

# Plato's *Republic*: Degeneration

## Questions

TT00 Q4: 'Of all political ideals, that of making the people happy is perhaps the most dangerous' (POPPER). Is the *Republic* vulnerable to such a charge?

TT01 Q9: What function is served within the *Republic* by the analysis of inferior forms of constitution?

TT02 Q12: In what way, if at all, can Plato's objections to democracy be answered?

TT04 Q10: Assess Socrates' criticisms of democracy.

TT05 Q12: Is the *Republic* anti-political?

TT06 Q11: Does the *Republic* belittle the worth of the individual?

TT07 Q9: Does Plato have good arguments against democracy?

TT10 Q5: Defend democracy against Plato's critique, or show that it cannot be defended against that critique.

- Examiner Comment: *There were some good, imaginative answers to this question, making excellent use of the text as a whole. Several candidates said that though Plato would approve of having unelected experts as rulers, he wouldn't think that a training in economics qualified one to be a ruler. Some candidates also went on to discuss whether Plato would approve of imposing economic austerity.*

TT12 Q11: 'In modern Greece and Italy, governments of unelected economic experts are imposing austerity.' If so, would Plato approve?

TT13 Q10: What would Plato have said to the Leveson inquiry and why? How would you respond to Plato?

- The Leveson inquiry was a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press following the News International phone hacking scandal, chaired by Lord Justice Leveson, who was appointed in July 2011.

TT14 Q11: '[I]t is better for everyone to be ruled by divine reason, preferably within himself and his own, otherwise imposed from without' (*Republic* 590d). What, if anything, is wrong with this claim?

TT17 Q8: Would Plato look more favourably on modern British democracy than on his own?

TT18 Q9: Why is the life of the tyrant the most unhappy life? Are Socrates' arguments convincing?

- Examiner comment: *Very few candidates attempted the question, those that did offered a sound account of the inner conflict of the tyrant's soul.*

TT19 Q10: Would Plato's Callipolis be immune to the rise of demagoguery and populism?

- Examiner comments: *I enjoyed reading these generally creative and well-done essays. Several candidates began with the decline of the kallipolis in Rep. 8. Since it is possible – inevitable? – for this fate to befall the ideal city, then complete immunity from the democratic ills mentioned in the prompt seems out of reach. Others took up the invitation to discuss whether the program of early education in books 2-3 was effective in instilling correct ethical values in the populace, even if it falls short of the more systematic higher education available to the guardians. Still others discussed how Plato would assess contemporary populist appeals in light of his psychological and metaphysical theory.*

TT20 Q9: Why are the pleasures experienced by the philosopher truer than those of the tyrant? How, if at all, does this claim help to establish that justice is more profitable than injustice?

# Building Blocks

## CONSTITUTION-SOUL MAPPING

- “if there are five forms of city, there must also be five forms of the individual soul.” (544e)

Constitution	Soul
Ideal state	Just soul – The soul that is like aristocracy
Timocracy (Spartan/Cretan/Laconian Constitution)	Victory-loving and honour-loving
Oligarchy	Oligarchic (e.g. thrifty money-maker)
Democracy	Democratic
Tyranny	Tyrannical

## THE IDEAL STATE / ARISTOCRACY

- The first constitution
- Summary of the ideal state (543a - 543b)
  - Common wives, children and education
  - Kings must be chosen from people who proved to be best at philosophy and warfare
  - No private property for rulers
  - Rulers to receive a yearly upkeep from other citizens

## TRANSITION TO TIMOCRACY

- The second constitution
- Aristocracy => Timocracy
- Children are born when they are not supposed to (546b)
  - Plato elaborates on using numbers of how there must be perfect timings (546b - 546c)
  - Join brides and grooms at the wrong time and children will be neither good natured nor fortunate (546c - 546d)
    - These children will not pay as much attention to music and physical training as they should
    - Difficult to determine whether one is of the gold, silver, bronze or iron race
- This leads to a civil war
  - “The intermixing of iron with silver and bronze with gold that results will engender lack of likeness and unharmonious inequality, and these always breed war and hostility whenever they arise.” (547a)
    - The iron and bronze type will pull the constitution towards money-making and the acquisition of land, houses gold and silver (547b)
    - The gold and silver types will pull the constitution towards virtue and the old order (547b)
    - They struggle with one another but reaches a compromise (547b)

