

[Skip to comments.](#)

Plato's Criticism of Democracy

04/26/2007 | Matt Brazil

Posted on **April 26, 2007 11:15:30 PM EDT** by [Ultra Sonic 007](#)

Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.

(Apology 31e-32a)

These are the words of Socrates, who spoke before the Athenian jury in the trial that would, ultimately, condemn him to his death. Through works such as the *Apology* and *The Republic*, we can see Plato's distaste of the concept of democracy. Why does he consider democracy to be so flawed? Let us look through his own eyes and see what his individual criticisms are, and determine if the very concept of democracy is as flawed as he believes it to be.

One of the contemporary definitions of democracy today is as follows: "Government by the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives; Rule by the majority" ("Democracy" Def.1,4). Democracy, as a form of government, was a radical idea when it manifested; many governments in the early history of the world were totalitarian or tyrannical in nature, due to overarching beliefs that the strong ruled over the weak.

Although the Greeks coined the word "democracy" – the words *demos* "people" and *kratos* "rule" conjoined together to mean, literally, "rule by the people" – there is speculation about whether or not certain other peoples, such as the Sumerians and the Indians, managed to engage in democratic methods of governance first. However, the history of democracy is not what is being discussed here; we are focusing on Plato's criticism of democracy, particularly with regards to the Athenian model and his writings in the Socratic dialogues. Let us continue on, before we veer off and lose sight of the argument.

So democracy is a system of government wherein the people elect their rulers; in the case of Athens, it was, more or less, a direct democracy, where all male citizens voted in an assembly and decided by majority rule (elected officials were chosen by allotment). Why would this be a bad thing? Is it not better than dictatorships or oligarchies, where anywhere from one man to a small group of elites have power over all? Why exactly would a government that has its decisions made by the very people it represents be considered something worthy of criticism?

This is where we get into the meat of the argument. Take note that there might be some consideration as to whether or not, particularly with regard to the Socratic dialogues, the criticism of democracy's properties originated from Socrates or Plato. But with regards to this essay, such a consideration is irrelevant, as it is not incorrect to say that Plato did indeed have some problems with democracy, especially with regard to the Athenian model.

The crux of this argument will focus on three of Plato's works: *Gorgias*, *Apology*, and *The Republic*.

In *Gorgias*, named for the Sicilian sophist and rhetorician featured in the dialogue, Socrates speaks with Gorgias concerning the nature of rhetoric as compared with philosophy; also, he speaks with Gorgias's pupil Polus concerning the tyrant and how he truly is the most unhappiest of all, despite any ill-gotten gains they may have attained. Socrates' distaste – and, by extension, Plato's – of the rhetorician is quite evident in passage 459 (Helmbold 18-19).

How does this tie in to the discussion of democracy?

Let us see first how Socrates classifies one skilled in the art of rhetoric, particularly with regards to one who is not learned in a particular subject outside of rhetoric. Using Socrates' own analogy, it is suggested that a rhetorician would be more capable of persuading a crowd of ignorant people on the subject of health than even a doctor. Although this seems foolish on the surface, a further examination would reveal the chilling truth behind these words; throughout the history of the world, a great multitude of people have been deceived and beguiled by skilled speakers, masters of rhetoric. This was something that Friedrich Nietzsche noted: "Insanity in individuals is something rare - but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule." Even today, we hear the words of those who proclaim they have wisdom in areas they have no expertise in. Though this may seem contradictory by default, it pays to not underestimate the ignorance of the populace at large, particularly when normally skeptical and rational individuals are swayed into thinking along with the group.

However, let us refocus the argument on Socrates and his words concerning the evil-doing tyrant in passages 470-480 (Helmbold 32-48). Polus – a teacher of rhetoric – contends that an unjust man (in this case, Archelaus, a king of Macedon), despite the crimes he has committed, is happy. Despite his unjust actions, he managed to become a person of power; he is the happier man, considering he has not met any punishment. Socrates does not agree with this notion; he contends that, among all wretched men, it is the unpunished that are truly unhappy. Recall, if you will, the beliefs of Socrates in terms of the soul.

He emphasized throughout his life that men should be concerned about the welfare of their soul. It is not at all unlike Socrates to suggest that a criminal who receives punishment for his wrongdoing – in other words, correction of their evils – will, in the end, be far happier than he who does not receive any punishment at all.

Let us carry this line of thought back to the issue of democracy. As Socrates suggested in Plato's *Gorgias*, the criminal who does wrongdoing without receiving any punishment is the most wretched person of all. What then, of a democracy, where the majority of people determines actions and policies?

What if, as a majority, the people decided to commit a heinous act, such as an unjustified military action against another nation for the sake of resources, no matter the cost in human lives? Such an action would lead to death and suffering for a great many people. Also, consider that the majority would not judge or correct themselves, for they were the ones who agreed to partake in that course of action. As such, they inflict evil upon many more people than an individual could ever hope to; after all, as a democracy, the majority's actions affect the entirety of the state and its citizens.

