

Critics of *The Republic*, Plato's contribution to the history of political theory, have formed two distinct opinions on the reasoning behind the work. The first group believes that *The Republic* is truly a model for a political society, while the other strongly objects to that, stating it as being far too fantastic for any society to operate successfully by these suggested methods. In an exchange between Crito and Dionysius, this argument is first introduced, with Crito siding with those who agree that *The Republic* is a realistic political model, and Dionysius arguing on behalf of those who doubt it as being realistic, claiming it to be a criticism of politics in general.

Both sides have legitimate arguments, and there is evidence within the text to support each opinion. When Plato wrote *Gorgias*, he made it clear where exactly he stood on his personal involvement in politics (Cornford 1941, xix). "Unlimited power without the knowledge of good and evil is at the best unenviable, and the tyrant who uses it to exterminate his enemies and rivals is the most miserable of men--a theme to be further developed in *The Republic* (Cornford xx)." But here, Plato was referring to the politics of his time, and critics who sided with Crito believed that *The Republic* was Plato's way of introducing a political system in which he would feel comfortable supporting (Plato 204). Conversely though, *The Republic* itself is summed up this way:

Well, one would be enough to effect all this reform that now seems so incredible, if he had subjects disposed to obey; for it is surely not impossible that they should consent to carry out our laws and customs when laid down by a ruler. It would be no miracle if others should think as we do; and we have, I believe, sufficiently shown that our plan, if practicable, is the best. So, to conclude: our institutions would be the best, if they could be realized, and to realize them, though hard, is not impossible (Plato 210-211).

These institutions of which Plato speaks are described in the body of *The Republic*, and not only does Plato explain how they are carried out in current society, but he offers his own alterations, which is the primary cause of the arguments over the content of the book (Plato 222).

In his fifth chapter, entitled "The Problem Stated," Plato introduces what he believes to be wrong with the current system of politics (Plato 41). He starts by describing the Social Contract theory (Plato 53), the method used during his time, a method

Plato rejected. It says:

all the customary rules of religion and moral conduct imposed on the individual by social sanctions have their origin in human intelligence and will and always rest on tacit consent. They are neither laws of nature nor divine enactments, but conventions which man who made them can alter, as laws are changed or repealed by legislative bodies. It is assumed that, if all these artificial restraints were removed, the natural man would be left only with purely egotistic instincts and desires, which he would indulge in all that

Thrasymachus commended as injustice (Plato 41-42).

In response to this description, Plato wrote,

First, I will state what is commonly held about the nature of justice and its origin; secondly, I shall maintain that it is always practiced with reluctance, not as good in itself, but as a thing one cannot do without; and thirdly, that this reluctance is reasonable, because the life of injustice is much the better life of the two--so people say. That is not what I think myself, Socrates; only I am bewildered by all that Thrasymachus and ever so many others have dinned into my ears; and I have never yet heard the case for justice stated as I wish to hear it (Plato 43).

Throughout this chapter, Plato makes a point to say how difficult it is to do what is right, since it seems so much easier to take the easy way out, to do the wrong (Plato 49). And in summing up this chapter, Plato had one final contribution, "You must not be content with proving that justice is superior to injustice; you must make clear what good or what harm each of them does to its possessor, taking it simply in itself and leaving out of account the

reputation it bears (Plato 52)." At this point, Plato has revealed his mental viewpoint on the problems in current government, and the remainder of the book deals with the ways he intends to do away with that which cripples those in politics, including corruption, various conflicts, and many traditional practices.

Plato continues on to describe how luxuries are not necessities, as many prominent figures of his time had believed (Plato 61). Soonafter came his suggestions on how society should be educated (Plato 231). Not only did he intend to totally alter the curriculum, but he also wanted to change people who were educated. To him, education was not to be limited to the wealthy, it was to be focused primarily on those who showed the greatest potential, the greatest talents. His most radical idea was to reform society based on his method of education. He rejected the idea of having a person's place in society based on family name or wealth (Plato 111). His ideal society would have rank based on merit, ability and talent, and should a woman possess these skills, then she would have a high rank in society (Plato 153). Not only did he want women to be included, but he also made his system of education almost rigorous, hoping to weed out those who did not belong, or who showed more talent as say a soldier rather than a mathematician (Plato 102-103). To finalize his suggested society, Plato wrote,