- “They distribute the land and houses as private property, enslave and hold as serfs and servants those whom they previously guarded as free friends and providers of upkeep, and occupy themselves with war and with guarding against those whom they’ve enslaved.” (547b)

### THE TIMOCRATIC STATE

- Timocracy as the halfway between aristocracy and oligarchy (547c)
  - Aristocratic in the sense that rulers are respected (547d)
  - BUT rulers chosen for their spirit, not wisdom (547e)
  - Oligarchic in the sense that the rulers have a passion for wealth, which they keep hidden (548a)
  - They will like to use other people’s money but will save theirs because they cannot openly acquire their private funds (548b)

### THE TIMOCRAT

- The timocrat is the “son of a good father who lives in a city that isn’t well governed” (549c)
  - PP adds: “son” metaphor links to the idea that a certain kind of constitution breeds another kind of constitution
- Intergenerational degradation
  - “His father nourishes the rational part of the soul and makes it grow; the others nourish the spirited and appetitive parts.” (550b)
  - PP adds: but this imagery of upbringing does not match the family dynamics in the ideal state?
- The timocrat ends up in the middle
- Spirit dominates in the timocrat’s soul

### TRANSITION TO OLIGARCHY

- Oligarchy = “The constitution based on a property assessment, in which the rich rule, and the poor man has no share in ruling.” (550c)
- Socrates describes the transformation from a timocracy into an oligarchy as being “clear even to the blind” (550d)
- The rulers in the timocracy stretch the laws to facilitate their money spending then disobey the laws altogether; others follow this behaviour (550d - 550e)
  - “in the end, the victory-loving and honour-loving men become lovers of making money, or money-lovers. And they praise and admire wealthy people and appoint them as rulers, while they dishonour poor ones.” (551a)
  - PP adds: BUT if everyone is interested in making their own money, should they not be against the rich? By giving the rich power they are limiting their own money-making capabilities.
  - Maybe they just become the rich themselves, utilising their incumbent positions as leverage
  - BUT the timocrat does not have a good ending “crashing against the city like a ship” (553a)
- Problem 1: the poor person might be the better captain of the ship; oligarchy may select the wrong leader (551c)

- Problem 2: rich people and poor people living in the same place would result in them plotting against each other (551d)
  - BUT oligarchs are few in number and so will not win a war, yet some are too stingy to hire mercenaries; if they hire the majority and arm them, then they will fear the majority will use their weapons against them rather than the enemy (551d -551e)
  - What if oligarchs were money-makers and soldiers simultaneously?
  - Still not good because it is meddling with others' affairs, which goes against Plato's idea of specialisation (551e)

#### THE OLIGARCHIC STATE

- The oligarchic constitution allows for inequality
  - Adeimantus says the "almost everyone except the rulers is a beggar there" (552d)
- Drone analogy (552c - 552d)
  - Drone = male bee
  - A drone is a cell is an affliction to the hive just as the person who has sold all their possessions and spent the money an affliction to the city
  - All winged drones are stingless; some wingless ones are stingless while other wingless ones have dangerous stings
  - Stingless ones are beggars; those with stings are evil-doers (thieves)
  - The evil doers are to be kept in check by force

