

The Dangers of Democracy: Lessons from Plato for Modern America

Remarks delivered at Carroll College (Helena, Montana)

12 September 2019

David Nowakowski

<https://davidnowakowski.net>

Thank you all for coming tonight. Thanks to Humanities Montana for sponsoring this event, to Carroll College for hosting us, and to Merlin CCC for their support.

We're fortunate to be here tonight, on the day that the ancient Athenian calendar calls *Demokratia*, the festival of democracy, when the Athenians honored the Goddess *Themis* for her role in establishing the Athenian democracy, and also made sacrifices to *Zeus* and *Athena* in their roles as protectors of the democratic city. The people of Athens knew the importance not only of giving thanks for their democratic constitution, but also of entreating the help necessary to maintain it, from threats both without and within.

In that spirit, I'd like to reflect tonight on some of the dangers inherent to democracy, as the great Athenian philosopher *Plato* saw them. I'll focus on just two issues: first, the unique way in which, according to *Plato*, life in a democracy, unlike life under other forms of civic governance, is dangerous to the well-being of the individual; and second, *Plato's* often-misunderstood concerns about education, in which he is sometimes accused of censorship.

Today, *Plato* is most famous for the *Republic*, a vast work whose primary theme concerns justice, both in the individual human person, and in the city at large. In the eighth book of the *Republic*, *Plato* examines five different constitutions, that is, five different ways of arranging governance—both the governance of a city, and the internal governance of each person within her own life. Earlier in the *Republic*, *Plato* had introduced the well-governed city as a model for the well-governed individual. Now, *Plato* goes farther, to examine how the kind of city a person lives in affects her internal character.

Plato sees a downward trajectory in five steps, from ideal governance by reason; to the timocracy, governed by the love of honor; to the oligarchy, governed by the pursuit of wealth and necessary bodily pleasures; to democracy; and finally to tyranny. What's interesting about this discussion is that the narrative progresses by considering the way in which life under each civic constitution forms or shapes the character—that is, the internal constitution—of a young person who grows up there. As Plato tells the story, the political and the personal do not just resemble each other; rather, they directly affect each other.

For Plato, the ideal human life, just like the ideal city, is governed by reason. Here, Plato includes under “the rule of reason” both the selection of the proper goals, or ends, and what philosophers call instrumental reasoning: determining the means by which our chosen goals can most effectively be achieved. In the human lives, and cities, which are less-than-ideal, the role of reason becomes progressively less and less. In the timocracy and oligarchy, which value honor and wealth, respectively, above all else, Plato judges that the ends are misguided—there are better things to live for—and so in this respect, these lives are not lived in a fully rational way. But they still have something going for them, with respect to reason: at least these two lives have some single focus which gives them purpose and direction, and so there's still room for instrumental rationality to operate.

Contrast this with the democratic way of life, which Plato judges to be even worse. Where all the previous constitutions had some single goal in mind, the democratic way of life, precisely because of its emphasis on equality, encourages us, in Plato's words, to deny “that some pleasures belong to fine and good desires, and others to evil ones,” and instead to “declare that all pleasures are equal and must be valued equally.”¹ Just as in the civic democracy of Plato's day, leaders were normally chosen randomly, by drawing lots, so too Plato says, the democratic person “lives, always surrendering rule over himself to whichever desire comes along, as if it were chosen by lot. And when that is satisfied, he surrenders the rule to another, not disdaining any, but satisfying them all equally.”² Sometimes he'll indulge heavily in food and drink, other times he'll diet and exercise, other times he'll be totally idle, and at still other times, he'll dabble in philosophy, or politics, or business. Plato concludes his description of the democratic person by saying that “There's neither order nor necessity in his life, but he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and he follows it for as long as he lives.”³

In other words, for Plato, the democratic ideal of equality runs the risk of establishing, not only in our cities or communities, but even more damagingly, in our own lives, a sense that anything goes, and an unwillingness to settle on any one goal

1 *Republic* VIII, 561b-c (trans. Grube/Reeve).

2 *Republic* VIII, 561b.

3 *Republic* VIII, 561d.

over the long term. On this way of life, because we lack a single goal (however good or problematic), there is not even room for instrumental rationality, whose job would be to figure out which choices and activities would help us to achieve that goal. Where the person totally fixated on wealth, for example, could say to other desires, “no, that’s going to cost too much, and get in the way of my having wealth,” there is no such deliberative judgment available to Plato’s democratic character. Thus, Plato sees a risk that an excessive focus on equality can undercut our capacity to reason, by preventing us from focusing on any goal or project, whatever that might be, over and above all other options, for long enough to make a difference.

