Socrates’ Critique of Democracy  
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Democracy is a political system that grants its citizens certain personal and political rights. Personal rights are represented by institutionalized freedoms, such as freedom of speech, expression, and assembly; political rights are represented by citizens’ power to choose their own rulers and therefore determine the course of public affairs.

In Book VIII of Plato’s Republic, Socrates identifies democracy as one of the most unjust political regimes. He describes four types of unjust political regimes: timocracy as an honor-driven society; oligarchy as a society driven by the desire for wealth; democracy as a society in which absolute freedom becomes the paramount value; and tyranny as a society ruled by the unrestricted, unlawful desires of one individual. Socrates identifies timocracy as the closest to the ideal political system, i.e. aristocracy (literally, rule by the best). The other regimes descend in value as listed. Socrates’ low estimation of democracy is based on four inherent critical flaws of this regime – excessive freedom, hostility to authority, protection of privacy, and artificial egalitarianism. Socrates maintains that these very flaws will result in the inevitable transformation of democracy to tyranny. Using the flaws and the nature of people within the democratic system, Socrates illustrates the occurrence of the transformation.

Although Socrates’ theories and examples appear logical and compelling, there are positive aspects of democracy which must be explored. The following discussion elaborate Socrates’ view of democracy and its
transformation to tyranny. However, the conclusion will emphasize the positive aspects of democracy.

The first flaw in democracy, Plato finds, is its excessive freedom. The citizens are given a license “to do what they want... and arrange their own life in whatever manner pleases them” (Plato, Republic. 557b). Although the citizens consider their lives to be “pleasant, free and blessedly happy” (Plato, Republic. 561d), Socrates believes the excessive freedom creates undisciplined and disorderly individuals. In fact, Socrates finds the democratic citizens quite whimsical.

Sometimes such an individual drinks heavily while listening to the flute, at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he’s idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy. He often engages in politics, leaping up from his seat and saying and doing whatever comes into his mind. If he happens to admire soldiers, he’s carried in that direction, if money-makers, in that one (Plato, Republic. 561c, d).

Socrates firmly believes that the citizens can achieve their highest potential only within a society that has a rigid educational and social structure. Only then can the citizens become the best they could be and truly benefit their society.

Out of the excessive democratic freedom arises another flaw in this system, the hostility to authority. Freedom becomes such a paramount value of democracy that its citizens perceive any kind of authority as a threat to their personal freedom. The growing hostility can be apparent in both private and public lives of the citizens. Children feel no shame or fear in front of their parents, while “the old imitate the young for fear of appearing disagreeable
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and authoritarian” (Plato, Republic. 563a). The teachers in such a community becomes afraid of their students, while the students despise their teachers and tutors. In public affairs, the resentment towards authority manifests itself in the citizens’ choice of their rulers. They only appoint rulers who are pliable and provide them with plenty of freedom. They insult “those who obey the rulers as willing slaves and good-for-nothings and praise and honor rulers who behave like subjects” (Plato, Republic. 562d). Socrates believes that this hostility can only lead to a lawless society since the citizens eventually start ignoring even “the laws, whether written or unwritten, in order to avoid having any master at all (Plato, Republic. 563d).

Another flaw of democracy that coincides with the excessive freedom is the protection of privacy. Socrates maintains that the protection of privacy allows the citizens to stay apolitical, even if they have the potential to become great political leaders. Indeed, “there is no requirement to rule, even if you are capable of it... and there is no requirement that you not serve in public office as a juror, if you happen to want to serve, even if there is a law forbidding you to do so” (Plato, Republic. 557e). Socrates believes that the best society should have a right to compel their most talented individuals to “labor in politics and rule for the city’s sake, not as if he were doing something fine, but rather something that has to be done” (Plato, Republic, 540b).

The last flaw of democracy criticized by Socrates is its artificial egalitarianism. Democracy is founded on the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal consideration. Every citizen is, therefore, given an equal opportunity to participate in public affairs regardless of his character, knowledge or capabilities. Socrates,
however, holds that not all people are equal, and that certain individuals are innately physically and intellectually superior to others. These naturally superior individuals should be fostered by their society to become its political leaders. Socrates believes that a society cannot become truly successful while it prefers artificial equality to natural merit and ability.

Having identified the flaws of democracy, Socrates states that these very flaws will lead to the transformation of a democracy to a tyranny. When the citizens start “calling insolence good breeding, anarchy freedom, extravagance magnificence, and shamelessness courage” (Plato, Republic. 560e), the transformation becomes simply inevitable. To best illustrate this transformation, Socrates first divides the “democratic society into three parts in theory, this being the way that it is in fact divided” (Plato, Republic. 564c).

The first group is the class of the politically engaged citizens. These individuals hold political offices, establish new laws and rules, and determine the course of public affairs in general. They claim to aim at the welfare of the community and its citizens, but their true goals are their personal benefits. Even though these individuals are not naturally best suited to be the community’s leaders, they become the most influential people in their society nonetheless. They maintain their power through careful rhetoric, constantly trying to please the other citizens who could potentially become hostile towards their authority.

The second group is the class of the affluent citizens. These people acquire their wealth by being naturally the most organized. Although they are the smallest group, they own almost all of the society’s wealth.
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The last group includes everyone else, “the people - those who work with their own hands... They take no part in politics and have few possessions, but, when they are assembled, they are the largest and most powerful class in a democracy” (Plato, Republic. 565a).

Socrates tells us that the politicians from the first group are always scheming how to get a share of the wealthy citizens’ possessions. They try to do this by inciting the two other groups against each other. They publicly accuse the rich of being oligarchs, appropriate their wealth and promise to distribute it to the poor. Although some distribution of the confiscated wealth does take place, the politicians keep the greater part for themselves. Consequently, “those whose wealth is taken away are compelled to defend themselves... and when they see the people trying to harm them, they truly do become oligarchs and embrace oligarchy’s evils” (Plato, Republic. 565b). The oligarchic behavior of the rich makes the poor revolt, and soon the entire society finds itself in the middle of a civil war.