#### THE OLIGARCH

- Son of the timocrat
  - The timocrat falls and has his property confiscated. His son, humbled by poverty, turns greedily to making money (553b - 553c)
  - The son of the timocrat does not pay attention to education, for if he did, he would not choose the ruler based on wealthiness as a criteria (554b)
- A thrifty money maker is like an oligarchic city
  - "this thrifty man is a poor individual contestant for victory in a city or for any other fine and much-honoured thing, for he's not willing to spend money for the sake of a fine reputation or on contests for such things. He's afraid to arouse his appetites for spending or to call on them as allies to obtain victory, so he fights like an oligarch, with only a few of his resources. Hence he's mostly defeated but remains rich." (554e - 555a)
- Appetite (specifically necessary appetites) dominate the oligarch's soul

#### TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

- There will be tension between the rich and the poor in the oligarchic state
- The struggle makes the state unhealthy and able to fall ill into a civil war without external influence (556e - 557a)
- "Democracy comes about when the poor are victorious, killing some of their opponents and expelling others, and giving the rest an equal share in ruling under the constitution, and for the most part assigning people to positions of rule by lot." (557a)

#### THE DEMOCRATIC STATE (557a-558c)

- The city is full of freedom and freedom of speech, and everyone in it has the license to do what he wants; so everyone goes about life in the way they like, so “it’s most of all under this constitution that one finds people of all varieties”
- “Like a coat embroidered with every kind of ornament, this city, embroidered with every kind of character type, would seem to be the most beautiful [...] many people would probably judge it to be so, as women and children do when they see something multicolored” (557c)
- It’s a “convenient place” to look for a constitution; a “supermarket of constitutions” (557d)
- There is no requirement to rule, or to be ruled, or to be at war or at peace, unless you want to [etc]; so a democracy is pleasant while it lasts (557e-558a)
- The calm of some of their condemned criminals is a sign of sophistication
- The city is completely lacking in small-mindedness that it “utterly despises the things we took so seriously when we were founding our city, namely, that unless someone had transcendent natural gifts, he’d never become good unless he played the right games and followed a fine way of life from early childhood”
- It “tramples all this underfoot” by giving no thought to what someone was doing before he entered public life and by honoring him if only he tells them that he wishes the majority well
- It “lacks rulers but not variety” and “distributes a sort of equality to both equals and unequals alike”

#### PLATO’S CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY

- Too much freedom and equality
- **Lack of unity and stability:** it *seems to be* preferable that there are all kinds of constitutions; but on Plato’s account there is only one ideal state, the Kallipolis
- **Lack of expertise:** one does not need to be capable to rule in a democracy – people who are good at winning elections and nothing else will eventually dominate politics; but according to Plato a) only some people can become rulers and they need to be nurtured the right way; b) only the capable should rule (why would you give power to people not equipped to rule?)
- **Further degeneration:** lack of expertise → democracies follow citizens’ impulses rather than pursuing the common good → life in a democracy is divine and pleasant *while it lasts*; but on Plato’s account it won’t last for long, since the emphasis on the expertise of winning elections comes at the expense of the expertise that is necessary to properly govern societies
- Thinking points: justice / liberty / education / unity and stability

#### THE DEMOCRAT

- Son of the thrifty oligarch
  - While the thrifty oligarch is ruled by necessary desires, the spendthrift son is ruled by unnecessary desires (559c)
  - The young person reared in miserly and uneducated manner tastes honey and becomes addicted to the desires
  - “sometimes the democratic party yields to the oligarchic, so that some of the young man’s appetites are overcome, others are expelled, a kind of shame rises in his soul and order is restored” (560a)

- BUT the expelled desires grow numerous and strong (560b)
- “these desires draw him back into the same bad company and in secret intercourse breed a multitude of others” (560b)
- “and so he lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand” (561c)
- Appetite dominates the democrat’s soul (equality of desires)