Even if the aforementioned individual were actually a tyrant, the evil he inflicts would only pollute his own soul; a democracy that commits wrongdoing pollutes the souls of everyone who partakes in the political process. Recall in the *Apology* that Socrates was tried and sentenced to death by the men of Athens. Recall that their minds were swayed against Socrates by rhetoricians; from the time they were mere babes, the men of the jury were of the opinion that Socrates had committed things that were, in fact, falsities (*Apology* 17a-19e). A wise and noble philosopher was put to death by people who had been persuaded wrongfully by skilled rhetoricians (once again reminding us that there was no love lost between Plato and those who were

considered masters of persuasion), and as such they committed an unjust act that, in the end, negatively affected the welfare of the souls. After all, who would rejoice in putting an innocent man of wisdom to death? The answer: only those who are ignorant of the philosopher's innocence, misled as they were by groupthink and ill-intentioned rhetoricians.

So now we can see why Plato had some unflattering opinions of democracy; for a philosopher concerned with the welfare of the soul, the idea of so many people – people that, in large groups, can be swayed easily by rhetoricians – being capable of unwittingly corrupting the health of their own souls must be horrifying. This leads us to Plato's idea of the "ideal" government. In the vast work that is *The Republic*, there is one passage in Book V that shows the ones whom Socrates thinks should be the rulers of a government:

Unless the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place, while the many natures now making their way to either apart from the other are by necessity excluded, there is no rest from ills for the cities, my dear Glaucon, nor I think for human kind, nor will the regime we have now described in speech ever come forth from nature, insofar as possible, and see the light of the sun. (Republic 473d-e)

A philosopher, to Plato and Socrates, is the ideal ruler of a state. The fact that such a government would be one where the people do not decide is irrelevant; as a philosopher concerned with the welfare of one's soul, Plato wants what is best for the souls of the citizens. A king concerned with the pursuit of wisdom would undoubtedly be better than a lover of wealth, power, or status.

In conclusion, it should be noted that, in modern times, a democracy is considered one of the more ideal forms of government, considering the value many people tend to place on individual liberty and the freedom to choose one's own path in life. However, Plato's criticisms should be kept in mind when determining the merit of a democratic government. Oh, would it not be great to have a democracy of philosophers, who would pursue truth and wisdom! Alas, we are only human, and susceptible to many evils and lies. The trick is to prevent such ignorant people from becoming the majority. At times, it seems nigh impossible to do so; curse our stupidity!

WORKS CITED

"Democracy." Def.1.4. The American Heritage Dictionary. 2nd college ed. 1991.

Plato. "The Apology." Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo. 2nd ed. Trans. Grube, G.M.A. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2002. 36.

Gorgias. Trans. Helmbold, W.C. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1952. 18-19, 32-48.

"Book V." The Republic of Plato. Trans. Bloom, Allan. New York: Basic Books Inc, 1968. 153-154.

TOPICS: History

KEYWORDS: democracy; godsgravesglyphs; greece; plato; socrates; whethernotweather

Something different; final paper for **History of Philosophy**. I usually like to insert my own conservative tone in my articles, but it's kind of hard to do this considering the material.

Wonder what Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle would've thought of the constitutional republic our Founding Fathers conceived...

Works Cited page included for any historians who want to confirm anything.

1 posted on **April 26, 2007 11:15:31 PM EDT** by **Ultra Sonic 007**

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **motzman; pissant; dirtboy; ImaGraftedBranch; AuntB; wagglebee; alicewonders; airborne**

Ping.

2 posted on **April 26, 2007 11:29:05 PM EDT** by **Ultra Sonic 007** (Why vote for Duncan Hunter in 2008? Look at my profile.)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

I'll take the wisdom of Franklin, Hamilton and Madison over that of the ancient greeks. These founders had 2000 years of other wise men to cull wisdom from in addition to the greeks. Not only that, they worked for a living.

3 posted on **April 26, 2007 11:36:37 PM EDT** by **pissant**

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

What if, as a majority, the people decided to commit a heinous act, such as an unjustified military action against another nation for the sake of resources, no matter the cost in human lives? Such an action would lead to death and suffering for a great many people. Also, consider that the majority would not judge or correct themselves, for they were the ones who agreed to partake in that course of action.

Something to think about.

4 posted on **April 26, 2007 11:38:35 PM EDT** by **airborne** (Duncan Hunter is the only real choice for honest to goodness conservatives!)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **pissant**

True. I think our system of government is the best in the world.

But I'd have loved to see Aristotle get in a debate with Benjamin Franklin.

