

The Soul of the Democrat

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[H]e lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand. Sometimes he 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 to mind. If he happens to admire soldiers, he's carried in that direction, if money-makers, in that one. There's neither order nor necessity in his life, but he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and he follows it for as long as he lives

You've perfectly described the life of a man who believes in legal equality [561d].

These words are from Plato and are found in book eight of Republic in which the constitutions of the democratic city and the soul of the democratic man are described. Of the five constitutions of the city-states in Republic, and the individuals housed within each, which are presented in descending order from the highest to the lowest, the democratic state is fourth from the top, one step away from tyranny, which is the city state and man ruled by erotic love.

Plato understands the soul as tripart: reason, spirit and desire. Reason and desire are understood as the rational and irrational parts of the soul; the former part "calculates," and the latter part "lusts, hungers, thirsts, and gets excited by other appetites" [439d]. Man by nature has an end, telos, at which he may aim if he is to be fulfilled. Man's end is known by reason, and he is a creature who lives by ideas. A just man, a man in full, is governed by the rational part of his soul which directs him to act in a virtuous manner, such that every part of him performs its proper function while reason controls the inferior parts of his nature. The just state is realized when a person is performing his proper function and not meddling where he does not belong.

The just state in Republic is the ideal state, which is created by Socrates' dialectic discussion with Glaucon, Polemarchus, Adeimantus, Thrasymachus and the other young men who are present for the discussion of how justice works in the soul of man. [The reader, obviously, is present, if, that is, he is engaged.] The ideal state, the Aristocracy, has never existed, but the virtues on which it is founded, justice, wisdom, courage and moderation, are grasped by reason and do exist in the souls and actions of man. This state serves as a point of reference from which to set the extreme constitution of tyranny, its opposite, as well as the intermediate states of the timocrat, oligarch, and the democrat.

It is helpful when reading Plato to remember that man is not an animal by nature, but part of him is like an animal. Let me explain. A Gordon setter is by nature a soft-mouthed dog, ideal for retrieving birds because it does not sink its teeth into the bird. The Gordon setter is very alert, interested and aggressive. It is a responsive gun dog, and an eager-to-please dog in the home. A Gordon setter will not naturally retrieve birds, but it can easily be trained to do so because it is within its potential to do so. If, that is, the Gordon setter has a trainer.

Man is like an animal in that he also needs instruction to reach his potential. Man, like a dog, comes in a variety of breeds; however, being well-bred for a man is different than having the pedigree of a Gordon setter. Man's pedigree is revealed by the performance of his function, which has been handed down to him in the stories of his virtuous ancestors. Unlike a Gordon setter, man does not inherit his pedigree; it is something he achieves by performing his function.

Each person has a variety of functions. If he is a cobbler [obviously, an ancient example as cobblers have gone the way of the bare feet that stomped the grapes], he makes shoes, and if he is a virtuous cobbler, he makes good shoes. A cobbler has the various functions, of a husband, father, soldier, neighbor, friend and like relationships in which he finds himself. Man as a cobbler is a creature who becomes himself -- or not -- in his relationships with the leather and his community.

Being a virtuous human is a question of being well-ordered. In this case, order is a word which signifies a harmonious arrangement, first, in the soul, which is the moral order, and then in the city-state, which is the constitutional order.

Reason is the ruling element in the soul which grasps moral principles, the enduring standards, and the moral norms of man's nature which are necessary for self-examination. In as much as the moral principles are enduring, they are divine and not the creation of man.

Which brings us back to the soul of a democrat, a free spirit whose soul is not guided by moral principle; he lacks the ability to distinguish higher from lower, right from wrong, and good from evil. In the democratic soul, reason is the handmaid of desire, the inferior part of man's nature; thus, he *lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand*. This democrat uses his intellect to rationalize whatever his desires crave at the moment; he cannot truly discriminate between his necessary and unnecessary desires. In effect, each desire has a say, and all desires are treated as equal. This is a soul Plato ironically describes as being *a pleasant constitution, which lacks rulers but not variety and which distributes a sort of equality to both equals and unequals alike* [558b].

The democratic city state is similar to the democratic soul: everyone is treated equally. At first glance it seems to be a fine constitution, *like a coat embroidered with every kind of ornament* because it has every kind of character type. With such diversity, could it be anything but wonderful? However, in the city and the souls which live by the idea of treating equals and unequals as equal, condemned criminals walk about freely and

foreigners have the rights of citizens, but the obligations of the citizens to vote or serve on juries and in the military are such that they may do so if they feel like it. The democratic soul turns inward and neglects its public responsibility; in fact, it does not have a sense of community. It has nothing in common with those within its city, other than being guided by desires which cry to be heard and feel the need to be satisfied.

Thus, the democratic soul, as well as the democratic city, lacks “rulers” and is opposed to any form of authority other than the pressing momentary urge. So, *he 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.*

His mind is not led by moral principles (an example of principle given at the beginning of Republic is “you should not return a harm with a harm”) and he cannot focus upon an ideal and use it as the point for his actions. The democratic father, for example, refuses to accept a guiding principle into his soul, as it would be an infringement upon the equality of his children’s right to fulfill their immediate desires. Thus, *a father accustoms himself to behave like a child and fear his sons, while the son behaves like a father, feeling neither shame nor fear in front of his parents, in order to be free*[562e].

The democratic soul sees freedom as being “free from” as opposed to “free to,” so he is “free from” responsibility and does as he feels at the moment. It is important to notice that the father behaves like a child; the emphasis is on behave, as the father does not “act,” for to act one needs to “know” what he is doing, making him the author of his act. The democratic father behaves because he is motivated by desire and not by principle. He exercises until it becomes painful, boring, or another desire clamors to be satisfied. The son behaves like a father; he does not act like a father but becomes like a father because of the demanding nature, or authority, of the adolescent desires rising up in his soul at any moment. As the son is defiant of authority, all tradition, the way of his ancestors, is denied as being outdated and confining to his freedom to serve his desires.

