitome of Western freedom, and it is somewhat startling to read in one so revered and influential a Western philosopher as Plato an attack on what has become so definably and fundamentally associated with Western ideals. However, examining the terms of Plato's objections reveals that his attack is not of democracy as the political manifestation of freedom and equality that it represents in modern times, but on the moral indolence he sees in society. While Plato is generally applauded for his criticism of this (for it should be criticised) what he observes is latent in any political regime if the individuals of that population are immoral (however immorality might be defined), and not necessarily identifiable with any one political system as he suggests. For the modern reader to understand Plato's concerns there needs to be some frame of reference, provided here by a comparison of what is currently understood as representative of democracy, with the democracies of Plato's time. His criticisms of democracy as a political ideal are then analyzed for consistency and revealed as misguided, even when set against the inevitably flawed Greek democracies of the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE.

Modern democracy is generally representative of the value that free and liberal societies place on the link between politics and human rights (Evans, 2001, p. 623). Evans (2001) explains that in practical terms the citizens within a "self-governing community" (p. 624) take responsibility collectively for determining that "important civil freedoms" (*ibid*) are accounted for, and that the "aims and objectives of the community, as expressed through the ballot box" (*ibid*) are upheld and maintained for the common interest. There is scope for much discussion as to the complexities and tensions incumbent in this ideal but at the heart of the matter are the values of freedom, human rights, and equality. Importantly, as Schemel (2000) identifies, the "democratic goal [is in] helping leaders to limit their own power, to listen to critics, and to have self-restraint" (p. 107).

While the ideals of the Athenian people may have been similar, Athenian democracy of Plato's time was rather different (Cartledge, 2011, para. 8). Far Eastern politics had experienced throughout its history a number of political systems, including oligarchies and other totalitarian-style regimes, against which the population of Athens were (at Plato's time) resistant. They had evolved a complex assembly or council (Rhodes, 1980, pp. 321-322) responsible for the political administration of the state. The openly 'democratic' process for selecting those to serve in this administration was similar to what we might call a lottery, taken from a pool of eligible male citizens; being at the time considered a fair and impartial strategy "without regard to wealth, birth or even popularity or eloquence" (Jones, 1953, p. 6). In reality though, as Schemel (2000) observes, it suffered from its share of corruption with "its profusion of nepotism, clientelism, personalization of power, sycophants, parasites, and foreign speechwriters selling their rhetorical and juridical skills..." (p. 103, citing Hansen, 1991/1993).

Written against this backdrop *The Republic* is primarily known as Plato's attempt to unpack the nature of justice and morality for which he devises an extensive analogy of a just city, using it to demonstrate that the structure of a moral city has characteristics correlating in a human as indicators of personal justice and morality. To achieve this Plato goes to some length to describe this ideal state. He endorses the 'principle of specialisation' in which we "...have different natural aptitudes, which fit us for different jobs" (Plato, 2003, 370b). Unfortunately, Plato anticipates that such a city is inevitably bound to encounter hostility from neighbouring states, indicating specialists in fighting and security (373b - e).

Plato envisaged these as a second-tier 'class' of citizen, requiring intense regulatory management in the way they were selected, accommodated and provisioned (376d - 421c). He even went so far as to devise a eugenic breeding plan to augment the quality of this class of human (459a - 461c). Then, from only the most excellent of this 'guardian' class would be selected the leaders, who would embark on an intense long-term programme of physical and intellectual training to develop them into the paragons of society that Plato called the 'philosopher kings'. A stable population could then go about its business 'happily' recognising in its leaders a benign and nonpareil set of philanthropists in whose capable hands they could safely leave to the ordering of their lives.

It is interesting that having described a theoretically perfect state, Plato then predicts its demise in five regressing phases, of which democracy is the worst but for one. He saw it as the penultimate stage of a state's degeneration caused by the preceding (oligarchic) ruler's neglecting to intervene for the benefit of the people to teach self-discipline and frugal habits, leading to poverty. Eventually this disenfranchised population begins to murmur and plot (555d) and consider revolution (556d); they imagine democracy to be the answer to their problems and elect for themselves leaders seen to be the friends of the people promising freedom, prosperity, and equality.

Plato acknowledged (perhaps a little sarcastically) the seeming attractiveness of democracy with its values of freedom, diversity and variety "like the different colours in a patterned dress" (557c). But the problem for Plato was that his collectivist community ideals could not condone a society in which an *individual* might decide whether or not to submit to authority, might choose whether or not to fight the city's wars, or might choose to start his/her own wars (557e); a society with equal laws for those who manifestly were not equals (for example citizens, foreigners and slaves) (558c), and where disregard at random for the decrees of the court was permitted (558a). In short, a society in which "...every individual is free to do as he likes" (557b). He depicted political carnage, social turmoil and moral disharmony as resulting from such lack of restriction.

Plato believed that democracy encouraged certain inferior and undesirable character traits in society, namely shallow, egotistical and acquisitive citizens, who justified their selfishness, cowardice, insolence and wastefulness with lexical slipperiness. He complains that these shallow and superficial citizens demote the value of moderation to 'meanness', they misname waste as 'magnificence', they mistake insolence for 'breeding', anarchy they call 'freedom', and impudence the label as 'courage' (560-561). They exert themselves only to dash from one carnal gratification to the next, developing a taste for unnecessary pleasures and frivolities. This description brings to mind the graphic picture of John Bunyan's (1978, originally published 1678) *Vanity Fair* in which Bunyan describes in horrifying detail the extreme influence upon the decisions of the ruler/s that this dangerously whimsical and hedonistic population have; their sense of entitlement to indulge so bloated that in the story they force the execution of the traveller for not wishing to partake. Like Plato's, Bunyan's disgust was seated in a spiritual yearning for a higher plain of existence where one might find the ultimate source of what is "good" beyond the bondage of this earthly life.