In Socrates’ opinion, it is precisely at the time of a civil war that the tyrant arises. He will ascend to his power first as the leader of the poor, representing and protecting them against the reactionary rich and the scheming politicians. The poor themselves appoint this leader “as their special champion, nurturing him and making him great” (Plato, Republic. 565c). He is the ultimate populist. He is the ultimate demagogue. He appeals to fears, expectations, and emotions of the people through perfect rhetoric and propaganda, and makes grandiose public promises for a better future. “During the first days of his reign and for some time after, he smiles in welcome at anyone he meets, saying that he’s no tyrant” (Plato,
Republic. 566d). He even fulfills some of his initial promises. He sets about the relief of debtors and the distribution of the land to the people, making himself look gracious and selfless. He calls the rich and anyone who opposes him the ‘enemies of the people.’ He brings some of them to trial on false charges, banishes some, and kills others, justifying these atrocities by saying that he only committed them in the interest of the common people. It is at this time, that the tyrant demands his own private bodyguards. He justifies his request by claiming that he needs the bodyguards to protect him from the ‘enemies of the people’. And the citizens are glad to grant his request since they look upon his bodyguards as a popular militia, which is there to protect their interest.

When all the ‘enemies of the people’ have been dealt with and the threat of civil war has passed, the tyrant starts a war with a foreign enemy in order to solidify his own rule. The tyrant hopes that the tumultuous state of war will make people feel again in need of a leader, and there is one more benefit the tyrant gains from this war. The citizens become poor through having to pay for war expenses; they become more occupied with their day-to-day survival and less concerned about the enormous growing power of the tyrant.

Despite the citizens’ preoccupation with the continual war, there will still be some individuals, “the courageous, high-minded, and knowledgeable” (Plato, Republic. 567b), who dare to criticize the tyrant’s rule and his growing power. But the tyrant will have to do away with such people if he intends to maintain his supremacy. He won’t even hesitate to use his bodyguards against the citizens, turning the once-popular militia into an instrument of exploitation and oppression.
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The transformation of democracy to tyranny is now complete. The society is in the perpetual war stage, and the tyrant has denuded it of its very best citizens. There is nothing and no one to restrain his insatiable desire for absolute power. “The people... have escaped the smoke only to fall into the fire, exchanging service to free men for the tyranny of slaves. That freedom which knew no bounds must now put on the livery of the most harsh and bitter servitude” (Plato, Republic. 569b,c).

Socrates’ account of the inevitable transformation of a democracy to a tyranny is certainly thought provoking. In the 20th century alone, the pattern of an evolution of a demagogue into a tyrant has been reenacted on more than one occasion. We can cite several examples in the 20th century of tyrants who began their reigns precisely as Socrates says, as the ultimate populists: Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Saddam Hussein (Roochnik, Plato’s Republic. 80).

However, in his critique of democracy, Socrates neglects to emphasize the positive aspects of this system. It was precisely the democratic freedom of speech and protection of privacy that allowed Socrates to engage in the dialogue of Republic. Socrates would not be able to follow his intellectual thoughts as freely as he did in any other political system. Indeed, he himself states: “…it looks as though anyone who wants to put a city in order, as we were doing, should probably go to a democracy” (Plato, Republic. 557d). Although Socrates viewed freedom of speech and protection of privacy as the ‘defects’ of the system, it appears that these very principles seem to be the conditions necessary for the possibility of philosophy.

Another positive aspect of democracy is the wide scope of opinions that goes into the process of determining the
course of public affairs. Democracy is founded upon the belief that the widest popular discussion and participation is likely to yield wiser decisions than a discussion limited to the few. Aristotle argues for this aspect of democracy in his *Politics* when he declares:

*The many, of whom each individual is but an ordinary person, when they meet together may very likely be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively... For each individual among the many has a share of virtue and prudence, and when they meet together, they become in a manner one man, who has many feet, and hands, and senses; that is a figure of their mind and disposition. Hence the many are better judges than a single man... for some understand one part, and some another, and among them they understand the whole*” (Aristotle, *The Politics*. III.XI.2-3).

The equal consideration and opportunity that democracy ideally offers to its citizens is another positive aspect of democracy. The equal opportunity system creates a naturally competitive environment that allows the most talented individuals to rise to the leading positions of society. Through this positively stimulating environment, society achieves structure that Socrates promotes as a root of any successful society.

The last positive aspect of democracy that needs to be emphasized is its appreciation of dignity and worth of human life. All citizens are considered equal, not in their mental and physical attributes, but equal in their common humanity. All humans are capable of feeling pain and affection, and we all have a “desire for self-respect”. Bernard Williams identified this “desire for self-respect” in his article *The Idea of Equality* as a “human desire to be identified with what one is doing, to be able to realize purposes of one’s own, and not to be the instrument of
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another’s will” (Williams, The Idea of Equality. 93). The democratic principles of equality and protection of privacy provide all citizens with plenty of opportunity to pursue their interest and desires, and freely choose and realize the purposes of their life.

Socrates’ critique of democracy certainly represents an important challenge to our present political system. The undisciplined and disorderly citizens, the lack of well-trained leaders, and the hostility to authority it promotes easily point out the inherent weaknesses of this political regime. However, the wide scope of opinions it encompasses, the appreciation of dignity and worth of human life, and the equal consideration and opportunity it offers have proven to be quite beneficial to many societies. After all, democratic freedom of speech and protection of privacy are the very principles Socrates himself built his life around.

Works Cited


