

# Plato's *Republic*

## An Introduction

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# 12. The Decline and Fall of the Ideal City-Soul

## Books VIII–IX

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Having addressed the Three Waves to the satisfaction of Glaucon and company, Socrates picks up where he left off at the end of Book IV, ‘enquir[ing] whether it is more profitable to act justly, live in a fine way, and be just [...] or to act unjustly and be unjust’ (4.444e–45a). To settle this question, he plans to trace the decay of the ideal, just city and soul into their unjust opposites. This is as we should expect, given the city-soul (*polis-psychê*) analogy that guides him in answering the *Republic*’s two main questions, *What is justice?* and *Is the just life happier than the unjust life?* There are five mirroring pairs here, with each city corresponding to a kind of soul, both organized and governed in the same way and having a distinctive good that it pursues. This is a story of decay, of psychic and political disease rather than mere change. Matters go from best to worst as the aristocratic soul and city—so called because the best (*ariston*) part of the city and the soul has power (*kratos*)—gives way to the honor-loving timocracy, which in turn degenerates into the money-loving oligarchy, and this to freedom-loving democracy until the worst psychic and political arrangement is reached: tyranny. Ultimately, Socrates will compare the aristocratic and the tyrannical souls as he answers the *Republic*’s second question.

There is a lot going on here, so our discussion will be selective. Of course we will want to attend to which part of the city or soul is in charge and what end or goal each pursues as good in itself. We will

also attend to the transvaluation of values—to the ways in which virtues become vices and vices virtues—in this long, dark night of the soul and city, noting both the internal and external causes of decay. A common thread throughout the discussion is the role played by changes to the educational program developed earlier in Books II and III.

### The Aristocratic City and Soul (8.543a–547c)

Philosophers govern the aristocratic city and reason governs the aristocratic soul. The former is the paradigm of political justice, the latter of personal justice—which is what Plato most cares about in the *Republic*, a fact that is easy to forget, given the attention lavished on city-building. It is interesting that Socrates does not make explicit what the best and the worst cities and souls take the good to be—here by ‘the good’ he means not the Form of the good but rather ‘[the] single goal at which all their actions, public and private, inevitably aim’ (7.519c). It is their *telos*, their end or overarching aim, the goal that organizes their thought and action. It is by reference to this good that their activities make sense. There are a few plausible candidates for the aristocratic city’s and soul’s good, and I suggest that we take *justice*, the outstanding virtue in the *Republic*, to be their good. With each part of the city or soul performing its role well, the city and soul will function well and flourish and thrive: it will be happy.

By this point we have a pretty good idea of what the aristocratic city and soul are like, given the care with which Socrates has described them. So what causes the decay of these ideals? Why does aristocracy decay into the second-best arrangement, timocracy? Socrates’ answer is a bit of a downer. It is not that aristocracy *does* decay but rather that it *must*: ‘everything that comes into being must decay’ (8.546a). Perhaps this is a prescient nod to a moral analog of the law of entropy. Depressing though it is, it should come as no surprise, for if the ideal, aristocratic *polis* were ever realized, it would be realized in the visible, sensible world. This is the world of coming-to-be and passing-away, the world of becoming rather than the world of being, where the changeless Forms reside. Decay is inescapable in the sensible world of concrete particulars, which are ceaselessly coming to be and passing away.

The initial cause is somewhat surprising, though: the guardians, as wise and mathematically gifted as they are, miscalculate the ‘perfect number’ (8.546b) that should govern the reproductive schedule of the guardians. It is not their fault, really. They are bringing ‘calculation (λογισμός [*logismos*])’, the heart of the first subject of advanced study for would-be rulers, to bear upon ‘sense perception’ (8.546b), and one of the abiding lessons of the Third Wave is that while we can have beliefs, even true beliefs, about the objects that populate the visible world, ‘there is no knowledge of such things’ (7.529b). It is not a defect in the philosopher-rulers so much as a defect in the world: they lack knowledge of the correct number because such things are by their very natures not knowable: one can have beliefs about particulars, but not knowledge. Even if the philosopher-queens and -kings get it right most of the time (which we can assume they will), they will miss the mark often enough to make a difference: they will ‘join brides and grooms at the wrong time, the children will be neither good natured nor fortunate’ (8.546d). In short, non-gold children will be born to gold parents—but, like lawlessness and other evils, this will go unnoticed (4.424d). The problem posed by these defective natures is exacerbated by their being nurtured badly, as the program of education that was laid out in such detail in Books II and III begins to go awry: ‘they will have less consideration for music and poetry than they ought’ (8.546d). Thus the rulers will fail in their great duty, that they guard against ‘the mixture of the metals in the souls of the next generation’ (3.415b).

