

# A PLATONIC DEFENSE OF LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM



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“And doesn’t that mean that he is making the best of his natural gifts, and, by forming a character in which self-control and justice and understanding are combined, getting something worth more than physical strength and health and good looks, just as the mind is worth more than the body?”

*The Republic* (591b)

## 1. Introduction

Plato’s *Republic* is normally taken to be a defense of hierarchical, authoritarian rule by an elite class of philosophers, and I have no quarrel with the standard interpretation. But does Plato’s vision of society flow logically from his account of the human soul, his moral theory, and his theory of human inequality? While Plato’s politics seems consistent with his broader philosophical system, the sequel will argue that many of his views could easily be turned to support liberal individualism.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Nature of the Soul

Plato tells us that the each human soul contains three elements: reason, spirit, and appetite. Appetite consists roughly in instinctive drives, spirit in acquired desires such as those for honor and self-respect, and reason in the ability to acquire knowledge (including moral knowledge). Having made this distinction, Plato draws the following normative implication: “The just man will not allow the three elements which make up his inward self to trespass on each other’s functions or interfere with each other, but, by keeping all three in tune, will in the truest sense set his house to rights, attain self-mastery and order, and live on good terms with himself.” (443d) And naturally, the function of reason is to rule the soul: “So the reason ought to rule, having the wisdom and foresight to act for the whole, and the spirit ought to obey and support it.” (441e) Or as Aristotle put it in one of his Platonic moments, “just as a city or any other systematic whole is most properly identified with the most authoritative element in it, so is a man. Besides, a man is said to have or not to have self-control according as his reason has or has not the control, on the assumption that this is the man himself.” (1168b31-35) Plato goes on to say repeatedly that both morally virtuous character and true happiness necessarily flow from a proper internal ordering of the soul, in which reason alone rules.

## 3. Plato’s Derivation of Authoritarianism

To the previous theory of the nature of the soul, Plato adds the observation that human beings are far from equal in their rational

abilities. “And, what is more, the greatest number and variety of desires and pleasures and pains is generally to be found in children and women and slaves, and in the less respectable majority of so-called free man,” Socrates tells us. And in contrast, “the simple and moderate desires, guided by reason and right judgment and reflection, are to be found in a minority who have the best natural gifts and best education.” (431c)

From this point, Plato makes an argument by analogy to a form of political authoritarianism. We say that a person rules himself when his reason is in control over the other aspects of his soul. Similarly, we should say that a state has self-control when its rational element has authority over its appetites. Combining this insight with the empirical premise of inequality of rational abilities, we see that rational rule requires rule by the few rational people over the many people who live under the sway of their passions; or, as Plato puts it, “the desires of the less respectable minority are controlled by the desires and the wisdom of the superior minority.” (431c-d)

## 4. First Objection: Plato’s State Cannot Lead to General Happiness

When Adeimantus objects that the Guardians will be unhappy, Socrates replies that, “though it would not in fact be in the least surprising if our Guardians were very happy indeed, our purpose in founding our state was not to promote the particular happiness of a single class, but, so far as possible, of the whole community.” (420c) At the same time, Socrates has also told us repeatedly that true happiness consists in the life of reason, not a life guided by appetite.

But these two premises imply that any state in which most people continue to live under the sway of their appetites cannot satisfy the announced aim of the ideal state. If true happiness consists in the life of reason, and the just state seeks the happiness of as many people as possible, then the just state must seek to make as many people rational as possible. It cannot be content with educating a tiny minority in the ways of reason. But this is precisely what Plato argues the ideal state will do.

To put the argument a little more formally:

1. True happiness is possible only to those guided by reason.
2. The aim of the ideal state is to achieve the happiness of the whole community, not merely a part of it.
3. Therefore, the ideal state must make everyone in the community as rational as possible.

Plato’s dilemma is that he has identified happiness with reason (premise 1), and has proclaimed the purpose of the state to make all classes of people happy (premise 2). But his authoritarian state does not and cannot fulfill both requirements simultaneously, since it self-consciously leaves the large majority of the people under the sway of their passions. How could Plato keep his proposed state? He must either alter his account of happiness, so that less able people can be happy without reason. Or, he could say that the goal of the state is not to make everyone happy. In either case, Plato’s proposed hierarchical society seems to be inconsistent with at least one of his two basic principles.

## 5. Second Objection: Rational Development Requires Freedom and Responsibility

Now Plato could reply that unfortunately, it is beyond the capacity of most people to become rational. So as a second-best solution, Plato’s state abandons the attempt to make everyone happy in the strict sense (that is, give everyone the happiness that goes along



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with rationality), and instead merely tries to give them the “popular idea of happiness”. (591d) This does not constitute an abandonment of the the conclusion that true happiness flows from rationality; it merely accomodates the theory to the limitations of average people.

But even on this slightly modified justification of Plato’s political philosophy, Plato’s state turns out to inadequately serve its ends. Granted that most people cannot become philosophers, and therefore cannot attain supreme happiness. But just because most people cannot become supremely rational, does it follow that they cannot be rational to any degree at all? If true happiness flows from the life of reason, then it would seem that each person would be as happy as possible only if each person lived up to his full rational potential. A system based on Plato’s basic ideas should therefore be designed to encourage each individual to reach the highest level of rationality of which he is capable.

