

# Plato and *The Republic*

**Nearly 2,400 years ago, the Greek philosopher Plato explored the meaning of justice. He concluded that a truly just society was one where a wise philosopher-king ruled and every person knew his or her place.**

Plato was born about 427 B.C. into a wealthy family in the democratic Greek city-state of Athens. He grew up in a violent time of war, rebellion, and political conflict.

Around age 20, Plato became a student of the philosopher Socrates. Socrates taught by asking his students important questions, such as "What is honesty?" When students responded, he kept questioning them, using reason to examine all possible answers. Through his Socratic method or dialogue, he got students to question their own beliefs and assumptions and to use reason to seek the truth.

In Athenian democracy, all male citizens directly participated in making laws and deciding jury trials. Citizens were also selected by lot to hold government posts, usually for one year. By Plato's time, even poor men could take time away from work to attend and speak at the lawmaking Assembly and jury trials, because citizens were paid for their service.

Socrates often criticized Athenian democracy. He especially criticized it for the selfish individuals who gained power and wealth by using speech-making tricks and flattery to gain the support of citizens.

Much of his criticism took place during the 27-year Peloponnesian War between Athens and its great rival, Sparta. The city-state of Sparta was devoted to military honor, patriotism, and war. In Sparta, wealthy landowners elected about 100 men for life. These men held most of the political power. Sparta was an oligarchy, or "rule by the few." The state took both boys and girls from their parents at an early age to train them to become physically tough and obedient. Each youth was educated to develop skills to serve the state.

In 404 B.C., the war ended when Sparta finally defeated Athens. Sparta imposed an oligarchy on Athens by appointing 30 wealthy Athenians to rule. A leader of the oligarchy was Critias, a former student of Socrates. But the oligarchy ruled brutally and did not last long. A rebellion erupted, and Athens restored its democracy.

After democracy returned, Socrates resumed teaching his students to think for themselves. This often led to dialogues that criticized Athenian democracy and its politicians. He relentlessly questioned the honesty of Athenian politicians whom he called "pretenders to wisdom." An increasing number of Athenians viewed Socrates as a threat to their city-state.

## **The Trial of Socrates**

In 399 B.C., Athens put the 70-year-old Socrates on trial. Three prosecutors accused him of not accepting the gods of Athens and of corrupting the young. The prosecutors proposed a penalty of death.

The only records of the trial come from Socrates' supporters (like Plato), so it is difficult to assess what actually took place. The religious charge against Socrates seemed trumped up. Other famous Athenians had made fun of the gods without being charged. Socrates was more pro-reason than he was anti-religion. His enemies, however, must have feared that Socrates was likely to foment discontent among young people against the fragile Athenian democracy.

Socrates' trial lasted one day and was heard by 501 jurors. He spoke in his own defense and even cross-examined one of the prosecutors. Socrates stated that there was "nothing real of which to accuse me." But the jurors found him guilty. A second vote sentenced him to death by poison.

Friends offered Socrates a chance to escape Athens, but he refused. He argued that it was the duty of every citizen to obey the state that had educated and sustained him. He believed it was better to suffer an injustice than to commit one. He then drank the poisonous hemlock.

At the death of Socrates, Plato concluded that democracy was a corrupt and unjust form of government. He left Athens and traveled for a few years before returning in 387 B.C. to establish a school of philosophy.

## ***The Republic***

Known as the Academy, Plato's school aimed to educate future Greek leaders to use reason and wisdom in ruling. Shortly after he founded the Academy, Plato wrote his most important work, *The Republic*. In this work, Plato attempted to design an ideal society and government that were free of injustice and conflict.

Plato wrote his work as a dialogue among characters. The main character was Socrates, who voiced Plato's ideas. (The real Socrates never wrote down his ideas.) Through the dialogue, Plato was trying to duplicate the way Socrates taught philosophy by engaging his students on a significant question.

*The Republic* is set in a private home where a small group of Athenians have gathered to have a philosophical discussion with Socrates.