The rulers whose golden souls are infected with bronze and iron begin to see a gap between the city’s good and their own. They question the prohibition on possessing private property, required by the city’s foundational myth. They expect ruling to pay and so begin to drive a wedge into the ever-widening gap, hastening the aristocratic city toward the ruin prophesized at the end of Book III. The city is not unified—literally, it has dis-integrated—being no longer ‘of one mind’ (8.545d) about who should rule and what is best for the city. As false rulers pull the city toward money-making, the true rulers and auxiliaries, whose souls are still pure gold and silver, pull in the other direction, ‘towards virtue and the old order’ (8.547b). To end the strife, a deal is struck, settling on a middle way, between rational, aristocratic virtue and

appetitive, oligarchic wealth: timocracy, in which the good is honor and in which spirit rules the soul and the auxiliaries rule the city.

### The Timocratic City and Soul (8.547c–550c)

The timocratic city and soul do not exhibit justice. They cannot, as they are governed by the honor-loving spirited element, which is supposed to be reason's ally and helper (4.441a), not governor of soul and city. Only a soul and city in which each part performs its proper task can be just. Still, calling them *unjust* seems too strong. People for whom honor is the good will regard shame as bad—perhaps as *the* bad, the thing most to be avoided—and thus will avoid conventionally unjust conduct. This love of honor is fueled by their 'valu[ing] physical training more than music and poetry' (8.548b), which also fuels a change for the worse in fundamental values. Justice, we know, 'is doing one's own work and not meddling with what is not one's own' (4.433a), but in a timocracy those 'who do their work are called fools and held to be of little account, while those who meddle in other people's affairs are honored and praised' (8.550a). Thus justice begins to be regarded as the kind of simple-minded foolishness that Thrasymachus mocked in Book I.

In accounting for the rise of the timocratic person, Socrates seems to give more evidence that he is not really a feminist, as he lays the blame for its rise at the feet of a carping, status-hungry wife who complains to her son about his father's shortcomings. The aristocratic father, who is reminiscent of Book VI's shelter-seeker who wants to 'lead a quiet life and do [his] own work' (6.496d), is not interested in ruling as his city degenerates, and this negatively affects his wife's status among the other wives. He is uninterested in money and 'does not fight back when he is insulted' (8.549c). In short, his wife complains to their son that his father is 'unmanly [and] too easy-going' (8.549d), since, presumably, he subscribes to Socrates' proto-Stoic view that 'human affairs are not worth taking very seriously' (10.604b) and thus is among those who are 'unwilling to occupy themselves in human affairs' (7.517c). At his mother's urging, their son wants 'to be more of a man than his father' (8.550a). It clear that Plato is criticizing a kind of masculinity that typifies and would be ascendant in an honor-driven, competitive culture. The timocratic son is not bad by nature, Socrates insists, but he

is surrounded by people who value honor and victory more than virtue and truth, so it is no wonder, given how readily children absorb values from their culture, that he turns out as he does.

Honor is a fine thing, as it can lead one to have a soul that is *kalon*, fine and noble and beautiful, and thus *worthy of being honored*. Kant thought it a facsimile of virtue, as it provides a nobler motive than self-interest. Aristotle writes of a healthy competition in which people strive to emulate and even outdo each other in virtue.<sup>1</sup> But honor as an internal good can easily give way to the external good of *being honored*, especially in a competitive, victory-loving culture. Being honored should be merely a foreseeable consequence of acting well, but it becomes instead the intended outcome, the goal aimed at.

### The Oligarchic City and Soul (8.550c–555b)

Changes to education and changes in value are again part of the story as timocracy degenerates into oligarchy. The most momentous change is wealth's replacing honor as the over-arching goal of city and soul, as the competition for honor that drove the timocratic person finds a new object. It is no accident that Plato twice appeals to the notion of emulation in explaining this transition (the Greek term is ζήλος (*zēlos*), which is the root of the words 'zealous' and 'jealous'). Iron- and bronze-souled rulers see their fellows stretching and then disregarding the rules against private property; they emulate and compete with each other, which ultimately leads them to formally establish wealth as a qualification for ruling. Wealth is the criterion by which they choose the captain of the ship of state, 'refusing to entrust the ship to a poor person even if he was a better captain' (8.551c). As wealthy craftspeople govern the oligarchic city, appetite—in particular the desire to make money—governs the soul. Thus appetite and the craftspeople operate in areas beyond their expertise, 'meddling in other people's affairs' (8.551e)—the affairs of the guardians and auxiliaries.