5 posted on **April 26, 2007 11:40:29 PM EDT** by **Ultra Sonic 007** (Why vote for Duncan Hunter in 2008? Look at my profile.)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 3](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **SunkenCiv**

Probably not GGG-ping worthy, but I thought you'd be interested anyway.

6 posted on **April 26, 2007 11:45:21 PM EDT** by **Ultra Sonic 007** (Why vote for Duncan Hunter in 2008? Look at my profile.)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

Ben Franklin is in my top five favorite people of all time. Not only for his witty and profound philosophy, but for his grounded common sense, humor and his scientific genius.

If you read John Adams biography by David McCullough, there is a great snippet (written by Adams) about he and Franklin travelling together on a mission for the continental congress, I believe. Don't remember what colony they were in, but they had to share a room at an inn, and lo and behold, it only had one bed. Adams wanted the window closed, but Franklin insisted it remain open. They mildly argued for a while, then Adams relented, and he fell asleep while listening to a long lecture from Ben about the health benefits of fresh air.

History is simply amazing.

7 posted on **April 26, 2007 11:52:30 PM EDT** by **pissant**

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 5](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

In Plato's Republic democracy was second to the last, just below tyranny, in the breakdown of just or good regimes and all that was needed to slip into tyranny was a strong demagogue to persuade men to believe that he could give to the masses what they want. In the Germany's Wiemar Republic we see how the fledgling democracy fell to the dictator Adolf Hitler and this could possibly happen again... perhaps in Iraq. Plato hated democracy for a number of reasons, least of all was Athens putting his friend Socrates to death. However, Socrates challenged the Athenian democracy by questioning the existence of their gods (he was supposedly an atheist), corrupting their youth to do the same in challenging traditional authority, and being a general pain in the ass. Socrates had opportunities to escape a number of times but chose not to.

Interesting that Hegel thought that the state was justified for condemning Socrates and putting him to death, but Hegel always believed in the supremacy of the state as the absolute over the individual. And Hegel was also the inspiration for Marx and his idea of the collective. The individual always gets subsumed as part of the collective will.

The idea of the purity of the soul implies nature and a natural law that governs man. Today, there is no belief in nature, rather just a belief in the conventions of society and the relativism of all culture. We are more sophisticated and perhaps more the sophists as well.

8 posted on **April 27, 2007 12:10:49 AM EDT** by **Blind Eye Jones**

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007; blam; FairOpinion; StayAt HomeMother; Ernest_at_the_Beach; 24Karet; 3AngelaD; ...**

Thanks US007. Reading *The Republic* is an eye-opener for anyone thinking Plato liked democracy. :) I've added this to the catalog, and think a ping would not be out of line.

To all -- please ping me to other topics which are appropriate for the GGG list. Thanks.

Please **FREEMAIL** me if you want on or off the
"Gods, Graves, Glyphs" PING list or **GGG weekly digest**
 -- Archaeology/Anthropology/Ancient Cultures/Artifacts/Antiquities, etc.
Gods, Graves, Glyphs (alpha order)

9 posted on **April 27, 2007 12:18:02 AM EDT** by **SunkenCiv** (I last updated my profile on Tuesday, April 26, 2007.
<https://secure.freerepublic.com/donate/>)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Blind Eye Jones**

Actually, if you read more of the Apology, Socrates makes it clear that he does believe in the gods (he said his whole life of philosophy was a divine mission). What he doesn't like is the dogmatic approach that many in Athens took, instead of resorting to their reason and rationality to determine the existence of higher deities (which is something I happen to somewhat agree with; I look around at such a complex world and see a great intelligence involved in its creation).

As for Plato, the highest up the list of his "good regime" list was an aristocracy, then a timocracy, then an oligarchy, then a democracy, and at dead last was a tyranny.

10 posted on **April 27, 2007 12:26:59 AM EDT** by **Ultra Sonic 007** (Why vote for Duncan Hunter in 2008? Look at my profile.)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 8](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

If you read Aristophanes' *The Clouds* he portrays Socrates as a natural scientist in the early part of his career and it was only later that he became interest in ethics, morality and various human qualities. As a scientist Socrates questioned the gods — and it could be argued that he carried that through into his later years. That Socrates pays some kind of lips service to men's belief in gods only shows that he was respectful of the state and had loyalty and attachments to its citizens. To deny the existence of the gods publicly would weaken the divine foundation of the state and Plato says much the same in the *Republic*. Men need to believe in the afterlife and in the noble beginning of the state. In the *Republic* myths were created to bind mens attachments. However, amongst philosophers there is a tacit agreement, a seeing of the truth — which is not always pleasant or salutary for ordinary men — that men live in caves (culture) and believe in shadows. Only a few can escape and see the sun light. Socrates greatest accuser was Aristophanes who in fact knew who he was — though as a comedian Aristophanes could say the same kinds of things as comedy and never cross the

line — and saw Socrates overt blasphemy. It can also be argued that Plato's Republic is a response to Aristophanes' comedy but of a different kind, in that, the Republic, because it can only exist in speech, was in fact a great perversion of nature and nature needs to be tortured in order for Socrates to build the ideal state. Nature can't support the Republic — that is until that rational dream was attempted by John Locke and Marx and the whole modern project. The moderns believe they can conquer nature through science. That science lets everybody out of the cave into the possibility of a new utopia. But still God needs to be dead....