The dialogue focuses on two questions: What is justice and why should an individual act justly? Thrasymachus, a character who teaches politicians, declares that justice is whatever is in the interest of the powerful who rule the state. In other words, he claims that might makes right. Socrates disagrees and argues that justice requires rulers to act in

the interest of their subjects like a doctor and his patients. Justice brings harmony to a society rather than conflict, Socrates concludes.

Another character, Glaucon enters the conversation. He argues that people only act justly out of fear. To illustrate his point, he tells the story of Gyges, a shepherd who discovers a ring that makes him invisible. Given this new power, Gyges sneaks into the palace, seduces the queen, and murders the king. Gyges continues his life as a just person when visible, but also benefits from his unjust acts when invisible. Glaucon concludes that given the chance, most men would act in this way. He says that they would reap the benefits of injustice and of being seen as a just person.

Socrates answers that such a man would not be at peace with himself. He would have lost his most precious possession—his integrity. He would, in short, have harmed his soul, which is the worst thing that can happen to a person.

Socrates says it might be helpful in thinking about justice to look beyond individuals and look at the bigger picture of what makes a "just state." Socrates begins to explain his ideal state. Socrates argues that a just society would be composed of three classes. First are the rulers, the wisest and the best. Next, are the auxiliaries, the police and military who along with the rulers make up the Guardians of the state. Finally, the farmers, merchants, and other producers control the economy and provide food, clothing, and other necessities.

Plato based this social structure on a story called the "Myth of the Metals." In this myth, the Earth god added gold to those wise fated to rule, silver to the auxiliaries, and bronze to the producers. These metals signified their nature and destiny in life.

Socrates reasons that individuals will be the happiest if they use their natural talents and abilities (as signified by their metal). Such a society, concludes Socrates, would be harmonious and peaceful.

Next, Plato, continuing to speak as Socrates, says the Guardians must be carefully trained to be "philosophic, spirited, swift, and strong." Borrowing from the Spartans, he insists that both men and women who have the aptitude should train together in athletics and for combat to become the Guardians of the ideal state.

Plato argues that as children, the Guardians must be exposed only to stories and myths that demonstrate goodness, courage, moderation, and obedience. Stories and myths that fail to do this must be censored. Later in *The Republic*, Plato declares that most poetry, music, and drama have no place in the ideal state. They are all pretense and illusion that corrupt society.

Once the young Guardians have completed their elementary physical and moral training, Plato explains, they would be tested and divided into two sub-classes. First, the future rulers, called philosopher-kings, are selected for their superior ability to reason. The rest

of the Guardians become warriors who assist the rulers. Plato made clear that women could become either rulers or warriors, depending on their natural abilities.

All those in society who are not in the two Guardian classes, the vast majority of people, own all the land and control all the wealth. But they have no role in governing.

The philosopher-kings and warriors are not permitted to own property, accumulate money, or even have a family. Plato did not want them distracted from ruling and defending the state. The Guardians live in barracks, eat together, and share possessions.

The ruling philosopher-kings secretly select Guardian marriage partners for the purpose of breeding the best children. After conceiving, the parents go their separate ways. Once they are born, the children are taken from their mothers and placed in common nurseries until they are ready for their elementary state training. Deformed or weak infants are allowed to die in the wilderness. The end result, according to Plato, is a society where everyone happily knows his or her place in a city-state that is free of conflict. Plato calls this a just city-state.

### **The Philosopher-King**

Plato goes on to explain why philosophers make the best rulers. He tells a story about a ship of fools who all think they know how to navigate the vessel. In the dialogue, Socrates says: "Sometimes one party fails but another succeeds better; then one party kills the other, or throws them overboard, and the good, honest captain they bind hand and foot. . . ." Little do the fools realize that the captain must know all about the position of stars, winds, currents and other matters of the sea to steer the ship safely to port. So too must a wise ruler know all about philosophy in order to create a harmonious and just state.