Plato's psychology of the oligarchic person is subtle and fascinating. The oligarchic person subordinates reason to appetite, reducing reason to the merely instrumental role of determining the best means to the end

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1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.8 1169a6–10.

which appetite sets for him—and thus embodies the Humean picture on which 'Reason is and ought only be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office but than to serve and obey them'.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Hume endorses the oligarch's substantive goal: he does not think our primary aim is or should be the pursuit of wealth. Hume's point is structural, concerning the relation of reason and passion, not the substantive ends we pursue: passion, not reason, provides us with our goals and ends; reason's job is merely to determine the best means to achieve those ends. Although Plato regards wealth and virtue as polar opposites (8.550e), he implies that there is something about the desire for wealth that gives the oligarch's life order and discipline. The oligarch is unwilling to indulge what Socrates calls 'his dronish appetites' (8.554c) for sensual gratification but instead is 'a thrifty worker, who satisfies only his necessary appetites' (8.554a). Since reason does not govern his soul, he is not just, but he is not quite unjust—at least his conduct is not reliably unjust. His baser appetites are kept in check, not by reason, as they are in the just, aristocratic soul, nor by a healthy sense of shame, as they are in the spirit-governed timocratic soul, but instead by fear. The oligarch fears that indulging his other appetites will be financially too costly. The contest between force and persuasion, raised in the opening scene of the *Republic*, is decisively settled in favor of force by the time oligarchy arrives. The oligarch's dronish appetites are 'forcibly held in check by his carefulness' (8.554c) and thus 'his better desires are in control of his worse' (8.554d).

Carefulness is a fine quality; indeed, it is a trait the guardians must possess, given the importance of their task to the city's wellbeing (2.374e). Caution keeps the oligarchic person on the straight and narrow, more or less, but 'where they have ample opportunity to do justice with impunity' (8.554c), they will probably take it. After all, what is needed for success in business, they will reason, is a reputation for justice: not *being* just but merely *seeming* just. Despite the oligarch's devotion to financial gain, Socrates insists that 'the true virtue of a single-minded and harmonious soul far escapes him' (8.554e). This may seem an odd remark for Socrates to make, given the oligarch's focus on wealth, which certainly seems single-minded. But as is so often the case in the *Republic*,

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2 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 415 (II.iii.3).

the way things *seem* is not the way they *are*. I take Socrates' point to be that while the oligarch's devotion to wealth is indeed single, it is not *single-minded*: it is not a product of rational reflection but rather of appetite. The tune his soul sings must be dissonant at times, since its parts are not playing their proper roles—reason should govern but here is subordinated to appetite—and the soul is ordered not by reason and persuasion but by force, and fear does not make for harmony. This lack of single-mindedness is also a feature of the timocratic city and soul, which, like the oligarchic city and soul, is in tension with itself.

Toward the beginning of Book IV, Socrates worried about the corruptive and corrosive powers of wealth, fearing their 'slipping into the city unnoticed' (4.421e). The changes all seem minor and inconsequential. What harm, for example, could allowing flutes and the Lydian mode do? But it is precisely their seeming innocuousness that makes changes to education and relaxing the Specialization Principle so dangerous. We can imagine the processes of rationalization at work as values such as justice and nobility are replaced by the drive for wealth. The oligarch is not someone who 'pays any attention to education' (8.554b), at least not education in music and poetry! What a waste of time, we can imagine the oligarchs complaining. Education—especially if it is publicly funded—should be practical, teaching marketable skills to people regarded primarily as consumers and only secondarily if at all as citizens. If we listen closely, we can almost hear Dickens' Mr Gradgrind weighing in: 'Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else'.<sup>3</sup> While the oligarch will perhaps embrace the pre-dialectic mathematical education spelled out in Book VII, they will re-purpose it in an anti-Socratic way, insisting that number be studied by 'tradesmen and retailers, for the sake of buying and selling' (7.525c), that its aim be practical, never theoretical.

The careful and hard-working oligarch 'has a good reputation and is thought to be just' (8.554c), but whatever his reputation, we know that his soul is not in fact just. He is the midpoint in the decay of the ideal city and soul. He is not good, but he is not thoroughly bad, either. He is someone like Cephalus, whom Socrates clearly respects. Cephalus is

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3 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 10.

wealthy, and while he is fond of money, he is not *too fond* of it (1.330bc). He does not use his considerable wealth to indulge his sensuous appetites; instead, it has given him a moral cushion of sorts: because he is (and was born) wealthy, he is not tempted to act unjustly in the pursuit of wealth. Cephalus has enough self-awareness to admit that his moral decency is not a consequence of unshakable inner virtue but owes a great deal to luck and external circumstance.

