

1. 5 types of constitutions, 5 types of souls

We now pick up where we left off ... at the end of Book IV. Now, since we founded the city as perfectly good, and we said the the city would be self-perpetuating in some sense, it is difficult to see how it would degenerate into something less than totally good. The city we founded was an *aristocracy* (rule by the *excellent*)-- and we recall its structure: the guardians/philosopher kings rule, aided by the auxiliaries. In the individual soul, the analogue will be the best kind of life-- one which is ruled by reason. Notice something interesting: in the *aristocratic* form of government, the rulers have the corresponding form of soul. This pattern will continue: the rulers in a particular form of government will have the analogous form of soul to the form of government they rule in.

2. Timocracy

So, how will the city fall into the “next best” form of government- *timocracy* (or “rule by the worthy”)? The problem, Plato thinks, lies with his program of eugenics. Although, for the most part, the rulers will arrange the best possible pairings to get the best offspring, at some point they will fail, either because they have to rely on sense perception (546b) or because they will be ignorant of the human “geometrical number” described at 546b, probably because we can’t predict lifespans. The result will be offspring who are less excellent than the previous generation, which isn’t in itself bad right away; the problem comes when these future guardians (someone has to act as the guardians) turn to educate the *next* generation. (547d). The slightly less good guardians give slightly worse education to the next generation of offspring, especially when it comes to musical education, and they will pay less attention to testing and refining the future guardians. We now have the beginning of a struggle for power: some want to defend virtue, others, who are not true guardians, have developed a timocratic soul (we’ll see how this happens in a minute) and so are no longer content with the life of a guardian. The guardians compromise and divide up all the land and goods.

However, this government won’t be all bad. All of the guardians are still somewhat *decent*-- they received an education and what results is “the love of victories and honors.” (548c). In fact, it turns out that the person with the timocratic soul only wants money and possessions because of *honor*.

What happens is that the person with that would develop a timocratic soul would, under the aristocracy, have become an auxiliary-- they are *good persons*, yet, they can be corrupted. In this case, what happens is the following: they see their father being made fun of and ridiculed by their “friends,” for being so “virtuous” yet getting nothing out of it. Now, if the future timocrat was like their parents, they would look on this slanderer with dispassionate reason and realize how little they know about virtue. But not so for the timocrat, their sense of honor cannot bear to listen to this, and they, while they still do not care about money *for the sake of having money*, and they are still under the good influence of their parents, they themselves want to have money

for the sake of *honor*- the timocratic soul is *ruled by spirit*. (*thumos*). Reason becomes the servant of spirit.

Which isn't all bad. In fact, Plato seems to admire this sort of government. However, the problem is that the city is now on an inevitable slide to becoming worse, the next stop is *oligarchy* (rule by the rich.)

3. Oligarchy

Let's go in the opposite order of Plato and look at the oligarchic soul- which will be ruled by the *necessary appetites*. How does this soul come to be? The trouble lies in elevating honor to top spot of importance. Suppose you see your parents lose all of their property or suffer in some other way like this-- if you care most of all about honor you vow this will never happen to you. What will you do? Well, according to Plato, you will, ironically "throw the honor-loving and spirited element headlong from the throne" in your soul. (553b). After all, it only brings ruin! What will you turn to instead? Moneymaking. This represents true security. Now notice you still at this point don't care about money *for the sake of what money can buy*- you only care about the security it represents. You certainly won't find such a person worrying about fame (555a) or luxuries (554a) or anything like this. They only want peace and security. Now, maybe this isn't *too* bad a way of life-- we suggested that it is the way of life (rule by the necessary appetites) that would probably be recommended by Epicurus (341-270 BCE) who, we said, is a *hedonist*, but of the sort that we want to live lives where we avoid suffering-- we should in fact employ our reason to accomplish this objective.

How does the oligarchic soul become an oligarchic ruler? Well it is a combination of being "pulled down" into valuing wealth more and more as being honorable (as opposed to true honor and reason), and the desire to protect one's own wealth. However, we've now let wealth into the city, and poverty soon follows (552a), and while we aren't yet at the worst sort of government, our oligarchic city "would contain ... evils" (552e) like people living in abject poverty and all of the bad consequences this has. But things can get worse (even if they *look* better).

