

# The issue of identities in plato's republic

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**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In a crowded room, take a look around. What do you see? What do you notice about the individuals standing beside you? Perhaps you notice their “gender,” their skin color, their hair color, what they are wearing, or even how wealthy they appear. If you took a few moments to get to know them, what would you learn? Maybe you learn about their background, their ethnicity, career, or political views. What do these mean? Why have our minds been trained in such a way to squeeze those around us, and ourselves into a little box of an identity that is not fixed, nor defines us? Identity, as it has been taught to us, is essentially everything about you; who you are, where you are from, how much money you make, what you believe in, and the list goes on. Identity has been thrust upon us as a fixed construct, an unchanging and permanent label that is plastered on you and regarded by everyone. In reality, identity is not fixed, in fact, our “identities” are far too dynamic to be controlled and labeled and held to a standard of no change. While this remains true, both the government and the governed continue to regard identity as fixed. In order to maintain power and control, the government has resorted to the stratification of individuals in a society, through fixed identities. These identities have been engrained into the minds of the governed as stereotypes and generalizations, so much so that they are accepted as fixed by the masses even to this day.

The first book of Plato's Republic begins with the characters grappling with the definition of justice, or what it means to be a just individual. From there, each book adds on to this conversation, as numerous individuals come and go, and chime in with varying remarks and lines of questioning, all in the pursuit of determining what it truly means to be just. Eventually, this

discussion leads to Plato's description of the ideal city. He does so in order to construct a model of true justice, as it may apply to a political entity, such as a city. Plato's argument is that both the individual and the city have justice and that the justice of a city will be easier to understand, seeing as it is the larger of the two. From here, the argument progresses to the topic of specialization within the Kallipolis – the idea that all men are born with one set of skills, and they are to pursue those skills. A shoemaker fulfills his role and makes shoes, a farmer produces food, a servant sells their strength and becomes a wage earner, and so on. Plato is arguing that in the kallipolis, individuals are tied to their specialties, and are good for nothing more or less than their label. Along with specialization comes class division. Inevitably, as individuals divide into their own specialties, some will make more than others, and as a result, a hierarchy forms.

According to Plato, some individuals are intrinsically “ below” others. The servants, for example, are seen as people whose minds do not qualify them to be a member of the community. This sort of divide in socio-economic status can be clearly traced throughout our nation's history and is still prevalent today. The idea that the servants' minds are not developed enough, or qualified enough for them to be a part of the community is a rational quite similar to the one used against colored individuals as they were taken into slavery and mistreated throughout much of American history. Those with lighter skin associated color with lesser brain function and truly believed that those of color were not civilized enough to join society. Shamefully, to this day there is still evidence of prejudice against individuals of color. Race and ethnicity have stuck onto people like leeches

and have staked their claim as their 'identity' when in reality, the creation of these separate groups is merely a way for the government distinguish certain groups from others, awarding privilege and respect to some, while justifying leaving others behind.

Plato's emphasis on stratification within a city is seen further through his recounting of the 'myth of the metals' which builds off the noble lie that all citizens of the city are made of the earth. The myth holds that each citizen has inside their soul, a mixture of metals. He then goes on to describe that these metals determine their roles in society. The producers are at the bottom, they are made of either bronze or iron. Above them are the auxiliaries, or the soldiers, with silver in their souls. And finally, the highest class are those with gold mixed in, these are the guardians, or rulers. Plato argues that these forms of identity are innate, you are born with them and they are predetermined. This myth serves as justification used by the government within the kallipolis for the different ways in which individuals are treated, and the respect and education that each supposedly deserves. Theoretically, in a harmonious world with no conflict, uprising, or chaos, this myth makes sense. If each citizen has their own place in society, their own jobs and essentially their own separate lives, then each can go about their day doing their jobs and living their lives the way they have been told to since the day they were born. However in reality, it is inevitable that members of the producing class or even the auxiliaries will question their place in society, and wonder why they cannot be a member of the guardian class, as it is human nature to want more. Though people of today's world have been split socio-economically speaking, and are told that their class is a

part of their identity, people are constantly trying to work harder, earn more, and change their status, and therefore their identity. The reality of identity and most metals for that matter is that they are both malleable. Identity, if it can mold and change, and turn into something it never was, cannot be fixed. It is simple for the government to look at individuals through a narrow lens, and assume that one group of individuals is inherently unequal due to the color of their skin, or that there are two genders and one is supposed to mate with the other. But the inconsistency within that is, one's ethnicity should not and does not determine how successful they can be in life, or what jobs one will hold. Similarly, one's sex does not determine immediately that the individuals they will be attracted to are of the opposite sex. That is simply not how identity works.

Overall it is quite obvious that identities are meant to change, that they are not real, and that they have been created by the government in order to categorize and group us, and therefore maintain control. However, it still remains true that despite this, we, the governed, continue to regard identity as fixed. When a girl is walking alone at night and sees a man of color walking toward her, it is highly likely that she would be more afraid for her safety than if a white man were walking toward her. This conditioning to fear those of color and feel safer around those who have lighter skin is a result of years and years of stereotypes that have been etched into the minds of our nation. Even after the civil rights movement, after men and women of color gained basic human rights, they were still discriminated against as they are now. The actions of a few individuals who have acted violently have led to a complete stereotype to be formed on an entire group of individuals. Sound

familiar? In terms of immigration, the government has made it clear that Muslims are a threat to our nation's security, and that we should close our borders to them, as they are "high risk." Stereotyping an entire group of individuals as "terrorists" is absurd, and because the government does this, the governed follows. The deep hold and control the government has over the governed is evident in moments like this, the government is able to convince the masses of their mindset solely because of the perspectives and generalizations they make about people and their identities.

Over time, we have become so ignorant to our habits of maintaining these fixed identities, that we so comfortably know, that when we are told to take a step back and evaluate why we believe the things we do and hold so many identities to be fixed, it leads us to re-evaluate. Perhaps this was Plato's aim in presenting the readers with such an impossible blueprint of a city. Any reader can see that the "perfect" city is unobtainable. Why then would Plato describe it to us? In the allegory of the cave, one prisoner is given the chance to leave all that he knew in the cave to see the world for what it really is, and all that the sun can provide. He was no longer seeing shadows, but instead, he saw the real world. When the prisoner went back down to the cave to enlighten the others about what the truth of the world was, he was violently attacked, for the others were unwilling to hear about something so unknown.

Perhaps Plato's intention in mapping out this kallipolis throughout numerous books of his Republic was simply a way of giving us evidence of the government's control over the governed, using identity. It is possible that

Plato wishes to enlighten readers and speak to us the truth about life outside of the cave. If he were to come right out and say to all that we are controlled by the government, he would be asked to prove it. The epistemological question would then arise, “ how does he know what he knows?” Instead of forcing on us an idea as bold as that, he brings us to the ideal city, the beautiful city, the kallipolis. He takes us through each step of how the city runs, from the specialization to the division of labor, to the order of rule, and more. All of this, so that we, as readers, can point out the impossible nature of it, seeing how ridiculous it is to fix identities. This then takes us into the light outside of the cave, as we re-evaluate what we know, and what we see in our daily lives. We then begin to question the way that we are governed in the real world and see that it is not far off from the structure of the kallipolis, where identities are often perceived to be fixed. By enlightening his readers, teaching them to think critically, Plato is then being the sun, showing us the truth, and urging us to go and spread this knowledge, and create change in the face of it. Do you feel the heat?