The oligarchic city is really two cities, rich and poor, at war with each other, and it is relatively stable, but as its stability is born of fear and power rather than justice, it is not a stability that can last. And it does not last, Socrates thinks: it inevitably decays into democracy.

### The Democratic City and Soul (8.555b–562a)

Etymologically, 'democracy' means rule (*-cracy*) of the *demes*—the people. Readers are often taken aback at the dim view Plato has of democracy, but it really should not be a surprise. Plato thinks that 'the majority cannot be philosophic' (6.494a), so most people are incapable of possessing wisdom, knowledge of what is best for the city as a whole, which is the virtue required to govern well. I trust that we can understand why he takes this view, even if we disagree with him.

The good in a democracy is freedom, which for Plato is not unambiguously good. He quickly associates it with 'license to do what [one] wants' and to 'arrange [one's] own life in whatever manner pleases him' (8.557b). License carries with it a hint of arrogance, and perhaps immaturity, reminiscent of the 'silly, adolescent idea of happiness' (5.466b) condemned earlier. One way to think about Plato's discomfort with this sort of freedom is that it is ungrounded in any rational principle and that it underwrites choices based on whim. The Specialization Principle has long since given way to the impulse of the moment. 'There is neither order nor necessity in his life' (8.561d), Socrates says of the democratic person. He is unfocused, with the attention span of a golden retriever. Today he gives himself over to drinking and debauchery; next week he drinks only water and becomes an exercise addict; he tries business, he then dabbles in philosophy, etc. He lacks the discipline his oligarchic father had, and indeed his lifestyle is a reaction to parental frugality and austerity.

Following the late Isaiah Berlin, philosophers often distinguish between positive and negative freedom. Freedom conceived negatively is the absence of constraint. The freedom of speech guaranteed in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, for example, is a guarantee against state interference with expressing one's views. But conceived positively, freedom is genuine autonomy and self-direction. As Berlin puts it, 'I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces [...] I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside'.<sup>4</sup> The democratic person's freedom is largely negative; they are not prevented from doing as they like (subject, of course, to various reasonable constraints, e.g., that their conduct does not harm others). But the democrat seems too impulsive and reactive, too susceptible to external influences to count as positively free. They do not scrutinize their values or plans or adopt only those endorsed after a period of reflection, as the positively free person does. There is a deep sense in which the democrat's reasons and purposes are not really their own. At the very least, they are ephemeral and shifting, and do not reflect the presence of a well-thought-out life-plan.

So, we know what the democratic city and soul take the good to be. And in place of oligarchy's wealth requirement, in the democratic city all citizens—or, at least, all *male* citizens—have political rights: the city is ruled not by the wealthy craftspeople but by all the craftspeople. The political classes of the aristocratic city are a thing of the past, and the army comprises citizen-soldiers, rather than the professionals that Plato envisioned. But what governs the democratic soul? There are *five* kinds of constitutional arrangement, Socrates insists, but only *three* parts of the soul—so by the time we arrive at democracy, we seem to have run out of parts. So what governs?

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4 Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in Berlin, *Liberty: Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. by Henry Hardy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924989x.001.0001>, p. 178.

## Interlude: Necessary versus Unnecessary Appetites

Appetite governs the democratic soul, as it does in the oligarchic soul, but here Socrates makes a philosophically interesting distinction between *kinds* of appetites or desires. The democratic soul is governed by *unnecessary* desires, the sort the oligarch steadfastly and cautiously refused to indulge, while necessary desires govern the oligarchic soul. Socrates alluded to the distinction (without explaining it) when describing the oligarch, whom he called 'a thrifty worker who satisfies only his necessary appetites' (8.554a). And indeed, the distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires is implicit in the difference between the rustic and the luxurious ideal cities. The latter comes about because the citizens have 'overstepped the limit of their necessities' (2.373d), which suggests that in the rustic city, which Socrates regards as 'the true city [...] the healthy one' (2.372e), the citizens satisfy only their necessary appetites, whereas satisfying the unnecessary appetites fuels the luxurious city. So how do necessary and unnecessary desires differ?