Those selected to be future rulers undergo advanced training in mathematics and philosophical reasoning. At age 35, they become trained philosophers, whom Plato describes as lovers of the truth, wisdom, and all knowledge. They clearly see what justice and goodness are, while others see only shadows and illusion.

Plato illustrates the role of the philosopher-king by telling his most famous story, "The Myth of the Cave." In this myth, humans are chained in a cave and can look only at the wall in front of them. They can talk, but not see one another. There is a fire behind them, and some other humans pass between it and the human prisoners, casting shadows on the cave wall. The prisoners believe these shadows are reality.

One prisoner is released and walks out of the cave. At first confused, he finally sees the light of day and the real world, which Plato equates with goodness, truth, and justice. When the enlightened prisoner returns to those in the cave to tell them that the shadows they see are not reality, they laugh at and even threaten him.

Thus, Plato sees the purpose of the philosopher-king as bringing enlightenment to the ignorant to increase their happiness. This will often be a thankless job, Plato notes, because the ignorant sometimes reject wisdom and even attack wise people, as in the case of the real Socrates.

At age 50, the philosophers are ready to rule the ideal state. The philosopher-king rules reluctantly, but with a sense of duty to do what is best for the common good. He or she rules with absolute power for life. There is no need for laws, argues Plato, since they would only get in the way of the philosopher-king exercising his wisdom. People will know their place in society and live in harmony in this *aristocracy*, or rule by an elite.

Toward the end of *The Republic*, Plato describes and ranks four "unjust states." Plato says that the best of these is a *timocracy*. Modeled after Sparta, this warrior state is based on military honors and ambition. Gradually, however, the warriors accumulate wealth, which becomes more important than the welfare of the citizens. Greed takes over and the state turns into an *oligarchy*.

In an oligarchy, only the rich rule. The majority become impoverished and have no role in government. The rich and the poor plot against each other. Finally, the poor overthrow the rich, confiscate their property, and establish a *democracy*.

Plato finds many faults with democracy. Any male citizen can vote and hold office, even if he is ignorant or incompetent. Freedom is supreme, but the laws are not obeyed and chaos results. Leaders pander to the wants of the people, whom Plato refers to as the "beast." A few people take advantage and accumulate great wealth.

To restore order and put down the rich, the citizens in a democracy vote a tyrant (dictator) into power. But the tyrant grabs power for himself and destroys anyone who opposes him. Fear rules the city as the *tyranny* steals the freedom of the people.

At the end of *The Republic*, Plato returns to answering why it is better to act justly than unjustly. The answer, in short, is that acting unjustly harms one's soul and acting justly nourishes it. Plato tells one last story about just and unjust persons. Er, a soldier killed in battle, travels to a place between heaven and earth where judges decide the fate of just and unjust souls. Er sees how the just are rewarded for their good lives while the unjust are punished for their evil ones. After their rewards and punishments, all souls get another chance for a mortal life. Each soul must choose a just or unjust new life. While some choose wisely, others prefer to become a tyrant or some other unjust character, condemning themselves to misery after death. Why would someone do this? Plato answers that foolish people act out of ignorance. Wise people carefully evaluate what they do. In the words of the real Socrates, "the unexamined life is not worth living."

### **For Discussion and Writing (Individual)**

1. Pericles, probably the greatest democratic leader of Athens, once said in a speech before the Assembly that he regarded "the man who does not participate in [public] affairs at all not as a man who minds his own business but as useless." Would Plato agree or disagree with Pericles? Why? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. How was Athenian democracy different from today's American democracy? Do you think Plato would have liked American democracy? Explain.
3. What do you think are the positive elements of Plato's ideal state? Negative elements?
4. What do you think is the strongest argument for Plato's ideal state? What is the strongest argument against it?

### **A C T I V I T Y**

#### **Democracy**

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965) once said, "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried . . . ." In *The Republic*, Plato makes many criticisms of democracy.

1. Find at least three criticisms of democracy by Plato in the article.
2. Examine whether each criticism is valid of American democracy today.
3. Think of things that American democracy could do to protect itself from this problem.