

Does plato's republic
still stand in today's
society?



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Few philosophers in ancient and modern history continue to have as much influence as Plato. More than 2500 years after Plato's death, his teachings regarding justice and the ideal state continue to inspire discussion and debate. The ideal community he envisioned in *The Republic* continues to influence leaders and political thinkers, and his study of the ideal state formed the foundations of political science.

This paper examines the continuing relevance of the book *The Republic*, with particular focus on Plato's concepts of justice, happiness and the ideal society.

Plato was born in Athens in 427 BC. He belonged to an aristocratic family, as his father was a descendant of an Athenian king while his mother was distantly related to the lawmaker Solon. Plato's father died early, and his mother re-married an associate of Pericles, the statesman. Based on familial ties, Plato had strong connections with both democracy and the oligarchy.

Following his stepfather's footsteps, the young Plato had political ambitions. Soon, however, he became disillusioned by the corrupt and inefficient political leadership in Athens.

Plato then followed his older brothers who had become pupils of Socrates. Plato eventually became a great follower of Socrates, adopting the great teacher's basic philosophy and style of debate. Plato also vigorously adopted Socrates' motto, "Know thyself," and he pursued this knowledge through Socrates' dialectical system of questions, answers and additional questions.

This critical method of instruction, however, caused Socrates to fall into disfavor with his students. The teacher was tried for religious impiety and corruption of youth and was sentenced to death. Socrates' death further increased Plato's dissatisfaction with all existing political regimes.

In 387 BC, Plato founded his own school, the Academy, in Athens. This university was for higher studies, with instruction in the sciences, mathematics and philosophy. The academy attracted students for more than nine centuries. Plato continued to teach and served as president of the Academy until his death in 347 at the age of 80.

In *The Republic*, Plato proposes his theory that the ideal state or polis can only be achieved through a balance of elements. Political justice can only be present when people serve their functions, as determined by their tripartite souls.

Plato believed that the human soul is divided into three elements. First, there are the bodily appetites, expressed through bodily needs such as hunger and thirst. Second are the spiritual elements, expressed through emotions like love, anger and compassion. Above all, the third element that separates people from animals and makes them unique is the human ability to use language and reason. Plato compared the soul to an organism. An imbalance among these elements leads to conflict, sickness and misery.

Plato also believed that there are three types of personalities. The most common is the person dominated by bodily appetites. This person is driven by desires, money and possessions. The second personality is dominated by the spirit. This person would be driven by goals like success, fame and power.

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Finally, there is the person who is dominated by reason, the person who aspires towards truth and wisdom. He or she would be willing to give up family, forgo basic appetites and live the austere lifestyle to discover the unchangeable human essence.

Plato believed that happiness comes when these three elements of the soul are satisfied under the rule of reason. This is a difficult endeavor, for the bodily drives often conflict with reason. However, knowledge and right conduct can only come from a soul dominated by reason. Hence, only those who are governed by reason and knowledge should be in a position to govern the other members of society.

Like the human soul, Plato also viewed society as an organism. In Plato's ideal society, each person's social role will be determined by the element dominant in his or her soul.

People who are ruled by bodily appetites would make the best producers – farmers, laborers, hunters, merchants and the others whose work sustains a populace's physical needs. People who are driven by spiritual desires like honor, loyalty, fame and other spiritual elements should be members of a city's auxiliary and military staff.

Finally, there are the men and women who are ruled by reason. They are devoid of family ties and do not possess private property. Through years of training, they could enact laws and make decisions based on reason and wisdom, on what Plato termed the “ idea of the good.”

These, Plato believed, are the philosophers who should also be kings. Only people who are dominated by reason should become guardians.

Plato was critical of Athenian society, which allowed even people who are ruled by bodily appetites to govern. In Plato's view, this leads to an imbalance in the social organism, manifesting in the societal conflict and corruption that turned him away from politics as a young man. Plato's belief in establishing harmony within conflicting human and social elements led him to conclude that an ideal society must be governed by knowledgeable and reason-driven elite.

Plato's descriptions of justice, virtue and happiness are very different from the modern understandings of these terms. For Plato, all these concepts are entwined in his understanding of the ideal state and, again, his concept of the tripartite soul.

In *The Republic*, Plato wrote of his concept of individual justice as an offshoot of what he sees as a tripartite soul. Plato believed that the human soul is divided into three elements. First, there are the bodily appetites, expressed through bodily needs such as hunger and thirst. Second are the spiritual elements, expressed through emotions like love, anger and compassion. Above all, the third element that separates people from animals and makes them unique is the human ability to use language and reason (Rice 58-61).

