

## **Descending to Democracy: Problems for the Soul in *Republic* 8**

Maddox Larson

[maddoxlarson@creighton.edu](mailto:maddoxlarson@creighton.edu)

**ABSTRACT:** This essay considers the role of the soul in Plato's political philosophy. Contra Gerasimos Santas, I offer a reading of *Republic* 8 which takes Plato's criticism of the democratic soul as his criticism of the psychological pressures innate in the democratic constitution. On this account, democracy fails because it encourages unnecessary appetites. These appetites breed anarchy and ignorance under the guise of freedom. Section two reviews Santas reading of the *Republic* and his interpretation of Plato's treatment of democratic principles: private property, knowledge, and freedom. Section three provides a reading which takes the soul into consideration. Reading the descent to democracy and the birth of the democratic man as indicative of the pressures of the democratic system, we gain insights into the psychology of democracy.

**KEYWORDS:** Plato; democracy; political philosophy

**PAGE COUNT (excluding references):** 10

**WORD COUNT (excluding footnotes, references):** 2,974

## I. Introduction

Plato's *Republic* famously argues for a city with a strong class divide and ruled by philosophers. This is because the rulers of a just city must know the Form of the Good in order to bring about the good of the city. This is also way Plato lists democracy toward the end of a list of increasingly defective constitutions from his own city, Kallipolis. Plato's antidemocratic remarks in *Republic* cause trouble for pro-democratic ancient philosophers. What do we make of these comments?

Gerasimos Santas aims to extract lessons from Plato's criticism of democratic principles such as private property, knowledge, and freedom. He divides Plato's theory into abstract/formal theory and empirical assumptions (or practical applications). This results in a reading of Plato's *Republic* where we can take lessons from Plato without accepting (or even acknowledging) his theory of the soul. This is puzzling considering how much time Plato's Socrates devotes to exploring the timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical souls in *Republic* 8 and 9.

I offer a reading of *Republic* 8 which takes Plato's criticism of the democratic soul as his criticism of the psychological pressures innate in the democratic constitution. Democracy fails because it encourages unnecessary appetites. These appetites breed anarchy and ignorance under the guise of freedom. Section two reviews Santas reading of the *Republic* and his interpretation of Plato's treatment of democratic principles: private property, knowledge, and freedom. Section three provides a reading which takes the soul into consideration. Reading the descent to democracy and the birth of the democratic man as indicative of the pressures of the democratic system, we gain insights into the psychology of democracy. Section four concludes.

## II. A Separable Account of Plato's Criticisms

Gerasimos Santas interprets Plato’s metaphysics and social philosophy as separable. On his account, we can take lessons from Plato’s criticisms of democracy without accepting his theory of justice for the soul. In this section, I review his claim that Plato’s metaphysics and social philosophy which he calls abstract theory and empirical assumptions, respectively, are separable with respect to the theory of the soul.

Santas separates Plato’s metaphysics and social philosophy because if we can identify errors in his metaphysics, then we can find errors in his social philosophy (Santas 2007, 72). He identifies this distinction at work in Book 1. When Socrates and Thrasymachus discuss the function and virtue of things, Thrasymachus agrees that everything has its function (*Rep.* 1, 352e-353d).<sup>1</sup> These are examples of metaphysics (or abstract or formal) definitions. Then Socrates uses these definitions to advance propositions that we can only live, deliberate, and decide with the soul. Further, he concludes that justice is the virtue of the soul – an ethical thesis. Santas says we can use this distinction to identify errors in either the metaphysics or the social philosophy to determine where the theory needs to be revised.

Using this methodology, Santas first considers Plato’s critique of private property ownership by the ruling class in his ideal city, Kallipolis, mentioned in Books 3 and 4. We learn in Book 3 that the rulers of this city must be among the best of the guardians who are knowledgeable and capable of guarding the city and who care for it (*Rep.* 3, 412cd). The requirements to become a member of the guardian class become more and more demanding throughout the *Republic*. They are not allowed to possess any private property that is not “wholly necessary” (412cd) and are forbidden to even touch gold and silver (416d). This is because if they were to possess any private property, they would become distracted from guarding the city and become “household managers

---

<sup>1</sup> All citations to Plato’s works are in C.D.C. Reeve’s *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues* (Hackett, 1967).

