

# The rhetoric of democracy



[the democratic man] puts his pleasures on an equal footing. And so, he lives, always surrendering rule over himself to whichever desire comes along, as if it were chosen by lot ... And he doesn't admit any word of truth into the guardhouse, for if someone tells him that some pleasures belong to fine and good desires and others to evil ones and that he must pursue and value the former and restrain and enslave the latter, he denies all this and declares that all pleasures are equal and must be valued equally (The republic 561b-c).

Plato's view of social justice in *The Republic* is often viewed as antidemocratic. His specific reasons for criticizing the democratic theory and ranking it lower than an oligarchy are largely debated in literature, but the general outline of the argument remains the same and are agreed upon; democracy considers freedom far too much and applicable knowledge far too little. Perhaps the best way to begin investigating Plato's argument is in his own words. In chapter 11, lines 561b-c Plato presents a city-soul analogy which signifies that a democratic soul has no direction in pleasures since both good and bad pleasures are always equal. This type of soul is destined to fail, which by the analogy means that the overall democratic city will fail as chaos and strife become unavoidable since there is no clear direction for the city to go in. This specific passage serves as the basis to which one can compare the presented ideas with other contemporary values of democracy which will serve as an avenue of getting a deeper understanding of the passage. For in today's world, certain aspects of democracy are valued highly but those values do not describe the kind of democracy that Plato is trying to in this passage.

Before considering specific values that are different between Plato's democracy and other contemporary forms, it is important to first define what Plato is trying to argue. When it comes to the types of government, each one is broken into two parts: how far it derives from the ideal state and the representation of the human soul. Now only working with how far democracy derives from the ideal state, aristocracy, Plato goes on to state, "...despite being a single person ... philosophers are the only ones who should rule over communities" (496a-498a) because they have an everlasting appreciation and capacity to be knowledgeable in all fields of study. They are regarded as the philosopher king as they rule over the guardians and workers. It is with this three-caste system in which society knows what specific job they must do to keep the city thriving. Comparing that to Plato's description of democracy in the selected passage, democracy is nearly an opposite of aristocracy. Where Plato is more concerned though, is that " democracy starts, in my opinion, when the poor members of the community are victorious. They kill some of the rich, they expel others..." (558a-560a). With having the poor or in this case the workers rule, the greed of money takes over and the idea of goodness is lost. Essentially everyone becomes equal when it's not necessary for them to be.

Now working with the second part in each type of government, the soul, is where Plato furthers his argument. It is described that "[the democratic man] puts his pleasures on an equal footing. And so, he lives, always surrendering rule over himself to whichever desire comes along, as if it were chosen by lot" (561b-c). This abundance of freedom coupled with the fact that everyone is autonomous presents the situation that people choose their

pleasures without thinking if it is beneficial for the soul or community.

However, there is a silver lining in which Plato does appreciate the democratic soul by stating “ It’s probably the most gorgeous political system there is... it is adorned with every species of human trait” (557a). Despite the average person having no clear direction, the human soul can grow and flourish in its own unique form. This creates a society of people that can make an original life for themselves; society can create new political ideas and systems (557a).

Moving slightly away from Plato’s definition of democracy where it furthers the background for the selected passage, and focusing on more of the modern views of democracy and how it does not relate, let’s take the main argument from the passage, freedom, and clarify its meaning. Per Gregory Recco, freedom comes in two different versions when dealing with the notion in *The Republic* ; undirected action and nobility of character (Recco 16).

Generally, nobility of character is found in aristocracy while undirected action is found in democracy. The theme of unspecified action is elaborated on in the selected passage. However, the two types of freedom are linked by self-rule and law which instantiates that democracy is not absurdly different from aristocracy – the ideal state. This is because democracy is the rule of self-created laws (Recco 17). These laws demand that its citizens become informed and committed to creating a better society. The aims for creating such laws are quite high and this reinforces lines 557a because Plato knows this is one of the few types of government in which change has a possibility of ruling. In Recco’s words, “ democracy is committed to freedom in the fullest sense: self-rule through persuasive logos (that is, law)” (Recco 17). As

compared to Plato's definition of democracy, this statement and several others further our appreciation of the passage in its entirety.

Taking another aspect of the main argument in the selected passage, equality, let's look how it applies to the democratic soul with non-Plato views. An essential component in the democratic constitution is that its citizens are guaranteed equality before the law. That there are no "degrees" of citizens like in an aristocracy with Philosopher kings, guardians, and workers. Fomara takes this idea further and elaborates by stating "with respect to the laws, all have an equal share in [settling] their private differences" (Fomara 199). That is to say, the law is supposed to be applied equally amongst all people and citizens expect to be treated so. In addition to citizens being equal with the law, democratic citizens enjoy the right to serve on juries (Recco 238). The right to serve holds an important place in Plato's portrayal of democracy as anyone may be a ruler or juror regardless of qualification (557e). In all these ways, then, citizens have equality as enforcers of the law. Their enjoying of this equality amounts to that the citizens have a common good for the city. For example, Marshall states that in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates is condemned to death for "converting" the youth with his philosophical ideals, yet if the democratic citizen is committed to ensuring equality, a philosopher should not be put to death for simply being a philosopher (Marshall 4). This sense of committing to equality and saving the philosopher is in the best interest of the common good for the city.

Certainly, when talking about equality in the selected passage, it is important to refer to the desires and pleasures of the democratic soul. For

Plato makes most his claim based on “ that all pleasures are equal and must be valued equally” (561b-c). From that point of view, it can be expanded to include not only indulging in a single democratic souls’ desires, but indulge in all citizens’ desires (Marshall 5). The treating of everyone else’s pleasures shows democracy at work, for it “ dispenses a certain equality to equals and unequals alike” (558c). In another example, taking sometimes a mandatory interest in everyone else’s interest appears when the democratic man must vote. Each person has one vote where they generally can support or refute a specified desire. This notion holds simply because “ what undergirds the criterion for distributing votes is some commitment to equal standing” (Marshall 5). Clearly, Plato does not take his claim to this extent when defining what a pleasure is and how the democratic soul interacts at a larger scope.

In conclusion, after reviewing Plato’s antidemocratic view in *The Republic* , our appreciation for the selected passage and the type of discussion it brings up is highlighted in the numerous claims of other authors. For it is rather clear that Plato limits his view of democracy as to how far it diverges from Aristocracy and the condition of the human soul. This is particularly done by focusing on the degree of freedom that the democratic soul has.

Furthermore, this ultimate freedom leads to the problem of not knowing what is necessary and unnecessary in terms of pleasures since all things are considered equal. Plato focuses heavily on the ambiguity of democracy as there is no way of knowing how specific things will be achieved. Naturally this is a tough question to answer, but modern views of democracy show that it is not that far off from the ideal state. Citizens in their self-rule create

order and determine the best pleasures to peruse for the common good of the city. Moreover, it is in the democratic setting that a person's soul can develop and flourish fully without constraints. In essence, it can be said that there are different versions of democracy and Plato is only antidemocratic towards a specific version.

## Works Cited

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