It could be argued that Plato's quest for a greater reality and his dedication to the pursuit of 'goodness' represents the pinnacle of his achievement, but in attempting to align it with a political commentary he risks undermining his philosophy. In recent years one of Plato's severest critics is Popper (2003), dedicated to unzipping Plato's politics, labelling him an enemy of the open society. Some might

consider this treatment somewhat harsh, but it is fairly apparent that Plato's politics are marred by a number of unsubstantiated claims and inconsistencies.

Of course wise and considered decision making is most important in any leader; few would argue with Plato about this, but Plato assumes that morality is not possible in society unless its leader first models it. This is too sweeping a claim to accept. Surely a philosophically moral (democratic) population is capable of choosing for itself to be led by a ruler reflecting the values it wishes to see cultivated in society. Plato does not give ordinary people that much credit. Jones (1953) cites Protagoras's reply to Plato, saying that although we may well have been created with individual and unique talents, we also were all given "a sense of decency and fair play, since without them society would be impossible" (p. 6). Similarly, Plato assumes that a population under the rule of a philosopher king would follow his (or her) example of a good and moderate life. This reveals a paradox in that coercing the people to adopt values that they don't already hold would create the tyrant that Plato also deprecates. His solution of manipulating the population by "noble lies" is a strategy that must grate with those of his (modern) readers (at least) who admire his value of austere moral integrity.

On morals then, Plato's objection is to the hedonistic decadence that he attributes to democracy. But in this he is misleading, for any population can be selfish and egotistical irrespective of political regime. In the face of such, Plato's plans for a perfect state with a benign and wise ruler would not necessarily be equal. Plato sympathisers might observe that his politics is transcendent (like his philosophy), ultimately viewing political leadership as "an ethical and spiritual matter, depending on ... personal responsibility" (Popper, 2003, p. 133). However, no politician can avoid moral compromise. There is no wisdom sufficient to answer the "dirty hands" dilemma systemic in politics, and those who have the intestinal fortitude for such a role would not necessarily make ideal leaders according to Plato's requirements. Therefore a philosopher king would only take on the position with extreme and self-disqualifying reluctance. Schemel (2000) reveals Plato's thesis as a phenomenon known as the "phantasm of unity... at the root of authoritarian regimes..." in which "power is in the hands of ideological or religious priests desperately striving to make life perfect on earth, whereas all religious messages stress imperfection as the real meaning of this world" (p. 106). One wonders how Plato managed so significantly to underestimate the role of political leadership and place his (mythical) philosopher king in a position that he or she then would find morally repugnant. Perhaps this aspect of leadership would not be a problem for Plato, but one can imagine that it would be for many. This undermines Plato's negative views on democracy by challenging the validity of his theory on the 'ideal' state.

This perfect city, Plato contends, is a 'happy' city, revealing another dubious claim; that there is a connection between justice, happiness, and politics. One can acknowledge merit in Plato's thesis that a self-disciplined and moderate society is happier than a flagrant and greedy one, but Plato (555d) denies the possibility that moderation and discipline are possible within the normal constraints of society and attributes the supposed unhappiness of the population to its being democratic. It is possible that Plato's understanding of 'happiness', being more akin to 'well-being and healthiness' than our modern interpretation of 'generic personal optimism', may render this criticism somewhat anachronistic. However, while a connection between justice and morality as linked with happiness may have modern scientific backing, it is not a political matter, or if so only indirectly, and there is no *theoretical* reason why moral integrity and 'happiness' (however that is interpreted) is not possible within any (peaceful and prosperous) benign political system, democratic or not.

It is not difficult to accept that the selfish, ill-disciplined, unrestrained and shallow values that distress Plato would be equally distressing in today's society, especially when individuals feel entitled by right to impinge on the rights of others. These are issues that society still discusses, and modern democracies are regulated with laws to prevent just the turmoil he describes. This leads to the speculation (in conclusion) that either what Plato understood by the word 'democracy' is not the same as what is understood by it now, or modern democracies are closer to his concept of the perfect state than is immediately apparent and he has been maligned. But Plato is inconsistent throughout *The Republic*; he devises a perfect state that is supposedly stable and happy, yet realises that curtailing freedom and confining people to simple lives may lead to resistance. His solutions are to devise myths and stories to manipulate the population, and a guardian class to keep law and order, with the prediction that even his ideal will suffer from entropy. He yearns to transcend the realities of this world and find ultimate justice, yet does not see that deceiving the population is morally wrong, and by calling falsehood 'noble lies' he commits the same verbal sleight-of-hand that he then criticises in the democrat. The possibility of political perfection is perennially doubtful, but many commentators consider democracy as the only legitimate answer (Evans, 2001, p. 623). What Plato does is provide a superlative example in demonstrating how we should train ourselves to think, but his correlation between totalitarian principles and personal justice as manifest in his attack on democracy must have limited validity.

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