## Descending to Democracy

and farmers instead of guardians” (417a; Santas 2007, 74). While Santas does not believe that any society has or ever can implement these, there is something important that Plato is saying. With a third of the members of the U.S. House of Representatives being identified as millionaires in annual income, Santas regards Plato’s extreme measures against private property ownership as indicative of the need for dissolving the current connection between ruling and wealth (75-76).

While it is true that Plato expresses concerns about private property ownership by the ruling class, he is not expressly concerned about political rent-seeking, but about the ability of leaders to care for and lead the city. That is to say that men who are concerned with money and property cannot be concerned with philosophical matters such as bringing about the good of the city, at least not in the same way. Democracy’s freedom to own property undermines this by allowing and even encouraging property ownership. In the same way, its license to “do whatever you want” means that the rulers do not have to care about let alone know the good for the city. In this sense, when we separate the metaphysics from the social philosophy, we are not getting all of the implications from Plato’s criticism.

Santas also considers Plato’s emphasis on knowledge in the ruling class. Plato makes it clear that the guardian class must possess some specialized knowledge – knowledge of the Forms and of the Good (*Rep.* 4, 428ab). Since the completely good city may be said to have wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, the rulers must be those who are able to know those four things (427e). After all, “it certainly is not through *ignorance* that people do the prudent thing, but through knowledge” (428b; original emphasis). According to Santas, there is a lot of merit to this idea: “absent the poor, the requirements for voting might include a high school education” (Santas 2007, 79). If it were not for America’s large-scale wealth inequality and its correlation to education attainment (especially along racial lines), it is reasonable to expect that requirements for voting or

running for political office include education at the high school, collegiate, or post-baccalaureate levels. For Plato, knowledge of the Good is necessary for rulers because they cannot lead a city to goodness without knowing it. For Santas, knowledge is valuable in itself such that having an educated populous makes for a more just city.

Plato does emphasize the role of knowledge in the ruling class, but it is not just any knowledge that leaders must have but knowledge of the Forms. Knowledge of the Forms and of the Good is required in order to bring about the good for the city. Democracy boasts its allowance for anyone to rule without regard for his epistemic qualifications. This is problematic because at least in Kallipolis, philosopher-kings are required to know the Good such that they can direct the city in a good way. Democracy has no such preoccupation. Instead, each person gets to do what he wants. We might be able to separate Plato's metaphysics and social philosophy insofar as rejecting his theory of Forms but accepting his theory of justice for the city. However, we cannot get past the idea that philosophers must rule because of their special knowledge.

Finally, Santas considers democratic freedoms. Plato opposes free choice of profession because each man has natural talents and an aptitude for something. Recall that each of us differs somewhat from another in that we are suited for different jobs (*Rep.* 2, 370d). To allow the man with an aptitude for carpentry to become a baker harms the city. Each person must only practice one pursuit, the one for which he is naturally best suited (*Rep.* 3, 433a). Santas takes this opposition to freedom of professions as irreconcilable with democracy. Providing for the city, defending it, and ruling it would be better done in Plato's city because those in charge would assess each person's capabilities and assign him to the job for which he is best suited. The most likely reason, to Santas, is that allowing those who are not best suited for providing, ruling, or defending violates the principle of organization, which is foundational, or at least necessary, for the other virtues of

## Descending to Democracy

the city (Santas 2007, 87). Meanwhile, democracy allows freedom of choice which is inefficient since each man could choose to do something in which he is not proficient, or less competent, comparatively. Santas (88) further notes that “[h]ere the distinction between justice and empirical assumptions finds its limits; the dispute cannot be resolved by modifying—hopefully in the direction of truth—empirical assumptions used in the construction of the theory of justice or in its applications.”