The theory of political justice parallels the theory of individual justice. For Plato, a city is "man writ large against the sky." Since people are social animals, cities are a natural extension and mirror of the human soul. In

Plato's ideal society, each person's social role should be determined by the element dominant in his or her soul.

Political justice occurs when the guardians rule wisely and the other classes do their tasks, ensuring the smooth function of the social organism. As in the body, when all aspects of society function as one, there will be harmony. This harmony engenders the reign of political justice, resulting in a state that is free from war or civil disorder.

An imbalance among these elements leads to conflict, sickness and misery. Individual happiness can only happen when all three elements are in balance. Only when this balance occurs can a person live a just and harmonious life (Rice 61).

For Plato, ensuring that the guardians rule wisely and the other classes do their tasks will facilitate the smooth function of the social organism. When all aspects of society function as one, there will be harmony. This harmony begets the reign of political justice, resulting in a state that is free from war or civil disorder. Only in such a society can human happiness be possible, as the alternative is chaos.

Plato thus viewed happiness as an abstract, a fringe benefit of living a virtuous life and facilitating a harmonious social organization.

Plato used the haunting allegory of the cave as a metaphor for the human condition. Plato believed that ordinary humans who do not bother to, in the Socratic tradition, "examine their lives" were doomed to live like prisoners

in a cave. These prisoners can only see shadows, which are created by artificial light and manipulated by unseen overlords (Plato 514a-519a).

These individuals cannot have proper concepts of their existence and their needs. They do not have the knowledge to recognize their victimization and therefore have to desire to be free. Any interruption in their ways of thought - such as a prisoner who escapes and returns, telling of the sunlight outside the cave - is regarded with disrespect and suspicion.

Only by leaving the cave can these prisoners ever learn the difference between what is real and what are artificial shadows.

Several criticisms have been written regarding the weaknesses in Plato's formulations. Though a modern reading of Plato would find his concepts of democracy and justice as strange, criticisms regarding this work began much earlier.

For example, Plato's formulation of happiness is understandable given how the ancient Greeks stressed the importance of the polis. However, viewed from a modern perspective, what Plato defines as "happiness" is more like "contentment." People live their lives according to an inner nature that is inflexible. They derive satisfaction from fulfilling their assigned societal roles.

Plato's definition, however, lacks an important component of happiness - passion. True human happiness involves the active and passionate pursuit of a goal.

Plato's student Aristotle was also one of his earliest critics. Aristotle recognized the weaknesses of Plato's concept of happiness and introduced a

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much-needed layer of empiricism to Plato's philosophy. Aristotle was critical of Plato's reliance on intuitive reason and a supposedly immutable world of ideas. Instead, Aristotle believed that knowledge should be anchored in real experiences that can be perceived by the senses.

Plato thus viewed happiness as an abstract, a fringe benefit of living a virtuous life and facilitating a harmonious social organization. Like Plato, Aristotle also placed emphasis on the virtuous life. However, Aristotle's concept of happiness also differed significantly from his predecessor.

In contrast to Plato's tripartite soul, Aristotle divided the human soul into two elements — the rational and the irrational. While humans share irrational elements with animals, they also possess faculties that are distinctly human. For example, humans have the ability to control their bodily desires through reason. In addition, only humans are capable of logical calculation and intellectual activities, which Aristotle defines as intellectual virtue (Grant 256).

Unlike Plato's concept of happiness as an abstraction, Aristotle believed that happiness is based on human nature. The nature of happiness is itself based on human nature. For Aristotle, happiness can only spring from the rational part of the human soul and is therefore a goal unique to humans (Grant 256-257).

The contrast between the two philosophers illustrates one of the greatest weaknesses in Plato's philosophy. By emphasizing the all-importance of reason, Plato neglects other important aspects of human nature. These

include the emotions, such as happiness and love, as well as desires, such as sex.

This strict division of social labor between the social classes runs counter to many feelings that are considered fundamental parts of human nature. For example, while Plato is one of the few philosophers who believes that women can be governed by reason, he also stipulates that guardian women must not raise their own families. If they procreate and bear children, their offspring will be raised by another woman from the lower social ranks.

With regards to sex, Plato views the sexual appetites as illicit. The failure to impose restrictions on one's appetites makes a person the victim of disorganized and unfocused demands. This leads Plato to make conclusions that corruption and social illnesses spring from uncontrolled human appetites (Kraut 325-226).

Furthermore, other critics have pointed to the absence of a concept of good character in Plato's teachings. There is no concept of sympathy or empathy for fellow human beings. As philosopher Max Eastman later writes, Plato sees the good person as ruled by reason, whereas most moral codes see good people as ruled "by a passion - that of love for...fellow (humans)" (96).