But in reality justice, though evidently analogous to this principle, is not a matter of external behavior, but of the inward self and of attending to all that is, in the fullest sense, a man's proper concern. The just man does not allow the several elements in his soul to usurp one another's functions; he is indeed one who sets his house in order, by self-mastery and discipline coming to be at peace with himself, and bringing into tune those three parts, like the terms in the proportion of a musical scale, the highest and lowest notes and the mean between them, with all the intermediate intervals. Only when he has linked these parts together in well-tempered harmony and has made himself one man instead of many, will he be ready to go about whatever he may have to do, whether it be making money or satisfying

bodily wants, or business transactions, or affairs of state. In all these

fields when he speaks of just and honorable conduct, he will mean the behavior that helps to produce and to preserve this habit of mind; and by wisdom he will mean the knowledge which presides over such conduct. Any action which tends to break down this habit will be for him unjust; and the notions governing it he will call ignorance and folly...we...have discovered the just man and the just state, and wherein their justice consists (Plato 142).

The final installment in Plato's ideal society is the ruler (Plato 122). He devotes an entire chapter describing the duties of a philosopher king (Plato 205). His main arguments in favor of such a ruler include "when strength fails and they are past civil and military duties, let them range at will, free from all serious business but philosophy; for theirs is to be a life of happiness, crowned after death with a fitting destiny in the other world (Plato 207)."

With that said, there is now an overview of what Plato feels to be the ideal society. Elements discussed include how society is educated, categorized, as well as ruled. And some people accepted this model, and argued on Plato's behalf, including Crito. But as in all arguments, there must be a second party, and that group viewed this as impossible to accomplish as well as destined for failure. Even though the arguments against *The Republic* are not in plain text, those who do not see eye to eye with Plato do have a valid argument, and there is enough evidence hidden between the lines of *The Republic* to support their statement.

When Plato discussed virtues within a state (Plato 119), he mentioned wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice as the virtues that make up a state. Those arguing against *The Republic* can refer to a statement made by Plato reading, "Strangest of all, every one of those qualities which we approved--courage, temperance, and all the rest--tends to ruin its possessor and to wrest his mind away from philosophy (Plato 198)." Here is probably the

most obvious statement Plato makes that is anti-political, saying that the ideal political state cannot successfully contain elements of philosophy (Plato 29).

Mentioned in the exchange is the Allegory of the Cave (Plato 227-235). Here, Plato tries to explain why he should be taken seriously, for he is one of the few who has seen this light, and he is trying to adjust society in such a way that it would resemble the world he was exposed to when he left the cave. But he does not think that ordinary people would accept these proposals, and may even fear Plato to be insane (Plato 231). Many other of his simplified stories can be mistaken for deliberate attacks on politics in general, rather than methods by which politics could be improved. Among these are the ideas that women could be equal to men in Plato's ideal society (Plato 144), as well as Plato's suggestions that such traditions as Olympian religion and poetry were not important in his educational scheme (Plato 67, 321).

Although the evidence in favor of *The Republic* is far greater than that which opposes it, the argument itself cannot really be won. Plato consistently expresses doubt throughout his work, which favors the opposition. But, his ideas themselves are in no way impossible to accomplish. Plato had this to say to sum up all his beliefs,

there will never be a perfect state or constitution, nor yet a perfect man, until some happy circumstance compels these few philosophers who have escaped corruption but are now called useless, to take charge, whether they like it or not, of a state which will submit to their authority; or else until kings and rulers or their sons are divinely inspired with a genuine passion for true philosophy. If either alternative or both were impossible, we might justly be laughed at as idle dreamers; but, as I maintain, there is no ground for saying so. Accordingly, if ever in the infinity of time, past or future, or even today in some foreign region far beyond our horizon, men of the highest gifts for philosophy are constrained to take charge of a commonwealth, we are ready to

maintain that, then and there, the constitution we have described has been realized, or will be realized when once the philosophic muse becomes mistress of a state. For that might happen. Our plan is difficult--we have admitted as much--but not impossible (Plato 208).