### III. Descending to Democracy

Though the tenants of democracy seem favorable due to its emphasis on personal freedoms, democracy has pitfalls. I diverge from Santas’ analysis for democratic principles such as private property or freedoms in *Republic* 2, 3, 4 by focusing my analysis on the democratic man and constitution in Book 8. This means that I focus on what Plato takes to be his own analysis of the democratic constitution and man. The description of the descent from Plato’s utopia to tyranny provides insight into the psychology of each form of governance. My treatment of Plato’s criticism of freedom in this section shows that something is missing from Santas’ account – the soul.

The description of the descent from utopia to aristocracy to timocracy to oligarchy to democracy to tyranny provides keen insights into the psychology of democracy. Democracy arises from oligarchy because the poor in this society become intemperate with the inequality exercised by their leaders (*Rep.* 8, 555d). A Marxist revolt breaks out and the poor overthrow their oligarchic leaders, giving each remaining person an “equal share in the constitution and the ruling offices” (556b-557a). Though this is not true of many democracies, there is still a sense in which Plato is right. Democracy in the United States arose because of the early settlers’ disapproval of monarchic rule in England. Absolute power wielded by one person over many seemed unreasonable and

unfair. Democracy in France arose for similar reasons. Both the American and French revolutions result in the same consequence that Plato describes: each remaining person agrees to have an equal share in the constitution and ruling offices. In a situation where individuals are fed up with centralized power wielded by few people, the natural option is a decentralized system of governance.

More specifically, democracy arises from the oligarchic man. The oligarchic man's son is raised to have the same characteristics as him: to seek out his *necessary* appetites (559c). The necessary appetites are those which we cannot deny such as eating to the point of health, well-being, and the "desire for bread and relishes (559ab). Those appetites which are unnecessary are those which incline us to eat beyond the point of health and into excess, the sexual appetites, and other pleasures (559c). When the son of the oligarchic man is raised in the same manner as his father, he will not be familiar with the other pleasures. When he encounters "the honey of the drones and associates with wild and terrible creatures who can provide multifarious pleasures," he will surely be overwhelmed and succumb to them (559d). The son of the oligarchic man is not representative of every person in a democracy, but there are still some keen insights here. It can certainly be said that when individuals are raised in a household which shelters them from unnecessary appetites, those children grow up to encounter those appetites and can be overwhelmed by them. Consider the standard stereotype of the teenager who experiments with drugs, sex, and rock and roll. Growing up in a sheltered environment does not eliminate their curiosity but in a sense encourages their fascination once they discover those things hidden from them.

It is because of this description of the birth of democracy that Plato correctly characterizes democracy by the freedoms it provides. The people who live under such a constitution are free to

## Descending to Democracy

exercise freedom of speech and license to do whatever they want (557b). This is problematic for Plato because those unnecessary appetites which the oligarchic man's son has discovered come to seize "the citadel of the young man's soul" since it is empty of the fine studies and true arguments that are the best guardians in the mind (560b). Since the son has only been raised to attend to those necessary appetites with no knowledge of the unnecessary ones, he is left defenseless, like an immune system without a vaccine. The defenseless son becomes the democratic man. The democratic man then confuses those bad qualities with goods ones, "calling arrogance 'good breeding,' anarchy 'freedom,' extravagance 'magnificence,' and shamelessness 'courage.'" (560e). It is in this sense that the democratic man exchanges his childhood among the necessary appetites for a free life among the unnecessary ones. Socrates says:

And so he [the democratic man] lives from day to day, gratifying the appetite of the moment. Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute, while at others he drinks only water and is on a diet. Sometimes he goes in for physical training, while there are others when he is idle and neglects everything. Sometimes he spends his time engaged in what he takes to be philosophy. Often, though, he takes part in politics, leaping to his feet and saying and doing whatever happens to come into his mind. If he admires some military men, that is the direction in which he is carried; if some moneymakers, then in that different one. There is neither order nor necessity in his life, yet he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and follows it throughout his entire life. (561cd)