Now the problem with Plato’s system is that it simply doesn’t encourage ordinary people to become more rational. It assigns each person his place in society, decides what he should believe, what cultural influences he may be exposed to. An ordinary person in Plato’s society could live his whole life without ever having to make an important decision for himself. Is this the best way to develop his rational faculties? When the Guardians make decisions for ordinary people, they take away the freedom and the responsibility of making those decisions for themselves.

Perhaps an analogy will make the argument clearer. Parents naturally want to take care of their children; but at the same time, they want their children to develop into free and responsible adults. The dilemma is: if parents take care of their children completely, they will never learn how to cope with freedom or how to accept responsibility. So wise parents look to the long-run interest of their children, and remember that while parents may know their children’s interests better than the children themselves do, they must allow them some degree of freedom or else they will never learn to make decisions for themselves. And similarly, while parents would like to shield their children from the consequences of bad choices, they realize that if children never suffer the consequences of their mistakes, they will never learn responsibility. Or as Plato tells us in a slightly different context, “no one who had not exceptional gifts could grow into a good man unless he were brought up from childhood in a good environment and trained in good habits.” (558b) Well-intentioned but unwise parents make all of their children’s decisions and protect them from the consequences of their actions; but the end result is that their children will probably grow up to be dependent and irresponsible adults. I think that Plato would acknowledge that only the former sort of parent shows true concern for the welfare of his child.

Similarly, a state seeking to make all of its citizens happy would be careful to leave each citizen a wide sphere of free choice, and to try to refrain from rescuing them from the consequences of bad choices. Wise rulers would indeed know the short-run interests of its less rational citizens better than they do themselves; but they would also give due weight to each citizen’s long-run interest in developing his rational faculty to its full potential. These considerations argue strongly against censorship of literature and ideas; for a mind that is never exposed to controversy or argument will surely be stunted at a low level. Socrates’ midwife analogy in *Theaetetus* illustrates the point with especial eloquence: “my art of midwifery is in most respects like theirs; but differs in that I attend men and not women, and I look after their souls when they are in labor, and not after their bodies; and the triumph of my art is in thoroughly examining whether the thought which the mind of the young man brings forth is a false idol or a noble and true birth.” (150) The crucial thing to note here is that Socrates wants the truth to emerge from each person’s own reflections; he wants understanding, not merely agreement. The central failure of the Platonic state to give true happiness to all of its citizens lies in its attempt to elicit the people’s agreement without their understanding.

And the Platonic state need not limit freedom to the narrowly defined intellectual realm. There is a good case for allowing each citizen to choose his own occupation — namely, that leaving each individual to make such decisions for himself helps develop his character and especially his intellect. Indeed, it could be argued

that it would benefit the Guardians if they were given the freedom to marry and own property, since this would prepare them for making more important decisions when they are in power. After all, Plato counts moral thinking as one vital aspect of reason; and leaving each individual to make important life choices for himself will help develop his moral sense and thereby his reason.

## 6. Third Objection: Inequality Argues for Freedom not Authority

Most thinkers probably agree with Plato that human inequality argues to some extent for authoritarianism, but the case is much less clear than it appears. For if individuals are unequal, mightn’t we also say that they are different, that they are diverse? Some kinds of inequality, such as unequal intellectual abilities, might argue for authoritarianism. But other kinds of inequality, such as unequal (i.e., different) interests, tastes, aspirations, and talents, argue for a strong dose of individual freedom. For if each individual is different from every other, then each person will have a special advantage in knowing his own good.

How does this differ from moral relativism, the very doctrine that *The Republic* is trying to refute? Well, there is all the difference in the world between saying that good is in the eye of the beholder, and saying that each individual will find it easier to reason about his own good than he will about other people’s good. The point is simply that if people are highly diverse, then knowledge about what is really good for each person will be radically decentralized.

Now of course an extremely astute philosopher might be able to figure out a person’s good with greater precision than the person himself could. (For example, someone might not be very introspective, or might have trouble reasoning from the facts about their unique constitutions to their proper course in life.) But this would be very difficult, since each person would know the crucial facts about their own interests, tastes, aspirations, talents, and so on with intimate familiarity. In other words, even the wisest philosopher would have to balance his superior theoretical insight into the good against the superior factual knowledge of his own character that each individual enjoys.

## 7. Conclusion: Reconstructing the Platonic State

The preceding analysis suggests that Plato’s ideal state would have to be drastically altered in order to cohere with the rest of his philosophical system. Most importantly, ordinary people would have to be given vastly greater degrees of personal freedom and responsibility. Otherwise, their rational development will be stunted, so they shall never enjoy true happiness; and since the aim of the ideal state is the happiness of all, the ideal state would completely fail in its announced aim. The Guardians should also probably be given greater freedom, such as the freedom to marry and enjoy property, for this would help develop their moral faculties and prepare them for ruling. And there would be no need to restrict foreign trade or the importation of foreign ideas; for even the challenge of wrong ideas helps to develop the rational faculty. What would remain distinctively Platonic about this society? Power would remain in the hands of the philosophers, but their power would be significantly reduced, since they would have to leave most decisions to each citizen to decide for himself or herself. Education would remain a central concern of the state — but education would have to aim at developing each person’s rational faculty, and leave room for individual differences to blossom. In sum, the Platonic state would not be a democracy, but it would be an open society.

## NOTE

1. As a first approximation, I would say that “liberal individualism” encompasses all political philosophies which (a) emphasize individual freedom and individual responsibility, (b) as a corollary, leave most decisions not to the state, but to each individual.

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