11 posted on **April 27, 2007 1:25:54 AM EDT** by **Blind Eye Jones**
 [[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 10](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

I tend to believe little to nothing of what was written about Socrates, especially when it comes to Plato. Reading the Republic, I always got the sense that Plato was simply using Socrates as a mouthpiece for his own ideas. Plato did not despise democracy because of Socrates, he despised it because he, like so many other historical detractors of ochlocracy (mob rule, ancient Greek slur against Democracy), believed that most people were too stupid to be trusted with civil power.

What Plato proposes for government looks like an "enlightened" variation of Sparta.

12 posted on **April 27, 2007 2:56:18 AM EDT** by **Quick or Dead** (Both oligarch and tyrant mistrust the people, and therefore deprive them of their arms - Aristotle)
 [[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

What if, as a majority, the people decided to commit a heinous act, such as an unjustified military action against another nation for the sake of resources, no matter the cost in human lives? Such an action would lead to death and suffering for a great many people. Also, consider that the majority would not judge or correct themselves, for they were the ones who agreed to partake in that course of action. As such, they inflict evil upon many more people than an individual could ever hope to; after all, as a democracy, the majority's actions affect the entirety of the state and its citizens.

Argument by appeal to higher authority. Suppose we change that statement slightly, maintaining the same conclusion:

What if, as a majority, the people decided to commit a heinous act, such as surrendering to an aggressive foreign country, for the sake of their habitual safety and hedonist existence no matter the enemy's stated intentions of complete and utter slavery? Such an action would lead to death and suffering for a great many people, and a permanent subjugation of all. Also, consider that the majority would not judge or correct themselves, for they were the ones who agreed to partake in that course of action. As such, they inflict evil upon many more people than an individual could ever hope to; after all, as a democracy, the majority's actions affect the entirety of the state and its citizens.

13 posted on **April 27, 2007 3:06:48 AM EDT** by **Publius6961** (MSM: Israelis are killed by rockets; Lebanese are killed by Israelis.)
 [[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Quick or Dead**

That's one of the problems concerning the Socratic dialogues; there's very little surviving material that can be directly traced to Socrates, and there's a question of whether or not Socrates actually said everything he was claimed to have said.

And yes, the philosophers such as Plato certainly did espouse a bit of elitism, didn't they?

14 posted on **April 27, 2007 6:23:39 AM EDT** by **Ultra Sonic 007** (Why vote for Duncan Hunter in 2008? Look at my profile.)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 12](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Publius6961**

Ooh, I like that one. ;D

15 posted on **April 27, 2007 7:32:38 AM EDT** by **Ultra Sonic 007** (Why vote for Duncan Hunter in 2008? Look at my profile.)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 13](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

what Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle would've thought of the constitutional republic

All Gov'ts are constitutional. Aristotle had an immense collection of constitutions of Gov'ts existing at his time, and just about everything was represented. What he didn't have is the XIVth Amendment that we have now as the central controlling portion of our constitution and it isn't at heart essentially a Republic.

16 posted on **April 27, 2007 10:50:31 AM EDT** by **RightWhale** (3 May '07 3:14 PM)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

A philosopher, to Plato and Socrates, is the ideal ruler of a state.

What a shock!

Philosophers consider philosophers to be the ideal rulers.

Little changes. Today, intellectuals still believe they are deserving of absolute power over others.

17 posted on **April 27, 2007 5:11:55 PM EDT** by **Sherman Logan** (I didn't claw my way to the top of the food chain to be a vegetarian.)

[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

To: **Ultra Sonic 007**

1,253 views.

18 posted on **March 28, 2008 7:41:11 PM EDT** by **cornelis**
[[Post Reply](#) | [Private Reply](#) | [To 1](#) | [View Replies](#)]

Disclaimer: Opinions posted on Free Republic are those of the individual posters and do not necessarily represent the opinion of Free Republic or its management. All materials posted herein are protected by copyright law and the exemption for fair use of copyrighted works.

[Free Republic](#)
[Browse](#) · [Search](#)

[General/Chat](#)
[Topics](#) · [Post Article](#)

FreeRepublic, LLC, PO BOX 9771, FRESNO, CA 93794

FreeRepublic.com is powered by software copyright 2000-2008 John Robinson