

Plato on Politics: The Ordered Soul and the Ordered City

Introduction: What is Politics?

- **Politics** derives from the Greek *polis*—a tightly structured **city-state**, not just a city.
- Plato’s *Republic* = *Politeia* in Greek: "constitution" or "civic order."
- The Latin *res publica* (“public thing”) comes much later, via Cicero.

Politics is the art of structuring a just and flourishing society.

I. Plato’s Political Motivation

Historical Context

- Athens in collapse: plague, failed Sicilian expedition (415 BC), Peloponnesian War, rise of the 30 tyrants.
 - Socrates’ execution (399 BC) = political and philosophical crisis.
 - Plato witnesses the failure of Athenian **democracy**, corrupted by **Sophists** and rhetoric.
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II. What is Justice? The Soul and the City

“We must first understand the soul to understand justice in a person. But that’s hard. So let’s scale up—let’s look at justice in the city.”

The Tripartite Soul (from the *Phaedrus*)

Part	Symbol	Function
Reason	Charioteer	Seeks truth, governs wisely

Spirit	White Horse	Courage, ambition, willpower
Appetite	Black Horse	Desires food, sex, money

- Justice = **each part doing its proper work in harmony.**
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III. The Three Classes of the Ideal City

Class	Soul Type	Function	Motivation
Gold Class	Reason	Rulers	Wisdom
Silver Class	Spirit	Guardians	Honor
Bronze Class	Appetite	Producers	Pleasure/Wealth

- Each class mirrors a soul type.
 - Justice in society = **each class doing its proper job**, governed by the wise.
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IV. The Four Cardinal Virtues

*Plato's ideal soul and society hinge on **virtue**—from **cardo**, the “hinge.”*

1. **Wisdom** – Knowing the Good; possessed by rulers.
 2. **Courage** – Holding fast to what's right; found in guardians.
 3. **Temperance** – Self-mastery; all classes in harmony.
 4. **Justice** – Each part of soul or city playing its proper role.
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V. The Education of the Philosopher Rulers

- **Books 6 & 7:** The philosopher must ascend out of the cave and **contemplate the Good**.
- Education is not information transfer—it is **conversion** (*converto*, to turn around).
- True leadership = wisdom + ascetic lifestyle (no wealth, no family, communal dormitories).

*Plato's rulers are **philosopher ascetics**, not power-hungry elites.*

VI. The Degeneration of the City (Books 8–9)

*Plato charts the **fall** from the ideal state in five stages:*

1. **Aristocracy** – Rule by the best (wisdom).
 2. **Timocracy** – Rule by honor-loving warriors.
 3. **Oligarchy** – Rule by the rich.
 4. **Democracy** – Rule by the many; freedom above all.
 5. **Tyranny** – Rule by the worst: a single appetitive tyrant.
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Democracy's Fatal Flaws

- **Freedom as supreme value** → lawlessness, disintegration of virtue.
 - **Equality as sameness** → collapse of hierarchy and order.
 - **Privacy obsession** → no shared vision of the good.
 - Citizens become "**drones**"—obsessed with pleasure and consumption.
 - **Tyrant arises** by flattering the mob, then sowing **division** to retain power.
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VII. Plato vs. Rawls: Veil of Ignorance vs. Ladder to the Good

Plato	Rawls
Philosophers must rule	Philosophers must sit out
Metaphysics drives politics	Politics must be neutral
Truth exists, must be known	Truth is private, must be bracketed
Education = turning toward Good	Education = learning to tolerate

VIII. The *Laws*: Plato's Late Political Vision

*In the **Laws**, Plato is older, humbler, more realistic—and more authoritarian.*

- The fictional city of **Magnesia** = a frozen, ideal order.
 - **No innovation**; excess population sent away to colonize new cities.
 - **Education** stressed: music, astronomy, physical training—but **no Sophists**.
 - **Religion** essential: civic theocracy.
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IX. Plato's Theology and Book 10 of the *Laws*

- Book 10 = philosophical theology.
 - Offers a **cosmological argument** for a divine source of order.
 - Logos (Reason) rules the cosmos → city must mirror cosmic order.
 - **Atheism = moral collapse**, disenchanting the world.
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X. Plato, Myth, and Logos

- Plato uses **Mythos** to reflect **Logos**—stories pointing to transcendent truths.
 - Contrast with **Jung**:
 - Jung: archetypes exist in the psyche.
 - Plato: Forms exist *outside* the psyche—eternal and independent.
 - For Plato, Beauty and Truth are not projections; they are **objective realities**.
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XI. Modern Responses to Plato's Politics

Karl Popper (1945, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*)

- Accuses Plato of being a **proto-fascist**.
- Sees the Republic as advocating a **closed society**—anti-democratic, anti-freedom.

Others (esp. Cold War-era thinkers)

- Praise Plato's critique of **radical egalitarianism**.
 - See him as a prophet of how **freedom without virtue** becomes tyranny.
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XII. Final Thoughts

*Plato's politics are not easily pinned down. He has been claimed by both **left** and **right**.*

- He critiques **elections, private property, and wealth accumulation**.
 - He insists on **hierarchy, order, and philosophical rule**.
 - Education is **soul formation**, not career prep.
 - Politics is about **justice**, not power games.
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Discussion Questions

- What would Plato think of **social media**? (Answer: ban it, except for rulers.)
- Is **wealth a sign of virtue**? Plato: No. Wisdom is.
- Is **democracy sustainable** without a shared vision of the good?