4. Democracy

The oligarchic rulers care about making money most of all. They therefore have no interest in preventing people from spending everything they have (555c)-- it's not their problem that others do not have oligarchic souls like they have. But what happens when you allow people to spend themselves into poverty? Resentment; a problem which becomes worse when the poor and rich "meet on journeys or some share undertakings ..." such as a military campaign. Poor people realize how useless the rich really are: "These men are ours for the taking; they are good for nothing?" (556d). And now the city is *infected*-- it will turn against itself. The poor, greater in numbers, will prevail, and take over ruling.

For a time, the result looks pretty good: the city is "full of freedom and freedom of speech." (557b). And each person can "arrange [their] own life in whatever way it pleases [them]." (557b). Plato concedes that this form of government looks pretty good:

“It looks, then as though it is the most beautiful of all the constitutions. For just like an embroidered cloak embroidered with every kind of ornament, it is embroidered with every sort of character, and so would appear to be the most beautiful.” (557c).

But all is not well. We’ll see what’s wrong after we consider the democratic soul, and how it comes to be:

“When a young [person] who is reared in the uneducated and thrifty manner we described just now tastes the honey of the drones and associates with wild and terrible creatures who can provide multifarious pleasures of every degree of complexity and sort, that probably marks the beginning from having an oligarchic constitution within [them] to having a democratic one.” (559e).

What happens is that the parents teach their children to be thrifty and oligarchic. But the children have lost contact with *why* the parents were thrifty and oligarchic-- to prevent dishonor. They have no experience of what happened to the previous generations: all they see is a bunch of wealth that no one seems to be using properly-- in spending on the pleasures they are introduced to-- the pleasures of the *unnecessary appetites*. And the deck is completely stacked against our future democratic soul: they received hardly any of the right sort of education that could keep them safe; but only learned things which relate to making and keeping money. Nothing in this sort of education provided anything that can withstand the persuasive power of the pleasures of the unnecessary appetites¹, however: and the unnecessary appetites come to rule. (560b).

Now, all is not lost for the democratic soul, because while the unnecessary appetites rule, reason is still around: although it is the servant of the unnecessary appetites. Reason is able to inform the soul that if it wants to go on getting pleasures, it is going to have to plan a bit. What ends up happening is described at 561c-d: chaos. (“There is neither order nor necessity in his² life, yet he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and follows it throughout his entire life.”)

Okay, well this doesn’t sound so bad, either as a way of life, or as a government. What’s the problem? The problem is that the democratic soul, and the democratic city, can’t sustain itself. And in the search for order, it will look for something, anything. What it finds will result in the opposite of being “happy and free.”

¹ Since the oligarchic soul isn’t completely bad, it will put up a bit of a fight (see 560a), but eventually, untethered from reason, shame wears down and is finally defeated by the unnecessary appetites.

² Changing the pronouns here makes this too cumbersome.

5. Tyranny

The democratic city and the democratic soul value *freedom* more than anything else. So:

“a father gets into the habit of behaving like a child and fearing his son, and the son gets into the habit of behaving like a father, feeling neither shame nor fear in front of his parents-- all in order to be *free*.” (562e).

Remember how the oligarchic city became “infected” and the result was democracy? The democratic city can get sick as well. But the infection it gets (563e) is nearly *fatal*, because “extreme freedom probably cannot lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery, whether in a private individual or a city.” (564a).

Here’s what Plato thinks will happen: in the chaos of the democracy there is a political class, constantly bickering and arguing and fighting for power (and no one can really stop them in a democracy), a class of the wealthy; and finally a third class of people (the popular class) who keep to themselves and to their own work-- the largest and most powerful class (in a democracy). When the wealthy try to defend themselves from the political class, the political class accuse them of being anti-democratic. The political class take from the wealthy and give to the popular class-- and when the wealthy fight against this, this is taken by the popular class to be further evidence that the wealthy class really is against them. Eventually, “there are impeachments, judgments, and trials on both sides” (565c). “And don’t the people always tend to set up one man as their special leader, nurturing him and making him great? ... And it is clear that when a tyrant arises, the position of popular leader is the sole root from which he springs.” (556c-d).

Now the city is doomed. The tyrant, having nothing of the character of the true ruler³, will act quickly to consolidate power, fearing the loss of it more than anything else-- in the end, no one in the city is safe. Eventually, everyone will realize what has happened-- but by then it will be too late. (569b).

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³ Recall the ship analogy from Book VI-- the true ruler won’t be in the business of the giving persuasive speeches or trying to gain power in such conditions-- the tyrant is someone who *wants power*.