

Discussion and critique of platos six facets of his utopian society



Plato's exhaustive treatment of the theme of justice in "The Republic" as articulated by Socrates results not only in the probing of metaphysical and philosophical themes, but in the theoretical construction of the ideal society, envisioned as a great city during the symposium where "The Republic" takes place. The primary focus point of the structure of the society is the pursuit or emulation of Plato's ultimate notion of justice; however, the specifics of social order and political government seem far from "just" or ideal to a modern reader such as myself.

To begin with, Plato's notion of "class" strikes the modern reader of being merely a euphemism for "caste system" and the resultant lack of individual liberty and freedom seems more autocratic than ideal. Plato's idea of class emerges from the top down, so to speak, in that he recommends that the ideal city be ruled by the "smallest group and part of itself and the knowledge in it, from the supervising and ruling part, that a city founded according to nature would be wise as a whole" which openly endorses rule by an elite.

The following thoughts, "And this class, which properly has a share in that knowledge which alone among the various kinds of knowledge ought to be called wisdom, has, as it seems, the fewest members by nature" makes it clear that inclusion among the elite will be based on knowledge rather than wealth or lineage. (Plato 107) Plato's observations on class extend to the "wage-earners" and soldiers, as well as the philosopher-rulers; women and children and slaves also form separate classes.

So, although Plato's conception of the ideal society is envisioned from the top down, the foundation of the ideal city actually rests upon the shoulders of those classes which he most disparaged. Plato insisted that the city be ruled by philosophers of great wisdom, but the contradiction here was just how to "to educate a ruling class which is such as to possess the characteristics of both the citizen, who cares for his country and has the spirit to fight for it, and the philosopher, who is gentle and cosmopolitan.

This is a quasi-impossibility" and the inherent contradiction exposes for the modern reader, many of Plato's shortcomings. (Plato, 1991, p. xvi) In between wage-earners and rulers, a warrior class would be used in the ideal city to enforce law and order. The "warrior class would then be the link between the highest and lowest class," but --Plato insists -- would gain its meaning from "its service to the higher"; a modern reader views this as only a slight variation on fascist political philosophy.

In order to control the city there would be a need for "defenders, and it also now needs rulers, for its feverish desires make living together impossible without control" (Plato 349). If this vision promotes an idea in some readers' minds of a parallel between Plato's ideal city and a typical city in Nazi Germany, it would not be so surprising; in fact, further evidence in "The Republic" exists to foster just such a parallel vision.

Like the Nazi's, Plato similarly insists upon allegiance to the city above self, or family: ""The family is abolished, unless one considers the city as one family" and this ideal of civic-sacrifice extends to children themselves:" Children are to transfer to the city what they would give to their parents""

(Plato 385). A rigid social hierarchy with civic-allegiance which is also propelled by philosopher-rulers is Plato's ideal city.

The same systematic deployment of control and hierarchy extends in Plato's estimation to one's self-orientation and particularly one's moral bearing: Therefore, it is a harvest greater by such ills that is reaped by a man who has a bad regime in himself -- the one you just now judged most wretched, the tyrannic man -- and who doesn't live out his life as a private man but is compelled by some chance to be a tyrant, and while not having control of himself attempts to rule others, just as if a man with a body that is sick and without control of itself were compelled to spend his life not in a private station but contesting and fighting with other bodies. " (Plato 260)

So, seemingly, Plato argues on behalf of the benevolent tyrant, but to modern readers, the result is still: tyranny. For one to accept Plato's notions of class control and civility, it is probable that one must first embrace his idea of justice, which is, itself, only achievable within the context of his ideally imagined city. This is a form of a circular argument in my opinion. However, the idea of a " perfect regime, to establish a harmony between the knowledge of nature and of politics" certainly demonstrates that Plato's ideal of knowledge as the highest " good" was the backbone of his Republic.

By demonstrating knowledge, human beings rise above their more base natures, attain civility and become " not be merely the playthings of chance," but powerful thinkers able to " perfect technical control over the conditions of decent political life. " (Plato 467) In Plato's ideal, justice takes the place usually reserved by " liberty" in the mind of an American citizen.

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His notion that " justice was to be shown to conduce to human happiness in the same way health does" seems reasonable at first glance, but a deeper reading of " The Republic" exposes fallacies and prejudices which seem to weaken the impact of his argument.

The concept of consent -- of being governed by consent -- would seem to save " The Republic" from complete surrender to an interpretation of its more tyrannical aspects. key among Plato's ideas in " the Republic" is the notion of consent, an act which is " discovered" and revealed within the course of action in the symposium itself: " they take a vote and ratify their decision, and a new principle of rule emerges: consent. It is a mixture of powerless wisdom and unwise power.

All political life will be founded on such compromises, more or less satisfactory, until the means can be discovered to permit the absolute rule of wisdom" (Plato 312). This latter statement in and of itself seems to hold the inherent contradiction in Plato's Republic: the idea of an elite, ruling class which is also of the people and for them, standing as guardians of a non-democratic but somehow yet egalitarian dream-society. I don't feel that the Republic would be seen as ideal by any citizen of a modern democracy i the twenty-first century.