The democratic teacher, next in line in the tradition of authority over the young, fairs equally as well as the father, and [a] *teacher in such a community is afraid of his students and flatters them, while the students despise their teachers . . .* [563b.] The teacher is afraid of students because he has no right to impose his knowledge – all opinions being equal-- upon students. Furthermore, the student despises his teachers for presuming to think that they know more than the students. It is best for students, in the words of Bob Dylan, to let their teachers know what they have told their parents,

*Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don’t criticize
What you can’t understand*

*Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command.*

The democratic ruler, ascending in authority, in order to gain his position, need only tell the citizens “that he wishes the majority well” [558b]. Which means the citizens in the democratic state will be free to continue doing whatever they desire, be it reading Milton or looking at website pornography, being faithfully married or committing adultery, paying taxes or not, having children or aborting babies, helping the sick and aged or euthanizing them -- it is all the same. Thus “[t]he person who is honored and considered clever and wise in important matters by such badly governed cities is the one who serves them most pleasantly, indulges them, flatters them, anticipates their wishes, and is clever in fulfilling them [426c].

The soul of the democratic man is in turmoil as reason is subservient to a multitude of desires, unrestrained by the virtue of moderation, and above authority. The words which correctly name the virtues have been distorted by this character.

Doing battle and controlling things themselves, won't they call reverence foolishness and moderation cowardice, abusing them and casting them out beyond the frontiers like disenfranchised exiles? And won't they persuade the young man that measured and orderly expenditure is boorish and mean, and, joining with many useless desires, won't they expel it across the border . . . they proceed to return insolence, anarchy, extravagance, and shamelessness from exile and give them fine names, calling insolence good breeding, anarchy freedom, extravagance magnificence, and shamelessness courage [560d-561a].

What we now have is an uncontrollable adolescent, refusing authority and revering nothing. The distortions of his head visit the body and, as he ages, lacking self-control, his health deteriorates, so he thinks the function of physicians is to restore that which he abused. All the money spent on healing is of no use, so he ends up blaming the abysmal quality of physicians as the source of his feeling ill.

And isn't it amusing that they consider their worst enemy to be the person who tells them the truth, namely, that until they give up drunkenness, overeating, lechery, and idleness, no medicine, cautery, or surgery, no charms, amulets, or anything else of that kind will do them any good [426b]?

The democratic soul is obsessed with the idea of tolerance, which becomes a virtue, so it naively treats all desires as deserving equal attention. This is the intellectual position; however, when desire has replaced right-minded reason in the soul, what the head thinks to be the case is secondary to the demands of the body. So, while the head is tolerant of all desires being equal, the depraved desire of erotic love, the antithesis of

philosophy which is the love of wisdom, consumes the soul. The element of authority is impotent in the soul of a democrat so *“he’s idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy.”*

The perversion of a democrat’s attempt at philosophy is seen when Glaucon, Polemarchus, Adeimantus, Thrasymachus, and the other young men of the dialogue, as “reasonable men,” distort the ancient proverb “Friends have all things in common” to deduce that women and children are possessions and friends ought to share their possessions.

Under the spell of erotic love, they further decide that the *best men* [which they all assume themselves to be] *ought to have sex with the best women as frequently as possible*. To keep the women from becoming attached to their children (which is the natural way to act) the women are treated as equals and now share occupations alongside the men. Their children of the best men and best women are housed in a “rearing pen,” the ancient equivalent of a day-care center, *to insure that no mother knows her child*. True to form the children of the worst parents are left outside the rearing pen to die. The father is oblivious to his children, as those driven by erotic love feel no responsibility for the offspring of their actions. [This is decided upon, obviously, without the young men consulting the mothers, sisters, or women of the state.]

The final descent into the tyrannical nature of erotic love is seen in the confrontation between Socrates and Glaucon, the pedophiliac, to show how the egalitarian soul is caught in a swoon before the object of its depravity which consumes its insatiable lust.

But it isn’t appropriate for an erotically inclined man to forget that all boys in the bloom of youth pique the interest of the lover of boys and arouse him and that all seem worthy of his care and pleasure. Or isn’t that the way you people behave to fine and beautiful boys? You praise a snub-nosed one as cute, a hook-nosed one you say is regal, one in between is well proportioned, dark ones look manly, and pale ones are children of the gods. And as for a honey-colored boy, do you think that this very term is anything but the euphemistic coinage of a lover who found it easy to tolerate shallowness, provided it was accompanied by the bloom of youth? In other word, you find all kinds of terms and excuses so as not to reject anyone whose flower is in bloom [474e-475a].

Such is the destructive nature of erotic love; first it destroys the love between man and woman, then turns women into common possessions and resolves the dilemma of unwanted children by lodging them in “rearing pens,” and finally erotic love accepts the sterile act of fornicating with the same sex as in Glaucon’s homosexual passion for any boy in “the bloom of youth.”

At this point the descent of the democratic soul is complete. “Extreme freedom can’t be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery, whether for a private individual or for a city” [564a].

This type of democracy is not a virtuous form of government in as much as it is one step away from tyranny. Lacking self-restraint and transfixed by the idea of the equality of both *equals and unequals alike*, the soul is fractioned, each appetite having a will and clamoring to be heard. Ultimately, the strongest desire of erotic love gives license to mad sensuality having its way in a soul that is a slave to its “mad masters.”

And so it goes.