Plato gives a two-pronged definition of necessary desires: 'those we cannot desist from and those whose satisfaction benefits us [are] rightly called necessary for we are by nature compelled to satisfy them' (8.558e). This 'and' should be an 'or', however, since a desire that meets either criterion will count as necessary. Consider bread. As a basic element in the Greek diet, we can think of it as proxy for food generally. A desire for bread is necessary on both counts: first, we cannot desist from it—we cannot not want it, as a desire for food comes with our animal nature. Someone without this desire—e.g., someone suffering from anorexia, which etymologically is the absence (the privative *an-*) of desire (*orexis*)—would be very badly off and in an unnatural, unhealthy state. Second, satisfying a desire for bread is good for us, and indeed we enjoy it. While bread makes life possible, good bread makes life enjoyable. So, too, do the delicacies we put on the bread make life more enjoyable, but we can learn to do without them. Remember that it was the absence of delicacies that Glaucon decried in the first, rustic ideal city back in Book II (2.372c), claiming the city was fit only for pigs. So a desire for delicacies will also count as a necessary desire, since it is *natural* for us to desire something to put on the bread. Only an appetite

that fails both counts will be unnecessary. Though Socrates does not say so, presumably this will vary from person to person: you may be able to enjoy a cocktail before and a glass or two of wine with dinner, but for an alcoholic, even a couple of drinks starts them on the road to self-destructive drunkenness. So wine—also a Greek staple—is necessary for some of us but unnecessary for others.

Though the distinction between necessary and unnecessary desires is needed for Socrates to distinguish between the oligarchic and democratic souls, the democratic person rejects it, taking all desires to be equally worthy of pursuit: the democrat ‘puts all his pleasures on an equal footing’ (8.561b). The democratic person does not deny the distinction in a conceptual way, holding it to be incoherent or non-existent. Instead, they deny that the distinction is a suitable basis for action and choice, ‘declar[ing] that all pleasures are equal and must be valued equally’ (8.561c). They do not think that necessary desires are *better* than unnecessary desires or that there is any reason to blush at pursuing what those frugal oligarchs regard as ‘unnecessary [desires] that aim at frivolity and display’ (9.572c). Where their fathers pursued only necessary desires, the young democrats reject this frugal austerity (and thus the order and discipline their focus on necessary desires gave rise to) and seek to indulge the desires that characterize the ne’er-do-well drones.

Although the democrat seems uninterested in thinking philosophically about Plato’s way of distinguishing necessary and unnecessary desires, *we* might find it worthwhile to do so, to see if there are independent reasons to reject it or at least to reformulate it, as it seems awkward to regard a desire for delicacies as necessary, since, as Socrates himself points out, we can learn to give them up. So we do not get too far afield, let us consider briefly the taxonomy of desires Epicurus (BCE 341–270) proposed. First, a word of warning: though the word ‘epicurean’ has some resonance with ancient Epicureanism (which took pleasure alone to be good in itself, the view we identified in an earlier chapter as hedonism), Epicurus actually took the absence of pain and disturbance to be what pleasure truly is. For him, the pleasure that constitutes the good is not a full belly but a tranquil mind.

Where Plato fuses necessary and natural desires, calling some desires necessary because they are natural, Epicurus distinguishes between

what is natural and what is necessary. For Epicurus, a necessary desire is one whose non-satisfaction causes physical pain. When we do not eat, we experience the pangs of hunger. Thus a desire for food—for bread, as Socrates put it—counts as necessary. While every necessary desire is natural, for Epicurus, not all natural desires are necessary. The desire for bread is both natural and necessary. But desires for relishes, while natural, are not necessary. Think of a favorite dish. I love the *Pha Ram Long Song* at Ruam Mit Thai in downtown St Paul; its deliciousness makes my life better, but I can clearly live without it: it is a natural but unnecessary desire. If I show up only to find that the restaurant is no longer open on Sundays, I should react with mild disappointment: 'Oh, dang it! I was really looking forward to that. Oh well.' I will ask my companions where we should go instead. If, on the other hand, I am not disappointed but really angry that the restaurant is closed and am still muttering 'I cannot fricking believe it!' hours later, sulking and ruining dinner for everyone because I did not get what I wanted, then my desire is not only unnecessary, it is also unnatural. Excessive psychological distress at a desire's not being satisfied is not natural: there is something wrong with me. So the difference between *natural but unnecessary* desires and *unnatural and unnecessary* desires is not a difference in objects desired but rather in the desirer themself. I should be able to eliminate my desire for *x* when *x* is difficult to obtain—or if *x* is bad for me. Epicurus thinks that the source is usually 'a groundless opinion'—some false belief that I cannot be happy unless I have *this* particular Thai dish or *that* flavor of ice cream or that I get a promotion, etc. In fact, for Epicurus eliminating such desires is one of the keys to happiness. No gourmand himself, Epicurus thought that

Plain fare gives as much pleasure as a costly diet, when once the pain of want has been removed, while bread and water confer the highest possible pleasure when they are brought to hungry lips. To habituate oneself, therefore, to simple and inexpensive diet supplies all that is needful for health, and enables a man to meet the necessary requirements of life without shrinking, and it places us in a better condition when we approach at intervals a costly fare and renders us fearless of fortune.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Epicurus, 'Letter to Menoeceus', in *The Art of Happiness*, ed. by George Strodach (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 159 [DL 10.130–31].

