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Final Essay

Individualism vs. The Collective Good in Plato's *The Republic*

In Plato's *The Republic*, the city-soul analogy described throughout the book creates a clear dilemma between pursuing widespread individualism in a democracy and guiding society towards the collective good or the just and harmonious society of an aristocracy. *In this paper, I will compare these regimes to claim that an aristocracy is less collectively good when compared to a democracy as in the former the collective is portrayed by the philosophers. In the latter, the collective is based first on equality and then decided upon by the masses with this principle as a foundation better corresponding with Plato's metaphysics. I will argue that both the protection of individualism and the pursuit of the collective good of the state can coexist together. A solution for Plato's dilemma of individualism vs the collective would be a state which inclusively represents the populace and collectively agrees to protect personal individualism, essentially modern liberalism which, due to its egalitarian (rather than hierarchical) nature provides a much more stable political structure. What is good for the state is decided upon with the foundational understanding of individual equality (stemming from mathematical principles) playing the most vital moral obligatory role.*

The paper will be organized into the following sections; I will first look at how Plato describes and compares democracy with the aristocracy using his city-soul analogy and argue how an aristocracy is less stable than a democracy as the former is in a state of constant impending collapse. I will also discuss how Plato's democracy is more representative of state will and therefore more collectively desirable when compared to an aristocracy that is based on

only the philosopher's understanding and guidance; Plato simply considers the masses dangerous and misguided by their emotions. Then I will examine why Plato considers individualism and freedom the source of social vice which plagues and corrupts rulers disrupting social harmony, infecting the leadership (or a soul's reason, the regulator of other parts) and by extension the rest of the state with those who are not fit to rule. Plato's version of free democracy is based on how politics (the ruling class) shapes social morals. To Plato, the best (not necessarily most inclusive) political structure, the aristocracy, will lead to the most optimal education and create a harmonious social-moral attitude based on a hierarchy where everyone does what they are suited to. In contrast, a democracy lacks cohesion and harmony (justice) and, is dominated by self-interest. I will argue that democratic social-moral structure is caused by a different type of harmony (one based on equality, not hierarchy and is, therefore, more intelligible) only possible in the most inclusive regimes when individual equal rights are seen as the collective good resulting in essentially liberal political and educational structures. The social development of moral obligation toward individual equality allows for inclusive decisions about what is collectively good to become a possibility resulting in greater societal well-being than if this goal was directed.

How Plato Uses the City-Soul Analogy

Plato uses the city-soul analogy to connect the states of the soul with the constitutions of society, the more unified, and harmonious the soul of the rulers (harmonious in how each part works its natural way), the more these characteristics will be present in the state. Plato sees the aristocracy as the ultimate form of the just state as it best corresponds with the natural structure of the tripartite soul. All classes defined by the structure of their soul harmoniously work

together in their natural roles with rulers who love wisdom (Plato sees lovers of knowledge as true philosophers and the only soul archetype capable of ruling), guardians who love courage and honour, and producers who love their appetites. Therefore, the state degrades and eventually collapses when those not naturally suited to rule, as they do not value reason the most, end up in positions of power disrupting the natural harmony. In a democracy, Plato believes that the democratic rulers' insatiable commitment to their unnecessary appetites (namely money) and to be free rather than reason and knowledge eventually leads to the erosion of the stability and harmony of a state (555a-561a). He uses assortments of arguments to showcase the lifecycle of democracy and how the pursuit of freedom in a democratic regime paradoxically leads to tyranny. To Plato, stabilization can never be achieved if the masses rule based on individual desires as seen in a democracy. This only produces factionalism and instability. In fact, to Plato, knowledge of what the collective good is can only be obtained by philosophers who, based on the structure of their soul, are lovers of reason, and contemplation and the only ones capable of such knowledge of the forms (474c4-480a13).

The Stability of the Aristocratic Regime

Even in the aristocracy when philosophers rule and decide upon the collective good, the stability of this specific political structure is not implied. Plato explains how eventually the ruling philosophers will come to disagreements and those who do not have souls fit to rule as they do not prioritize reason will be born into positions of power and slowly degrade the state to lesser constitutions (546a-547a). Plato often admits that the aristocracy is the most difficult constitution to achieve as it relies on the existence of the rarest type of soul, one of a true philosopher who has escaped Platos' metaphorical cave becoming educated but decides to go

back and guide others out as well - the Philosopher King (503b5-503b10). Another important note not addressed is how these ruling philosophers will convince everyone to behave according to their great plan. Disregarding the soul part of the analogy which gives purpose to the aristocratic regime as it corresponds with the natural structure of the soul, there is not much other reasoning as to how this type of governing will provide harmony to the state (other than certain policies about anonymous parenthood). If these drastic measures must be met and maintained for the aristocracy to survive can it be argued that this is a stable and desirable form of politics? Plato argues the aristocracy is most harmonious because every citizen does what they are best suited to. A cup filled with water teetering on the edge of a table may be hierarchical and unitary but will eventually spill over; even if this regime is Platonically harmonic, it is still in a constant state of impending collapse and therefore not stable.

