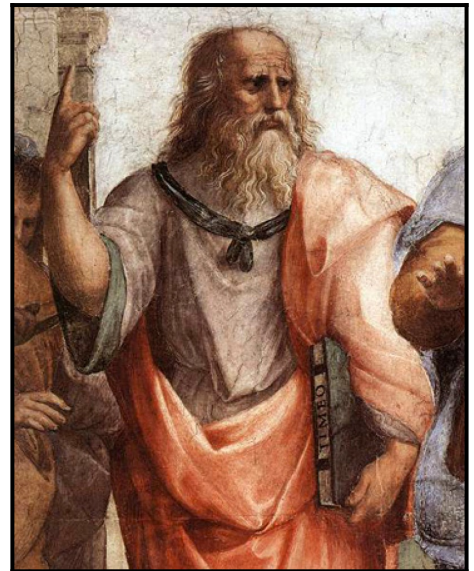


Plato Nails Democratic Man

In Book VIII of *The Republic*, Plato describes various types of political man, such as oligarchs and aristocrats, through a fictitious conversation between Socrates and Adeimantus. Given the age of democracy we're in, Plato's descriptions of democratic man seem especially prescient.

From Plato's perspective, democratic man is dominated by two ideas: freedom and equality. As such, the democratic man makes a shift from previous men, he has no hierarchy of values since the highest value is equality. Consider:

"...spending his money and labour and time on unnecessary pleasures quite as much as on necessary ones; but if he be fortunate, and is not too much disordered in his wits, when years have elapsed, and the heyday of passion is over –supposing that he then re-admits into the city some part of the exiled virtues, and does not wholly give himself up to their successors –in that case he balances



his pleasures and lives in a sort of equilibrium, putting the government of himself into the hands of the one which comes first and wins the turn; and when he has had enough of that, then into the hands of another; he despises none of them but encourages them all equally."

From Plato's perspective, democratic man has so imbibed with the idea of equality that lacks the means to govern himself. Instead, he gives himself over to the strongest passion of the moment. But even then, the democratic man is blind to the fact that he is ruled by passions rather than reason, confusing the two and unable to break out of an egalitarian mindset.

“Neither does he receive or let pass into the [mind] any true word of advice; if any one says to him that some pleasures are the satisfactions of good and noble desires, and others of evil desires, and that he ought to use and honour some and chastise and master the others –whenever this is repeated to him he shakes his head and says that they are all alike, and that one is as good as another.”

In other words, by embracing freedom and equality, democratic man is forced to embrace relativism. If he recognizes that something is evil or good, that would instantly force him to arrange his life based on a hierarchy of values. That hierarchy would also apply then to political and social life. Without any hierarchy of values and giving himself over to relativism, he is then ruled by the strongest passion of the moment, a flame that is easily fanned in a time of mass-media.

“...he lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour; and sometimes he is lapped in drink and strains of the flute; then he becomes a water-drinker, and tries to get thin; then he takes a turn at gymnastics; sometimes idling and neglecting everything, then once more living the life of a philosopher; often he-is busy with politics, and starts to his feet and says and does whatever comes into his head; and, if he is emulous of any one who is a warrior, off he is in that direction, or of men of business, once more in that. His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so he goes on.”

While it may seem like a blissful life, Plato sees a dark side to being ruled by one’s passions. The problem is that both the people and the leaders are of the same mindset.

“When a democracy which is thirsting for freedom has evil cupbearers presiding over the feast, and has drunk too deeply of the strong wine of freedom, then, unless her rulers are very amenable and give a plentiful draught, she

calls them to account and punishes them, and says that they are cursed oligarchs...

...

...she would have subjects who are like rulers, and rulers who are like subjects: these are men after her own heart, whom she praises and honours both in private and public. Now, in such a State, can liberty have any limit?"

In other words, Plato argues that once relativism becomes the norm, then the common response is essentially this one:



Unsurprisingly, Plato argues that such an attitude eventually leads to a start of chaos or anarchy:

"...and as the result of all, see how sensitive the citizens become; they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority and at length, as you know, they cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them."

The anarchy, though, isn't limited to personal lives. Disorder in personal lives, and especially family, leads to disorder in society. As Edmund Burke, the 18th century political-philosopher, wrote,



“Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.”

In other words, we either govern ourselves (especially our passions) or someone will govern us.

Plato saw this same problem, too. He warns us in *The Republic*:

“The ruin of oligarchy is the ruin of democracy; the same disease magnified and intensified by liberty overmasters democracy –the truth being that the excessive increase of anything often causes a reaction in the opposite direction; and this is the case not only in the seasons and in vegetable and animal life, but above all in forms of government.

...

The excess of liberty, whether in States or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery.

Yes, the natural order.

And so tyranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme form of liberty?

As we might expect.”