Epicurus' taxonomy of desire seems an improvement on Plato's largely because he separates naturalness and necessity, which Plato conflates. Plato's way of distinguishing necessary and unnecessary seems awkward and even mistaken—but if so, it is not a fatal mistake but rather one that is easily repairable.

## Democracy, Continued

Equality comes a close second to freedom as democracy's defining good. Not only are all pleasures and desires equal, but so too are men and women (8.563b) (which is yet another point against the view that Socrates is a feminist, given the disdain he has for democracy), slave and owner, citizen and non-citizen (8.562e), and even humans and non-human animals (8.563c). Where the oligarchic father 'satisfies only his necessary appetites [...] and enslaves his other desires as vain' (8.554a), his democratic son celebrates 'the liberation and release of useless and unnecessary pleasures' (8.561a).

Plato stresses how attractive the democratic polity appears: it is 'multicolored' (8.559d, 561e) and 'embroidered with every kind of character type' (8.557c). But it is a specious beauty. The democratic children of oligarchic parents seem to suffer from what is sometimes called *affluenza*: they are 'fond of luxury, incapable of effort either mental or physical, too soft to stand up to pleasures or pains, and idle besides' (8.556b). Their teachers, perhaps afraid of low scores on student surveys, fear and flatter them (8.563a), and their parents want most of all to be their friends. It is a prescription for disaster, Plato thinks. Despite its obvious shortcomings, taking the good to be wealth has its benefits, because it is a value with content and moreover one that imposes discipline and order. Freedom, on the other hand, is formal rather than contentful, and indeed it is perhaps *too* formal and too open-textured to guide one's life. Aristotle wrote that 'not to have one's life organized in view of some end is a mark of much folly'.<sup>6</sup> Plato surely agrees; he seems to be arguing that freedom is ill suited to play the role the democrat has cast it in. *Do whatever you want* is, technically, a life-guiding principle, but so long as there are few or no restrictions on what

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6 Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, I.2 1214b10.

one should want or desire, it is going to lead to chaos. So what we have is not so much democracy as anarchy—*ἀναρχία* (*anarchia*): the absence of a leader or leading principle (8.562e).

We see this most clearly in the way the correct, aristocratic scheme of values is turned on its head in the democratic city and soul. Reverence, the proper sense of respect and shame that proper stories about the gods were meant to cultivate, is thought of as foolishness. The cardinal virtue of moderation is regarded as the cardinal vice of cowardice, and the vice of shamelessness is now become courage. Insolence—literally, *ὑβρις* (*hubris*)—is regarded as good breeding and anarchy is freedom. They mistake prodigality or wastefulness as the public-spirited virtue of magnificence (private spending for public goods such as producing a tragedy, outfitting a trireme, etc.). Where the oligarchic father was not willing to spend on such matters, the democratic son goes wrong in the other direction, spending wildly. It is an upside-down world, but of course the democratic person thinks it is the best of all worlds, free of stuffy conventions and old-fashioned thinking.

### The Tyrannical City and Soul (8.562a–9.576b)

Plato's explanation of the transformation from democracy to oligarchy has the elegance of Newton's third law of motion, which states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. For Plato, 'excessive action in one direction usually sets up a reaction in the opposite direction' (8.563e), so the extreme freedom found in democracies leads inexorably to the total lack of freedom found in tyrannies. Plato thinks his proto-Newtonian principle is not merely political—it explains changes in seasons, plants, and bodies, too—but alas we do not have space to pursue this fascinating line of thought.

It is no accident that Plato appeals to a principle of physics here. Nor should it be a surprise; after all, it is something like entropy that explains why the ideal state begins to decay in the first place. In addition to physical explanations of political events and changes—and it is helpful to keep in mind that our word 'physics' derives from the ancient Greek word *φύσις* [*phusis*], which means nature more broadly—he also appeals to economic factors. Consider first the change from oligarchy to democracy. Having exploited existing sources of wealth,

the oligarchs need new sources, new markets, so they hit upon one with great contemporary relevance: they find young people to be a potentially lucrative market to lend money to. More interested in profit than people, 'they are unwilling to enact laws to prevent young people who have had no discipline from spending and wasting their wealth, so that by making loans to them, secured by the young people's property, and then calling those loans in, they themselves become ever richer and more honored' (8.555c).