The analogy of the cave underscores Plato's emphasis on the importance of the examined life. People who see only manipulated shadows fail to see the bigger picture outside and can thus never be able to make properly informed decisions. They will continue to hold false values and ideals, and will continue to resist efforts made on their behalf to improve their lives.

Though Plato's vision of the ideal polis is rightly criticized for its strict hierarchical roles, he makes a significant contribution to political thought by maintaining that the political community must promote the well being of its citizens. After all, Plato wrote at a time when tyrants routinely used the resources of the nation-state in their own interests. The idea of the greater good being more important than the rights of the sovereign ruler is thus an important departure.

As a result of this, Plato maintained that a good political leader must be educated. Also, while Plato is rightly criticized for ignoring human needs when he abolishes family ties for the ruling class, this severing of ties is geared towards the abolition of property. By removing family and property ties, Plato hopes that a political leader can truly make informed decisions based on reason and not simply based on their own or their loved one's interests.

Finally, perhaps the most remarkable feature of Plato's Republic is his startling idea of equality – although limited – among the sexes. Plato believed that qualified women can become members of the guardian class. Like men, Plato believed that there are women who are governed by reason and, by rights, should be accorded the responsibilities of governing (Smith 467).

In addition to the Philosopher-Kings, Plato also believed in the possibility of Philosopher-Queens. Plato later expanded this thesis in *Laws*, saying that all citizen women should be allowed to take part in public affairs. They should

be allowed to join athletic and military training, to dine in public communally and to receive education in political virtues (Saunders 480).

In summary, much of the weaknesses in Plato's political theory, as set about in the Republic, arise from an imperfect and rigid classification of human nature. Plato does not make allowances for basic human emotions and needs. As such, he prescribes social roles that, while supposedly serving the greater social good, force people to sublimate their own needs and desires.

However, these weaknesses do not take away from the enduring importance of the Republic. First, Plato laid the foundations for a true democracy by stipulating that those who govern should act in the best interests of their citizens. Second, Plato recognized the importance of education, both in ensuring the qualifications of those who govern and that the citizens themselves can make informed political decisions.

Most importantly, Plato presents an ideal community, where no one person is automatically privileged by wealth, birth or gender. It is an attractive ideal, where no one's needs are ignored and where every member strives to live an "examined life."

Plato's ideal society has figured prominently in many later normative conceptions of ideal social orders. In Utopia, the influential 16th century vision of the ideal state, Thomas More incorporated Plato's earlier negation of private property and the necessity for educated and qualified rulers.

By the 18th century, French philosopher Emile Durkheim once again wrote of society as an organism requiring the integrated function of its parts in his *The Division of Labor in Society*.

More recent history continues to show appropriation of Plato's work, even though in very different forms. Max Nomad found significant parallels between the supposedly classless society of the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev and Plato's ideal society. This included the division in Soviet society between peasants and merchants, the warriors/soldiers and finally, the members of the elite government (Nomad 10).

Plato's rejection of Athenian democracy should be viewed in its proper historical context, since during his time, the highest government offices were chosen by lottery. Though some may contest whether current democracy, as practiced in the United States, is truly representative, the availability of free expression and genuine public debate remains a cornerstone of many democratic societies today.

In summary, despite their limitations, many of Plato's ideal principles continue to hold relevance today. First is the general belief that leaders should be qualified through education, and that voters should be empowered to make informed decisions. Most societies also subscribe to the idea of a meritocracy, where the ability to rule is measured independently of wealth, gender or other forms of privilege. Finally, Plato's belief in the importance of debate and dialogue continues to be upheld.

In conclusion, Plato's Republic was, in many ways, a product of its time. It was born out of Plato's dissatisfaction with the way Athens was governed, a
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corrupt democracy and oligarchy that was ruled by the inept. As such, the ruling government did not take care of the needs of its citizens. Those who dared to question their authority, like Socrates, were executed.

Many have rightly criticized Plato's formulation of the tripartite soul and, based on this principle, the ideal society of guardians, auxiliaries and producers. This formulation privileges reason over other essential aspects of human nature, like emotions and passions.

However, a critical reading and appropriation shows that Plato's Republic has much to offer political and democratic theory today. The idea that governments should act in their citizens' interests seems a given, but tyrants and despots were the norm when Plato wrote about his ideal society.

Furthermore, the idea of a meritocracy - a system that allows people to progress based on their own qualifications, rather than on privileges of wealth or status - remains a strikingly modern idea.

In the Republic, Plato's most important contribution was to imagine an ideal that addressed the prevailing political and social injustices of his time.

Today, more than 2500 years later, societies around the world continue to strive for Plato's ideal.

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