## TRANSITION TO TYRANNY (562a-566d)

- Democracy has an insatiable desire for freedom (what it defines as the good)
- Unless the rulers provide plenty of freedom, they are punished by the city and accused of being accursed oligarchs
- A father fears his sons, while the son behaves like a father, feeling neither shame nor fear in front of his parents, in order to be free (similarly, a resident alien or a foreign visitor is made equal to a citizen; a teacher is afraid of his students)
- “In general, the young imitate their elders and compete with them in word and deed, while the old stoop to the level of the young and are full of play and pleasantries, imitating the young for fear of appearing disagreeable and authoritarian” (563a)
- These things make the citizens’ souls so sensitive that, if anyone even puts upon *himself* the least degree of slavery, they become angry and cannot endure it (and in the end they ignore the laws to avoid having any master at all)
- This is the “fine and impetuous origin” from which tyranny evolves (563e)
- Excessive action in one direction usually sets up a reaction in the opposite direction, so extreme freedom leads to extreme slavery, both for the individual and the city
- Three types of people in a democratic state (564c - 565b)
  - Class of idlers: the dominant class which manages everything in a democracy
  - Class of money-makers: “drone-fodder” (564e)
    - Drone bees are either winged or wingless; the wingless may not have stingers
    - In the city, drone-like men are beggars or evildoers (stingless); the sinister and lawless characters are those with stingers
  - Class of workers
    - The largest and most powerful class if assembled, but are not willing to assemble unless they get a share of the honey
    - Accused by the drones of plotting against the people and of being oligarchs, even if they have no desire for revolution at all
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- People are always in the habit of setting up one man as their special champion, nurturing him and making him great
- “when a tyrant arises, this special leadership is the sole root from which he sprouts” (565d)
- The leader of the mob, without self-restraint, would become a tyrant (565e - 566a)

## THE TYRANNICAL STATE (566d-569c)

### THE TYRANT

- The tyrant draws off the best and leaves the worst – the opposite of what a doctor does when he purges (567c)

- The tyrant dares to use violence against his father when he has seized his weapons (569b)
- Appetite dominates the tyrant's soul (but the worse, lawless desires; some sort of *eros* or lust)
- "When the entire soul follows the philosophic part, and there is no civil war in it, each part of it does its own work exclusively and is just, and in particular it enjoys its own pleasures, the best and truest pleasures possible for it" (578e)
- "But when one of the other parts gains control, it won't be able to secure its own pleasure and will compel the other parts to pursue an alien and untrue pleasure"
- Foreshadowings of the mentions of the tyrant
  - Parry (2007): Thrasymachus says the most thoroughly unjust are those who subject cities and peoples to themselves (348d)
  - Parry (2007): Callicles says it is right by nature for the better to have the advantage of the worse and the most powerful of the least powerful (483d)
    - The stronger are those who are intelligent and brave about the affairs of the city; and they should rule (491c–d)

#### Emergence of the tyrant (571a–573c)

- The tyrant is full of insatiable unnecessary appetites
- Some unnecessary desires are lawful and others are lawless
- Our dreams make it clear than there is a dangerous, wild, and lawless form of desire in everyone, even in those of us who seem to be entirely moderate or measured
- The democratic man settles down in the middle between his father's way of life (thrifty) and his corrupters' (full of lawless desires)

#### Character of the tyrant (573c–576b)

- Friendlessness (575e)
- Fear (578d ff.)
- 'Poverty' (insatiability, 577e-578a)
- Lack of freedom (577c-d)
  - Prisoner in his own house
- Regret (577d-e)
- A sensual man who cannot actually fulfil his desires

#### Unhappiness of the tyrant (576b–580a)

- Parry (2007)
  - Mages (magoi) want to keep son of the democrat to further their political plans for tyranny so they implant *eros* into him
    - *Eros* was probably as tyrannizing erotic drive
    - "Without this *eros*, the democratic youth might fall back to a constitution in his soul that would give all appetites an equal share in ruling."
  - Unrestrained pleasures magnify the *eros* and gives it a sense of longing so strong the *eros* has to be guarded by madness
    - Madness "seizes any belief or appetite that might be thought useful or capable of shame and kills and throws it out, until the soul is purged of moderation and filled with an alien madness (573a–b)"