Although the details differ, something similar is afoot in the US, where student loan debt now tops one trillion dollars, exceeding even credit card debt. Though the cause is massive state disinvestment in higher education rather than predatory lending, the results seem the same: indebted young people. While indebtedness in the US seems to push us away from democracy and toward oligarchy, in Plato's world things go in the opposite direction: as the rich become fewer but richer and the poor become poorer but grow in number, an actual and not merely metaphorical civil war breaks out and the people are victorious.

In true Thrasymachan fashion, the holders of political power pass laws that benefit themselves rather than the citizenry at large or the state as a whole. They resist suggestions that 'the majority of voluntary contracts be entered into at the lender's own risk' (8.556b), much as contemporary bankers resist calls to eliminate the moral hazards of a system that privatizes profit but socializes loss by having the citizenry bail out the 'too big to fail' banks and investment firms that crashed the world economy in 2008. The transition to tyranny is fueled by the would-be tyrant's 'making all sorts of promises both in public and private, freeing the people from debt [and] redistributing the land to them' (8.566e). Thus economic factors are at work here, as well. Many readers will note eerie similarities with today's global political climate, which seems to feature the emergence of the 'strongman' whom 'the people' have set up 'as their special champion' (8.565c). I will leave it to more economically and politically sophisticated readers to pursue this for themselves; there is plenty of food for thought here, where—as elsewhere—the *Republic* is surprisingly contemporarily relevant.

## Interlude: Lawless versus Lawful Desires

Earlier it seemed that Socrates had run out of parts of the soul, there being five kinds of souls (and cities) but only three parts in the soul. To distinguish oligarch and democrat he distinguished between necessary and unnecessary desires. Here a similar problem arises: what governs the tyrannical soul? And so, at the beginning of Book IX Socrates makes a distinction between kinds of unnecessary desires: some are lawless, and some are law-abiding or at least law-amenable. In an account that rings some Freudian bells, Plato indicates that the lawless, unnecessary appetites are most apparent in our dreams, for it is there that our 'bestly and savage part' (8.571c) emerges—as anyone who has had not just a weird but a genuinely creepy dream can attest. There is nothing that is off-limits for the lawless, unnecessary desires; in their grip a person 'does not shrink from trying to have sex with a mother [...] or with anyone else at all, whether man, god, or beast. It will commit any foul murder, and there is no food it refuses to eat' (9.572d). Whom one has sex with, whom one kills, and what one eats form an unholy trinity indeed. The role played here and elsewhere in the *Republic* is intriguing; it was pivotal in the rejection of the first ideal city and in understanding the lawless unnecessary desires which define the tyrant. (It may be helpful to note that the Greek word translated as 'lawless' is *παράνομος* [*paranomos*], which connotes not the absence of law so much as going beyond it.)

It is not that only the tyrant has lawless unnecessary appetites; they are present in almost everyone, Plato thinks, but they *govern* the tyrannical soul. In most of us they are kept at bay by constraints internal (reason, in the best of us; shame or fear, in the rest of us) or external (the law). Indeed, Plato's account of psychic and political degeneration is an account of how these constraints change. In the aristocratic, philosophical soul, it is reason—rational persuasion—that keeps the beastly desires at bay. They are tamed by arguments (8.554d) and by the meditative practice Plato counsels undertaking before one goes to bed at night (9.571e–2a). The spirit-governed timocrat, more responsive to honor than to reason, is motivated by a healthy sense of shame, honor's opposite. Remember that much of the point of musical-poetic education is cultivating 'the right

distastes' (3.401e)—of being properly disgusted. The timocrat should be disgusted at the thought of ignoble or dishonorable thoughts and deeds and presumably would not even be tempted to embezzle from or cheat a widow or orphan, though the oligarch probably is. For the oligarch's dronish, unnecessary desires are not held in check by reason or shame but rather by fear; and if the oligarch believes they can 'do injustice with impunity' (8.554c), they probably will, just as Gyges did back in Book II (2.360c). The democratic person wavers between fear and shame, being too unsettled to have a constant, characteristic motivation: sometimes their disordered soul is ordered by 'a kind of shame' (8.560a), which overcomes some of their base appetites and expels others. But at other times they 'feel neither shame nor fear in front of [their] parents' (8.562e), thinking themselves their parents' equal and taking shamelessness to be a form of courage (8.560e). The tyrannical soul is 'free of all control by shame or reason' (9.571c). As the tyrannical city long ago abandoned proper education in music and poetry, the main bulwark against lawlessness (4.424d), this should come as no surprise.

