

# How Is Plato's *Republic* Relevant Today?



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**Answer by Cecili Chadwick:**

Written in ancient Greece at a time of major political decay, Plato's *Republic* is becoming increasingly relevant for anyone who cares about justice or has an interest in restoring the political health of our communities. In fact, I can't think of anything more relevant. What we learn in the *Republic* is that the nature of justice depends on the nature of the city and that there are strong parallels between the city and the soul.

One view of justice held by many can be found in a discussion with Thrasymachus when he says:

Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws, and so on with the others. And they declare what they have made—what is to their own advantage — to be just for their subjects, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust. This, then, is what I say justice is, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established rule.

In the *Republic*, just as there are five different regime types, there are also five corresponding characters of men, and they each give birth to the next: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. These regime types can also be read in order of excellence.

An aristocracy is a regime ruled by well-educated people who mix prudence and experience to become superior leaders. The leaders of this regime channel their desire and ambition through reason. There are three separate castes in an aristocratic society: 1) ruling class, defined by wisdom; 2) soldiers/guardians, defined by a pursuit of honor; and 3) the majority class, defined by the base desires of man. Considering Plato's tripartite theory of the soul, an aristocrat is a person in whom appetite, logic, and spirit work together properly.

A timocracy is a system where property replaces wisdom as the highest value. In this regime, the soldier/guardian class are no longer warriors in pursuit of honor but seek the things important to people of the middle class—moderate wealth, medicine, basic schooling, leisure, influence, etc. In this system, leaders are more “high-spirited” and simple-minded than in an aristocratic regime (Crete and Sparta are Plato's examples of a timocracy). A timocratic man's nature is primarily good, but reason's pre-eminence has been eclipsed by appetite and spirit, which are the new highest values in a timocracy.

An oligarchy is the first regime in which an actual desire for wealth rules. It is not property in this system that is valued, but money. Money is desired for its own sake, whereas in previous regimes money was a means to acquire the materials necessary for the good life. In this way, money is prized over virtue or honor. The rulers in an oligarchy are warriors whose “spiritedness” dominates their souls. Oligarchs tend to be thrifty, hard-working, and possess a superficial honesty derived from self-interest. They may seem superior to the majority, but their souls are extremely fragile. Oligarchs are scions who have forsaken their fathers' values because the fragility of a decaying regime could not maintain its previous orientation toward the good life. Oligarchs retreat from a life of high ambition and virtuous living. These men only *appear* to be good, while their desires are almost entirely self-referential and materialistic.

In Plato's *Republic*, a democracy is a regime where one can find the most variety, which is why every character type can be found in it. Again, as found in previous regimes, the aim of democracy is not virtue, but freedom. Democracy abhors restraint, so freedom for individuals to do as they wish is the highest value. In a democracy, the ordering of the rulers and the ruled is often reversed. In this way, the lower classes grow large and society begins to cater to the lowest common denominator. In a democracy, men act more like boys, teachers fear their students, and the battle of the sexes finally commences. A democratic man is often consumed by his desires and he assigns equality to everyone regardless of merit or deed.

After democracy crumbles, tyranny emerges from combining a desire for freedom and a lack of discipline. In this regime there are no remnants of civic virtue and power is seized for the purpose of maintaining order. A tyrant is the worst type of man and he is completely unjust. Naturally, he is also the man who leads the worst type of regime. The tyrant is eros incarnate. For a real life example, it's quite possible that this character type has some Trump-like qualities.

Considering the state of our current political spectrum, I think we may have something important to learn from Plato's *Republic*. If nothing else, we could certainly benefit from a discussion about *the good* at a time when everything seems so relative ... or democratic?