If the aristocracy is inherently unstable and unsustainable as it will always degenerate then it cannot be considered anything other than one generation away from a timocracy where the rulers love courage and honour more than reason. In contrast, the democratic regime can metaphorically be seen as a cup that has already fallen from the ledge and spilt on the ground, the description of harmony is no longer Platonic or naturally hierarchical but rather egalitarian, multifaceted, and stable (a lake is most stable when all the water is calm and equal rather than thrashing about with some waves ruling over others). Plato claims that democracy, the freest of constitutions would inevitably lead to tyranny, the most enslaved, as class conflict causes one particular popular leader to arise from the chaos (565a-566a) however other than this presumption there is no indication that given the freedom of democracy, the classes will automatically devolve into inciting violence against each other. Democracies can be seen as a

more flexible ruling style as they can adapt to the needs of the state. If social welfare is becoming a problem and wealth is unequally shared then there may be unrest but only provoking change that creates a different style of democracy not necessarily overthrowing the entire system for a tyrant.

The Portrayed Good of an Aristocracy vs The Representative Good

Not only is the aristocracy unstable and prone to collapse in its pursuit of the collective good to be a just and harmonious society but it can also be argued that the collective good of an aristocracy posed by the philosopher rulers is something portrayed to be beneficial to the collective and rather only benefits the few. As evident by Plato's 'Ship of Fools' analogy (488a-489a), he deems the rule of the masses to be tyrannical as governance not based on reason and knowledge is faulty (a ship cannot be led without a captain). The philosophers who are the only ones truly capable of wisdom due to their love of reason must be the class which rules over the aristocratic city and guides the citizens because of this quality. Plato argues the aristocrats will be kept on the righteous path through education, however, if the philosophers are the only group to know what is good for the state, can we claim this to be a collective goal or one laid out by the ruling class? What if after years of contemplation, the philosophers come to understand that the best path forward for the state is to not care about reason but rather money or honour- would they give their rule up? There is no reason to believe a philosopher will properly interpret the form of the good and translate that into politics, by manipulating the form of the good into politics it becomes only a product of what the philosopher portrays as the form of the good, not the good itself. Plato seems to assume that the guardians would go to war and the producers would live their lives working simply so the aristocratic class could rule even if this political

structure does not represent the populace. The Philosopher King can only be as 'philosophical' as the state will allow him to be especially if, due to a lack of education and ability for knowledge, the other classes can never truly understand the purpose of an aristocratic regime. I would argue that the real collective good is not objective but has to be decided upon by the collective and not forced by the aristocracy.

The aristocratic goal of maintaining harmony by distinguishing a soul hierarchy will only be promoted by those wishing to uphold this form of unequal harmony; those who benefit the most in this structure (the philosophers) because it protects their social class (connecting to Socrates' execution). It is inherently Thrasymachian. It can even be argued the rulers in an aristocracy would not understand the lives, business, or affairs of the guardians and producers as they are too detached from their city worrying about the forms, that leadership over the other classes would be difficult to manage. The democratic goal of egalitarian (rather than hierarchical) harmony and personal freedom (rather than state-enforced order) can protect all who live in this structure not just certain classes making it more inclusive. Plato would argue that the goal set forth by the democratic rulers would be the freedom to indulge in unnecessary appetites; however, in his most basic description of the ideal city which would only include necessities, Plato admits that relishes acquired through warfare are needed on top of necessities to make their city luxurious and not just one fit for animals (372c-374a). Even in the aristocracy, luxury seems to be something found reasonable to strive for insofar as to train and deploy a military force against others to acquire it. If luxury is a reasonable goal for the aristocrats then Plato should not criticize the democrats for the same appetite. In a hierarchical setting, what is good for everyone is not collectively decided upon but rather portrayed and instilled by the top.

This hierarchical harmony is inefficient if the aristocrats inevitably fail to decide upon certain questions leading to factionalism and decay. The real good for the state will better represent the collective will if it is decided upon.

Why Plato Argues Democratic Freedom Infects Society

Plato understands that freedom (individualism in a democracy) and justice (the collective good of an aristocracy) are desirable qualities in society but does not believe that one leads to the other. Freedom to Plato allows people to perform societal roles to which they are not naturally suited and disrupts the order of a state. Plato sees freedom as something which does not promote progression but rather selfish and shameless indulgences(560e-561a5). It is almost as if to Plato in a democracy everyone decides to litter because they have the freedom to do so allowing the public to live without rules. The characteristic of a free society completely at the mercy of individual desires which is most evident in a democracy causes Plato to describe this structure as a route to anarchy. This supposed connection between the two is because Plato believes that the desire for freedom in a democracy outweighs the legislative protection of the state. In Platos' democracy, the citizens and rulers will fight and harm each other for their ability to be free. However it seems Plato assumes that humans are inherently unjust, given the opportunity which is presented in the free structure of a democracy, we will fight each other for our desires creating chaos and eventual decay into tyranny. Plato might think this because of how he understands politics and the makeup of the soul to impact our moral structures.