### Tyranny, Continued

Although Plato is less explicit about the tyrannical soul's good than he is with the defining goods of the timocratic, oligarchic, and democratic souls, it seems that the tyrant's good is erotic love and desire: ἔρωϛ [erôs]. But this is not really erotic love, as opposed to familial or friendly love. It is mad, addictive, erotic desire for *everything*. Plato told us back in Book III that the right kind of erotic love—ὁ ὀρθὸς ἔρωϛ: the *orthos erôs*—is 'the love of order and beauty that has been moderated by education in music and poetry [... which] has nothing mad or licentious about it' (3.403a). The tyrant's erotic love, by contrast, is a kind of 'madness (μανία [mania])' (9.573b) that leads not merely to house-breaking, purse-snatching, temple-robbing and the like (9.575b), a cluster of unjust acts that pop up elsewhere in the *Republic* (1.344a, 4.443a, 8.552d), but to 'complete anarchy and lawlessness' (9.575a). It is outdoing—*pleonxia*—gone mad.

Thus the tyrant when awake is what most of us are when we sleep and have dark dreams of fulfilling lawless unnecessary desires (9.574e).

The tyrant is the inversion of the philosopher, who, in contrast to lovers of opinion and the cave-dwellers, is awake (5.476d, 7.520c). The tyrant's 'waking life is like the nightmare we described earlier' (9.576b). Their desires are not merely many but are insatiable, for they are 'like a vessel full of holes' (9.586b): no sooner has one appetite or lust been satisfied than another makes its demands. Always wanting more, nothing is ever enough. Epicurus seems to have diagnosed him exactly: 'Nothing is enough for the man for whom enough is too little'.<sup>7</sup>

The portrait of the tyrant is interesting, but some readers may feel that it misses the mark. It does not seem to fit tyrants most of us are familiar with—for example, Hitler and Stalin, neither of whom seemed to be a bubbling cauldron of lust, unable to control himself. Plato seems to have captured the essence of an addict running wild, manic and disordered and undisciplined. But he seems not to have captured the cold, calculating tyrant that Thrasymachus praises. The tyrant, after all, is supposed to be like a wolf (8.566a), preying upon the flock that the guardian-shepherds try to protect with the help of the sheepdog-auxiliaries, to bring the metaphor full circle. While the wolf as portrayed by Plato poses a threat to the flock, it is hard to see how this undisciplined, manic, deeply disturbed person can *appear* a paragon of justice, as the argument of the *Republic* requires. Someone more ordered and calculating seems needed, someone possessing the oligarch's singular focus and discipline, someone whose soul is as ordered and reason-governed as the just person's—but someone who possesses cleverness rather than wisdom: that is, someone who knows what best serves *their* interests rather than the city's. In short, the tyrant should be a 'wise villain' (3.409c).

No doubt there are people with dark secret lives who manage to convey an ordered, mild façade. But it is difficult to imagine how someone whose inner life is as deranged and insane as Plato's tyrant is could manage to appear completely respectable. Readers might wish that Adeimantus would push back here, as he has done elsewhere in the *Republic*. It is a shame that Adeimantus does not resist Glaucon's 'taking over the argument' (9.576b) at the conclusion of the account of the tyrant and raise some of these objections to Socrates. Because

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7 Epicurus, 'Vatican Sayings' #68, in *The Art of Happiness*, p. 183.

he does not, we will want to keep them in mind as we look at the arguments that the just life is happier than the unjust life, to which we now turn.

### Some Suggestions for Further Reading

Readers interested in the philosophical thought of Epicurus will find his extant writings along with a helpful introductory essay in *The Art of Happiness*, trans. by George Strodach (New York: Penguin Classics, 2012). Epicurus' thought is expressed vividly in one of the great poems of world literature, Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. by Alicia Stallings (New York: Penguin Books, 2007). The story of the fifteenth-century rediscovery of it is the subject of Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In presenting Epicurus' taxonomy of desire, I draw on an excellent essay, Raphael Woolf, 'Pleasure and Desire', in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9780521873475>, pp. 158–78.

Readers interested in an accessible, erudite discussion of the decay of the city and soul will profit from G.R.F. Ferrari, *City and Soul in Plato's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

As many readers will have noticed for themselves, there has been a revival of popular interest in Plato's conception of tyranny in light of recent electoral events in America. There are many interesting opinion pieces online. For a scholarly take, interested readers might see the essays collected in *Trump and Political Philosophy: Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism, and Civic Virtue*, ed. by Marc Benjamin Sable and Angel Jaramillo Torres (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74427-8>, or in *Trump and Political Philosophy: Leadership, Statesmanship, and Tyranny*, ed. by Angel Jaramillo Torres and Marc Benjamin Sable (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74445-2>.

Readers interested in a brief, wise, and oddly hopeful look at tyranny from one of the world's leading historians of modern Europe will

certainly want to read Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