Reflecting on our own lives, do we see any ring of truth to this? How much is our attention divided between various goals and projects—even various good and worthwhile projects—such that none (or very few) ever get accomplished to a high level of excellence? As we’re bombarded by appeals for this cause and that one, ads for this product and that one, all the various educational, career, recreational, or other opportunities which are available to us, Plato might ask, what are we doing to maintain our focus as individuals, to ruthlessly pursue excellence over mediocrity?

That leads to another of the issues which Plato raises in the *Republic*: the question of what sorts of poetry should be allowed in a well-governed city, and likewise, in a well-governed individual human life. You might think, “Poetry, really? We’re worried about *poetry*?” But this too stands in for a larger class of issues. On the one hand, the poets and playwrights of Plato’s day are in many ways akin to the digital media that we consume today. But even more deeply, the Greek root of *poetry* refers to all activities of making, craftsmanship, and construction at all levels.

At bottom, Plato’s primary concern is not with the value, or lack of value, that different forms of creative expression have in themselves, or for their creators. Rather, he’s concerned with education: what effect do these artistic forms have on the people who hear, read, or otherwise receive them? And among all the potential audiences, he’s especially concerned with young people.

Plato distinguishes between three, or perhaps four, different types of poetry. At worst, we find what’s called mimetic, or imitative, poetry, which speaks to the senses or the emotions, but without affording any grip on the underlying realities. It excites, but fails to inform. In modern terms, it speaks to the heart, but not the head. Even more to the point, media of this kind is designed, by its very nature, to take us away from a place of calm, composed, reflective judgment, and to bring us instead to a place of volatile, unreflective emotional reactivity. On this score, Plato’s question for us is clear: in which of those directions does the media we consume take us? Toward calm and

careful reflection, or toward panic and anxiety? The former will enable us to judge effectively how to respond to our society's challenges, and to carry out those judgments carefully and well. The latter will not.

At the other end of the spectrum, there's the poetry which is divinely inspired, which can give the hearer a direct, immediate glimpse of the highest and most important things. For Plato, this meant most especially knowledge of the Gods. Much of this kind of expression will be through myth and allegory, communicating through symbols. But Plato warns us that "the young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. For these reasons, then, we should probably take the utmost care to insure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear."⁴

It's not that the poems of Homer, for example, are of low esteem. Quite the contrary. Plato says that before hearing these divinely-inspired allegories, the hearers should be "pledged to secrecy" and should first "sacrifice not just a pig, but something great and scarce" because "such stories are hard to deal with."⁵ Anyone reading this in ancient Athens would immediately notice that these preliminary steps—the vows of secrecy, the sacrifices—are exactly what you would do as preliminaries to initiation into one of the many religious mystery cults, immediately before the holiest and most sacred things were revealed. These preliminary steps were there, on the one hand, to protect the sacred mysteries themselves, but also, and just as importantly, to protect those who were not properly prepared from being exposed to dangerous and powerful things, which precisely because of their power could both greatly help and greatly harm, depending on the recipient's level of preparation. For Plato, the Homeric myths work similarly: disclosing the goodness of the Gods and the order of the cosmos to those who can penetrate the allegory, but presenting them in a blasphemous and impious way, and seeming to advocate all kinds of poor behavior, to those who could not see past the allegory.

Plato's concern, then, was to carefully structure our education, making sure that patterns of virtuous character could be established first, as a necessary foundation for dealing with the stories that are both harder, and for that very reason all the more important. At a purely secular level, I wonder about the corresponding careful progression—or lack thereof—with our national mythology: not the stories of the Gods, but like the seemingly flawed human characters in Homer's epics, the heroes, the founders and leaders of our country. It's become something of a fashion in many circles to tear down Washington, Jefferson, and their successors for a variety of reasons:

4 *Republic* II, 378d.

5 *Republic* II, 378a.

because they tolerated or participated in the evils of slavery, because they were greedy and self-interested, because of other failings of various kinds. These are indeed important conversations to have, facing up to the problems and challenges of our history and our present. But in the same way that he was very cautious about Homer, I think Plato would caution us to have the hard conversations within a shared framework of the good and noble ideals of our country, and as people who, inspired by those ideals, live good and noble lives ourselves. That emphasis on the ideals of justice, Plato seems to suggest, is the place to start: in educating our young people, in each one of us cultivating our own character, and in coming together as a community. With that foundation in place, we'll be more likely to respond to the challenges and injustices of the past and present in constructive ways, that strengthen our society.