According to Plato, because people live in a free system as a result of a decline in city-soul standards for regimes and rulers who desire freedom and money more than anything, no

one will have any sense of obligation to the state because people will do whatever they please (561a5). In an aristocratic system its structure is provided by the ruling class of philosophers, the harmony present in this system as enforced by the guardians will motivate all citizens to do what they are naturally suited to. Arguably, the lack of political freedom means those in power will devote the state to whatever they see fit rather than collective wishes. However, a directed moral structure based on the philosophers who love reason is more favourable to Plato than a lack of moral structure as seen in a democracy. But does democracy lack moral structure as seen in anarchy or rather does it have one shaped by more influences than just the ruling social class? One that is perhaps both complex and beautiful containing the freedom to think and philosophize, question traditional norms and practice personal belief systems (557b5-558a). Allowing these influences to coalesce into a better populace-represented morality based on equality. The guidance of political hierarchical harmony does not shape the moral structure of democracy; a different type of harmony based on many sources and creating a collective representation of the good (rather than portrayed) resulting in egalitarianism (rather than hierarchy) creates the democratic moral structure.

The Intelligible Collective Good of the Free Democracy - Individual Equality

As evident from previous arguments, Plato believes the city-soul conjunction defines what collective good is sent forth for the state. When the city and soul are structured to create a hierarchical harmony, the individual is sacrificed for the common good and qualities such as freedom are given up for order. The city-soul constitution directly corresponds with the moral guidelines that the state appeals to, which are laid out by the rulers in an aristocracy. To Plato, the political structure defines morality, and in an aristocracy, individualism must be given up to

appeal to more ordered and unitary morals based on the proposed collective. The guidance of the philosopher outweighs the freedom of the individual and therefore these two cannot exist together. Plato would argue that democracy is the opposite of this measurement of value in that freedom outweighs the collective good of the state. I propose that Plato's version of democracy is unitary and ordered even though many different sources influence it morally. The universal moral standard of a democracy starts with protecting individual equality allowing the representational collective to determine their moral system based on qualities such as liberty and freedom. In the aristocracy, politics determine the moral standards and what is collectively good, however in a democracy, the moral standard to protect equality is the first universal law. From this principle, you get collective ideas of what is good for the state and political frameworks which best represent these ideas. So in fact, in a democracy, politics does not define morals but vice-versa.

If democracies are based first on formal principles such as equality and freedom from which a moral and political system is set up, while aristocracies are based on fallacies such as soul hierarchy- then it seems Plato's democracy is more attuned with his Line analogy (509d5) that metaphysically places the intelligible world over imagination (the former is more real). Even if one argues that the aristocratic interpretation of soul hierarchy is an accurate metaphysical understanding, the fact that it is portrayed by the philosophers in politics makes it more of an image than a principle. Does philosophizing about the good cause philosophers to realize it is beneficial to create social hierarchies? I would argue this seems like an interpretation of what is good rather than the form of the good making it more of an image that has to be justified which is the purpose of the city-soul analogy.

As I have argued that aristocracies are based on images, I suppose my argument instead assumes that democracies use intelligible principles as the source for their politics and morals. This relies on the notion that equality, to be equal, is a mathematical principle that places it in the intelligible world, more real than the physical or imaginary. Democracies are based on the insatiable appetite for individual equality allowing for concepts of the collective good which represent the population and revolve around freedom and liberty. From this development, you get the political structures which entrench this system and make it flexible allowing for an array of different ideas and opinions but all existing in the underlying foundational structure that everyone is equal based on the mathematical principle of equality. If one can at least connect democracies with the principle of equality then it is possible to argue this political regime is based on a moral collective structure which is intelligible, better represents the people, and protects individualism. Even if the aristocracy is based on the mathematical principle of inequality making it correspond better with Plato's metaphysics, the question becomes what makes people unequal. To say that people have unequal souls makes this interpretation of the principle of inequality into a physical, or even worse, imaginary (if one does not believe in souls) representation.

Is This Type of Democracy Possible?

Although this version which has been constructed of democracy does not entirely fit the definition of Plato's democracy or his understanding of what this regime entails, this version is only possible in this type of political structure which holds that the collective good is individualism. This contrast also does not mean that this type of democracy is too idealistic and

therefore unrealistic as I would argue there are currently many examples of democratic systems based on equality first, which then lay out moral standards and political structures originating from the principle of equality. The historical transition from monarchies to liberal democracies can be seen as evidence of the existence of this type of democratic regime. Modern-day liberal democracies are first developed by principles originating in the Enlightenment and other moral influences which have propelled equality to reign as the most important social virtue. This has allowed political frameworks, usually relying on constitutions, to cement pre-existing inclusive moral standards which value individual freedom as the collective good instead of hierarchical order like in an aristocracy. This results in a different type of order and harmony, one not enforced but rather naturally occurring when the concept that everyone is equal is first universally supported. A social harmony more egalitarian than aristocratic. The most flexible therefore stable, representative of the collective will, and intelligible regarding Plato's metaphysics, type of political regime.

Cited

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