- “in the grip of madness, he is like someone who expects to be able to rule over not only men but gods as well – and actually tries to do so (573b–c)”
    - Normalisation of outlaw beliefs (unlike the democrat who only occasionally satisfy his outlaw appetites)
  - The tyrant is miserable
    - “The best parts will be enslaved, while the small, wretched, and mad part will be the despot (577c–d)”
    - “Just as the tyrannical city does least of all what it wishes, so the tyrannical soul would do least of all what it wishes, if one thinks of the soul as a whole, that is, if one thinks of the parts of the soul other than erotic passion. Being violently dragged around by madness, this soul is filled with confusion and regret.”
    - Madness cannot mask the underlying psychological disaster caused by realising that one’s beliefs are false
      - Reason still knows that is good for the soul and want to achieve it although it is overpowered by appetite
      - Padel (1995) analysed Greek tragedies, finding that madness in the ancient world was episodic
  - Of all individuals with a tyrannical soul, the most tyrannic who becomes the tyrant, is the most miserable (578b-c)
    - The mages plant eros into many people
    - “The city whose majority are tyrannical souls will change the city into a tyranny, choosing the one with the most tyrannical soul as the actual tyrant.”
    - “As a private citizen, the man with a tyrannical soul suffers fear, longing, and regret. If he becomes an actual tyrant, to these are added the ills of such a public life. Now he must fear for his survival, flatter his servants, renounce the ordinary pleasures of the common free man, and become the object of disgust.”
  - Unlike the just person whose soul is ruled with moderation (Book 4), the tyrant’s soul is ruled by violence

#### CONTEXT: CONTEMPORARY ATHENS

- **Populist, direct democracy** (not representative democracy); many officials were elected by lot (c.f. 557a)
- **Not free and equal:** the franchise was initially limited to male property owners, later expanded to all citizens (as it was during the time when Plato wrote); a clearly defined way of life separated those with power from those without, and society was intolerant of openly expressed nonconformity (Annas)
- **Lack of expertise:** Before the *Republic* was written, Athens had lost a war to Sparta, leading to a criticism of democracy that its rulers lack expertise

#### IMPLICATIONS OF PLATO’S CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY

- People have been using Plato to justify authoritarianism
- Popper: Plato proposes the idea where the state is the entity over and above the individual; the state has its own interests for which the individuals are to be sacrificed

- Popper was a refugee from Austria during WWII
- Reply: Plato is more a utilitarian, and he thinks there is nothing more important than the unity of the state (it is the greatest good, not a means towards happiness)

## THE SHIP OF STATE

IEP: // Plato's critique of democracy may be considered by modern readers as not applicable to liberal democracy today. Liberal democracies are not only founded on considerations of freedom and equality, but also include other elements, such as the rule of law, multiparty systems, periodic elections, and a professional civil service. Organized along the principle of separation of powers, today's Western democracy resembles more a revised version of mixed government, with a degree of moderation and competence, rather than the highly unstable and unchecked Athenian democracy of the fourth and fifth century B.C.E., in which all governmental policies were directly determined by the often changing moods of the people. However, what still seems to be relevant in Plato's political philosophy is that he reminds us of the moral and spiritual dimension of political life. He believes that virtue is the lifeblood of any good society. //

// In the Republic he criticizes the direct and unchecked democracy of his time precisely because of its leading features (557a-564a). Firstly, although freedom is for Plato a true value, democracy involves the danger of excessive freedom, of doing as one likes, which leads to anarchy. Secondly, equality, related to the belief that everyone has the right and equal capacity to rule, brings to politics all kinds of power-seeking individuals, motivated by personal gain rather than public good. Democracy is thus highly corruptible. It opens gates to demagogues, potential dictators, and can thus lead to tyranny. Hence, although it may not be applicable to modern liberal democracies, Plato's main charge against the democracy he knows from the ancient Greek political practice is that it is unstable, leading from anarchy to tyranny, and that it lacks leaders with proper skill and morals. Democracy depends on chance and must be mixed with competent leadership (501b) //