This story of the birth and descent of the democratic man cannot be said to be indicative of every person, but it illustrates the greatest pitfall of democracy: freedom. Plato's authoritarian Kallipolis prioritizes the well-being of the city above all else. The guardians of Kallipolis have the requisite knowledge of the Forms such that they can bring about Good in the city. Democracy contrasts sharply with this. Each man is free to do as he pleases. This results in a commitment to unnecessary appetites with freedom always being cited as the justification. In fact, freedom is what destroys democracy (562bc). The pursuit of freedom leads people to lose sense of their social roles. Fathers give freedom to their children and in turn are met with unruly and disrespectful children; teachers give freedom to their students, leading them too to become unruly and rebellious. Plato's penchant for maintaining control over everything in the city is certainly concerning, one might see that his commentary on the pursuit of freedom ending in anarchy is true to an extent. In post-COVID America, teachers are quitting every day and citing an increase in behavioral issues among students. Social media has created trends which have resulted in the destruction of school property, harm of teachers, and disrespect toward administrators. In a sense, this may contribute to the development of the fearful fathers and teachers that Plato describes. In an effort to maintain the freedom of their children and students, parents and teachers will fail to discipline them in the appropriate way. In America at least, it cannot be the teachers' fault. The ever-present threat of school violence may lead them to be rightfully scared of their students. This too stems from an issue of freedom.

These descriptions extend not only to the democratic man, but the democratic constitution. An overcommitment to unnecessary appetites results in a constitution which prioritizes freedom over the well-being of the city. Plato this might mean increased labor mobility and workers' rights, but we can also consider freedom of speech, association, assembly, or the right to bear arms.

## Descending to Democracy

Because democracies struggle so much with how much of each freedom to provide, Plato might suggest cutting them all out. While this is undesirable, we can still see that the psychology of democracy pressures individuals to excessive appetites. We no longer accept the simple freedom to own weapons for safety but want weapons for the sake of having them. We want freedom of speech to be able to express opinions, yes, but also to harm others. None of these excessive practices promote the good of the soul or of the city to Plato. Owning weapons for their own sake is not honorable. Using freedom of speech to harm others is not virtuous.

### IV. Conclusion

We see that Plato's *Republic* offers insights into metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and social-political philosophy. Take separately they may be able to provide interesting commentary at the individual or social levels. Gerasimos Santas, for instance, aims to provide political commentary from Plato's criticisms of democracy in *Republic* 8 with only reference to his social-political philosophy therefore ignoring his metaphysics of the soul. This results in an inaccurate reading of the *Republic* and only makes use of select fragments of the text.

I have offered a reading of Book 8 that highlights the intertwining metaphysics and political philosophy. Justice for the city is intimately tied to justice for the individual. It is unsurprising then that Plato spends more time criticizing the democratic man than the democratic city. The commentary is transferable. The democratic man is unorganized and ignorant, so the democratic city is anarchic and develops faulty rules. Further, I have analyzed the consequences of my reading of Book 8 in comparison with Santas' separable account.

The account of justice that Plato provides is not easy to agree with. He disagrees with all the tenants of modern American society: pursuit of happiness, private property ownership, and

equality of all. The rulers do not need to be happy, they just need to have knowledge of the Forms and bring about justice for the city. When we explore the weaving of his metaphysics and political philosophy, we find interesting lessons for democracy. Sometimes private property ownership incentivizes rent-seeking in public offices. Sometimes philosophy can create strong leaders. Sometimes too much freedom is a bad thing.

## References

Reeve, C.D.C. 1967. *A Plato Reader: Eight Essential Dialogues*. Hackett Classics.

Santas, Gerasimos. 2007. "Plato's criticisms of democracy in the *Republic*." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 24 (2): pp. 70-89. DOI 10.1017/S0265052507070173.